

## Vibrant Localism: The Lure of Common Ground

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*This paper explores the emergence of the arts and environmental charity Common Ground and their association with authors such as John Fowles and Alice Oswald. Drawing on the background of its founding members in environmental activism of the 1970s, it suggests a relationship between the charity's response to the Thatcherite 1980s and the aesthetic strategies of the postmodern novel. But it also traces this into more recent preoccupations with an ethical attitude to 'a determining but nevertheless unrepresentable real' (Boxall). In tracking the resistance of these activists and authors to official government institutions and institutional practices, it does, however, recall an alternative way of thinking about institution as temporal, as the emergence of something new, drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and bringing it into productive dialogue with Raymond Williams' descriptions of divergences in a 'structure of feeling'. The claim it makes is that the work of Common Ground and these various artists helped to institute a divergence in a certain structure of feeling at a time of political and historical impasse. Doing so serves to remember the capacity of the 'institutional' to be oriented towards the future rather than an ossifying present and to connote possibility where it might otherwise suggest imposition.*

In the autumn of 1984, three debates were held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London on successive Thursday evenings to stoke the flames of public interest in matters of the environment. Press releases and posters had asked provocingly: 'Who Owns Nature?', 'Who should decide the future of the countryside?' and 'Nature: polluted and exploited wasteland or pastoral haven?'<sup>i</sup> Unusually for that time, the debates brought together artists, composers, academics, critics, conservationists, naturalists and activists to fight matters out in front of an animated public audience that filled the auditorium each week. Passions rose and sparks flew. After the first debate, the British land artist Hamish Fulton had to write to the organisers to apologise for storming out, complaining that there was 'too much emphasis on the human made aspects of the countryside and not enough on nature, on 'life'.' 'Reactionary again!' he added in good humour.<sup>ii</sup> At the second event, Colin Ward spoke after the literary critic John Barrell to (quite unfashionably) stand up for the idea of nostalgia in relation to landscape. He staunchly defended the right of the working classes, 'driven into towns and cities as wage-slaves of the industrial revolution', to create their makeshift 'plotlands' in the country without having their life choices dismissed as 'thoroughly nostalgic conservationist sentiment'.<sup>iii</sup> At the third and last event, serious doubts about 'whether 'conventional politics' could ever embrace the values of 'green politics'' were aired and argued over with Jonathan Porritt, who had recently become the

new director of Friends of the Earth.<sup>iv</sup> All three events sent out ripples, raised questions and began popular debates that would continue for some time.

These were the first events organized by the arts and environmental charity Common Ground and were intended to launch its first publication, *Second Nature*, an anthology of largely prose non-fiction essays and artworks by some forty authors and artists, all exploring landscape, nature and place in a contemporary context. The book, and the debates, were working in the shadow cast by Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), but also a decade of globally minded environmental activism with which Common Ground's founders had been closely involved. Common Ground had been established in 1983 by Sue Clifford, Angela King and Roger Deakin with the intention of working closely with artists of all kinds to inspire and embolden communities across the country to protect and celebrate what they valued about their local environments, putting into practice the environmental slogan 'think globally, act locally'.

Sue Clifford and Angela King in particular had been active members of Friends of the Earth UK throughout the 1970s. Clifford, a lecturer in rural and natural resources planning at UCL, had served on the Board of Directors since 1974. King had been their first Wildlife Campaigner, responsible for the battle against the use of furs in fashion, the national ban on otter hunting, as well as being a driving force behind the 'Save the Whale' campaign. The latter had seen public support respond to a giant model of a whale named 'Peter' towed up the Thames to the Houses of Parliament in a typically eye-catching attempt to raise the profile of the issue. King had also convinced David Bowie to give his first UK performance as Ziggy Stardust at the Royal Festival Hall to raise money for the campaign (Bowie was pictured on posters for the event arriving to save the whales astride a giant harpoon from 'somewhere east of Mars'.)<sup>v</sup>

Clifford and King are perhaps best known today for their singularly imaginative popular encyclopedia of local heritage, *England in Particular* (2006). Common Ground are perhaps best known as the driving force behind the highly successful Community Orchards movement in the UK and as the founders of its concomitant annual celebration, Apple Day (21<sup>st</sup> Oct), the first of which was held in the covered market of Covent Garden in 1990. They are also well known for the Parish Maps Project, begun the 1980s, and which has since seen thousands of communities across the country (and much further afield in Italy, the US, Latvia, India and Japan) create their own playful, subversive and imaginative maps of the places in which they live.<sup>vi</sup> That this history of environmental activism lurks in the background behind these projects is perhaps less well known.

