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Beyond Ecological Trauma
Aldous Huxley's Theory of Language

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Abstract • Aldous Huxley gained fame as the most cultivated and complex writer of his time. After the publication of *Brave New World* in 1932 his work became increasingly difficult to categorize as it began to cross the boundaries that separate art from science, religion and mysticism. Throughout his literary life he asked us to shift «our collective attention from the merely political to the basic biological aspects of the human situation». He urges us to shift from a nationalistic, warmongering way of thinking to an ecological approach: «Do we propose to live in this planet in symbiotic harmony with our environment? Or, preferring to be wantonly stupid, shall we choose to live like murderous and suicidal parasites that kill their host and so destroy themselves?» (*The Politics of Ecology*). He saw the ecological issues he dealt with as by-products of our world view, anticipating what environmentalists later defined as the 'belief paradigm' of our culture (Sawyer 2008). This paper studies the link Aldous Huxley draws between this 'belief paradigm' and language and how, through a brand-new theory of language, he identifies a pathway out of the ecological trauma that Man has caused. It focuses, in particular, on the four essays he devoted entirely to this theme: *Words and Behavior*, 1936; *Words and Their Meaning*, 1940, *On Languag*e, 1959, and *The Politics of Ecology. The Question of Survival* (1963). The last section of this paper analyses the novel *Island* (1962). It is in this 'utopian' novel, in fact, that he explores in greater depth the themes touched upon in his previous essay-writing. Here the author combines language theory, human narrative talent and ecological concern to build a unique picture which is, arguably, his most important legacy to future generations.

Keywords • Huxley; *Island*; Ecology; Language; Trauma.

Ledizioni

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On 26 July 1894, Aldous Leonard Huxley was born into a unique family. Huxley's grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, was the famous Victorian biologist known as 'Darwin's bulldog' while his great-uncle was the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold. At the end of nineteenth century, his illustrious relatives 'conversed' about the relationship between the 'two cultures', Science and Literature, in two significant speeches at the Annual Meeting of The Royal Academy of Arts.[1] In the speech *Science and Culture* (1883), T. H. Huxley offered a vision of a manifold culture, made up first by science and then by literature, as the only means to achieve a real knowledge of the world. This was the biologist's answer to Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Science* (1881), where the inverted word order underlined the primary importance of literature. Both speeches were attempts to provide a definition, with different nuances, of 'culture' at the end of the literary and industrial era that was the Victorian Age.

The sceptical mind of his grandfather and the Victorian moral ideals of his great-uncle combined in Aldous Huxley to make the author the most learned and complex writer of his time. To anyone familiar with Huxley's family history, it comes as no surprise that, after the publication of *Brave New World* in 1932, his work became increasingly difficult to categorise as it began to go beyond the boundaries that separate art from science, religion and mysticism.

Throughout his literary life he was concerned with one fundamental question, the question his grandfather T.H. Huxley called «the question of questions for mankind»: what is the place «man occupies in nature […]. Whence our race has come; what the limits of our power over nature, and of nature's power over us; to what goal are we tending?».[2] The conclusion he would reach would bring together social and biological sciences, literature and economics, Western philosophy and Eastern technological progress.

Given Huxley's choice of direction (which, as we will see, might be termed an ecological path),[3] it is hardly surprising that Peter Mortensen entitled his 2016 essay on Huxley *Tripping Back to Nature* or that in 2008 Dana Sawyer called him an 'environmental prophet'.

I believe Huxley marks out an 'ecological path' that may enable us to find a way out of the global catastrophe we have caused, partly through our use of language. Throughout his

[1] David. A. Ross, *Matthew Arnold and Thomas Henry Huxley: Two Speeches at the Royal Academy, 1881 and 1883*, «Modern Philology», 74, 3, 1977, pp. 316-324.

[2] Thomas Henry Huxley, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, 1863, quoted in Richard Samuel Deese, *We Are Amphibians. Julian and Aldous Huxley on the Future of our Species*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2015, p. 2.

[3] Since ecology is a a complex and systemic science, the only science able to interconnect the single parts with the whole: «The details of this binding up of ourselves with the world, and of all parts of the world, in a single quasi-organic whole are studied in the science of ecology, which is an extremely recent science […] and has unveiled the basic facts that living organisms exist in exquisitely balanced communities and that this balance can be very easily upset», Aldous Huxley, *More Nature in Art*, in Id., *The Human Situation. Lectures at Santa Barbara 1959*, London, Grafton Book, 1980, p. 40.

