Chapter 6  Language

“Some five thousand years before Champollion, the god Thoth travelled to Thebes and offered King Thamus of Egypt the art of writing. He explained Hieroglyphs and said that writing was the best remedy for poor memory and feeble knowledge.

The king refused the gift: “Memory? Knowledge? This invention will encourage forgetting. Knowledge resides in truth, not in its appearance. One cannot remember with the memory of another. Men will record, but they won't recall. They will repeat, but they will not live. They will learn of many things, but they won't understand a thing.” From Mirrors, 2009, by Eduardo Galeano

Value, Meaning, Purpose

What is the connection between language and truth? And what is the connection between truth and reality? Are they separate things, or is the whole of reality, including my individual experience, part of the same truth which has no need for language to verify its claim to objectivity? If you are already confused by these questions I suggest that this is exactly the minefield which conventional ideas of the logic of grammar paints itself into. In other words if we are looking for a system of the absolute hierarchical structure of language as a reflection and understanding of life then we will necessarily tie ourselves up in knots of contradiction and ambiguity.

The reason for this is that not only does each person view reality from a particular place in the world which is unique to themselves, but as language is a description of reality in abstract forms created by a particular view of truth, it is necessarily arbitrary and incomplete. The alternative position is to understand language as a multivariant symbolic form which assumes a role in a particular context. It is the meaning and purpose of the particular experience which acts as a guide to the appropriateness of the language used; the fundamental ambiguity of language allows for the individuality of the person to be expressed and for the nuances of meaning to emerge as a subtle grasp of the context in sound, narrative, rhythm, gesture etc.

In the first chapter I outlined the way in which modern ideas of the reliability and predictability of theories of knowledge essentially hang their proof claims on the internal symmetry of maths. Having cast doubt on the idea that the logic of mathematical construction is an adequate explanation of the holistic workings of nature, I alluded to the role of language in affirming the premises of a particular view of reality. I suggested that, far from nature being definable in terms of the abstract concepts of logic, reductionism actually construes reality from the point of making its theories fit the social hierarchies it has created.

On this basis I now want to elaborate this theme by firstly pointing to the way that we come to accept such ideas. After this I will go on to dissect the process of its proof claims in order to clarify a better way of understanding nature. To start with then, I have frequently given my opinion that if we are not satisfied
with the products of a particular culture, i.e. western scientific materialism, then we have grounds on which to query its claim to be a true representation of reality. And besides the obvious response which is to say that my view is not relevant, the other claim is that the unwanted side-effects of materialism could be a result of misapplying the otherwise correct rules of its system. Of course this is a possibility. So if we then go back to the basic elements of materialism and try to find a way of constructing a better system with the same basic building blocks what we find is that it is logically and practically impossible to do so. From this position it then becomes clear that the resulting chaos of the modern world results from a blinkered view of the basic stuff of life.

And before going on to look at the actual method of materialism in language, let me just re-iterate the basic claim that classical culture has essentially founded a system of knowledge based on the undisclosed preference to preserve the status quo and not the other way round, i.e. a society founded on the discoveries of an altruistic quest for impartial knowledge. And this is not to criticise the genuine quest for real knowledge irrespective of its final use in potentially corrupt systems. Rather it is that the process of gathering knowledge must actually be framed by the purpose it has; and that purpose must have a meaning which is rooted in the holistic context of life as a whole, including the subjective values of the individual.

Again, this kind of digression sometimes just muddies the water because it goes round and round in circles attempting to find a logical or abstract proof of what cannot be proved but only experienced, the truth of a particular perception. For the moment then I will leave it at the concept that the so-called proofs of mathematical necessity and linguistic correctness are themselves inadequate representations of the personal and infinitely complex processes of relationship in the natural world. From here we can go on to ask how is it that we have built a system of knowledge and social functioning ostensibly founded on the proofs of abstract logic?

The basic starting point of this inquiry is the question: on what basis are the axioms of materialism said to be an accurate representation of the world? And from here we can go on to analyse the definitions of what the world supposedly is, and also the character of the definitions themselves and their further elaboration into categories of knowledge which purport to explain complex living systems. Well, the first question is easy, as I have essentially already answered it; that for a reductionist there is no actual connection between what I experience and what I know. Strange as this may seem this is the basic axiom on which materialism is founded, that what I know about life is really a product of my adherence to the principles of 'reasonable' observation and not the sensual perception of some aspect of nature.

From this angle what is used to construct a proof of the correct perception of what is deemed to be a lifeless substratum, is the 'reasonableness' of the way that concepts can be inter-related. In other words, when I label my perception as conforming to a conventional definition of what my experience supposedly 'is', not only does this iron out the possibility of any personal interpretation,
but it shoehorns my perception into conformity with a system of knowledge which guarantees the perpetuation of that system and the undisclosed moral framework which justifies it. Or even more simply, there is no way of connecting what I experience with what I believe I am seeing because, in this system, what I am supposedly observing must conform to the knowledge system which sustains the particular definition. It is, in fact, entirely circular; I only see what I am supposed to see because I dare not contradict the status quo.

