

James Lee

Perceiving Plants: Experiencing Elemental Beings

A review of the book entitled *Perceiving Plants: Experiencing Elemental Beings – The Influence of Gnomes, Nymphs, Elves and Fire Spirits upon the Life of Plants* by R. van Romunde.

Dick van Romunde is a natural scientist and retired Waldorf school science teacher. He was a contemporary of Frits Julius, whom he considered a colleague, friend, and mentor. The works of Rudolf Steiner, Goethe, and Frits Julius inspired him to take on a meditative path of nature observation and plant study. Eventually, he was asked to write a forward for the book entitled *Man as Symphony of the Creative Word* by Rudolf Steiner. The publisher, recognizing the importance of his work, decided to publish it separately in 1988. Dick van Romunde characterizes the book *Perceiving Plants* as the product of forty years of meditation on the subject. The Dutch edition is now in its second printing.

The Gesture Language of Plants

About two hundred years ago, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe directed our attention to the attributes and secrets of outwardly perceptible nature. He told us about “the universally open holy secrets of nature that reveal themselves in the world of sense perceptible phenomenon if you know how to look.”¹ Early this century Rudolf Steiner connected this outwardly perceptible, visible world with the invisible world, saying they belong together and should be taken as a whole.

In the book *Perceiving Plants: Experiencing Elemental Beings*, Dick van Romunde describes the *gesture language* of the plant world, as he understands it from Goethe. This gesture language can be observed when we consider how the plant grows in the four elements of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. Pointing out the limitations of a natural science based only on mechanical principals, he focuses the reader’s attention on the need to employ a way of thinking and an appropriate methodology that does not limit a true understanding of the subject under investigation. The book brings together the spatial, sense perceptible world of Goetheanistic natural science with the non-spatial world of feelings, thoughts, and will impulses found in anthroposophical spiritual science. Through Goetheanistic natural science we are able to accumulate the spiritual forces necessary to understand the gesture language of nature. To accomplish this we must be able to develop non-judgmental memory pictures of our perceptions, the ability to concentrate on the pure image of perception, and a strengthened thinking that leads us to a perceptive faculty of higher judgment. Through anthroposophical spiritual science, we are able to develop the capacities required to envision the non-sense perceptible world of spiritual beings. Rudolf Steiner describes the activity and gestures of four groups of elemental beings that are connected with the world of plants and animals and characterizes them as the dynamics of the four elements.

Through sense perceptible observation, we can increase our awareness about an object under study such as a plant. Materialistically oriented natural science takes a quantitative approach when evaluating what has been observed, measuring and cataloging discrete aspects of the object under scrutiny. When taking an anthroposophical-Goetheanistic approach to observation, the spiritual researcher seeks a more qualitative answer about the object of study. With imagination, the researcher is able to observe the transformation of one process into another, which leads to the identification of the gesture.² Dick van Romunde connects the image of the plant and its gesture (following Goethe) with the beings behind the sense perceptible reality (following Steiner).

When we observe a dicotyledon seed sprouting in the moist earth, we see that independent of the orientation of the sprouting seed in the moist soil, it quickly sends a primary root downward toward the center of the earth while sending secondary roots out in a more horizontal direction. We can see a penetrating vertical gesture toward the center of the earth and an embracing gesture of the earth itself as the secondary roots extend outward. The cotyledons turn upwards as the stem continues its movement vertically skyward in the opposite direction toward the sun and cosmos.

The plant enters the moist airy realm as soon as it rises above the earth. This moist, watery element must be looked at and understood from Aristotle as “that which, without forming itself, easily adopts any form.”³ The plant spreads into space through the growth and multiplication of leaf surfaces, which in many herbaceous dicotyledons spiral upward along the stem to the sepals just under the flower. Leaves have veins that take on myriad forms among the plants, and these can be seen to ray outward from the petiole toward the leaf’s periphery and its margin with the characteristic spreading gesture of water.

Moving upward on the stem we notice the leaf shapes undergoing a transformation: stemming, spreading, differentiating and pointing. Indentations and a tendency toward a reduction of surfaces occur in the warm airy realm. Earth, water and light-filled air complement each other and make possible the process of photosynthesis. We observe with amazement as lifeless mineral substance is brought to the plant through its roots, then moved upward in a watery process stream that is characteristic of all living things. In the presence of light, substances such as oxygen and water vapor are released to the atmosphere while heavier carbon is taken up and made part of the plant. The lifeless mineral is thereby ennobled and raised into the realm of the living. We see in the dryer, light filled realm a gesture that comes into the leaf from the periphery toward the center, leading to indentations, complex leaf forms, and reduced surfaces.