It was with the author Roger Deakin that these two decided to break away from Friends of the Earth in 1983 to found Common Ground. This was in response to a feeling that the

environmental movement was becoming steered by professionals ‘just speaking to other professionals’ and that ‘people and their everyday lives were being pushed out’.<sup>vii</sup> As Friends of the Earth was growing, their communications with government bodies had become increasingly professionalized, capitulating, so they felt, to a discourse determined by the government at a time when that government was displaying an overtly hostile attitude to environmental organizations. This made them particularly wary of large institutions and organizations and the form, structure and modus operandi of Common Ground was, to a large extent, established with this wariness in mind. Their fear was put succinctly by one of the contributors to *Second Nature*, the novelist John Fowles, in an introduction to one of Common Ground’s later publications: ‘The scientists are the experts, they must know best; I don’t. Is not all the power, the knowledge of means, the authority, theirs? I need do nothing, for the very simple reason that I cannot.’<sup>viii</sup>

The emphasis among professional environmental bodies on National Parks, national monuments, and species of wildlife that were becoming statistically endangered on a national scale, was leaving a blind spot over ordinary landscapes, landscapes valued in terms of the local and personal meanings they had to those who inhabited them. Erosions and losses at this scale were simply not being monitored, let alone challenged. This was also a moment at which ‘agribusiness’ was working its way into the UK at an alarming rate. The broadening out of fields, the stripping out of hedges and stonewalls, the draining of wetlands and the ploughing up of moorland were all developments that were exempt from the planning process brought in by the post-war Town and Country Planning Acts leaving people with little recourse to opposition.<sup>ix</sup> As a new, small-scale organization, set apart from official government bodies, from the beginning, Common Ground stated its mission: ‘To promote the importance of common plants and animals, familiar and local places, local distinctiveness and our links with the past’.<sup>x</sup> Perhaps their most influential idea, ‘local distinctiveness’ was about ordinary culture, from regional varieties of apple and styles of drystone walling to historic trees and seasonal rituals, each in its own way a signifier of the unofficial but intertwined local heritage of people and the natural world in place.

In the era of ‘the heritage debates’, when Patrick Wright and Robert Hewison were attacking the idea of a ‘national heritage industry’, Common Ground were careful to keep their understanding of local distinctiveness grounded both in locality and a sense of grassroots democracy.<sup>xi</sup> As Clifford and King would write later, it was ‘about a fineness of grain – the neighbourhood, the locality, the parish, the housing estate, the high street, the village, the suburb, perhaps even the street,’ adding, most importantly of all, ‘as defined by those who live and work and play there.’<sup>xii</sup>

Natural England's Duncan Mackay, reflecting on the nature of their approach, has contrasted their 'gentleness' to the other 'fire and brimstone' environmental writing of the period.<sup>xiii</sup> In his eyes their tactics were indirect but effective. They would avoid driving 'headlong into battle [...] But they made sure their tiny arrows were shot. It was a type of sophistication'. He elaborates: 'they weren't coming at this telling people what to do [...] they might set a few ideas rolling, but they would actually sit back and let people come to them, that in itself was revolutionary for that time, which was always men telling you how to do it.' Former Director of the Countryside Commission, Michael Dower, has also described the charity, along similar lines, as 'a bizarre and beautiful exception'. He continued: 'it was essentially a two-woman band who were just gently and quietly, creatively, with limited resources, getting on and doing lovely things. Not pursuing great advocacy campaigns like many – like Friends of the Earth or CPRE – and not having national branches everywhere, not having a mass of members [...], not needing any of that hassle, just quietly getting on and doing good work.' He added that this 'light-footed' approach 'was appealing to the villages and to the people that took part [...] It made them unthreatening, unofficial, un pompous, rooted.'

Common Ground's mission was to attempt to invoke a spirit of localised self-organization away from the traditional environmental and conservation institutions. In doing this, however, though they might have been resistant to what they perceived as a rigged game at the level of government, they were themselves instituting a new social agent, an organization that would produce campaign after campaign in national newspapers and other mainstream media, and a centre to which thousands of people would turn for guidance and support. In this essay, I explore the relationship between this institutionally ambiguous organization and the authors with whom it shared a connection, especially John Fowles and Alice Oswald. I attempt to set out a relationship between the kind of social agent that Common Ground instituted and a line of thought and aesthetic practice that can be traced in its development through the literature of these associated authors, concluding that what can be seen is the generation of a particular 'structure of feeling' that I am calling 'vibrant localism'. In doing this I am thinking about the idea of 'institution' as temporal, as 'instituting', as a state of becoming, drawing on the way the word is explored in the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>xiv</sup>

To conceive of institutions in a temporal mode unsettles assumptions about their monolithic sedimentation, their imposition and hierarchy, recalling instead their struggle for germination and emergence often out of situations of what Michela Summa describes as 'impasse within an already given order'.<sup>xv</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, 'institution' involves a moment of 'divergence' (*écart*) from the prevailing structure of norms and conventions, a kind of productive

rupture.<sup>xvi</sup> In her study of the creativity of Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'institution', Summa describes an unfolding tension in the 'relation between the embeddedness of a creative act within an order and the openness toward a future, or a new order'.<sup>xvii</sup> Common Ground was founded in such an act of subtle divergence at a moment of impasse that we will look at more closely and was intended to nurture a new, or then underappreciated, culture of conservation and environmentalism. The relationship with the arts suggests a productive alignment between the way Williams describes the emergence and divergence of a 'structure of feeling' and the way Merleau-Ponty describes the emergence and divergence of the work of institution.