essays and novels he develops an unsystematic theory of language: starting from the relationship between language and thought, and the problem of how powerful the manipulation of language has proved to be in power politics, he proceeds to identify in literature and in what we might term the human talent for telling stories the tool we could – or rather have to – use in order to recognize «the relics of the past that still survive», to understand our present and to outline a «doable action aimed at producing the future we want and preventing the future we fear».[4]

In this paper, I will focus first on four essays that are particularly interesting in the way they outline Huxley's 'language theory' and how it is linked to the direction that needed to be taken in order to overcome the ecological crisis looming over twenty-century humanity: *Words and Behavior* (1936), *Words and Their Meanings* (1940), *On Language* (1959) and *The Politics of Ecology. The Question of Survival* (1963). I will then underline how these essays paved the way for Huxley's last novel (*Island*, 1962): it seems to me that Huxley has not only found a way out of the *semantic prisons* that confine us within an anthropocentric worldview but that, in his last utopian dream, he has also provided us with the alternative story we need. He profoundly believed, in fact, that human beings have been failing collectively because of the story we are told in our Judaeo-Christian, technocratic and jingoistic society.

Words and Behavior is the third essay of the collection *The Olive Tree and Other Stories* published in London by Chatto&Windus in 1936. The volume was well received in the anglophone world but, interestingly, did not fare so well in Italy. It was, in fact, expunged from the original volume by its translator, Ada Prospero. Prospero and Croce (who was the editor of the Laterza publishing house in those years) decided not to translate it in order to evade fascist censorship. They thought it was too explicit in the way it dealt with the fundamental role that the rhetoric of power politics plays in shaping people's minds. The essay, in fact, is Huxley's first attempt to link human behaviour with human language. He does not really develop a theory here but, foreshadowing Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) and Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live by* (1980), stresses the ethical and moral value we have to assign to words and to the way in which we use them. The essay is a beautifully written exposition of the misleading use of certain figures of speech: *abstraction*, *personification* and *metaphors*. Huxley shows us how those whom he calls the *ruling minorities* falsify the facts of *war* through these linguistic means and, in so doing, make the people they govern prone to «murder one another in cold blood and without provocation». What is even more interesting, in my opinion, however, is the subtle, though short, analysis of the role that the governed play in this fictitious *game*. In fact, the author chooses to begin the nine-page essay with a short, half-page, introduction: «Words form the thread on which we string our experiences. Without them we should live spasmodically and intermittently» (p. 82).[5]

Here, in the author's view, lies the difference between human beings and animals: «The dumb creation lives a life made up of discreet and mutually irrelevant episodes» while we are «purposeful because we can describe our feelings in rememberable words». The story we tell (or we have been told) makes us different from, though not superior to, other animals. But, if it is true that, thanks to words and sentences, we can remember 'love' and 'hate' and persevere in a task, and that «words give continuity to what we do and to a

[4] Marge Piercy, *Telling*, quoted in Raffaella Baccolini, *The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction*, «PMLA», 119, 3, 2004, p. 519.

[5] The quotations from *Words and Behavior* are from Huxley, *Words and Behavior*, in Id., *The Olive Tree*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1936. From now on, the quotations will be followed by page number.

considerable extent determine our direction», then it follows that: «If, as so often happens, we choose to give continuity to our experience by means of words which falsify the facts, this is because the falsification is somehow to our advantage as egotists» (p. 83).

Here Huxley is referring to the fine but crucial line between a 'mistake' and a 'sin'. In his view:

> War is enormously discreditable to those who order it to be waged and even to those who merely tolerate its existence. […] to developed sensibilities the facts of war are revolting and horrifying. To falsify these facts, and by so doing to make war seem less evil than it really is, and our own responsibility in tolerating the war less heavy, is doubly to our advantage. By suppressing and distorting the truth, we protect our sensibilities and preserve our self-esteem. […] Finding the reality of war too unpleasant to contemplate, we create a verbal alternative to that reality, parallel with it, but in quality quite different from it. That which we contemplate thenceforward is not that to which we react emotionally and upon which we pass our moral judgements, is not war as it is in fact, but the fiction of war as it exists in our pleasantly falsifying verbiage. Our stupidity in using inappropriate language turns out, on analysis, to be the most refined cunning (p. 84).

The sugar-coated depiction of war is the fiction required to deliberately keep on doing what we do but ought not to do.

The *fil rouge* that he traces here interweaves two key ideas that Huxley will eventually explore in greater depth in his later work: the first is the peculiar human ability to create stories and the second is how these stories can mould, and even create, a mindset. Before cognitive linguistics (which originated in the 1960's) Huxley realised that the revolution which enabled *Homo Sapiens* to rule over the world he inhabits was a product of the fictions he is able to tell. Through our ability to tell stories, we have been able to believe, collectively, in myths and legends and, as a consequence, to work together in order to make those fictions true.[6] This extraordinary power that language gives to human beings had already been identified by Locke and Hume in the eighteenth century, but what for them were «perfect cheats»,[7] for Huxley are the powerful instruments human beings use to destroy themselves or, conversely, to support their hope for a brave new wonderful world, as we will see in the analysis of *Island*.[8]

[6] As Yuval Noah Harari points out in his book *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, UK, Signal, Random House of Canada, Apple Book, 2014.

