

HERBA ET VERBA. AT THE HEART OF THE HEALING PROCESS

Everything is full of gods. This is what the philosopher and mathematician Thales asserted more than 2,500 years ago, manifesting a reality animated by numinous, interacting forces. In this same synergistic perspective, in the symbolic horizon of preclassical and classical antiquity, the botanical code provided an alphabet capable of creating an intimate dialogue between man and nature.

The *precationes omnium herbarum*, invocations to herbs preserved between the pages of manuscripts dated between the 6th and 13th centuries, are texts that have the flavor of officinal breviaries. With their beauty and poetic intensity, they testify to forms of devotion rooted in a remote religious fabric. They preceded the advent of polytheistic pantheons, offering a magical and animistic vision of the botanical element as an envelope of a numinous presence, according to a perspective widely spread and documented throughout the Indo-European area.

In this horizon of meaning, ritual, myth, pharmaceutical value and magic were embroiled in an indissoluble relationship. So-called “simple plants”, understood as pure elemental principles or subtle energies, were believed to carry an experience that found appropriate vocabulary and syntax in mythological language. Indeed, narrative would respond to the need to unfold the meanings of ritual, as it is revelatory of meaning. Myth was thus characterized as ritual in action, and ritual as acted narrative. They composed the warp and weft of a meaning weaving of great poignancy, becoming complementary subjects to the realization of symbolic experience. This explains, in many archetypal stories, the substantial presence of botanical narratives. In these stories, it became functional in determining the pharmaceutical value of plants through a rich etiology revealing their connection with the human element. This is the case with the many famous stories of nymphs transformed into trees, herbs or flowers, which palpate in deep resonance human and plant experience.

On the medicinal functions front, if it is true that each plant corresponded to an archetype, the therapeutic solution could also be explained according to a similar pattern. Therefore, the possible cure was archetypal, too. The symbol showed its etymological value in its inherent ability to recompose, revealing the interconnections between macrocosm and microcosm.

Some enigmatic and magical plants appearing in Hellenic literary sources have been studied by philologists and botanists. These include the mysterious herb known as *moly*, mentioned by Homer as being able to counteract Circe's enchantments. Or nepente, a drug with which, in an episode of the *Odyssey*, the beautiful Helen prepares a potion that can comfort the melancholy soul. But even botanical investigation loses significance in the face of the philosophical meanings these herbs propose. In fact, they reveal themselves to be sphinxes for questioning, alchemical elixirs, guides for the lost soul.

In terms of ritual aspects, the most significant expressions of archaic religiosity were directed mainly in the act of harvesting. Witnesses to this were liturgies whose officiant was the rhizotome. The rhizotome was a priest whose knowledge ranged from the balsamic characteristics and times of the plants to every ceremonial work, which included the proper orientation to be observed during harvesting, the tools to be used, purifications, prayer formulas or dances. Sources also document the use of

actual protocols for curing the injury inflicted on the plant during harvesting. In fact, since the harvester suppressed the plant's vital spirit, the sacrilegious act had to be subjected to "reparation" through libations and offerings.

The fascinating ritual of the harvest of the mandrake, a magical and sorcerous plant, documented by authors such as Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder and Claudius Elianus, hints at the hypothesis that even animal sacrifices may have been reserved for certain plants in ancient times. Since the action of the mandrake, with its potentially lethal influences, exposed the rhizotome to danger, its harvesting required special skill and dexterity. The root would be uprooted by a dog, which would be sacrificed at the end of the ritual, perhaps with the aim of placating the plant and encouraging its transformation into a beneficial drug.

However, it was the *carmen* that was the most important vehicle to get in touch with the subtle energies of the plant world. The chant-enchanted, the arcane whisper, a medium that transmutes latent force. The demiurgical value of the creative word coincided with the thaumaturgical one, which explains why litanies, averts and invocations animate almost all ancient medical treatises. The word, becoming an intermediary between the visible and invisible, coincided with the remedy, establishing a close correlation between numinous dimension and reality. Even when pagan religiosity gave way to the advent of Christianity, the language and forms of devotion of the new creed ended up recovering, albeit disguised by the novelty of a renewed language, the ancient liturgies of the *herbae cantatae*.

