

## Plant Speak

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Though the Earth be not animated with a Sensible soul,  
yet it is possible that it may be a great, Immortal  
Vegetable.  
M. Hale, 1677.

The latest buzz-word, this morning's radio program informs me, is conversation. Everyone is apparently having "conversations" about what ails us. The announcer lists endless reports on conversations, conversations within families, in cafes and workplaces, between unions and bosses, even between mining magnates and environmentalists. Yet, I can't help thinking, things seem to stay remarkably the same as if this supposedly great new hope for transformation is somehow a mere balm for our wounded and worried spirits, a salve for the troubles that beset us in our age of environmental angst.

This inability of conversation to usher in any sort of fundamental changes has me wondering what exactly conversation is, what it consists of, who starts it and with whom? Perhaps we need to stop taking conversation at face value and distinguish between various sorts of talking. Verbal communication might be the name of the game, but there are numerous ways of talking — not to mention the role of silence. Especially silence that is more than simply an absence of talk; silence that is an invocation, calling up a response from the non-human world.

After all, the presence of speech does not necessarily indicate genuine connection or meaningfulness, although I like to think that when I talk to the plants in my garden they acknowledge me on some mysterious level and flourish in response to my engagement with them. Sometimes, I prefer to just stroll among them, stroking the odd leaf, watering where necessary and sense the plants' appreciation of this quiet, unhurried interaction that has a very different quality to the present era's brisk, staccato conversations that demand feedback, the strident ultimatum or grilling that refuses to accept silence as an option; that is unable to imagine that silence might offer the opportunity to hear what earth's others have to say to us.

History, of course, teaches us that among the cacophony of recorded voices there are those that have been marginalised, unacknowledged, stilled or alternatively, those that have been deliberately withheld. The unrecorded voices of the more-than-human appear to indicate straightforward exclusion and rejection although it is also possible their silence may have been a sign of withdrawal and resistance. However, silence may also be a blessing, a moment when we sense our affinity with the natural world, an affinity that post-Enlightenment cultures have tended at best to belittle and at worst utterly deny. As a result, our ability to listen has suffered, conversations have become

one-sided and arrogant or merely a way of creating a comforting wall of noise between ourselves and the sweet sounds of the earth we refuse to hear. The cultural injunction to talk, our addiction to chat-rooms, tweeting, the need for answering machines to talk for us while we are away — all this constant buzz and hum of talking machines may conceal a terrible lack, an inability to listen to the subtle communications of the natural world around us.

So what does conversing with the natural world have to do with what ails us in our technologically sophisticated world? What might it offer in a world of increasing extinctions, environmental degradation and climate change? Can it offer something that all our palliative rituals of multi-media life have failed to supply? And what sort of conversation would it be?

It was Cicero in the west who first declared that conversation should be without passion or gossip and structured in such a way that each person had a turn. And so began a process by which a regulated form of conversing developed. The ideal conversation was organised around rules similar to those for debating and designed to solve problems rather than be spontaneous and playful. Of course this sort of conversation has its uses but I am more drawn to the ideas of Michael Oakeshott, a political philosopher, who believes that the aim of conversation is not inquiry. He writes that there is no need to hanker after a conclusion; neither informing nor persuading is crucial. Reasoning “is not sovereign”, he states, and conversation “does not compose an argument.” Conversation has no end outside itself. It is instead “an unrehearsed intellectual adventure.”<sup>2</sup>

To me the most resonant part of Oakeshott’s discussion of conversation is his notion that what human beings of a given historical era inherit in human civilisation is not science or technology or an accumulating body of knowledge but

a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves ... it is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world or to contrive a better world which distinguishes ... the civilized man from the barbarian.<sup>3</sup>

In this model conversation is oriented to the pleasure of interacting with others; it makes chatting today part of an ongoing conversation that derives its material from a human tradition in which a thread of continuity remains. We can trace that thread back to early hunter-gatherer societies which had a rapport with the natural world that is largely lost today. David Abram writes of how these societies experienced the landscape as animate and expressive, revealing its hidden presences through both sound and silence. He describes nomadic foraging societies where, “human and non-human life-worlds interpenetrate and inform one another.”<sup>4</sup>

This is a far cry from problem-solving conversations in which talk is a practical relationship articulating common ends. In these conversations the focus is on an ability to argue, to formulate and respond to declarative views of what the world is and what it should be like. Such interactions emphasise the equality of conversational partners who are civil and fair. The sociable model, on the other hand, emphasises cultivation and sensibility; conversational partners constantly enhance their capacities for fresh, entertaining and responsive talk. This model understands conversation as an end-in-itself, an aesthetic pleasure, whereas the problem-solving model sees conversation as a means to an end. This split into two basic types of conversation is, however, needless and unhelpful. We require both forms — it is the imbalance between them that must be addressed so that we can once again accept without cynicism, denial or disbelief, the ability and even desire of the more-than-human world to respond to our overtures.