[7] «In discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from [figurative speech] can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for something else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheats», John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human* understanding, III, 34, 1690.

[8] It is also worth noting that Huxley had read the writings of Wilhelm Von Humboldt (whom he often quotes unsystematically in his work) and might have read Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis about linguistic relativity. But while they focus their studies on how the structure of each language affects its speaker's worldview and on the importance of a diachronic and historical study of languages, Huxley overtly builds his argument on a less methodical and less *scientific* basis without dwelling on a particular language and, as, I have mentioned before, emphasises the responsibility each speaker has in using language, in contrast with the «naïve acceptance of fixed habit of speech» that Sapir stresses in *The Grammarian and His Language* (1924), in Id., *Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. by David G. Mandelbaum, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1949, pp. 150-159.

Aldous Huxley develops and expands his interest in language in the essay *Words and Their Meanings*. Written in 1940 for the audience of a Southern California book club, it was published by Ward Ritchie Press.[9] The essay returns to the themes of *Words and Behavior*, but also deals with two other fundamental key ideas: the relationship between the world of experience and the world of words, and the idea that only through careful use of language, might human beings be able to change the state of the world they live in.

As regards the relationship between what Huxley calls the *super-universe of direct experience* and the *super-universe of words*, he writes:

> Human beings are the inhabitants, not of one universe, but of many universes. They are able to move at will from the world, say, of atomic physics to the world of art, from the universe of discourse called 'chemistry' to the universe of discourse called 'ethics'. Between these various universes philosophy and science have not as yet succeeded in constructing any bridges. […] the only connection between these various universes consists in the fact that we are able to talk about all of them (p. 15).

Here lies the core of Huxley's thought. And, in fact, it seems to me that it is here that Huxley plants the seeds of the two metaphors which he will develop throughout his whole literary life: the metaphor of the *amphibian* and the metaphor of *pontifex*. For him, 'amphibian' has a general meaning of living in multiple realms; in order to make the best of these realms (or worlds) we need a *pontifex*, a bridge builder,[10] a Man able to integrate both our biological inheritance (which is linked with the universe of direct experience) and our latent spirituality (linked with the universe of words):

> […] we are both intellect and passion, our minds have both objective knowledge of outer world and subjective experience. To discover methods of bringing these separate worlds together, to show the relationship between them, is I feel, the most important task of modern education (p. 15).[11]

While the amphibian metaphor may be the most powerful explanation of his complex and holistic vision, the closely linked metaphor of pontifex will show how it is possible, through what we have termed the *human talent for narrative*, to connect the various universes into an organic whole.

Huxley believes that this task can be accomplished only by those who are able to use words properly and accurately, that is by «Men of letters», who are able to fictionalize the facts thanks to their *verbal recklessness*:

[9] A small publishing house created by Harry Ritchie, an American printer, book designer and book-collector who befriended Huxley during his stay in California. The quotations from *Words and Their Meanings* are from Aldous Huxley, *Words and Their Meanings*, New York, RIT Press, 2018. From now on, the quotations will be followed by page number.

[10] «We have an interesting word, *pontifex*, or bridge builder. […] In a religious context *pontifex* means builder of a bridge between Earth and Heaven, between the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine. The whole idea of the *pontifex*, the bridge builder, is a very profitable one, and we can meditate upon and make use of it in a very productive way. The function of the literary man in the present context, is precisely to build bridges between art and science, between objectively observed facts and immediate experience, between morals and scientific appraisal», Huxley, *Integrate Education*, in Id., *The Human Situation*, cit., p. 10.

[11] The urge for an integrated education will be at the roots of the utopic society described in *Island*, where the education system aims at the development of *human beings* and not of specialized technicians.

> Verbal recklessness opens unsuspected windows onto the unknown. By using liberated world-ideas in a reckless way, the poet can express, can evoke, can create potentialities of experience hitherto unrecognized or perhaps non-existent, can discover aspects of the essential mystery of existence, which otherwise would never have emerged.[12]

The value Huxley assigns to the Man of Letters and his unique ability to connect and intertwine different universes is unquestionable[13]: it is in literature that Huxley sees the way out from what, in *Island* and in *The Politics of Ecology*, he will call our «sub-human lot».