The 'gentleness' of Common Ground's approach, its refusal to take a didactic stance on issues that were nonetheless felt to be urgent, suggests an unconventional attitude to conservation, and to activism, that was rooted in a tradition of thought associated with local autonomy, self-organization, even some forms of anarchism that were current at the time. Colin Ward, who spoke at those early debates at the ICA (and was featured on their posters and fliers as 'the author of *Anarchy in Action*'), was an advocate of the now much quoted idea that 'a society which organizes itself without authority' is in fact 'always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state'.<sup>xviii</sup> The 'weight of the state', or at least its ideological atmosphere, in the Thatcherite 1980s has been characterized as one of 'authoritarian liberalism' by researchers comparing the history of environmental movements in the UK and other European countries.<sup>xix</sup> It saw the withdrawal of power from local authorities and an 'active exclusion' of environmental and conservationist organizations.<sup>xx</sup> Leaked cabinet papers in 1979 revealed the intention to 'reduce over-sensitivity to environmental considerations' while Thatcher herself would characterize environmental organizations as an 'enemy within'.<sup>xxi</sup>

The 'little arrows' that Common Ground deployed avoided the institutional channels of official and bureaucratic confrontations with this authoritarian articulation of power, and instead instituted their own culture of appealing directly to people and communities themselves. Elaborating Ward's image of a self-organising society as a 'seed beneath snow, buried under the weight of the state', Common Ground set about feeding the seed. In fact, such an image is given in Raymond Williams' description of the idea of a 'common culture' where he attempts to find a language for a form of culture not characterized by a 'dominative mode'.<sup>xxii</sup> For Williams, the possibility of this common culture relied on the acceptance of the idea that culture might be something essentially 'unplannable', that '[w]e have to ensure the means of life, and the means of community. But what will then, by these means, be lived, we cannot know or say. The idea of culture rests on a metaphor: the tending of natural growth'.<sup>xxiii</sup> Reading the term 'natural' here in its sense of vital but 'unplannable' rather than as 'organic' (a term Williams engages with critically

in *Culture and Society*), we can see the ways in which Common Ground would emulate this principle as an organization.

### **John Fowles**

It is not only that Common Ground's emergence represents a refreshing reminder of institution as a creative response to impasse but that they made this form of institution their object, endeavouring to create the conditions for other forms of self-organised institution to catch on in localized but numerous ways. Of course, this explains much of the lure of Common Ground for artists. The charity seemed to offer a genuine cultural alternative in a climate somewhat slumped under Thatcher's notorious campaign slogan: 'There is no alternative'. One such artist to be drawn to Common Ground's work was the novelist John Fowles. Fowles would write chapters and essays for Common Ground and corresponded with them over the years. He would appear at public events with them and he even contributed to an art patronization scheme that they arranged for a very young Andy Goldsworthy.

Common Ground's style of cultural intervention spoke to a particular social impasse that we see dramatized in the Fowles' first novel *The Collector* (1963). In this strange and sinister tale, the young man Frederick Clegg, after winning the football pools, drugs and imprisons the passionate art student Miranda Grey in the carefully prepared cellar of his Sussex country house until she is dead. Fowles revisited the novel in an essay he wrote for Common Ground published in *Second Nature*, 'The Blinded Eye', where he confesses and psychoanalyses his own younger self's hunting and collecting of animals. Collecting, in this sense, has ties to Linnæan taxonomy and enlightenment science and of course to the Romantic resistance of the same. In the essay, Fowles compares the nightingale as it is represented in a book of British birds to the nightingale of Keats' famous ode. He launches into a now fairly familiar Romantic argument about taxonomy vs emotional exuberance, science vs poetry. Intriguingly though, he concludes that '[t]he greatness of the ode as a piece of science is precisely that it decompartmentalises the phenomenon'.<sup>xxiv</sup> In this decompartmentalization there is a form of resistance to top-down impositions of power, a recuperative anarchic spirit familiar to Common Ground's interests.

