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## **Reconceiving the British Isles: The Literature of the Archipelago**

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### 'I have only one culture; and it is not mine': Professions of English Diaspora?

Where I live, on Sunday mornings in spring and early summer I can hear two sounds, one natural, the other technological: sheep, lambs and church bells combine, in rhythmic and arrhythmic canon and counterpoint. It is an aural image, unchanged more or less for several hundred years. It is disrupted only by the interruption of an incoming cut-price flight, making its final descent into East Midlands Airport. However brief the access to the sempiternal is, it remains, nevertheless, as if a moment in time were both opened and suspended, as if I were witness to the voices of a cyclical, communal temporality, voices which have a ground, and which give ground to identity and a sense of being in the same location. In hearing this, my momentary conceit is that I am joined to all those, living and dead, who have heard something similar, and who have therefore been marked by, and have left their otherwise anonymous marks on location. Neither a moment of unbroken continuity nor one of sundered discontinuity, but instead an instant in which, *through which*, there is the analogical apperception of a ghostly contiguity.

In such gatherings of sound or in other remnants that persist, any given place is marked as a site of memory, location as archive, being both witness and recording of the times. Such sites exist, and are revealed in their true condition, 'as arenas in which lives are lived...[and] as images of how private and communal life could be conducted' (Davie 1998, 243). In these and other *aletheic* instances, the articulation and apprehension of other identities are made available. Dissenting or, at least, alternative English identities emerge, given representation through their impress on the landscape. Unable to read such signs completely, one may perhaps gain insight into a mode of registration for cultural memory: that which passes leaves its traces to be read by future generations, and its 'dissent' remains to be read in the memory work of oral forms and the occasional literary manifestation as the gathering of the signs and voices of some other in danger of occlusion or obliteration. This affirmation registers as the remainder that survives.

Dissent may of course be *just* the registration of an alternative identity that apprehends its no longer having a home, the expression of a voice at variance with the times, the voice as both *contretemps* and countersignature. Thomas Hardy gives early expression to this in *Under the Greenwood Tree* most directly in the words of Michael Mail, who delivers the opinion that "'times have changed from the times they used to be'" (Hardy 1998a, 22), a sentiment echoed somewhat more polemically in a song by that famous composer, Anonymous, 'Hard Times of Old England'.

Come all brother tradesmen that travel along  
O pray, come and tell me where the trade is all gone  
Long time have I travelled, and I cannot find none

(Chorus) And sing all the hard times of old England  
In old England, very hard times

Provisions you buy at the shop, it is true  
But if you've no money, there's none there for you  
So what's a poor man and his family to do?

Chorus

You must go to the shop and you'll ask for a job  
They'll answer you there with a shake and a nod  
And that's enough to make a man turn out and rob

Chorus

You will see the poor tradesmen a-walking the street  
From morning to night for employment to seek  
And scarce have they got any shoes to their feet

Chorus

Our soldiers and sailors have just come from war  
Been fighting for Queen and country this year  
Come home to be starved, better stayed where they were

Chorus

And now to conclude and to finish my song  
Let us hope that these hard times will not last long  
I hope soon to have occasion to alter my song, and sing  
Oh, the good times of old England  
In old England, jolly good times!

With its reference to a return from war, the song issues a voice that remains all too timely, though the reference to itinerant tradesmen unable to find work, having been cashiered, points us to the experience of many following the Napoleonic Wars. As with all such songs, this has travelled down to the present day, given a lyric pertinent to a present by Billy Bragg, in which villages are gentrified, post offices closed, and farmers are no longer able to sell crops as a result of 'agribusiness' and agribarons.

More and more of our village gets sold everyday  
To folks from the city who are happy to pay  
For their holiday cottage to stand empty all day  
(Chorus) And it's oh the hard times of old England  
In old England very hard times.

The Countryside Alliance expects, I suppose,  
My support when they're marching to bloody Brown's nose  
But they said not a word when our post office closed

(Chorus) And sing all the hard times of old England  
In old England, very hard times

In this survival, and its transformation, we can trace nearly two hundred years of diaspora.