As we have highlighted, the author links his ideas on language (its close relationship with thoughts and behavior)[14] with a sort of theory of evolution, where our human genius for telling stories plays a fundamental role. It will only be after the 1940's that Huxley will start to combine language theory, human narrative talent and ecological concern into an integrated whole.

From 1937 to 1963 Aldous Huxley lived in California. It was there that he had the opportunity to become familiar with two of the first American ecologists, William Vogt and Fairfield Osborn, and with Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*.[15] These and other relationships led Huxley to realise that the science of ecology was complex and systemic, the only science able to interconnect the single parts with the whole.[16] It was in California that he held a series of university lectures, later collected in the volume *The Human Situation* (1959), in which he brings together his interest in language and his ecological sensitivity.

In the essay *On Language*, which is the transcript of his eleventh lecture, he again runs through his key ideas about the relationship between language, thought, and behaviour, though he adds notes on how human beings have ruled and prevailed over nature through language and, as a result, how:

> One becomes terribly oppressed by the awful humanization of nature. One has a sense of being boxed into a world where everything has a suffocating feeling of humanity instead of being other than humanity.[17]

Our signs and symbols could tell an «all too human story», could (and really do) create what he in this essay calls «semantic prisons», in which we voluntarily confine ourselves. But what is more interesting here is how from this point on Aldous Huxley saw environmental issues (such as the relationships between over-population and global resources or

[12] Huxley, *Literature and Science*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1963, p. 32.

[13] Cfr. Chiara Battisti, *Civiltà come manipolazione, cultura come redenzione in* Brave New World *e* Metropolis, Ravenna, Longo editore, 2004, pp. 171-179.

[14] Cfr. Jesùs Gerardo Martinez del Castillo, *Aldous Huxley's Concern for Language: An Analysis of 'Words and Their Meanings in the Light of Eugenio Coseriu' s Philosophy of Language*, «Aldous Huxley Annual», 10/11, 2011, pp. 253-284.

[15] *Silent Spring*, published on September 27, 1962, documents the environmental effects caused by the indiscriminate use of DDT in United States.

[16] Cfr. Vita Fortunati, *Aldous Huxley. Una visione di una società ecologica e pacifista*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2017, pp. 7-27.

[17] Huxley, *On Language*, in Id., *The Human Situation*, cit., p. 176. What he is suggesting in this essay is to consider some of the ideas of Indian philosophy, in particular the Buddhist concept of *nama-rupa*: «Indian philosophers have always affirmed that the thing which creates our specific human world is what they call *nama-rupa* (name-and-form). Name may be defined as subjectivized form and form is the projection of name into the outer world, and the two create for human beings this world of separate objects existing in time» (p. 171). Name and form engender a *profusion* which could be *terribly confusing* if not read and organized through our signs and symbols. Huxley's goal is to trace a path towards a fusion of the Western pragmatic approach to language and the Eastern *nama-rupa*.

the risk of pollution and depletion of top-soils) as by-products of the world view our society has built up through a misuse of language and a falsified story, of what he called *Weltanschauung* (in *Science, Liberty and Peace*), or what environmentalists (the second wave of environmentalists) call the *belief paradigm* of our culture: «A constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality».[18]

It is no coincidence, then, that the entry for the word *ecology* in the *OED* has two sets of meanings and the second mentions Aldous Huxley by name. The first is: «The science of the economy of animals and plants; that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life, etc.»; the second is: ««Used *attrib.* (and *absol.*) with reference to ecological issues such as industrial pollution considered in a political context; *spec.* applied to various political movements (esp. in western Europe) which represent the environmental or 'green' interest».[19] In reference to the second entry, the *OED* quotes «1963 A. Huxley (title) The Politics of Ecology» as the earliest recorded evidence for the use of the word ecology in this sense. In fact, it is in this paper, that Huxley gives us a detailed definition of *ecology*: «Ecology is the science of the mutual relations of organisms with their environment and with one another». The definition broadens Ernst Haeckel's of 1866, where the word ecology was used to «describe the complex web of relationships between living things and their environment». While in Haeckel's definition human beings were not assumed to be *things* and the *environment* was understood as everything that surrounded the *living things*, in Huxley's these two assumptions are radically altered. On the one hand, Aldous Huxley was profoundly convinced that living things, including human beings, were not mere things but «parts of a vast living organism»; on the other hand he alters the relationship between the environment and Man, making it two-directional. The Judaeo-Christian worldview that had divorced mankind from nature has been replaced by a return to a greater intimacy between the human race and nature.[20]