It is not that *The Collector* offers a straightforward allegory of the dominative state over the feeling individual, though. Instead, we might read the relationship between the two characters as a dramatization of a conflict *within* the individual under the dominative state. Among the responses of the individual to an authoritarian government, especially prevalent in a 'mass media' society, Raymond Williams has described a 'general sullenness, a withdrawal of interest [...] inertia and apathy'.<sup>xxv</sup> It is the violence of this 'sullenness' that we see dramatized in

Frederick's character in *The Collector* (a character James Aubrey describes as 'uncreative', 'impotent' and 'metaphorically dead'), and in his incarceration, repression and eventual murder of Miranda.<sup>xxvi</sup> The novel is a claustrophobic struggle played out across the floors of the home in a way that is suggestive of the interior, psychological life. Frederick is not a hot-headed sexual predator at the mercy of uncontrollable desire. There is something sad, cold, and withdrawn in him, a precise and always polite form of inward-facing control that simply wants to contain Miranda to death; his 'intentions were of the best'.<sup>xxvii</sup> It is his containment that kills her, his inaction, his refusal to risk embarrassment and retrieve medical help when she falls ill. The violence itself is flattened out and neutralized unsettlingly through the language of the hobbyist: he is a collector of butterflies and views his kidnap of this vibrant art student as comparable to the 'catching' of a Mazarine Blue. Fowles had collected butterflies as a child and, as he describes in his essay for *Common Ground*, his own vivid memories of catching and compartmentalizing the Mazarine Blue become Frederick's.<sup>xxviii</sup>

That Fowles sees the solution to this tragic impasse in the 'decompartmentalisation' of Keats' 'Ode' is something that is played out later in the relationship between his experiments with the postmodern novel and his interest in nature, in the wild, in what William Stephenson calls 'his allegiance to chaos, flux'.<sup>xxix</sup> In his book-length essay *The Tree* (1979), Fowles laments our antagonism to the apparent disorder, randomness and asymmetry of the natural world and celebrates the way writing might bend itself in more inventive ways towards what he describes (slightly misquoting William Carlos Williams) as the 'strange phosphorus of life, nameless under an old misappellation'.<sup>xxx</sup> The infamous openness of the ending to *The Magus* (published after *The Collector* but being written at the same time) and the double, or revised, ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) might be understood as this same 'allegiance to chaos', an attempt to give literature something of the resistant openness that he was so drawn to in encounters with woods, flowers, spiders, and wildlife. The way in which he disrupts convention, withholding closure, withholding that 'sense of an ending' is also a part of the emergent belief in Fowles that the 'true function of the novel' is 'heuristic, not didactic'.<sup>xxxi</sup> There is a relationship here, then, between his emphasis on the heuristic in the novel and *Common Ground*'s own insistence on fostering a non-didactic form of public participation. Both seem to be attempts to disrupt the impasse of sullenness under a dominative culture tending to pull power toward the centre; both do so by attempting to create the conditions for a form of self-governing institution of new social practices.

## **Beyond the Postmodern**

The disruptive, playful and subversive quality of the postmodern novel, as a solution to the tragic impasse of the sullen Thatcherite subject, was something that appealed to Common Ground beyond the work of Fowles too. Sue Clifford would quote Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) when she gave talks about the idea of public participation. Like *The Collector*, *Invisible Cities* is a narrative that dramatizes a fraught, asymmetrical relationship of power between two parties. In this case, it is between the fearsome emperor Kublai Khan and the visiting young traveler Marco Polo who regales the emperor with tales of the far flung cities within his empire. If *The Collector* was informed by the murderous atmosphere of *Bluebeard* (and Fowles has said as much, writing it soon after seeing Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*), *Invisible Cities* seems, instead, haunted by *One Thousand and One Nights*. There is still the atmosphere of threat and vulnerability but it is met by the imaginative cunning of a storytelling Sheherazade who survives by leaving her captor feeling duped but wanting more.

'Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartas does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger'.<sup>xxxii</sup> What is it about Marco Polo's descriptions that so entrances the emperor? The descriptions he gives of the empire's cities are oblique accounts, not by any means conventional spatial descriptions. They are unverifiable, ordered around feelings, fleeting moments of perception, uncertain memories, chance encounters, deeply subjective measures; in short, ordered around the intangible, 'a zodiac of the mind's phantasms' as Marco Polo puts it.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In these, Kublai Khan senses something that seems to escape the epistemology of empire, to exceed its conventional administrative measures. It is a kind of autonomous exuberance that does not play by the rules of, and that does not depend upon, the empire it inhabits.