Almost a century after Thomas Hardy wrote under *The Greenwood Tree*, and wrote of enclosures that 'the landlord leases land more & more frequently to capitalist farmers' (Hardy 2004, 3), Ronald Blythe records similar sentiments throughout *Akenfield*, the chronicle of a Suffolk village which charts loss and dispersal. One voice especially stands out, Sammy Whitelaw, a farrier and church bell-ringer, who by his own admission was 'bell-mad' (Blythe 2005, 77). Sammy's memory of ringing changes—that singularly English practice, where tuned bells are rung in a series of mathematical patterns or changes without the production of a tune—includes the recollection of having to climb the bell tower to strike the bell with a hammer, the ropes being out of commission. This was done so as to mark the death of Billy, 'one of the old people' Sammy says, 'who have gone and who have taken a lot of the truth out of the world with them' (Blythe 2005, 78). As in other villages, the bell was rung so that 'all could hear the passing and take note' (Blythe 2005, 78). At the same time, Billy's wife went to the bottom of the garden to tell the bees that Billy was dead; for, this rural practice has it, if the bees are not told of the death of their keeper, they die also.

Change ringing connects Sammy Whitelaw in 1969 to 'Eight Carriford men and one stranger' (Hardy 1998a, 401) who occupy the belfry of Carriford Church on Midsummer Night, 1867. Carriford is the fictive name for West Stafford, a village midway between Dorchester and East Lulworth, just south of Tolpuddle. In this scene, the epilogue to Thomas Hardy's first published novel, *Desperate Remedies*, the nine bell-ringers are represented in the act of ringing changes, which performance is presented by Hardy in present tense (Hardy 1998b, 401). Captured in an endless 'now', as if representation and witness were conjoined in a singular and ineluctable performative and represented through a 'blue, phosphoric and ghostly' illumination (Hardy 1998a, 401), this is just one of countless midsummer's nights. The narrative acknowledges the cyclical, iterable moment, in the affirmation that this has been 'music to the ears of Carriford Parish and the outlying districts for the last four hundred years' (Hardy 1998b, 401).

Every voice, from John Barleycorn or John Ball (not John Bull) to Michael Mail or Sammy Whitelaw, is both counterblast and broadcast: a cry affirming its meagre existence in the face of that which would deny it, move it on, displace it or silence it for ever; a voice transmitted, spread and scattered, unknowing of where its traces might take root, or which ears will receive it. Everything is risked on *and* in the voice, in the fiction of a single voice, imagining a single voice that carries the burden, both morally and musically,

of innumerable others. Dissenting always from accommodation within European impositions and the forces of Enlightenment, the verdict of the English voice is heard as it broadcasts an affirmation of itself and what Hélène Cixous has called 'Anglo-Saxon penumbra' (Cixous 1998, 172).

With all such shades and what they might have to whisper in mind, the more one looks and listens, the more one finds evidence everywhere, in historical detail and event obviously, but most insistently through the very weave of language itself, in particular words but also in those voices testifying in so many singular professions, of an English diaspora. Despite their having being broadcast, these diasporic voices are still on the air. The voices clamour for attention, demanding a concerted, yet disconcerting remembrance. One finds oneself haunted by their revenance gathering force under the heading of a diaspora that one could speak of as 'English', and of which one might speak in response to the many and various identities captured in singular attestation of different experiences of being English. The voices appear to me all the more insistent because they have never been spoken of in terms of diaspora, they have never been gathered within a shared if occluded ontology, whilst retaining the traces of their singularity, and marked by their differences from one another.

Such voices spoke in their times—and they continue to speak, remaining to be heard—from sites, from different grounds which gave to those voices a place and a meaning, and which place and sense was at one or another historical moment irreparably transformed. Now of course, there are names for the many historical events and irreparable acts of violation and dispossession of which I am thinking, names that serve as short-hand for the barbarity, oppression, and displacement that makes up so much of English history and what it means to be English. Of course, the very word, history, bears in it 'the theme of a final repression of difference' (Derrida 1982, 11). What I hear in this in the very silence or avoidance of speaking of diaspora is just this repression in the name of history. Diaspora bespeaks a heterogeneity and dissemination, which gathers in chorus the 'inscrutable [voices] of the long dead' (Lee 2005, ix). It is thus the one name one never hears, amongst the many names of historical event. Yet, with regard to the various different English identities marked by loss, what *diaspora* professes is all too important to leave unspoken, addressing as it does histories and testimonies, as Iain Chambers describes it, of 'mass rural displacement' (1994, 16); and it must be said that there is more than ample historical fact, data, statistics, research already pursued in a professional manner which authorizes me to speak, and to speak this name, diaspora.