The essay *The Politics of Ecology*: *A Question of Survival* was published by *The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions* in 1963.[21] It sums up Huxley's ideas about ecology and suggests how twentieth-century man could respond to the ecological trauma by changing his (or her) *Weltanschauung.* In order to tackle the crisis the planet (and humankind on the planet) is facing, we have to realise that «the basic problem confronting twentieth-century man is an ecological problem» and, as a consequence, we have to make a choice: «[…] shifting our attention from the now completely irrelevant and anachronistic politics of nationalism and military power to the problems of the human species and the still inchoate politics of human ecology […]» (p. 122).[22]

Huxley urges us to develop a completely new way of thinking; he asks us to shift «our collective attention from the merely political to the basic biological aspects of the human

[18] Dana Sawyer, *Brave New World-View: Aldous Huxley, Environmental Prophet*, «Aldous Huxley Annual», 8, 2008, p. 223.
[19] *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, vol. V, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989.
[20] Cfr. Fortunato, *How to Escape a Subhuman Lot: Aldous Huxley's* The Politics of Ecology – The Question of Survival, «Aldous Huxley Annual», 19, 2019, p. 105.
[21] The quotations from *The Politics of Ecology. The Question of Survival* are from Huxley, *The Politics of Ecology. The Question of Survival,* in *Aldous Huxley Annual. A Journal of Twentieth-Century Thought and Beyond*, vol. 19, ed. by Bernfield Nugel and Jerome Meckier, Zurich, Lit Verlang, 2019, pp. 113-124. From now on, the quotations will be followed by page number.
[22] Aldous Huxley's elder brother was Julian Huxley, the first director-general of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the founder of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

situation» (*PE*, 6). We have to pose ourselves a different set of questions, we have to shift from a nationalistic, warmongering way of thinking («Which is the best nation? The best religion? The best form of government? […]») to an ecological one: «how does the human race propose to survive and, if possible, improve the lot and the intrinsic quality of its individual members? Do we propose to live in this planet in symbiotic harmony with our environment? Or, preferring to be wantonly stupid, shall we choose to live like murderous and suicidal parasites that kill their host and so destroy themselves?» (*Ibidem*). These questions are addressed to all humankind and they can be answered only through a collective (narrative) effort. The answers to this set of questions will involve telling a brand-new story, a new story that Huxley gives us in his last novel, *Island*.

The novel depicts his vision of a human society based upon religious fulfilment and ecological sustainability.[23] Pala, the name of the island, is the result of the integrated vision of its two founders: the nineteenth-century Palanese king Murugan (who represents the Eastern tradition) and the British navy surgeon Andrew MacPhail (representing Western science). Murugan's meditation and Buddhist ethic of moderation and yoga are counterbalanced by Mac Phail's scientific method, birth control and modern medicine. Palanese society is a pacifist society (ruled by the wise Old Raja) based upon a small-scale economy[24] which follows the call made in *The Politics of Ecology*, but, in the end, it will not be able to hold out against invasion by Colonel Dipa (head of the military government of the neighbouring nation).

It is in this *utopian* novel[25] that Huxley answers the questions he raised in *Brave New World* about the «incompatibility of industrial society with humanist aspirations».[26] The small-scale communitarianism that is the basis of government in Pala, in fact, represents his ideal society, a sort of reversed brave new world,[27] «composed of freely cooperating individuals devoted to the pursuit of sanity».[28] The protagonist, Will Farnaby, is a journalist sent by the magnate John Aldehyde to find new oil-drilling sites to buy in the Indian Ocean. During his stay in Pala, Will, like the most typical of utopian characters, will discover a society and a philosophy very different from and superior to his own but, unlike in literary

[23] It is no coincidence that Serge Latouche in his book *Degrowth Before Degrowth. Precursors and Companions* includes Huxley among the forerunners of degrowth, or that Bill Deval and George Sessions cite Huxley's last novel as the work that articulated the principles of Deep Ecology. Cfr. Fortunati, *op. cit.*, 2017.

[24]Huxley had recommended, in *Science, Liberty and Peace* a decentralized economy based on the agrarian reformer Ralph Brosodi's model and the detachment between the production and consumption of 'goods' and 'well-fare' (and of 'well-being').

[25] Huxley himself describes it as «a kind of reverse *Brave New World*… a Topian rather than a phantasy, a phantasy dealing with a place, a *real place* and a *time*, rather than a phantasy dealing with *no* place and time», quoted in Sybille Belford, *Aldous Huxley, A Biography*, vol. 2, London, Chatto and Windus, 1964, p. 241.

[26] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History. A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 379.

