

## SCIENTIFIC ASSUMPTIONS, POETIC HYPOTHESES

It tends to have a circular form: sometimes it is an ovoid, at other times it is octagonal, and often it is irregular. When it has a nucleus in the centre, it recalls the shape of an eye, or a cell, or better still, an embryo: life compressed in something that is dense but anything but compact, something that is both ductile and solid at the same time. It is the shape of the soul of plants as described by the works of Caterina Aicardi published in this book, and indeed the thoughts of Gustav Theodor Fechner in *Nanna o L'anima delle piante*<sup>1</sup>.

There have not been many occasions in which I have sensed such a sharp affinity and clear correspondence between the work of an artist and a philosophical, or psychological, or perhaps simply literary, text. *Nanna* is a difficult book to define: it was written in 1848 by a physicist brimming with ontological questions and mystical concerns; at the time it represented an attempt to identify an *absolute sensitivity*, a perceptive condition that man and nature shared in a complete way, a kind of *universal soul* whose complete expression was found in plants. Today it appears as the outcome of a poetic hypothesis formulated on scientific assumptions that are anything but airy-fairy, as demonstrated by research on the reactivity of several plant species undertaken by Italian and American universities.

This connection between science and poetry is the first thing relating the minor nineteenth-century treatise with Caterina's work. Then there is feeling in the "silent evolving of vegetative life, in its being enveloping, in its capacity to attenuate, appearing and disappearing at pleasure, an exemplary figure: exemplary because pure life, pure feeling, arabesque feeling, unjustified expansive power without a desire for basis"<sup>2</sup>. Hence the title: that word, *Nanna*, which Fechner draws from Nordic mythology, with its odd, gentle and inescapably sleepy sound, perfectly suits certain works published in this book.

However, is the soul of plants, and in a broader sense the generative principle of natural processes, really like this, really a point surrounded by a circle? Does it really hide in the folds of spores, in pleasantly rubbery material, in a potentially iridescent structure? I wrote that *Nanna* is the outcome of poetic hypotheses with scientific assumptions: this statement is equally true for Caterina's art, but with a greater emphasis on the adjective *poetic*.

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<sup>1</sup> Gustav Theodor Fechner, *Nanna o L'anima delle piante*, edited by Giampiero Moretti, translation by Giuseppe Rensi, Adelphi, Milan 2008 (ed. or. *Nanna oder Über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen*, Leipzig 1848)

<sup>2</sup> G. Moretti, *La pianta angelicata. La questione dell'"anima vegetale" in Gustav Theodor Fechner* in G. T. Fechner, *op. cit.*, p. 131.