However, on the one hand, while it is always necessary to remind ourselves of particular historical events, on the other hand, one must risk everything on the voice. For, contemporary 'testimonies' of the voice have the ability to 'interrogate or undermine any simple or uncomplicated sense of origins,

traditions, and linear movement', which, conversely, academic history risks reconstituting, thereby damping down the disturbance that the voice might introduce (Chambers 1994, 16-17). Furthermore, through that which voice bears in its impurity, 'we are inevitably confronted with mixed histories, cultural mingling, composite languages...that are also central to [one's own] history' (Chambers 1994, 17; emphasis added) Through its force, voice solicits from within any 'abstract ideology of a uniformity stamped with the seals of tradition, nation, race and religion' (Chambers 1994, 17). In this, the voices of the others, those diasporic traces, have the capability to awaken a 'sense of belonging' marked by difference and alterity. The 'myths we carry in us...linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters' (Chambers 1994, 19).

If one is to speak of voices therefore; if one is to speak of lives, the very traces of which are borne on the resonances of those voices and which, in turn, in having become fragmented, frayed, partially erased, or muted have become hard to hear and to receive, as if there were some indistinctly heard group of wassailers outside your door; then facts, data, statistics can never be enough. Although the itinerary inaugurates directions for research, it is insufficient to speak, for example, of the Harrowing of the North, Hinderskelf, Peterloo, Orgreave, Speenhamland, the Swing Riots, Toldpuddle, the Enclosure Acts, The Poll Tax Riots, the SUS laws, Clause 28, the closure of village post offices, and so on. Such names, and the facts or statistics that accompany them, all such merely empirical evidence however irrefutable as a series of names gathered in an itinerary which promise to begin the thinking of diaspora, will never make us feel. Though necessary and important, merely professional 'academic history writing', Robert Lee observes, 'cannot always capture' the voices. It can fail to apprehend with any immediacy or sympathetic resonance, the voices of those convicted for poaching, allegedly, in, say, Rufford Park; or, for that matter, those convicted of the Clippesby Skimmington (1868), which, as a court reporter for the *Norfolk News* reports on 29 February, five young men paraded an effigy of gamekeeper John Mumford, around the neck of which effigy was a sign stating 'no friend to the poor man' (Lee 2005, 141-42). Poaching is, of course, a symptom, not only of enclosure, but anywhere, where common land is cordoned off, denied, and transformed into private property, as happened with the clearance of villages and parishes under Forest Law, in order to create the New Forest in 1079 for William. With the displacement of inhabitants the area also lost its Anglo-Saxon name, Ytene.

Understanding the problem in a merely professional historical account, knowing that the harrowing of the North laid waste to the majority of Yorkshire particularly, all crops and livestock destroyed, a scorched earth policy pursued, if narrated as mere facts organized after the event, is therefore insufficient to a true testimony and equally a true verdict, an act of speaking truly. Similarly, understanding that 7000 enclosure acts between

1700 and 1850 were passed gets us no closer to the life of one person. Providing names such as James Loveless, George Loveless, James Brine, James Hammett, Thomas and John Standfield may help to give individual shapes to the past, but we still have little chance of hearing the dead speak. The difficulty resides in empiricism's ideological and epistemological inability to apprehend either connection or invention. Yet, every time a name appears for the first time, it countersigns an inauguration, it marks a beginning, as Alexander Garcia Düttmann argues, and 'as such it is intimidating'. Its intimidation resides in our apprehension concerning what one may come to hear, if 'we hear the name of the other for the first time... [yet] have no memory of that name' (Düttmann 2000, 127). The singularity of the other imposes on the living a responsibility to bear witness, to invent a network that maintains difference. The name is therefore analogous to the voice; bearer of memory, encrypted archive, it promises the delivery of that memory, even if one does not know what that is, or what unlocking its secret will demand of the one who receives it. This, in short, is the gift of language, the gift of an apparition in waiting.