[27] Set in the year A.F. 632 (after Ford) *Brave New World* (1932) describes a world where famine, ageing, poverty and sadness have been defeated thanks to genetic engineering and psychological conditioning. Two billion human beings happily standardized and 'programmed' to be satisfied by what they can buy live in a consumerist society where even sex and arts are commodities. In *Brave New World* everybody is happy, the goodness of the name εύ-τοπος is so perfect that it becomes suffocating: there is no space for any form of alterity or diversity, no space for complexity. In other words, there is no space for that multifaceted heterogeneity which is the essential quality of human beings.

[28] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London, Vintage Books, 2007, pp. xliii-xliv.

utopias, Will Farnaby is also a wounded man who, through a psychological journey, undertakes a path of self-redemption. Huxley links individual growth with social renewal. The novel is structured around a long journey through Will's repressed trauma. His repressed and half-forgotten memories can be glimpsed in the parallel plot centred on the social and ecological crisis the world was undergoing.

From the very first page we are introduced to the wilderness of the beautiful island where the voice of a *mynah* bird with its warning cry «Attention!» creeps into the consciousness of the shipwrecked Farnaby. The protagonist is only half-awake and in his brain-fog the warning merges with his past memories: a name of a woman, *Molly*. Huxley opens «a window inside his head» (p. 1)[29] and allows us to spy on Will's «horribly familiar sense of guilt at the pit of the stomach» (p. 1). The story proceeds through the typical utopian dialogic device:[30] the traveller speaking with the natives. The first person Farnaby meets is a young girl, Mary; the clash between the two cultures (Eastern and Western) permeates their first dialogue:

> "Listen, Will," she said, laying a hand on his forehead. "We've got to get rid of this." Her tone was professional and calmly authoritative. "I wish I knew how," he said between chattering teeth. "How?" she repeated. "But in the usual way, of course. Tell me again about those snakes and how you fell down." He shook his head. "I don't want to." "Of course you don't want to," she said. "but you've got to. Listen to what the mynah's saying." "Here and now, boys," the bird was still exhorting. "Here and now, boys." "You can't be here and now," she went on, "until you've got rid of those snakes. Tell me (p. 16).

While in Will's recollection the remote voice of the dead Molly intertwines with the recent memory of his shipwreck and he refuses to give voice to either of his disturbing memories, Mary exhorts him to work through[31] his trauma, to experience it again and again with the help of words and his human talent to put them on the «thread on which we string our experience».[32]

Mary knows that, in order to heal a wound and cure the injured psyche, one can only uncover and extract the unbearable memories as if they were «a thorn in the spirit».[33] From this point on Farnaby will try to cover his painful 'thorn' while, page after page, his indigenous interlocutors (Mary, Susila, Dr MacPhail) will show him how to go beyond and overcome his individual traumas by giving them voice, letting them exist, putting them in a narrative which can give them meaning, shape and a place in his life. Farnaby's disarticulated

[29] The quotations from *Island* are from Aldous Huxley, *Island*, London, Penguin, 2005. From now on, the quotations will be followed by page number.
[30] Northrop Frye defines it as «a Socratic dialogue» in *The Stubborn Structure. Essays on Criticism and society*, London and New York, Methuen, 1970, p. 10.
[31] The *working-through* is the translation of Freud's *Durcharbeitung*. He used the term in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) "to describe a repetitive, lengthy psychic process – work – during which the resistances affecting a patient are overcome, at least partly", cfr. Jean-Michel Ganteau, *Working-Through*, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, ed. by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 131.
[32] Huxley, *Words and Behavior*, cit., p. 82.
[33] «In 1984, Reviewing the work of Breuer, Janet, and Freud in the inaugural issue of *Psychological Review*, William James compared what they called trauma to a 'thorn in the spirit' – an evocative image that equates trauma to a foreign object that becomes lodged in the psyche, like a wound that is covered over and rendered invisible but that continues to fester and cause problems and that can only be truly treated by being uncovered and extracted», J. Roger Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 3.

self accompanies us throughout the novel. The author interrupts the flow of the plot by allowing Will's overwhelming past to emerge here and there in the narrative. In this way, Huxley seems to achieve the goal of drawing a parallel between the inner and intimate trauma on the one hand and the outer, global, ecological, political and social trauma on the other. Throughout the novel, in fact, Will finds himself listening to the history of the constitutional monarchy of Pala, discovering that its educational system is based on a continuous learning process in which mind and body have the same relevance and that it aims to train individuals instead of physicians, mathematicians, economists, philosophers, and so on:[34]

> "So you take digging and delving as a form of therapy?" "As prevention – to make therapy unnecessary. In Pala even a professor, even a government official generally puts in two hours of digging and delving each day." (p. 143)

In a sort of Morrisean[35] dream, Huxley depicts a society where the gap between soul and body has been bridged, where hunger and overpopulation do not exist thanks to birth control and where violence and crime have been defeated through conditioning and drugs.[36] In this half utopian, half dystopian novel, the relationship between human beings and the environment maintains a perfect balance:

> […] how early do you start your science teaching?" "We start it at the same time as we start multiplication and division. First lessons in ecology." "Ecology? Isn't that a bit complicated?" "That's precisely the reason why we begin with it. Never give children a chance of imagining that anything exists in isolation. Make it plain from the very first that all living is relationship. Show them relationships in the woods, in the fields, in the ponds and streams, in the village and the country around it (p. 211).