One must take a leap when moving from the plant to the flower. Below the flower we observed the gesture of the leaf veins as they ray toward the periphery. Moving upward along the stem and under the flower, we observed a reduction of leaf surfaces and a more pointed leaf form. At the sepal of the dicotyledon we see the tendency toward parallel venation, with the veins coming to a point at the tip. In the light-filled warmth element, the sepal gives way to the finer substance of the corolla, which often exhibits bright colors and penetrating scents. When one follows the transition of the flower from the sepal to the pollen-coated anther, one has the distinct impression that the warmth forces coming into it are consuming and transforming the physical substance of the plant. The petals gradually deviate from the parallel venation of the sepals and the veins of the petals tend to ray outward, forming in some cases wing-like shapes. Finally, after following the shrinking petals to the end, the warmth-filled pollen dust can be found on the anthers. Once pollinated, the flower further transforms into a seed vessel that ripens in the sun. Dick van Romunde describes the transition from the sepal to the anther, but lets us take on the more complex work of imagining the complete transition from sepal to seed.

The Elemental Beings⁴

Each of the four elements of Earth, Water, Air, and Fire is associated with invisible beings that Rudolf Steiner calls the Elemental Beings. The following descriptions are culled mostly from Part Three: The Plant-World and the Elemental Nature-Spirits in *Man as Symphony of the Creative Word* by Rudolf Steiner. Dick van Romunde points to this information to give the reader a deeper understanding of the gesture language of plants.

The gnomes sink into and move about inside the moist earth as if it was a hollow space, seeking out mineral veins and ore deposits. They have unique experiences with each of the minerals and gain knowledge about the whole cosmos from them. Mineral substances become available to the plants through the roots when

peripheral forces that make them less dense and more mobile influence them. Rudolf Steiner, with his clairvoyant vision, tells us that it is possible to see the gnomes everywhere moving around the roots of plants, bringing mineral substances to them. Contrast this picture with that of gravity, which makes substances more dense and less available for life processes. The antipathy of the gnomes toward the earth and the gravity that pulls them toward its center gives them the force necessary to push the plant upward and into the light. Constantly recreating themselves out of gravity, these elemental beings don't particularly like the earth and are fearful of becoming like an amphibian, especially a toad. Alert, with a keen intellect and an access to knowledge without thinking, the gnomes are the carriers of cosmic wisdom and the archetypal plant form. Gnomes receive the archetypal plant forms as the plant substance withers and falls to earth in the autumn. They carry this archetypal image all winter, bringing the maternal earth forces together with the paternal forces carried in the seed. Thus, the activity of the gnomes and the fire spirits are closely connected. Rudolf Steiner calls the gnomes the fosterers of life. Working within the life ether, the gnomes bring mineral substances into flux and to the plant where it can be elevated into life.

The activity of the gnomes has two sense-perceptible gestures: one toward the center of the earth and one in the opposite direction toward the earth periphery and cosmos. Their gestures can be seen in the roots as they ray downward and in the stem as it is pushed upward. The gnomes are associated with the earth element and life ether.

The undines are the earth's chemists, mastering the processes of combining and separating, binding and releasing substances of the air that they introduce into the plant leaves. Inhabiting the watery realms, they carry the chemical ether into the plant. The undines live in the moist airy realm and are responsible for the spreading of the leaf surfaces into the space surrounding the growing plant. Living in a dream, they create the chemistry that makes possible the movement of mineral substance upward into the realm of life. Fearful of taking on a fixed shape, especially of a fish, they are always changing forms, moving from shape to shape in a constant metamorphosis. Their antipathy toward the fixed form makes it possible for them to carry the plant further in its growth through the development of the leaves. They foster the chemical ether and work closely with the sylphs to bring the plant to its full growth potential.

Undines exhibit a spreading gesture in the leaf that is coupled with the multiplication of leaf surfaces. Their gesture can be seen in the vein structures of the leaf. The undines are associated with the water element and the chemical ether.

The sylphs bring light to the leaf surfaces in the warm airy realm. In contrast with the antipathy of the gnomes toward the earth and the undines for fixed forms, the sylphs are highly sympathetic to the light and the finer but larger movements within the atmosphere. Flights of birds, which create vibrations in the air, make cosmic music for the sylphs. The sylphs look at the birds and have an experience similar to our ego experience when we say "I". This moving element of air is where they find themselves at home. In a deep sleep, the sylphs weave the *Archetypal Plant* within the plant from sylph-light and the undine-chemistry that work together in a plastic way. The sylphs carry the light ether into the plant and its blossoms.

Sylphs have a gesture that can be seen in the margins of the leaves, in the indentations that move counter to the leaf's spreading gesture and the pointed form that often results. The sylphs are associated with the air element and light ether.