Acknowledging then, the historical itinerary, yet knowing such an itinerary to be inadequate, it has to be remarked that this remains a calculated and measured act within the economy and constraints of institutional form, but haunted by a lack, the lack, specifically, of a single voice, to make you see, to make you feel, to borrow Joseph Conrad's formula. The responsibility to make one feel is, perhaps, the greatest responsibility of literature, especially in the face of the occlusion of oral cultures. Literature can present the trace of the voice, not as if it were a presence, but as if, having been broadcast, its trace, its seed and signal, reaches us with a touching immediacy, as in the following lines of John Clare's voice in 'The Fallen Elm', a poem that speaks of Enclosure:

To wrong another by the name of right  
It grows the liscence of o'erbearing fools  
To cheat plain honesty by force of might  
Thus came enclosure—ruin was its guide  
But freedom's clapping hands enjoyed the sight  
Though comfort's cottage soon was thrust aside  
And workhouse prisons raised upon the site  
[...]  
The common heath, became the spoilers' prey. (Clare 2000, 167-69)

The fatal consequences of what Clare calls the 'fence of ownership' in another poem, 'The Mores', which opposes the freedom of memory to the experience of enclosure, are caught by Oliver Goldsmith, just over a generation before:

Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey;  
Where wealth accumulates and men decay;  
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;  
A breath can make them as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied. (ll. 51-56)

Here, yet again, a single voice stands in for all those silenced and dispossessed; more than that, those otherwise mute voices gather in the poet's verdict and profession. Though not the voices of that peasantry, Goldsmith nevertheless makes an emotional demand in a voice that bears witness to the experience of what otherwise remains the clinical and objective account. In this, he anticipates a problem that haunts radical critique especially today, captured in questions put by a letter in 1926 by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci asks, 'how many times have I wondered if it is really possible to forge links with a mass of people when one has never had strong feelings for anyone...If it is possible to have a collectivity when one has not been deeply [touched] oneself by individual human creatures' (Gramsci 1991, 147). Without this, everything is a matter, as Gramsci continues, of 'pure intellect, of pure mathematical calculation' (147). Literature as a network of traces has the power to exceed calculation. It can always remind us that the ethics of witnessing and profession 'will not', as Jacques Derrida puts it in response to Francis Fukuyama, 'be a matter of merely accumulating, as Fukuyama might say, "empirical evidence," it will not suffice to point one's finger at the mass of undeniable facts that this [or that] picture could describe or denounce' (Derrida 1994, 80). Across two hundred years by chance, note how Goldsmith and Derrida are linked in their critique by an undisguised animosity to all that is borne economically and ideologically in the term 'accumulation'. A resonance is caught between the two, as one voice oscillates in the weft of language.

At an absolute limit, the diasporic English voice is marked as abject. The abject witness, who is neither singular nor plural but *both* singular *and* plural simultaneously, articulates material, cultural and ontological destitution.<sup>1</sup> The subject is, at the extreme, dispossessed of ground or world. It is this we hear, or receive, in John Clare's affirmation, 'I am—yet what I am none cares nor knows' or, alternatively, 'But now I only am—that's all' (Clare 2000, 311-12). Other voices, not yet forced to such extremity, nevertheless chronicle the experience of becoming dispossessed of the cultural and material ground from which one's being and one's voice has been formed, and which, through song, story, practice and tradition, has served to give voice to one's being. They remark the becoming-destitute that resonates within the diasporic voice. Suffering history, we might say, here are two such voices, the first 'fictional', the second 'real'. The first, from the midlands, is that of Timothy Cooper, an agricultural labourer, and can be dated to the late 1820s and early 1830s:



I'n seen lots o' things turn up sin' I war a young un – the war an' the peace, and the canells, an' the oald King George, an' the Regen', an' the new King George, an' the new un as has got a new ne-ame – an' it's been all aloike to the poor mon. What's the canells been t' him? They'n brought him neyther me-at nor be-acon, nor wage to lay by, if he didn't save it wi' clemmin' his own inside. Times ha' got wusser for him sin' I war a young un. An' so it'll be wi' the railroads. They'll on'y leave the poor mon funder behind. (Eliot 2003, 560)

The second voice, that of John Copper, is from Sussex, recorded in 2006:

When I come to think about it, old Jimmy Copper, my granddad, he was a lucky man, 'cause he worked in a place he really liked to be in, up on those old chalk downs; there's one spot, just in the valley near 'ere, Saltdean Valley, where he liked to be so much when 'e was up there workin', and he used to sit on the boundary stone eatin' 'is lunch, where 'e could look down through the valley to the sea. That was 'is favourite spot. Yeah, 'e liked it so much that 'e asked dad if, after 'e died, 'e'd sprinkle 'is ashes up there; and that's what dad did. 'n I bin up there with 'im many times, to visit the place. You 'ave to 'ave a good imagination now to imagine it like it was when Jim was younger. In fact, when 'e made a recording for the BBC back in 1951, 'e put it quite graphically; 'e said, 'I still do like to walk up on those old 'ills, where I was a shepherd boy; but they've changed today; they're all different now', 'e said...but now, you look down there 'n' all you see is 'ouses, 'ouses, 'ouses on the land that we used to plough [...] 'Ouses, 'ouses, 'ouses. That makes me prostrate with dismal', 'e said. Yes, there's only one thing he thought 'ad come down from the old days unchanged, and that was our old songs. (Copper, "'Ouses, 'Ouses, 'Ouses')