But this perfect balance does not suffice to save Pala from being conquered and despoiled by Western consumerism at the end of the novel.

While Pala will be wiped out by the culture of economic globalization, Will Farnaby will be cured from his trauma, suggesting that «mankind's great problems» cannot «be solved humanely on a global scale»,[37] Huxley's answer to the ecological and political crisis

[34] «I see now what the Old Raja was talking about. You can't be a good economist unless you're also a good psychologist. Or a good engineer without being the right kind of metaphysician." "And don't forget all the other sciences," said Dr Robert. "Pharmacology, sociology, physiology, not to mention pure and applied autology, neurotheology, metachemistry, mycomysticism, and the ultimate science," […] "the science that sooner or later we shall all have to be examined in – thanatology» (p. 141).

[35] William Morris describes in *News from Nowhere* (1890) what today would be called an ecological society based upon three 'hopes': hope of rest, hope of product, and hope of pleasure. A moneyless economy where production and demand are disconnected and each citizen alternates between manual and intellectual labour. Cfr. Paddy O' Sullivan, *The Ending of the Journey: William Morris, 'News from Nowhere' and Ecology*, in *William Morris and News from Nowhere. A Vision of our Time*, ed. by Stephen Coleman and Paddy O' Sulliven, Totnes (Devon), Green Books, 2004, pp. 169-181.

[36] Drugs are distributed to some psychological profiles and body types identified through the system devised by William Herbert Sheldon for classifying human character types.

[37] Claeys, *op. cit.*, p. 385. It is also worth noting how Claeys, in the paper presented at the last *Utopian Studies Society* international congress, revised this idea underlining the tight link between the organization of society and utopian/dystopian literature. In his talk he stresses the fundamental role played by literature in shaping new worlds based on *belongingness* instead of contemporary

here seems to rely on private and individual spiritual growth rather than on wider politics. The protagonist will eventually learn how to cope with his psychological wound, how to deal with Molly's death, thanks to language and narrative. In the final chapters Will will tell both Susila and himself what happened in his past, «say out loud the shameful things he must at all costs keep to himself» (p. 230): he had broken up with Molly, outside it was raining, Molly had left their house and that very night she had a car accident. She died. But he was not wounded by her death, he was wounded by his *shameful exultation* (p. 231), because that night, at the very moment in which Molly closed the door behind herself,

> […] he wanted to call her back. But Babs's lover remembered the skills, the reflexes, and, within its aura of musk, a body agonizing in the extremity of pleasure. Remembered these things and, standing at the window, watched her car move away through the rain, watched and was filled as it turned the corner, with a shameful exultation (p. 231).

By recounting his guilt in a narrative, he becomes able to recognize «the fact of the ending of sorrow as well as the fact of sorrow» (p. 285): to quote Freud, a healthy *mourning* and not a pathological *melancholy*.[38] The images that haunted Will have been given a voice, acknowledged and remembered and, as a consequence, he is now freed from his semantic prisons. The open ending of the novel, in which Pala is «destroyed in a single night» while Farnaby is freed from his individual trauma is Huxley's last plea to the reader.[39] Unlike the tragic finale to *Brave New World*, here the author marks out a narrow space between the dark horizon we are heading toward as a society and the hope put in every single human being's capacity to pass through their own trauma, accepting their responsibilities and its consequences in «a living relation with the present» and thus «begin to lay foundations for utopian change».[40] It is not surprising then that in the very last line of *Island* we still hear, amid Pala's ruins, the 'mynah's call: «"Karuna. Karuna." And, a semi-tone lower, "Attention"» (p. 286).

alienation and on sustainability instead of consumerism. He quoted from his forthcoming book *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022, p. 73: «there exists an intimate relationship between sociability, our relations with other people and the sense of belonging we seek to achieve in these, and our attitude towards objects and consumption. This is where approaches to luxury, consumerism, sociability, and groups intersect» and gave us a composite definition of utopianism: «Utopianism is the projection of both imagined and real ideal groups which embody the feeling of belongingness expressed as literature, theory, or international community. The functions of utopia are to represent a necessarily unattainable state of betterment, which always recedes before us but provides us with critical alternatives to the present, and to describe ideal past or projected future societies.in its content it promotes an enhanced sociability defined by friendship, neighborliness, acquaintance, communality, and solidarity, commencing with an attitude of benign neutrality but aspiring to stronger and more egalitarian, but still consensual, bonds. These goals are summarized in the concept of belongingness, which is the opposite of that form of alienation that is defined by the sense of not fitting into and feeling apart of our environment. In the degree to which we achieve it, the dominant principles of dystopia, loneliness and fear, are reduced».