Anyway without getting my philosophical knickers in a twist, I will pursue my line of enquiry with the proviso that I am trying to illuminate a system of linguistic rigidity, all the while maintaining a belief in a view of language which is fundamentally fluid, ambiguous and stylised. Going on then to suggest an alternative system, I will start with my own conclusion for the sake of a reference of where I am heading. A holistic understanding of the process of observation or perception starts from the basic assumption that I have an experience of the world which informs my senses, and provides the sense-data which become an expression of the meaning of the experience. The subjective value of the experience, (i.e. what personal significance it may have for me in particular), is included within the framework of the purpose of life in general; and this meta-concept of the absolute undefinable value of life itself as an infinite unknowable experience, provides a reference for the meaning of particular events.

This brief definition of holistic method serves here as a reference of meaning; the more complex sense of how language operates in the multiplicitous context of relationship will be described later. It serves to provide a contrast to the countervailing claim that materialism proves the validity of its observations by appeal to a logical process of the intellect in an abstracted domain. As previously outlined, it is my belief that these claims are essentially circular, or tautological, in philosophical jargon. This is to say that they imply their conclusions by stating their basic axioms as value-free observations, when in fact these basic statements are themselves already biased perceptions phrased in a way which forms part of the proof of their own existence!

Take the sentence 'The sun is hot'. In reductionist terms, we are devising a theory of knowledge from the supposedly neutral observation of the existence of the sun and heat. From this basic fact the role of 'is' explains the process of heating by pointing to the sun as the source of the heat which we feel. Therefore we have derived practical knowledge from the correct application of the logic of causation. However, in holistic terms we must already experience the sun as hot as part of our definition of what it is; equally the idea of heat is synonymous with the effect of heat in our experience. Holistically the sun and heat are things which naturally go together and mutually reinforce our understanding of both because they tend to exist in contexts where both are meaningful representations of some wider understanding of how they affect other things.

The reductionist view suggests that the sun is a value-free material object in
space which is only related to the concept of heat through the correct application of the laws of physics. What this means is that a materialist understanding of the whole process of life gradually builds through a pattern of inter-relations between exact abstract concepts which display the workings of the natural world. It is not that we experience the coherence of life through the sense-data of our experience in combination with our aspiration for meaning, but that the world is essentially meaningless and only makes sense when we correctly interpret it through the eyes of conventional wisdom. And even this reasonable view supposedly has no ulterior motive other than the advancement of knowledge as an end in itself.

So before going on to a more descriptive expression of how I feel language can operate as a limited part of life in general, I will just sketch a quick definition of a kind of holistic theory of language. And this is the sentence I used previously: 'what does mean mean?' Here we see that in order to even understand the question we have already assumed we understand the concept we are attempting to explain, meaning. So on level one we can say logically that mean means mean. We know what we mean when we use the word so that is not a problem. It does however illuminate the fallacy of reductionism in that we have no greater knowledge by scrutinising the terms in relation to each other than we must already have in order to use them correctly.

On level two we can say that actually a further contemplation of the deeper potential of the word 'meaning' is actually effected by asking the question. This is not because there is some hidden meaning in the supposedly rigid definition of the word as signifying an explanatory process, but because the idea of meaning itself can be infinitely expanded to include an infinite number of variations of experience and different permutations of language. In other words the meaning of the word mean can be savoured in the context of life and the addition of other words, to continually deepen our sensitivity for the meaning of experience.

**What is a Tree?**

As a student I came into contact with people studying science who seemed to look down at me from a great height for being a mere philosophy student. This echoed my experience at school having chosen to study Art at A'level which was looked down on as not really a proper subject. This did not dampen my enthusiasm for the natural world and I recognised the ultimate value of the experience of nature as well as the evocation of that experience in modern art, especially through colour. I will return to the theme of creativity in the next chapter. I mention it here to introduce the idea that there is something primary about perception and experience which cannot acquire any further meaning by endless analysis or description. In the previous section I suggested that language could almost reach that point of a parallel with the original experience through deep contemplation or a poetic use of language; so here I want to draw out the sense in which language always exists in relationship with an experience of reality and becomes a symbolic form in itself which reflects the harmony of the natural world.
Rather than carrying on attempting to dismiss any claim to objectivity through the construction of grammatically correct definitions of the world such as the scientists claimed to be doing, I want to look at this question, 'what is a tree?', and use a holistic way of answering it to sketch an alternative understanding of how language works. In this way what I mean by 'meaning' in its fullest sense is the totality of verbal descriptions of life within the context of how they relate to a sense of the purpose of life, and the way that we assign values to names, activities and events to form a whole picture of life.