While she was the director of Common Ground, Sue Clifford would, from time to time, begin a talk quoting Marco Polo to the emperor: 'With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This secret discourse of desire and fear is part of the invisible city that Marco Polo makes visible in his narratives. There is what Linda Hutcheon describes as a 'provisionality and irony' to this multiplication of narrative that unnerves those in possession of the grand narratives of empire and nation.<sup>xxxv</sup>

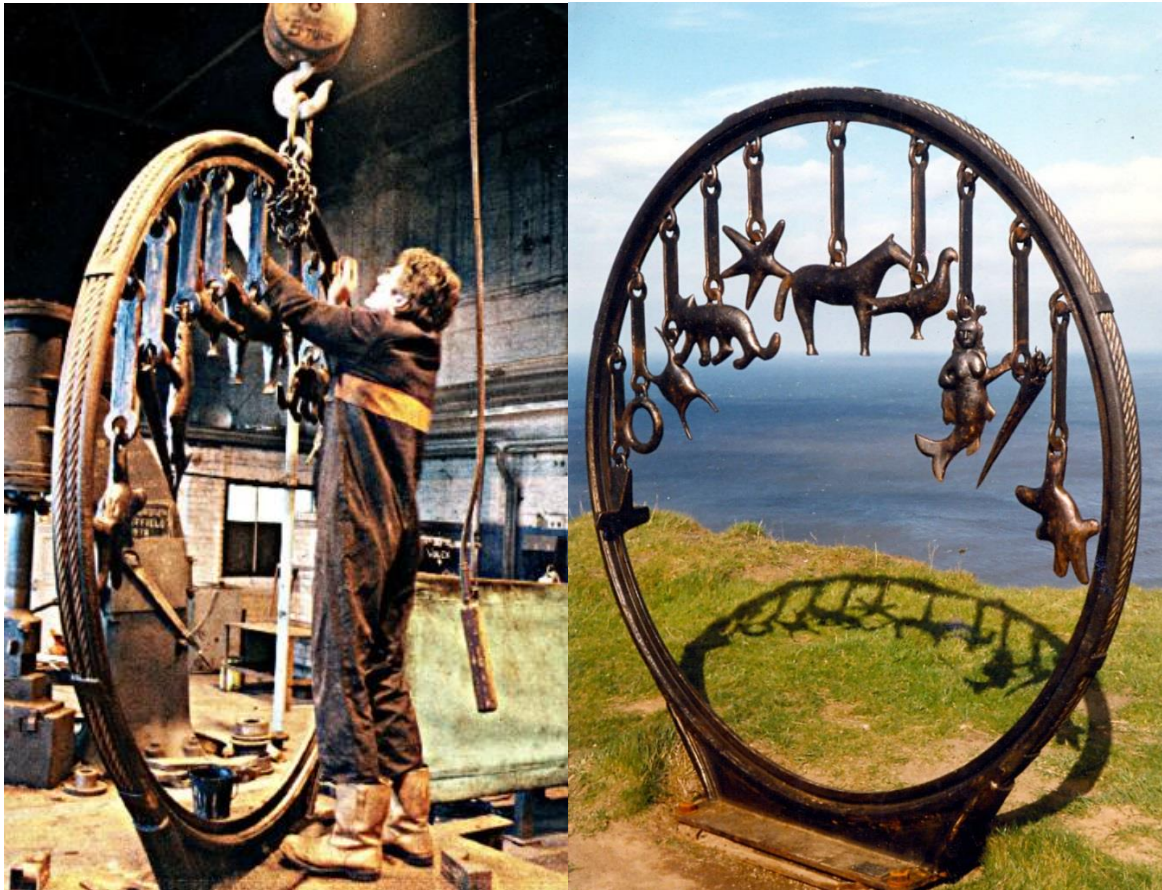
For Clifford, however, this metanarrative sleight of hand had the potential to go beyond the self-reflexive interiority of the printed page toward very real geographical interventions. That is to say, Common Ground were concerned with the imaginative ways in which the intangible



desires and fears, the feeling people had for a place, might be made visible in that place and thereby offset the sullenness of a dominative power dynamic between the administration and the subject. Clifford would continue: 'If we are to plan and intervene effectively, we must reclaim those difficult, intangible, and elusive aspects of our relations with places from the margins of professional activity, we must embrace the poetic and we must include people.'<sup>xxxvi</sup>

We can see this at work in their 'New Milestones' project, begun in 1985. This project helped to facilitate communities to commission their own new public works of sculpture for their locality by leading artists. These works would emerge from a close relationship between the artist and the community doing the commissioning and would eventually celebrate the distinctiveness of the area as it was understood and interpreted by the people who lived there. These were historic milestones, rather than geographic milestones, intended 'to crystallise feelings about [the] place in a public and permanent way'.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Inspired by both the early radical roots of the Artist's Placement Group schemes (which would become the artist's residency schemes we are more familiar with today), and the Land Art movement of the 1960s and 70s, this was about getting art out of the gallery and back into the hands of the public.