Meaningful interaction along with an ongoing capacity to revise our notions of what constitutes a conversation in accord with the prompts or responses of the more-than-human other could aid us in reversing today's global ecological collapse. Indigenous societies have in some instances retained this sort of dialogue and children in general tend to accept earth others as psycho-active until they are taught otherwise. Occasionally adults in the west also unwittingly retain remnants of these beliefs in their use of old wives' tales. My own parents for example, generally regarded as sensible and rational, nevertheless saw fit to inform me that babies were found under cabbages. Although patently ridiculous there remains in such out-dated avoidance of the "facts of life" a sense of the wondrous connection among beings both vegetable and animal that belies a life restricted solely to cause and effect interactions.

The unintentional result of this parental information was that I had high expectations of the cabbages in our garden and ironically, when a neighbour's home birth made it clear there was no direct link between cabbages and babies, my passion for babies diminished while my interest in plants developed into a life-long love affair.

Plants, I believed, were superior beings. Like the medieval Christians, I deduced from my observations that the principles of male and female were mingled in plants. They and they alone shared with god an undivided nature. Medieval Christians maintained that, "whereas animals were observed to reproduce sexually and were regarded as having participated in the fate, if not the sin, of man, and believed to have divided natures, plants on the other hand, were mirror images of god."<sup>5</sup> Sadly my school teacher was not impressed when I informed my class that God was the great, green cabbage in the sky.

Plants, I was told in no uncertain terms, were inferior, a passive resource and mere backdrop to human achievements and animal activities. In literature they featured as background colour or interest, never as a voice. Only in myths were plants powerful or agentic and myths were not to be taken seriously. Plants, after all, did not converse — they neither spoke nor read; they simply grew, imbibed nutrients and decayed. They had no need for motion or sensation, sex or ingestion. They had no stories and there was no need to afford them moral consideration.

Rather than accepting this understanding of the world of plants, I want to play about with it; to argue against a hierarchical ordering in which continuities between plant and human life are diminished or denied. I want to reassert that a link between babies and cabbages does exist and that myths about plants have important messages to convey in terms of subjectivity. We are after all dependent for our very survival on the plant biomass of the planet and exploring the possibilities of plant-like subjectivities offers us a vision of the possibility of another kind of subjectivity through which we might effect real change in the cultural order. This change would not pay homage to psychic development that is driven forward in a linear fashion but would rather deepen and broaden relational ways of being in the world.

Of course there are obvious differences between babies and cabbages. Plants, for example, live through a process of metamorphosis and growth. The plant does not grow from an essentially formed infant to a larger, but essentially and proportionally the same, adult. Parts of plants evolve into each other. As Goethe wrote in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, a plant's leaf becomes the flower, the flower the fruit. Plants may not move on their own from one place to another, but they can continue to grow to no specified end; there is no point at which a plant can be definitively designated as an individual. The plant represents that organism whose origin, though hidden, seems accessible, because its history can be read in the sequence of its metamorphoses.<sup>6</sup> The animal, or the baby, on the other hand, carries its own metamorphosis within it only as a memory, a trace of its past existence in the womb.

Exploring a plant-like subjectivity would also lead us into the depths of our cultural myths. Jung wrote that, “a man who thinks he can live without myth, or outside it ... is like one uprooted, having no true link with the past, or with ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary society ... The psyche is not of today; its ancestry goes back many millions of years. Individual consciousness is only the flower and fruit of a season, sprung from the perennial rhizome beneath the earth ...”<sup>7</sup> Jung acknowledges the dark underground source of our life-energy; that the plant world expresses the mystery of the emergence of life from inert matter.

This dark, melancholic aspect of much western myth warns us against a naive simplification of the complex issues involved in the need to preserve Earth’s vegetable life. Simply to proclaim participation in a unified “Gaia”, or a celebration of oneness with trees, misses the profoundly paradoxical questions raised by the vegetative tales of such figures as Persephone, for example, that tell of fear and uncertainty as well as hope and fulfilment. I examine the myth of Persephone’s abduction and her constrained life in the underworld in greater detail shortly.