Here are some answers to the question, 'what is a tree?'

A tree is a home for birds.  
A tree is a place to shelter when it's hot.  
A tree is where children play, build houses and swing from the branches.  
A tree is a useful windbreak.  
A tree is an object of beauty which is used to decorate gardens and houses at Christmas.  
A tree is a source of food and wood for timber and fuel.  
A tree provides vital conditioning for the soil and retains groundwater preventing erosion.  
A tree is part of a woods or forest in which numerous forms of life live.

Obviously a tree is many things then, and the value of each of its aspects will vary according to the use we wish to make of it. Then of course there are many different varieties of tree which each have their own character and uses which appeal to individuals according to their personality. In the White Goddess by Robert Graves [1948], he outlines what he believes to be a type of language or system of divination which he calls the tree alphabet. In this way the character of each type of tree is expressed symbolically by a sign which is used as part of a system of divination like Astrology.

So perhaps my answer to those who look down their noses at nature-lovers or flower-power hippies, or even dedicated artists of the natural world, is to defy them to define any of these functions as merely pertaining to the chemical or physical properties of wood. No they are processes which are an integral part of the web of life which get their meaning from the context in which they stand as labels for activities, explanations of natural systems, and a relationship with nature as the source of life. In this way the process of description acts as a medium to facilitate the comparison of different ideas of life, which are themselves abstractions from particular experiences. The more those ideas diverge from the particular context in which they derive their names, the less they express the fundamental harmony of the original experience.

I have already sketched out what we mean by a symbol, and also alluded to the historical process when mythology, as part of a purely oral culture, became divided into the narrative aspect of storytelling or myth, and the intellectual domain of analytic construction of meaning through writing and numerical deduction or logic. In the earlier phase symbol was an inextricable part of the
mythological culture which provided the backdrop to the activities and events of communities tied to the fundamental rhythms of nature. In its later guise the idea of myth is relegated to a realm of entertainment, and historical symbolic characters or events which conform to the new conception of the world. As such, a symbol is understood as a sign of something else much as the construction of letters in the new alphabet.

However if one remains wedded to the original idea of symbolic expression as a process which both elevates the function of the intuitive senses and also preserves the intrinsic potential for meaning expressed by ancient symbols as part of an erstwhile mythology; then this becomes a vehicle for a reappraisal of the modern Techno-Topia narrative, no less than a means to a re-imagining our place in the natural world. As such, words and letters can either be essentially dead signs of an intellectual process of the rational definition of life as value-neutral, or they can take on the symbolism of intermediaries between the sense-data of experience and the sensibility for the meaning of life as a whole.

Looking at my example of the tree it then becomes easier to understand the difference in approach. There is no one thing called a tree which is separate and definable according to fixed logic and rules of how nature works. The idea of a tree is a symbolic representation of all the diversity that it harbours and facilitates as part of a thriving ecosystem. From this perspective the beauty of the particular experience, say, of an ancient oak tree in the middle of a rural scene, perhaps populated by traditional crafts, and definitely devoid of pylons or nasty polluting cars, acts as a symbolic depository of the many layers of meaning and personal associations which it conjures up. And on this basis I cannot really describe in any better way how a symbol functions than by using it in this vein to suggest that it acts as a symbolic reference as part of a whole picture of life. As such it is the symbolic content of mythology which allows us to represent life as a meaningful event in evolution including levels of practical habitation and the aspiration for spiritual meaning.

If we then look a bit closer at the actual stuff of mythology or storytelling, or even the political narrative of ongoing dramas, we see that it lends itself to the multiple levels of meaning through the adoption of stylised evocations of meaning and purpose; and also through music, verse and forms such as the Australian Aboriginals Songlines which associate particular places with symbols or ideas as a way of constructing a psychic map of their territory, much as the Celts did with their stone monuments. The Native American Indians had elaborate names for places which sometimes also described what had happened there, so these locations became interwoven with the narrative of tribal identity. Michel Foucault is perhaps best known for his idea that concepts of political identity in fact evolve through the social adoption of symbolic processes which emerge in the context of the need to avoid any specific association with the forces of oppression.
Deconstruction and Recycling

In this section I want to look further at the origins of language, how we might reconnect with a more natural conception of language, and perhaps re-evaluate the process of history through an understanding of the distortions of the mechanistic system of language as tool of authoritarian denial of nature. In fact there can be no clear way of deconstructing the errors of synthetic claims of truth based on language because their basic axioms are a fundamental distortion of the natural process of life. Therefore it is impossible to extract any elements of meaning from a system which is at pains to deny the existence of intrinsic meaning in the domain which it describes. If one believes that it is nature which is the source of our sense of the coherence of particular living systems, then we cannot reuse the materialist idea of nature extracted from a system which denies it's value per se. As a result of this we have to re-imagine both the origins of language and also a way in which nature can serve in the present to furnish us with the necessary symbols to recycle what is left from the cultural eco-cide of our relationship with nature.