In 1989, Common Ground worked with Cleveland Arts and Langbaugh Borough Council to help the parish of Skelton and Brotton in the north east to commission the artist Richard Farrington to make a series of sculptural works to be sited on Huntcliff near the Skinningrove Steel Works. This commission saw Farrington undertake a residency in the steel works, labouring nervously under the gaze of local steel workers who would inspect his welding. The most striking of these is an 8ft steel ring stood upright and hung inside with what are described by most as 'charms' – an owl, a horse, a carrot, a cat, a starfish, and a bird. The ring itself is what was known at the steel works as a 'special', a type of pit prop for iron stone mining, while the charms hung in the middle all relate to the distinctive local history, natural history and folklore of the parish.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The sculptures are still there today thirty years on and have become a popular landmark of this stretch of coast, making visible an aspect of the parish's industrial, local and natural heritage all at once but, to recall Clifford and King's earlier phrase, 'as defined by those who live and work and play there.'<sup>xxxix</sup> Here we have a visual and material record of the exuberant intangibles of Marco Polo's 'invisible cities' made visible, made a fixed part of the landscape, the marker of a recuperated and vibrant localism.



### **Alice Oswald**

In the late 1990s, Common Ground had moved out of central London to take up offices in the small town of Shaftesbury in Dorset. There they began work on a project called ‘Confluence’ that was concerned with making the invisible *audible* rather than visible. It was still a project intent on recuperating a vibrant localism but in this case it was a musical rather than a visual art project that took place over three years with a series of musical events moving from source to sea along the River Stour in Dorset. Challenging the reduction of rivers to a civic utility and amenity, ‘decompartmentalizing’ the river, as Fowles might have said, the project set out to unearth and celebrate the language, culture and livelihood associated with rivers as a way of opening them up imaginatively, bringing them holistically into view, or into earshot.

The emphasis on music was in order to encourage the widest participation and soon new choirs were formed, and new ballads, carols, poems and drinking songs were being written and performed by residents that drew on their memories and research into the river catchment. There was a ‘Fish Cabaret’, a ‘Rain Cabaret’, a new choral work celebrating the rise in otter numbers, a ‘Water Market’, even a new band formed of musicians and plumbers whose instruments included the ‘boghorn’ which made use of the inflow and outflow of a toilet bowl, a

calorifier adapted with a top-mounted trombone slide and various percussive instruments made from dolly tubs, steel pipes, a galvanised immersion heater and a set of ballcock maracas. Confluence was an intensely local project but by the end it had received coverage in a number of national newspapers and the sound of the boghorn had been heard across the country on Radio 4.<sup>xi</sup>

The project would also see the publication of an anthology of poetry about rivers edited by Clifford and King and, included in this anthology, was a young Alice Oswald who was at this time working on what would come to be a her renowned and prize-winning book-length poem *Dart* (2001), which also moves from source to sea through the many working voices of its own river. One of Oswald's poems had even been illustrated and printed on a postcard for the project's publicity. *Dart* itself makes reference to two of the more obscure sources from a reading list on rivers that Common Ground had published, but perhaps most striking is the fact that in its draft stages in 1999 Oswald was also thinking about *Dart* in inclusive, musical terms. Early on she described her attempt 'to orchestrate [the poem] like a kind of Jazz, with various river-workers and river dwellers composing their own parts.'<sup>xii</sup>

Like Michael Drayton's seventeenth-century river atlas of Britain, *Poly-Olbion* (to which Oswald refers at numerous points), *Dart* is articulated in the first person and Oswald claims in an introductory note that 'all voices are to be read as the river's mutterings.'<sup>xiii</sup> However, this one voice is based upon a carefully crafted composite of tape-recorded interviews that she conducted with people along the river: wild swimmers, sewage workers, naturalists, a ferryman, fishermen, and rambles. *Dart* is a book that shuffles its different voices together in very striking ways that seem to look back to the heteroglossic and playful disruptions of narrative in the postmodern novel – a playful revision of *place* to answer playful revisions of history. However, it is one that, like the 'New Milestones' project, also looks ahead to a distinctly twenty-first century concern with responsibility to what lies beyond the page: an ethical relation of fidelity to what Peter Boxall describes as 'a determining but nevertheless unrepresentable real.'<sup>xiii</sup>

Oswald's love of pluralism in form and voice is one that is rooted in the very tangible pluralism of landscape and place itself. Intimate working vocabularies, personal turns of phrase, distinctive tones and rhythms from recordings make the 'one voice' of the poem intensely variegated. In the very fine grain of these voices, we can perhaps hear Calvino's Marco Polo, making visible, or audible, subtle qualities of the cultural geography of the River Dart's catchment that would never be found on an official map, drawing us down as it projects them up. But if so, where is the poem's Kublai Khan, or the sullen Frederick Clegg, the agents of the dominative state to be resisted or eluded?