Even in the midst of the Middle Ages, prayers and averts would have been considered in the same way as medicinal ingredients, thus sometimes associated with the administration of suitable herbs to enhance their efficacy. Even in written form, the verb was believed to hold the demiurgic force of sound. There is evidence of the use of writing healing formulas or extracts from sacred scriptures on parchment in ink and then dissolving them in the medicinal potion, serving as activators; alternatively, of transcribing the prayers on the leaves of herbs with medicinal virtues and having the patient ingest them.

In women's empirical medicine practices, for centuries word liturgies constituted the indispensable actions of each stage of the therapeutic operation. Not only did they accompany the gathering of simple herbs and the various stages of processing and transformation, but they became an integral part of the administration of medicine and related rituals. The medicine was activated by an invocation, and the anointing with medicinal oil was accompanied by arcane whispers or a mixture of pagan and Christian invocations. As has been suggested, each formula uttered was perhaps intended to mark the rhythms and timing of the healing ritual, establishing its duration.

The medicinal herbs considered sacred by Hellenic tradition were the common native plants of the Mediterranean *habitat*. Pliny the Elder referred to them as *herbae surdae*, that is to say silent, devoid of fame. They were the first witnesses to rituals, burned as incense on altars or used to purify sacred environments.

These include prophetic laurel, rosemary with its intense fragrance and purifying virtue, which was among the first incenses used by Mediterranean peoples. Thyme and St. John's Wort, which scares away demons and drives away melancholy. Myrtle, mugwort, verbena, and even such wondrous herbs as saving sage and mallow, which Pythagoras believed to be "the messenger of sympathy between

heavenly and earthly things." Or betonium, known as *magna herbarum* (the greatest among herbs), consecrated to twelve deities. Rue, which has been uninterruptedly used in empirical pharmacopoeia for centuries, interweaving its history with ancient feminine knowledge that found its early expression among the plants of Medea. Lastly, mint, which in the imagination of the Greeks was once a nymph and lover of Hades, then transformed into a plant. In mint lies the mythical archetype of illegitimate love revived, restrained and re-narrated in the characteristics of a haunting and infernal plant, aphrodisiac but abortive. All the plants mentioned have enjoyed an unbroken tradition of use in women's folk pharmacopoeia, handed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition.

The picture of symbolic relevance delineated in the previous paragraphs is completed by the importance of the olfactory stimulus as part of a philosophical approach. Throughout the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, the code of odors expressed a universally shared language. In this language, fragrances served not only religious and cosmetic, but also hygienic and medicinal functions. Such overlaps fed the heterogeneity of functions attributed to fragrances, fruitfully expressing their symbolic potential.

The nature of odors was attributed an intimate medicinal value, with factual effects on the health of the body and psyche. The therapeutic efficacy pertained to the olfactory aspect itself. It recalled a concept of health oriented to the psychic benefits brought by inhalation or by anointing and claimed the healing potential inherent in *euodia* (the good smell) as a factor in psychophysical rebalancing, in combination with the inherently healing character of spices.

Silvia Infranco's artistic project, with its strongly symbolic traces, summarizes through a very evocative creative process many of the aspects considered so far. The resonances become evident when she retraces the slow and patient ritual gestures, which in ancient practices characterized the phases of medicinal preparation. They are also suggested by her re-proposing, in the process of artistic gestation, the metamorphosis that is expressed in every process of nature, where everything transmutes preserving the memory of the original imprint and returning it in renewed form.

The horizon along which medicine and word, myth and ritual meet, interweaving their meanings, thus becomes the place where it is possible to imagine a hypothesis of continuity between the magical and scientific gaze, to read and tell with ancient and new words the world of nature.