As I mentioned in my introduction, my attempt to re-imagine a transition away from an industrial and towards an organic definition of the environment through painting, led me to the point of recognition that it was my insecurity which preserved my adherence to the concept of nature as commodity. This entailed both an unpacking of my own emotional disposition, no less than a reappraisal of how nature's energy can be enhanced to heal and sustain human life. From here I was able to re-connect with a symbolic sense of my own culture and realised its addiction to violence, as civic identity no less than bodily self-annihilation. Was this perhaps what Gandhi meant by the idea that 'history is a record of man's divergence from his natural course'?

Such an idea also chimes with my feeling that language, as a form which diverged from a symbolic role in tune with the forces of life, did so largely as a means to establishing a human order distinct from nature. This new order capitalised on the necessary ground of being in the ecosystem, and also established a hierarchy of values which perpetuated the dominance of an intellectual elite who understood the power of subversion. In its extreme form this subversion of equal opportunity becomes a culture of violence for its own sake, perpetuating a fear of reprisal against anyone who opposed its stranglehold on power, or who dabbled with intelligent speculation on possible alternatives.

From this vantage point the control of the very means of self-expression act as the cultural conditioning which perpetuates a monocultural and hierarchical scale of values. The 'Classical' style, which expressly excludes the lower forms of nature from its heroic, monumental and messianic vision is essentially insecure and devises ever more rapacious means to rape the natural world and reduce it to a breadbasket at the service of its Emperors. Absent any absolute reference of compassionate value the institutions of social status, ownership of property, military prowess, technical skill and extravagance of lifestyle foist themselves on an unsuspecting majority. Holistic and traditional ideas of
belonging to Nature and Community, no less than the value of personal subjective experience and participation in inclusive symbolic culture, are evermore forcefully squeezed out of the equation as the dominant principles of individualism and material value take root on centre stage.

In this brief survey of the appropriation of language in service of an unnatural order it is easy to understand that not only are the ends corrupt, but there is obviously no way of recycling any of it's basic principles in service of a more benign and ecologically sustainable culture. Therefore a way forward must divest itself of the unnecessary verbal imperatives of tyrannical systems, and enact a process of recycling the basic elements of life into a new vision of symbolic and creative harmony. This obviously risks that we carry over the principles of hierarchy with the basic elements of language which are unavoidable in a transition in which we all have the same basic education. Hopefully as time goes by we will evolve new concepts which are original and serve to co-ordinate the activities of a culture in harmony with nature.

Although such a risk seems at face value merely a relearning of how nature works from the perspective of sustainability, the danger lies in the fact that, like my own experience of painting nature, we carry over a deeper emotional conditioning which we cannot see in ourselves because it represents an addiction to something which hides our fundamental insecurity. On this count it is therefore necessary to effect both a transformation of our approach to knowledge and also a deeper and more holistic healing process of our core being. On this basis pretending that we can re-learn what is wrong with our relationship with nature without re-examining our lifestyle and its ramifications in the wider sense, is necessarily compounding the problem. I suggest therefore that we have to start with an attempt to re-acquaint ourselves with our core being through a kind of decompression from an addictive lifestyle. This will mean both giving up addictive and compulsive processes and filling that gap of anxiety with immersion in the rewards of natural stimulation such as nature walking, exercise routines, meditation, creativity, wholesome food, relationships with others and animals which come from the heart, while leaving behind judgemental and goal-oriented aspirations.

And to round off this section I will give a mention of a couple of strands of my thinking which serve to flesh out the wider picture of a culture in transformation and the re-empowerment of the individual. Eckhart Tolle achieved widespread recognition with a book called 'The Power of Now' [1997], which is essentially down to the fact that humans have within them a resource in the functioning of their own bodies which is able to discern a happy medium with respect to difficult decisions. In other words, when we have learned to properly relax, empty our frenetic minds and appreciate that this essential stillness is none other than the rhythm of the life force itself, this conveys an enormous sense of power and balance within our own lives. Call this meditation or deep relaxation, the proof is definitely in the eating. Go on, give it a try!

Just imagine a world in which, as John Lennon envisioned, no one was hell-
bent on destroying each other, but instead cultivated their own peaceful inner state with a view to creating a harmonious culture of equality and compassionate participation. Anyway, whether this chimes with your own sense of the future or a more political process, I feel it is 2 sides of the same coin. There can be no negotiation of collective spaces and culture which does not include all shades of personal conviction and which is fundamentally about equal opportunity and respect. Ivan Illich outlined a vision of education in his book 'Deschooling Society' [1971], which pointed to the massive cost and disparity of conventional education and suggested that society should be based on the passing down of knowledge and skills from the old to the young in local centres.