[38] Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and melancholia* [1917], in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey *et al.*, London, The Hogarth Press, vol. XIV, 1953, pp. 243-258.

[39] Leopardi in *Zibaldone* 3448-3460 explains how the happy ending is an illusion that the original order of a story has been restored. Without a happy ending, the reader 's discontent goes beyond the book and he is pushed towards action in his real world. An open ending creates a desire in the reader to oppose and contest. Cfr. Francesco Muzzioli, *Scritture della catastrofe. Istruzioni e ragguagli per un viaggio nelle distopie*, Milano, Meltemi, 2021, pos. 194.

[40] Baccolini, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

A final reckoning: if Farnaby is able to work through his trauma and to fix the breach it has caused in the defensive wall of his psyche,[41] it is not only as a result of what we can call his 'post-traumatic rehabilitation' but also thanks to the brief treatise *Notes on What's What* written by the Old Raja, which he reads throughout the novel. In the published version of the novel it was radically altered and cut, leaving the flow of *Island* fragmented and sometimes disjointed. In *We Are Amphibians. Julian and Aldous Huxley on the Future of our Species* (2015), Deese examines the original unbridged draft of the novel and brings to light a number of interesting passages where the theme of semiotics is strictly linked with our relationship to our ecological niche and, it seems to me, to our modern collective trauma. On the one hand, the treatise teaches him how to use language in order both to acknowledge reality without fighting it and to cope with the complex relationship between the *super-universe of direct experience* and the *super-universe of words* through the Buddhist concept of *namarupa*. We hear McPhail's cry:

> Teach them that individual things exist in their own right and are not merely concrete illustrations of abstract words. Teach them a little later about the creation of our human world by nama-rupa, name and form. Teach them too that things owe their thing-hood to the names we assign to the class of which they are members. Teach them that what is given is always a profusion of relationships, for which names do not exist or are woefully inadequate.

And Old Raja's conclusion:

> Teach them, above all, to take no arrangement of words too seriously. It is fatally easy to kill in the name of a dogma; it is blessedly difficult to kill in the name of a minimum working hypothesis.[42]

On the other hand, if «trauma is responsive to and constitutive of 'modernity'» for the growing mechanization of everyday life,[43] then Will Farnaby is the result of the modern Western world he inhabits. The protagonist, as pointed out above, is wounded not only by his personal life experience but also by the ever-accelerating, consumerist, warmongering culture he lives in. Summing up what Huxley had explained in his essay-writing, Old Raja stresses the 'magic' power of human language to enable us to behave in nobler but also much more atrocious ways than any other species:

> Language relates individuals to their culture; but may relate them so devouringly that they lose the capacity to be spontaneously creative themselves. Language provides us all with a character and a *persona*; but the mask has a way of sticking to the face, the character overlays the temperament and if it is ill chosen […] clashes with what we congenially are, so that we are forced to spend our best energies in an endless, pointless, utterly fruitless civil war.[44]

[41] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principles* [1920], in *op. cit.*, vol. XVIII, 1955, pp. 7-64.
[42] In Deese, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-167.
[43] «Nineteenth-century modernity is characterized by the shock of unprecedented social change, including widespread industrialization and urbanization, new political alignments, the rise of nation-states, increasingly capitalistic and imperial relations, the establishment of legal precedence for accident insurance, and technological innovations like the telegraph, electricity, steam engines, and photography. Although these changes all play a vital role in emerging trauma discourse, prepsychoanalytic medical and literary discourse about trauma unfolds against the embodiment of these forces of modernity: the railway», Karolyne Steffens in Kurtz, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
[44] In Deese, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

Old Raja underlines the danger concealed inside the human capacity for making symbols. Going back to the essay *On Language*, the risk is that our language describes an *all-too-human story* but, on the other hand, it gives us the opportunity to build up fictions and to collectively believe in those fictions.

While language has made Farnaby the product of his culture, the novel *Island*, I believe, represents Aldous Huxley's narrative attempt to build a *collective delusion*[45] through which human beings might tear off their mask and put on a new one in order to find a way out of the ecological trauma they have caused, to take action and perhaps even to change the world we inhabit.

[45] Margaret Atwood, *Payback. Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2009.