In fact, the poem offers quite a pointed relationship between the local and the national. In Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (following Geoffrey of Monmouth), the whole nation of Britain is founded on the banks of the River Dart, in Totnes, by Brutus, a Trojan soldier and descendent of Aeneas expanding his horizons after the Trojan War.<sup>xliv</sup> Brutus and his men land at Totnes, murder the only inhabitant of the islands – a giant called Gogmagog – and thereby secure for all of us a conveniently classical lineage (you can still visit Brutus' first footprint enshrined in cobbles just off the high street in Totnes today). Oswald can hardly help but revisit this episode in *Dart* but in her version the seventy-two lines of heroic quatrains of the Trojan war party give way at a jolt to the plodding prose of a drystone wall builder who fills the shoes of the soon-to-be-murdered Gogmagog:

At Totnes, limping and swaying,  
they set foot on the land.  
There's a giant walking towards them,  
a flat stone in each hand:

*stonewaller*

You get upriver stones and downriver stones. Beyond Totnes bridge and above Longmarsh the stones are horribly grey chunks, a waste of haulage, but in the estuary they're slatey flat<sup>xlv</sup>

The local expertise and craftsmanship of the drystone wall builder meet the violent imposition of the national myth, but in this case the war party fade away like ghosts and we're left listening to the more localized voice.

It is with this tension in mind that we can read a vibrant, subversive, playful localism in the voice of the river. In the following lines we might perhaps detect the echo of Miranda Grey and Marco Polo in their own different, upwardly directed and subversive appeals. Here the river is speaking to a canoeist but we might also be able to hear an anarchic *genius loci* of local distinctiveness seducing the nation state out of its fixed securities towards a sea-change:

come falleth in my push-you where it hurts  
and let me rough you under, be a laugh  
and breathe me please in whole inhale

come warmeth, I can outcanouvre you  
into the smallest small where it moils up

and masses under the sloosh gates, put your head,

it looks a good one, full of kiss

and known to those you love, come roll it on my stones,

come tongue-in-skull, come drinketh, come sleepeth<sup>xlvi</sup>

The passage is an upward radiation and a lure downwards at one and the same time. Its plays on sound and meaning – repeating structures, rhyming internally, resisting syntactic closure, unsettling and repurposing words and word order – show a voice capable of bending the rules to its will. It is a voice speaking from a site of creative energy in which the local may redefine itself autopoetically.

From the tragic impasse of *The Collector* then to experiments with an allegiance to the wild in John Fowles; from Fowles' disruption of conventional narrative closure to Calvino's eruption of proliferating narratives; and from these to the 'New Milestones' project and Oswald's polyphonic ethic of responsibility to 'the real', or at least to the local, in a slippery rule-bending and 'outcanouvreing' of its own. There is a developing narrative here running across the literature associated with Common Ground which is also Common Ground's organizational narrative. We can think about this in terms of creative institution, but we can also think about it in terms of a 'structure of feeling', one that has been on the rise since the late 1970s and that we might describe as 'vibrant localism'.

For Williams, especially in his later writing on the subject, a structure of feeling is also something entangled in the relations between the state and smaller scales of social being. Initially suggesting tensions between 'the dominant social character' of the day and its 'alternative social practices'<sup>xlvii</sup>, he later describes it as a tension between 'the official consciousness' of 'the social' and the 'practical consciousness' of 'the personal'.<sup>xlviii</sup> He goes on, 'if the social is the fixed and explicit – the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions – all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective'.<sup>xlix</sup> Here the 'personal' is offset against the 'institutional', but the institutional is figured as fixed and the personal is figured as somehow free in ways that we might feel uneasy about now. We might be quicker today to call to mind the institutionalized infringements of personal or subjective space, but there is a flip-side to this in which we might also question the solidity of institutional structures. What happens when this fixity breaks down, when institutions recall the 'becoming' of their coming into being? Common Ground, as an organization, exists ambiguously between

the ‘institutional’ and the ‘personal’ here, unsettling the institutional with the personal in a way that answers to the unsettling of the personal by the institutional that has been so familiar in theoretical discourse.

In the fluid ‘practical consciousness’ of the personal, Williams describes ‘a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined’.<sup>1</sup> It is a description that comes very close to the ‘embeddedness of a creative act within an order’ which Summa reads in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the creativity of the institutional when understood temporally.<sup>ii</sup> Such changes, Williams argues, ‘can be defined as changes in structures of feeling’.<sup>iii</sup> The example he uses to describe this is of changes in style in art and literature, embodied, immersive, pre-reflective changes that articulate their difference and their divergence on their own terms, in ways that might be seen to ‘outcanouvre’ convention. The ‘embryonic’ nature of this change suggests that the emergence or divergence of a structure of feeling is a matter of institution as a creative process of becoming at a time of critical impasse.