Paulo Freire also expressed a more communitarian form of education in a book called 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' [1968], which ultimately led to the establishment of a World Forum to debate and exchange progressive visions of the future. In this process Gustavo Esteva describes in 'Grassroots Postmodernism' [1998], the formula devised by the Zapatista movement of Mexico faced with the overwhelming oppression of a corrupt government in league with US expansionism. Basically it is the attempt to determine a consensus derived from the equality of all its participants, not so much a democracy as an enlightened anarchy. And lastly my own dissatisfaction with the education system I was brought up in led me to discover the work of A.S. Neil, who founded the English school Summerhill and whose motto was 'All play and no work!'

**Propaganda**

"...when colonial powers, through domination, takes your language away and imposes another, he or she, is actually naming the world; and in naming your world he begins to own that world." „...and therefore imposing their memory of place on the original owners of that place. So by colonial powers imposing their language on the colonised they are also imposing their memory of place, their memory of environment, their memory of history. So the African memory is buried under a European bourgeois memory through language and a return to our languages is a way of reconnecting ourselves to our memory; reconnecting it, if you like, making it work again.” Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Kenyan activist speaking on Radio 4

In his book simply entitled '1968', Mark Kurlansky [2004], points to the emergence of Television and satellite technology as the defining moment in the control of popular culture, no less than the shaping of the public image of presidents. Nearly 50 years on and we have well surpassed Orwell's gloomy prediction of the total appropriation of Television by those in power. And given that the internet, which now serves as the modern highway of popular communication, was in fact originally conceived as a tool of military intelligence, it seems apt to point out that technology is predominantly configured to serve the interests of the military-industrial complex.

As this chapter is concerned to illuminate the ways in which language forms
not just the focus of a system of knowledge, but also the strange relation of
knowledge and morality, we can see how the will to control language betrayed
the fundamental insecurity of an un-grounded culture. As such, indigenous
languages and dialects are perceived as a threat to the power of the coloniser
who tries to wipe them out in a bid for universal domination. Again it is the
instability of this dualistic worldview which feeds the fear and violence of the
Invader; and also creates the contrast between the expressed myth of
superiority of the coloniser and the indigenous culture of the oppressed.

The paranoid megalomaniac holds half-heartedly to the infallibility of his
technology and propaganda, all the while feeding an addiction to violence
which progressively distorts his vision of utopia. The maintenance of an
appearance of normality masks a fear of madness, the propaganda becomes
less credible and the masses revolt realising that the destruction of their
culture diminishes not only their quality of life, but more significantly, demeans
their personal identity as fools and knaves. In the context of British imperial
designs we see this process in Kenya as the wholesale eradication of ethnic
identity in favour of the master race, as the above quote suggests. As such the
language of a people is seen as a vital part, not only of knowledge systems,
but somehow as belonging to a particular environment and serving to define
that environment and the identity of the indigenous population.

In the context of early C20th Wales the means to domination were more subtle
and devious. In the English-speaking schools Welsh was 'not allowed' and
those caught speaking their native tongue were given a sign to hang round
their necks which read 'Welsh not'. At the end of the school day whoever had
the sign was given a beating. The insidious part of the plan was to enlist the
children's complicity against their schoolmates by making the rule that
whoever was caught by another child would inherit the sign, thus giving an
incentive to rat on their friends. Fortunately the Welsh language is now thriving
again although the Kenyans have succumbed to the lure of globalisation like
many former colonies. The Irish have through great efforts attempted to
preserve their language, but the longevity and harshness of Britain's genocidal
ambitions there have perhaps buried any real chance of it becoming a national
language again.

What this all leads to is the belief that somehow the myth of infallibility
invested in both the egotistical ambitions of the White Man, and his
determination to sell a vision of the future packaged in the digital medium, are
indications of a desire for absolute power over the forces of nature. As such,
language becomes not just a justification of violence and subjugation of others,
but a talisman in the bid for total conquest of life. The belief that such an
objective goal is possible only clarifies the absence of authentic knowledge
expressed as logical absolutism, and the essentially chaotic nature of the myth
of supreme power.