Whether fictional or real, as soon as such voices are taken up, registered, they enter into an iterable field, the mark or sign disseminated become what we call literature, in a singular negotiation between orality and writing. Literature thereby enables in its recording technique the staging of a 'historicity without history – historicity without direct references to actual occurrences but only direct exposure of its field' (Fynsk 1996, 223). Of course there are more or less direct references in both voices, which give to those voices, to make the point once more, the very ground that is subject to erasure. That ground however, the historical details and empirical facts, constitutes the speaking subject, through what Gilles Deleuze, after David Hume, describes as 'the flux of the sensible, a collection of impressions and images, or a set of perceptions' (Deleuze 1991, 87). Such voices as those just quoted, or that of John Clare, serve to produce testimony of loss and dispossession through the oral ability to give place to the subject. Experience

is thus registered as one voice affirming the experience of many, as in the examples given, in spoken word or song.

Timothy Cooper's testimony comes from *Middlemarch*. The second voice, that of John Copper, a member of a family of agricultural labourers and collectors of traditional song who can trace their family back to 1593 in the Rottingdean area. In both, and between the two, voices from more than a thousand years of English dispossession resonate. In shared oral cultures and the communities of difference they signify, what comes to be registered is not simply, if ever, history after the event. Instead, it has always been, and still remains, a living archive, history from the inside, a history that speaks itself every time a song is taken up. In such voices, between them and beyond in the intimation of countless other voices, an affirmation of shared cultural experiences of dispossession is heard. Difference of dialect and accent intimate all those communities of difference suffering the erasure of 'freely chosen alternatives' under the imposition of 'hegemonic rules of exclusion' (Smith 1994, 93, 94). In the supplement of the voice what we thus hear is not simply history after the event. Instead, the supplementary eruption of the trace marks itself and 'so lives on, at once translatable and untranslatable' (Derrida 1979, 79), as a living archive, history felt from the inside. In their singular fashion such voices, centuries later, take up the crisis of nationhood that informs Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, which is a crisis of people and a land represented as 'fragile and mutable, eroding and deforested, riven with political contest' (McEachern 1996, 139). This is very historicity of experience if you will of those who attest to the truth beyond distinctions between the fictional or real that 'one can be inside [a culture] without being inside...there is an...outside in the inside and this goes on infinitely' (Cixous 2005, 5).

In relation to the idea of an English diaspora, the voices of Clare, Copper and Cooper, and that of Frank Mansell, filtered through the work of Chris Wood, with which I shall conclude, profess the precarious condition of being liminal to the main currents of history and national identity. Their voices also aver that 'as with any displaced people the stories and songs which explain who [the English] are, are locked up in the land'. Professions of English diaspora then; these are voices of spectral survivals, admitting those who suffered dispossession, displacement and destitution, and with that the loss, if not of life, then certainly the ways and means of existence that connected them with their ancestors.

Five hundred thousand English pounds for this old house and a piece of ground;  
You and your wife have always planned, to settle down in Cotswold land.  
Well you'd best come in, you best sit down; it's such a long drive from London town.

Would you like some tea now while I tell the reasons why I will not sell.

This stone built house that you call nice was gained at far too high a price

For me to gaily sign away, what others toiled for night and day;

They hammered blue stone by the yard, and found the rent when times were hard;

And they lived and died beneath the sun, tending the fields you're gazing on.

Well, they're all gone, but as for me, the wild hare still runs as free,

And at dusk the badger travels still, ancestral highways on the hill;

I am as Cotswold bred as these, and I still need these fields and trees,

And I need the soil that bore my race, which holds their bones beneath this place.

You say you'll pay five hundred grand, for this old house and a piece of land,

Well, London's about four hours for me, but in your four by four, you'll do it in three.

Chris Wood, adaptation of the poem, 'The Cottager's Reply', by Frank Mansell; music and revised lyric © Chris Wood, poem © Frank Mansell; reproduced by kind permission of Chris Wood and Brenda Denes

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