If we follow this argument through, the *structure* of this vibrant localism that we can read across the literature and in the emergence of Common Ground as an organisation is, of course, not an institutional structure in the conventional sense of a normative, coherent and regulatory authority. However, as I have suggested, there is a new form of social agency being *instituted* here, both in Common Ground itself and also in the kinds of activity they helped to facilitate and promote. The structure of Common Ground’s activity might best be described as a network, decentred, polycentric, self-organizing and rhizomatic. Totnes, of course, in addition to being the site at which a fictional Brutus founded the imagined community of the nation, is also, and more recently, the (non-)centre of the Transition Towns Network, a translocal organization based on the same principles of self-organization. The Transition movement is one that is intent on building community-based resilience for a world of peak oil and climate change in the face of what they perceive as political foot-dragging, even impasse, at the national level. Perhaps we can see, in the Transition Network, the more formal structural institution of the practices of eco-localisation that Common Ground was feeding in the 1980s and 90s, the polycentric networks of community orchard groups or parish mapping groups that are still at work across the country today. Reflecting on this encourages a stretched understanding of the institutional, loosening its monolithic rigidity and reconfiguring it in terms of *possibility* where it has otherwise suggested *imposition*; and, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, orienting it towards the future where it has otherwise suggested an ossifying present.

## Biographical Note

Jos Smith is a lecturer in contemporary literature at UEA with an interest in the relationship between literature and the environmental movement. He is the author of *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (Bloomsbury Academic 2017) and co-editor of *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (OUP 2017).

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<sup>i</sup> Common Ground (1983), 'Second Nature' (Promotional poster), Common Ground Archive. University of Exeter, Special Collections Archives (GB 0029) EUL MS 416/PRO/1.1.2.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamish Fulton, 'Letter to Sue Clifford and Angela King' (n.d. [1985]), Common Ground Archive. University of Exeter, Special Collections Archives (GB 0029) EUL MS 416/PRO/1.

<sup>iii</sup> Talk reproduced in Ward, Colin, 'Who Owns Nature? Possession and Dispossession', *Talking Green* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2012, 44-49, (pp.46-7).

<sup>iv</sup> Chris Rose, 'Review' *ECOS*, 6:1 (1985), 60.

<sup>v</sup> Robert Lamb, *Promising the Earth* (London: Routledge, 1996), 23.

<sup>vi</sup> For an overview of the Parish Maps Project see David Matless and David Crouch, 'Refiguring Geography: Parish Maps of Common Ground', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21: 1, pp.236-255. British parish maps were exhibited alongside international examples in *Parish Maps: Reflecting on the Legacy* at the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (17 April-16 July 2015).

<sup>vii</sup> Jacqui Stearn, 'My Environment: Interview with Sue Clifford and Angela King', *Environment Now* (Sep 1988), 28-9.

<sup>viii</sup> John Fowles, 'Foreword', Sue Clifford and Angela King (eds), *Trees Be Company*, (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), xiii-xv (p.16).

<sup>ix</sup> Marion Shoard, *The Theft of the Countryside*, (London: Temple Smith, 1980), 23.

<sup>x</sup> Clifford, Sue and Angela King, 'Preface' in Sue Clifford, Angela King and Richard Mabey (eds), *Second Nature* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1984), vii-viii (p.vii).

<sup>xi</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (London: Methuen, 1987); Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country* (Oxford: OUP, 1985).

<sup>xii</sup> Sue Clifford and Angela King, 'Losing Your Place', Sue Clifford and Angela King (eds) *Local Distinctiveness* (London: Common Ground, 1993), 7-20 (p.11).

<sup>xiii</sup> All interview quotations in this paragraph are taken from two project interviews conducted as part of ongoing research exploring the history of the Parish Maps Project, funded by the University of Exeter.

<sup>xiv</sup> I am indebted in this line of inquiry to Prof. Annamaria Carusi for her generous conversations on the subject.

<sup>xv</sup> Michela Summa, 'Toward a Transcendental Account of Creativity. Kant and Merleau-Ponty on the Creative Power of Judgment and Creativity as Institution' *Continental Philosophy Review* 50 (2017), 105-126 (p.119).

<sup>xvi</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique. Le problème de la passivité: le sommeil, l'inconscient, la mémoire. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2003). Translated and quoted in Summa, 'Toward a Transcendental Account.' p.117.

<sup>xvii</sup> Summa, 'Toward a Transcendental Account', p.117.

<sup>xviii</sup> Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1973), p.11.

<sup>xix</sup> John Dryzek, David Downes, Christian Hunold, David Schlosberg, and Hans-Kristian Hernes, *Green States and Social Movements: Environmentalism in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p.43.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*, p.48-9.