Such a lopsided interpretation of the purpose of life can be seen in the legal
justification for colonisation, genocide and slavery devised by the British
Philosopher John Locke in the C17th, when he decreed that only those with the
intelligence to properly manage the estates of Britain's foreign acquisitions had the divine right to own them and the sub-humans who populated those lands. When the British Economist Adam Smith designated the poor as 'dogs' this wisdom was enacted both to keep them in low pay and to justify the appropriation of rural land. The legislation which endured till recently barring all but male landholders from participation in elections has a flavour which continues in the blatant appropriation of land and increasing inequality through the medium of so-called Liberalism. Perhaps we can see in this phenomenon the convergence of the ostensible myth of Utilitarianism, that we are all concerned to help each other, with the upside-down propaganda of modern media which claims to be making us more secure by fighting a war against the nebulous enemy within!

Anyway, I have no intention to induce a feeling of despondency in my reader so I will finish this section with a reminder of how we can actually avoid the cunning subversion of materialist elitism through an embrace of the fundamental vitality of nature and the spiritual realm beyond. The power of Foucault's observation that new ways to positive identity evolved in the behaviour of oppressed societies, lies in its recognition that humans are naturally communitarian and altruistic. They are also naturally inventive and cautious; so what Foucault calls the development of liberating ways of reconfiguring social identity through collective consciousness and behaviour, echoes my feeling that we have to some extent been able to sustain a healthy outlook despite, and not because of, the tyranny of modern so-called health provision and political participation.

But what Foucault misses, as, I feel, do the militant feminists in their configuration of a subversive 'body-politic', is the sense that we are not socially-defined animals. Luce Irigaray suggests in her book 'East and West' [2003], that the tendency to view motherhood as the foundation of an alternative feminist culture just reverses the Patriarchal order and confuses civic identity with a body politic grounded in nature. As such, saying that motherhood confers an ability to nurture a stricken culture back to life, determines civic identity as in the same category as a cow, for example. Irigaray implies that we have to have a more culturally constructed metaphor to define the way forward. My feeling is that this choice should rather favour a return to nature and a realisation that motherhood is not just about reproduction, but entails a sensibility for the workings of the ecosystem as the ground of being on which we depend.

In that vein the comparison with cows is not so absurd, albeit one which does not include the ability to manage and comprehend the complexity of the global environment. From this point we can suggest that men also have the ability to nurture and heal the wounds of civilisation and we therefore have to look at what we have in common. This seems to me to be the sensitivity for natural equilibrium conveyed by the body in a harmonious relationship with nature. Whether this be through a contemplative regard for the workings of living systems or the inner path of meditative relaxation, it is perhaps the part of us which has no need for the intervention of language-based knowing. Instead we
have a sensation of the value of particular perceptions in particular environments by reference to our sense of the organic whole of the planet as a living system. And if this is not in fact our ability and mission in life, this implies that our bodies and their senses, which we share with the majority of other animals, are obsolete appendages belonging to a previous evolutionary path!

**A vision of the future**

Despite its seeming association with the visual aspect of imagining it is obvious that the process of envisioning a possible future brings into play not so much pictures, but imagined scenes or relations containing all the elements of life. The wider sense of the word vision includes ideas both of future worlds and memorised or mythologised notions of past cultures which serve to symbolise imagined features. I will come to these next, but first I want to describe in some detail the narrower philosophical function of the idea of a vision or imagined future as the means whereby we transition from what we believe we know in the present to a perhaps intuited idea of what might be possible in the future.

In the technical terms of philosophical knowledge systems, called Epistemology, Karl Popper suggested in 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery' [1926], that we cannot advance our knowledge merely by piecing together known formulas to deduce further information about the world. He said that this only confirms what we already know. In order to advance a theory we must provide evidence that contradicts current knowledge and thereby adds a new slant to the theory. As such, part of the role of imagining a possible future is to suggest possible ways in which existing systems might be wrong. But obviously if we spent our whole time just trying to prove things wrong we would have no time for attempting to discover new ways of being which are a product of inspiration or speculative creativity about what we hope might exist. Of course these two processes could coincide, but the point is to create a new way of looking at life which advances our well-being and development towards ultimate fulfilment.

In the context of my assertions that western culture has significantly, or even catastrophically, diverged from a sustainable course of evolution, I have outlined the case for a wholesale rejection of the fundamental precepts of materialism, and suggested that the way out of the emotional conditioning of the system must come from a rigorous re-evaluation of our lifestyles and expectations of the ecosystem. Following on from that idea I have outlined the way in which traditional oral culture and mythological symbols can be understood in the light of the need for a new means of expression as a way out of the crisis. Whether we choose to revamp old symbols from cultures which had, or maybe still have, closer affinities with nature, or attempt to redefine culture in terms of the ecological imperatives of the present comes down to the depth and authenticity of our vision.