Yet it is this aspect of myth that grounds rationality, profoundly modifying its transcendent yearnings for abstraction, its hopes of immortality. While nourishing and energising our rationality, the vegetable keeps it in constant contact with immobility and loss of will, even with death. The vegetable, in other words, exhibits both a vigorous animation and a pull back to roots; it both takes us out into the wider world and deep back inside ourselves. It does not promise us salvation or immortality. Instead, by proclaiming that we are creatures imbedded in an ecosystem destined to become part of the earth, the vegetable brings us face-to-face with the materiality of death. Perhaps this is the source of our melancholy fear of vegetating, of the inertia associated with the insult of being called a vegetable. But the apparent immobility of the vegetable is more than a lack of animal activity; it is, as Gaston Bachelard explains a fundamental state of repose. “Vegetable permanence’ he writes, ‘what a symbol for a soul’s repose in a world worthy of dreams ...’<sup>8</sup>

Bachelard’s sense of reverie as a vegetable activity is at odds with Renaissance ideas about cabbages. Peter Bishop writes that, ‘Cabbages, according to [Richard] Burton, cause troublesome dreams, send black vapors up to the brain, and hence are especially to be avoided ...’<sup>9</sup> However, the word ‘vegetable’, he goes on to explain, ‘comes from a root that means the very opposite of immobile, passive, dull or uneventful. *Vegere* ... means to animate, enliven, invigorate, arouse. *Vegete* ... means to grow, to be refreshing, to vivify, animate. From these roots come words such as vigil, vigilant, and vigor, with all their connotations of being wide-awake, alert, of keeping watch.’ What better way to foster a vegetative consciousness that nurtures and cares for the planet’s biomass than through cabbages? For our dreams and fantasies shape the world even as the world shapes our fantasies. As Robert Bly writes, ‘others love us, the cabbages love the earth, the earth is fond of the heavens ...’<sup>10</sup>

Believing as I did that a cabbage was directly involved in my birth, I have always been drawn to plants — not only cabbages, I hasten to say, but flowers also. As a child I spent many hours with a flower press. I found something strangely satisfying about freezing blossoms into an eternal present, about controlling and subduing natural movement, about having this moment of flowering constantly available to my gaze.

My favourite flower to press was a small iris that always flowered on my birthday. Iris, meaning multi-coloured, as I discovered much later, was a messenger of the gods, a go-between messenger goddess. Although summoned and dispatched on Zeus’s command, Iris flew freely and alone, often giving sound advice and support to the characters with whom she interacted. Although she was later replaced by Hermes as the divine herald of Zeus, as a rainbow she was a physical vision flashing through the

sky to deliver messages then vanishing as quickly as the rainbow itself. Here was an image of a multi-hued plant flying freely, mobile, ecstatic, scattering colour across the sky, uniting earth and sky, water and air.

How pathetic my little dried Iris seemed in comparison to this bold yet fragile being who had the freedom to span the heavens and mock human pretensions to control. I realised that unlike living blooms, my dried flowers did not open and shut or have a temporal existence. I had separated them out and imprisoned them so that they were unable to transform into seed-heads that flew with the breeze; they were no longer delicately entwined in an ecosystem.

But just when I decided to relinquish my flower press and fall in love with the free-flying Iris, I discovered she had been replaced by Hermes and the notion of winged plants had fallen into obscurity. Iris had died down and we now associate her, not with a rainbow, but with an underground rhizome. The airy hues of Iris have taken on darker shades.

However, a rhizome is not restricted solely to a life underground. Rhizomes, as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, grow horizontally rather than vertically, putting out a multiplicity of small roots and shoots without any one central root or stem. Rhizomes have no territory; they may spread with the wind and cover any amount of ground, since they grow outward rather than upward. Rhizomes connect any point to any other point and have no identifiable beginning or end.<sup>11</sup>

Iris, having altered her nature, nevertheless offers a richly poetic topic of conversation. Although no longer imaged as a rainbow, as a rhizome she gestures towards the grief associated with loss of plant life, as well as the possibility of finding repose; to respect the complexity and power of vegetal life. To regain a psychological reflection that perceives the world through a vegetable eye, that retunes our imaginations to the sensual presence and subtle interweavings of the vegetable kingdom.

As an underground rhizome, Iris connects us to other western myths which also speak of the underworld, death and vegetable life — myths that ask whether bright things can survive in dark places. Greek mythology, for example, tells us of the drifts of narcissi which flowered in profusion along the banks of the black river Styx, bringing sunlight to a dark land. It was here that Persephone was wandering in the spring meadows picking daffodils when she was overpowered by Hades and dragged into the Underworld. It is said that daffodils looked up until they played a part in Persephone's abduction. Since then they have bowed their heads in shame, burdened by the knowledge that their beauty was the lure that enticed Persephone away. Now they remain forever associated with death and melancholy.

But Persephone did not die in the Underworld. Instead we read of her mother Demeter searching for her lost daughter. And when, eventually, she uncovers her whereabouts and Hermes is dispatched to the Underworld with a message for Persephone to return to the sunlit world, he finds, not a pale shade, but a radiant wife of Hades and queen of the dead. Yet I find it hard to see Persephone as a conquering heroine. Instead her muted existence sheds a soft glow in the dark vault. Mistress of her circumstances she also cradles sheaves of unfulfilled dreams. She has, after all eaten a pomegranate, the fruit of the dead, and there can be no permanent restoration to the sunshine. She returns home, arriving with the wet spring full of weeping and release, her arrival heralded by daffodils, paradoxically also symbols of the hope and rebirth associated with the new season.