The fire spirits are inhabitants of the light-filled warmth element and bring warmth to the plant. They gather up available warmth and carry it into the blossoms of the plants. Warmth forces are concentrated in the pollen-laden anthers and then carried to the moist, cooler ovule-bearing plant organ where the seeds come into

being and mature. The fire spirits foster the warmth ether, which combines with the life ether in the earth to promote the sprouting seed in spring. Fire spirits are sympathetic to insects and particularly butterflies. They gain great delight when they follow the tracks of the insects to distribute warmth for the seed buds. The aura of fire spirits can be observed with clairvoyant consciousness to be very close, almost part of, the insects that move to and fro among the flowering plants.

Fire spirits have a transforming gesture that can be seen in the transition of the flower petals to the stamen and pistil. Warmth forces refine the material substance of the plant and mature the seed that will carry forward the species. Fire spirits are associated with the fire element and warmth ether.

Looking back, we see that the gnomes and undines work from below upward in an environment filled with their antipathy to gravity and form, an activity that Rudolf Steiner tells us is the cause of the dense, resisting characteristics of the earth. The elves and fire spirits bring down light and warmth to the plants from above, in a sympathetic gesture that is also an act of sacrifice.

In the autumn, the physical substance of a withering, decomposing plant drops to earth and releases the forces of the ideal plant that formed it, forces which the gnomes carry through the winter as a clear image. The work of the fire spirits matures the seed that eventually finds its way into the earth, carrying with it the male principle of the cosmos. Fertilization of the seed occurs when the male principal meets with the female principal in the earth, an activity carried by the gnomes whom Rudolf Steiner characterizes as the spiritual midwives of the earth. When the plant is growing toward its fulfillment in flower and seed, the undines and sylphs work together to promote the form of the plant, thereby ennobling the mineral world and bringing it into the realm of life. Learning to see these processes is a task the spiritual researcher must pursue with diligence.

Spiritual Research

Goetheanistic observation leads the researcher to an imagination of processes occurring in the plant. In this activity the observer is able to identify and work with the gestures associated with the working and transformation of the various processes. Rudolf Steiner characterizes those gestures seen through imagination as the soul-expression of spiritual beings.⁵ In *An Outline of Occult Science* he gives an example of how one might think of this process. “If the human being touches an object and has a perception of heat, he must distinguish between what comes from the object, what streams out of it, as it were, and what he himself experiences in his soul. The inner soul experience of the sensation of heat is something quite different from the heat streaming from the object.”⁶ As the researcher begins to work with a plant gesture, he or she is able to separate from the sense-perceptible observation that led to the identification of the gesture in the first place, and work with the gesture by itself. This “cognition through inspiration” allows the researcher to penetrate to the inner spiritual nature of spiritual beings and to learn about their relationships to each other. Rudolf Steiner compares the imagination to the observation of letters and words without knowing their meaning. To inspiration he ascribes the reading of these letters and words with some understanding about their meaning. In a further step, the researcher separates from the sense-perceptible image, the visualization of the experience, and his or her sense of self and is led by “cognition through intuition” to the experience of the spiritual beings themselves.

The spiritual researcher who wants to investigate nature’s secrets must develop capacities to perceive plants and the hidden nature behind their sense perceptible form, function, and relationship to time. In a process, the researcher must take in the plant, its form, its function, and its whole nature in a way that is free of judgment and bias. Then he or she must call up the soul image of the observation, building it up in a stepwise process that gradually leads to a beholding of the entire image without the external stimulus. The observer

must engage his or her feelings to fully identify and comprehend the plant's gestures. This process leads to an image that is different and far beyond a memory photograph of the subject because it starts to live and unfold in the observer. When the researcher takes the image thereby created into meditation and focuses clearly on its character, in a manner similar to an actor who is learning his or her part, the researcher develops a closer relationship with the beingness of the observed plant. Finally, just as the actor becomes his or her part on stage, the researcher moves closer to the elemental beings behind the plant's form and function. Perhaps those beings will reveal themselves to the researcher who has the right preparation.

In his book *Perceiving Plants*; Dick van Romunde has directed our attention to a path of nature observation that has many positive implications for personal and professional development. It is a jewel and should be on the shelf of anyone wanting to expand his or her understanding of nature's veiled script.

References

¹ Margaret Colquhoun and Axel Ewald. Quote from *New Eyes for Plants*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, United Kingdom, 1996.

² Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*, Anthroposophic Press, Inc. 1972. Chapter V.

³ Ernst Michael Kranich. Quote from *On Coming to Be and Passing Away*, Book II by Aristotle, as written in *Planetary Influences Upon Plants* by Ernst Michael Kranich.

⁴ Rudolf Steiner. *Man as Symphony of the Creative Word*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1970. Part Three: The Plant-World and the Elemental Nature-Spirits, Lectures VII, VIII, IX.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*, Anthroposophic Press, Inc. 1972. Chapter V.

⁶ Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*, Anthroposophic Press, Inc. 1972. Chapter VII.