This is the process which I want to attempt to clarify and will now go on to
sketch in some features of how to re-imagine the future in a more sustainable way. Having already used the example of feminist theory as an explanatory model for how conventional concepts can shape our understanding of identity, I want to expand this idea to include a long view of history in terms of how perceptions of ancient symbols both give us a sense of life in the past and also act as a model on which to base a vision of the future. In her book ‘The myth of Matriarchal Prehistory – Why an invented past won’t give women a future’ [2000] Cynthia Eller raises the question both of the authenticity of claims of a Matriarchal Prehistory and also whether the use of such a myth as a model for current thinking adds to the debate.

Her book talks about archaeological evidence of Goddess culture as being an incomplete record and insufficient grounds for the founding of a myth; it also criticises the basis of using unsubstantiated theories of past cultures as a foundation for a positive identity. But for me, although this somehow implies that if the evidence were more complete then the case for using it would be stronger, it essentially misconstrues what we mean by a myth and also therefore the possibility of reinventing it to serve modern needs. I have dealt with this previously so feel there is no need to repeat my ideas about the difference between genuine mythology and the later emasculated versions.

Where this leaves me is with the idea that however thin on the ground are the actual artefacts of Old European culture, which Marija Gimbutas describes in her book 'The Living Godesses' [1999], they are sufficient evidence of some kind of use of a Goddess symbol as an intermediary of our ancestors relationship with nature and the spiritual community which created them. And as the saying goes, 'the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence', meaning that, whatever they might have thought, it cannot be proved either way so our attempt to redefine a semblance of our roots has equal claim as any other theory, given that the vast proportion of artefacts must have disintegrated over time. For me such symbols evoke an immediate emotional response, as do the prehistoric burial chambers of these islands, and it seems equally impossible to say whether these feelings are based on my present need for viable symbols as expressions of my spiritual development; or whether they contain an element of past cultures which we somehow inherit or re-imagine through the very sensations of physical belonging to the same spaces we now inhabit.

Personally such issues are not problematic, especially in light of the indisputable effect that such places and artefacts have on me in my quest for meaning. The clue, I feel, is to realise that if we are trapped in a binary materialist definition of life contoured by the finite boundaries of time and space, then we have to perceive the role of such places as possibly coming from a culture which felt the endurance of ancient spirits more strongly than us. And if not, then they can now at least serve to emancipate us from the narrow constraints of defining nature as a meaningless void, and provide a timeless landscape much more in tune with the rhythm of life than the ugly spectacle of urban industrialism.
This discussion of the role of past cultures prefigures my next topic which is the role of language in memory. From an analysis of how the different types of memory associated with, either the retention of information, or the sensation of an embodied experience, we can go on to look at the way that memory defines who we are in terms of the places we inhabit. From this sense of the dialogical relationship between the energies of the earth and our own role in life as part of the ecosystem, we can view the past as configured by symbolic creations which express a synchronicity of evolution. The backdrop to life is seen in terms of the development of a spiritual outlook; and the needs of a harmonious ecological order define the embodied memory of experience which attempts to align our 'whole' selves with the identity of particular places.

If memory is somehow the depository of knowledge then it must also be the source of our imaginings and thoughts about the world beyond our immediate experience. And without dwelling on the idea that a rational form of memory tends to produce imagined spaces which are synthetic and unnatural, I have evolved an understanding of memory as pertaining more to the emotions than to any capacity for the storage of factual information. Admittedly this displays my natural leanings toward a more intuitive and artistic mode of being, but this is perhaps a crucial distinction in that modern man has evolved along a path of stupendous technical proficiency which, to ramify my previous assertions, actually detracts from his propensity to consider the harmful side effects of materialism.

Be that as it may, I have long been convinced that what distinguishes a more emotional form of memory, which I am defining as the embodiment of sensations rather than the retention of information, is the ability to locate those sensations in particular contexts and to retain to a remarkable degree impressions about that original experience which might seem irrelevant to the general gist of the memory. Therefore my inability to retain the words of a song, for example, does not detract from my ability to remember the tune and the rhythm and minor details about the place when I first heard it. My contention therefore, although I don't want to take it any further, is that a holistic understanding of memory emphasises the sense-data of experience over the factual content of its definition, and uses this stored physical or emotional impression as a reference for a more tangible interpretation of the environment as the natural context of experience. Whether the experience is one totally informed by current needs, or is coloured by past experiences, this perhaps draws the 2 in closer collaboration as the means by which we use the past to aid our imaginings of a possible future.

And to round off this chapter I will attempt to describe what I think the future might look like from the vantage point of a holistic sensibility for the potential development of life on earth. To recap what I said about maintaining an emphasis on imagining a positive vision of the future rather than dwelling on present difficulties, it is nevertheless part of my vision that certain features of the modern world will no longer exist. Perhaps then this process of dynamic optimism is after all a method of bringing our creative energies to bear on the inadequacies of some things about the present, while framing them in light of a
more optimistic vision of a possible world. The lynchpin in the process however is that we have to devise symbolic ways of expressing this vision which reflect the organic and holistic nature of experience. Or more simply, we have to constantly renew our imaginations with the vital energy of our dialogical relationship with nature and the cosmic dimension beyond. That having been said I know in my bones that the future cannot be viable powered by nuclear energy; and also that we have to maintain an awareness of the finite limits of the balance between population and planet.