But each autumn when she departs for the Underworld her mother slides into mourning. So their reunion each spring is a bittersweet occasion, the time when darkness and light are in balance, when the root system of a plant and its flowers are in

balance. Although this myth speaks of the changing seasons and the sprouting of new life each spring, it also speaks to us today of the loss of plant biodiversity through destructive human actions, of this time when darkness and light are clearly not in balance and plants that should be flourishing on the earth are now mere shades, held in the arms of Persephone in the underworld for ever.

So is there a conversation to be had with plants that gestures toward balance; that offers hope in dark times by pointing to the possibilities inherent in a different subjectivity, one that might be in tune with the dreams of plants? Luce Irigaray believes she has found such a conversation piece in what she refers to as efflorescence. She argues that, in contrast to the more traditional rhizome, efflorescence intertwines two things in terms of one another in such a way that no priority can be drawn, there is no singular origin and both growth and conversation are fecund rather than simply investigative.

Efflorescence in other words designates a blossoming or blooming forth that cannot be enclosed within the traditional boundaries of embodiment. The flowering subject is always a multiple subject, a subject-in-becoming and a subject dependent upon the soil. In *The Forgetting of Air*, Irigaray describes efflorescence as a process in which, 'the contours wed each other in overflowing growth that never quits the medium that gives rise to it. That never abandons the body that gives it life. That does not set itself up with the haughty affirmation of a form that draws its vigour from that from which it parts. It rather abides in the delicate entwining of all dimensions.'<sup>12</sup>

It is in the quietness of abiding without separateness that efflorescence provides us with a model for conversation in which silence and invocation are fundamental to the necessary rapport to 'engage *imaginatively* with the non-human' to 'effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature.'<sup>13</sup>

Anyone who has cut a cabbage in the garden and left the root in the soil knows that new cabbage heads, efflorescences, form in place of the first cabbage head. They remain connected, dependent upon the original root yet different from it. To accept efflorescence as an underlying structure in life enables us to reclaim imaginative complexity that is not necessarily driven to express individuation but instead listens to the gathering power of plants in dreams, myths and fantasies, follows the way each plant in its own specific way, gathers imaginings around itself so that even the humble cabbage can bring a deeper sense of dwelling, of having roots, of being grounded; a reverie and repose that take us back to childhood, to the beginnings of things; an involvement with the sensual world.

This place where the vegetable gathers imaginings is not a place of rest or of inaction. It marks a point of repose: darkly active, constantly transmuting, incessantly accumulating and harvesting the world that surrounds it. But running through this image is a profound melancholy. The question of melancholy not only returns us downward into our own root concerns, but also to the tragedy of the metaphysical separation we have established between cabbages and babies; to the vegetative tragedy facing the world today. To embrace cabbageness as a solid, rooted presence, undermining human pretensions and imparting wisdom if we care to listen, is to say yes to the promise of transformation in the cultural order, to say yes to conversations about 'many things, of cabbages and kings and why the sea is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings.'<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Lorraine Shannon is a free-lance writer and editor. She has a PhD in postcolonial literature and a non-traditional PhD in ecology and literature. She has published articles in *The Australian Humanities Review*, *PAN*, and *Island Magazine* among other journals.
2. Michael Oakeshott (1962), 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Methuen, London, p. 198.
3. Ibid.
4. David Abram (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-than-Human World*, Vintage Books, New York, p. 144.
5. John Prest (1981), *The Garden of Eden. The Botanic Garden and the Re-Creation of Paradise*, Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 82.
6. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1790; 2009), *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
7. Carl Jung quoted in Peter Bishop (1990), *The Greening of Psychology: The Vegetable World in Myth, Dreaming and Healing*, Spring Publications Inc., Dallas Texas, p. 66.
8. Gaston Bachelard (1971), *The Poetics of Reverie*, Beacon Press, Boston, p. 82-83.
9. Peter Bishop (1990), *The Greening of Psychology: The Vegetable World in Myth, Dreaming and Healing*, Spring Publications Inc., Dallas Texas, p. 30.
10. Robert Bly, quoted in Howard Nelson, (1984), *Robert Bly, An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 166.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
12. Luce Irigaray (1999), *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (trans. Mary Beth Mader), University of Texas Press, Austin, p. 106.
13. Jonathan Bate (2000), *Song of the Earth*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, p. 100; 245.
14. Lewis Carroll (1872), 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, [www.jabberwocky.com/carroll/walrus.html](http://www.jabberwocky.com/carroll/walrus.html).