In terms of a general outlook on the future I feel we have a dual responsibility. On the practical level we are charged with maintaining the planet in an ecologically healthy state for future generations to enjoy. And on the spiritual level we must attempt to hold to the principle of equality and opportunity for all forms of life as a means to ultimate self-realisation. The omega point of the convergence of these two forms is in the recognition that there is indeed an ultimate purpose for life and that everything we do on earth needs to be framed by this meta-concept of purpose. Having suggested the 3-fold categorisation of method as value, meaning, purpose; my technique is to label the particular purpose in a particular context as a subjective 'value' which relates to the ultimate 'purpose' of infinite being, and then we have a kind of intermediate process which is defined as 'meaning', which acts to convert the local into the spiritual and vice versa. The search for meaning then is something which fluctuates between the local and the cosmic in a constant effort to balance the relationship which Herman Hesse described as the paradox between our individual and collective identity.

So finally coming to how to effect this quest in our transition from a destructive and selfish culture to a more communal and creative process, what we are really talking about is our habitation of the earth. If the world was in harmonious balance we could spend hours and hours pondering the mysteries of our navels and the ultimate dimensions of outer space. But the reality is that we have an urgent task to stem the tide of industrial and military despoliation of our home. This is not to suggest that there is no need to maintain a spiritual outlook or even that spirituality is not somehow the ground of practical being in the world. It does however imply that even if the earth could heal itself in the absence of humanity, our perilous predicament is one not just of the disintegration of our relationship with the ecosystem, but equally one of the deterioration of our relations with each other. Naturally, part of the way forward then must be to understand how these 2 categories are linked. And as my own journey with landscape painting told me, sometimes we actually have to take a long hard look at our own state of being in order to recognise some of the side effects of our own discontent in the world outside.

With that idea grasped we can then look to the idea of how we inhabit our spaces. I will look in more detail at a holistic idea of ecology in chapter 8, so here I will deal with the more socially-oriented idea of how we have come to define our cultural identity and economic modes of production in terms of scale. The tendency of man seems to have been one of expansion and efficiencies of large scale production and this concept owes much to the covert
emergence of a patriarchal system of morality which appropriated the means to life as a means of enforcing its authority. Fundamentally it is this institution of the rationalisation of life which has contributed to the monocultural mismanagement of our ecological foundations in nature. As such, the expansion of the human population has been tied to the imperative to dominate other cultures in a competition for the control of the entire surface of the planet.

The vital missing component then is that of the need for natural diversity and a dialogical relationship with nature in which its reproduction capacity is acknowledged. As nuclear expert Helen Caldicott points out in her book 'A Desperate Passion' [1996], natural diversity is maintained on a genetic level by natural background radiation. This fact has the added effect of a warning against the catastrophic consequences of radioactive poisoning, not to mention the countless other forms of industrial pollution which continue to increase and multiply mutations in the human as well as other forms of life. Diversity is the natural mode of evolution but it has to evolve in a symbiotic way with the planet as a whole at its own planetary pace, not the lightning speed of modern genetic manipulation and introduction of species into foreign environments.

On the macrobiotic scale what this means is that we have to reconfigure our communities and knowledge systems to match those of the ecosystem and not continue to impose our synthetic fantasies on a world which is exhausted of its natural resources and depleted of its rare species. We can perhaps draw on bygone pictures of rural or agricultural harmony to inspire us, but we also have the opportunity to re-imagine a world in which the best of our inventiveness can be incorporated into an appreciation for the inherent qualities of nature-left-alone. The key to making this transition is the understanding that what we have now is not a natural ecological balance; it represents millennia of cultural adaptation and evolution. What we need then is a sensitivity to graft our own vision of eco-stasis onto a sustainable theory of nature.

In terms of the structure of our communities it is the human scale which must be foremost; and this must include the sense that all life forms have the right to equal opportunity. On this basis forms of exchange must emphasise inclusivity as a paramount value in the construction of social identity and belonging. On the level of how we understand the wider sphere of human communications beyond the influence of our own home spaces, I feel that the rationalist paradigm, derived largely from the abstractions of maths, ignores the emotional sense of authentic habitation. Is it really necessary to spend vast amounts exploring outer space when billions live in poverty? And do we need to spend equal quantities in pursuit of ultimate definitions of microscopic life forms in the supposed bid to conquer disease and provide limitless energy? Is life not enough? Is there not a way to be naturally healthy and live sustainably on what the planet provides as renewable resources?