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Shifting vantage, common musings: the politics of Wordsworthian excursus in the poetry of Peter Riley

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This article reads the poetry of Peter Riley in the tradition of the loco-descriptive excursion poem, interrogating the politics of its logic of ascent and return and the shifting vantage points it allows the twentieth- and twenty-first century poet-traveller on the globalised world of capitalist ‘gain’. It detects dual registers running throughout three excursive volumes – *Noon Province* (1989), *The Llyn Writings* (2007) and *The Glacial Stairway* (2011) – that turn around an ambivalent lexicon that is both spiritual and financial. The article shows how this duality maps onto the self-splitting of Romantic excursus in William Wordsworth and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and argues that such division allows Riley to mediate between spiritual dedication to the excursion’s object and the tainted ‘world’ of commerce and bodily needs. It concludes by deploying Peter Larkin’s concepts of sufficiency and scarcity to frame Riley’s repeated use of dropping, cadential structures at the excursion’s end as a return to what Larkin calls the ‘basic conditions’ of the ordinary, common world. Bathos, withdrawal and coda are rhetorical figures for the abandonment of vantage in favour of a politics of what will suffice: their deployment circumvents the trajectory of accumulative gain that Riley employs the excursion to critique.

[198 words]

Keywords

Riley; Wordsworth; Larkin; excursion; walking

Introduction

Peter Riley's poetry is always on the move. *Noon Province* (1989),[1] *The Llŷn Writings* (2007) and *The Glacial Stairway* (2011) are three of his more peripatetic volumes, in a body of work that is always informed by mobility. In this article I analyse the ways they make use of 'excursus' – which I adapt from the loco-descriptive excursion poem and William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814) – as a medium for meditation on relations between globalised market economies and the circumscribed significance of the local or personal, between places visited that appear to be at some remove temporally or geographically from modernity (but are in reality implicated in its structures) and the poet-traveller's position, or point of 'vantage'.[2] An intervention in both the ecopoetic field of radical pedestrianism[3] and more locally in Peter Riley studies, this article builds on Hunter (2015) to argue that a contemporary poetics of excursus is rooted in loco-descriptive models that Wordsworth negotiated through eighteenth-century topographical and prospect poetry, most clearly in 'Tintern Abbey'. I demonstrate Riley's allusive engagement with 'the poem on the Wye', and argue that he interrogates excursive and loco-descriptive poetry's movement of ascent, prospect and return, and its problematic inscription of cultural difference from the place visited through the touristic excursion. While Hunter focuses on the hilltop as a topos of political tension, I also attend to the journey *to and from* the elevated point, which enables me to detect dual registers that run throughout these excursive volumes and turn around an ambivalent lexicon that is both spiritual and financial. This division allows Riley to mediate between spiritual dedication

to the excursion's object (summit or shrine) and the tainted 'world' of commerce and bodily needs.

This focus on register and lexicon allows me to examine the accumulation and consumption that underwrite excursus, and the liberal, Romantic voluntarism that Langan (1995) sees as the ideological frame that permits supposedly 'free' mobility. In excursive pedestrianism, a play-off between the work of walking and the freedom to move through the world at will seems to even out for the Wordsworthian poet-traveller, as the former 'pays' the debt incurred by the latter. But the marginal vagrant figures in some of Wordsworth's excursive poems stand for the irreducible reminder of material conditions that are not accounted for by this exchange. For Riley's excursive subjects that relation still pertains, in a dialectic of labour and reward, but it is not seen as a political solution to social loss and fragmentation. Rather, I conclude by arguing, poet and Romantic theorist Peter Larkin's concepts of sufficiency and scarcity allow Riley's poet-travellers to settle for a compromised politics of what will suffice. In the private and domestic sphere consumption and accumulation can be limited to need, a chastening of desire which may extend to a paradoxically reduced sociality. This argument sees Riley's repeated use of dropping, cadential structures at the excursion's end as a return to the 'basic conditions' of the ordinary, common world.[4] Bathos, withdrawal and coda are rhetorical figures for the abandonment of the privileges of vantage in favour of a politics of sufficiency. Counter-intuitively, I argue, retraction to the ordinary serves both Larkin and Riley as a site of qualified political resistance inasmuch as it imperfectly circumvents the trajectories of accumulative gain and touristic appropriation that Riley employs the excursion to critique.

Excursus and Prospect

The excursion poem is a loco-descriptive lyric or verse narrative documenting the 'experience of travel across specific landscapes, in which the speaker intermingles observations about scenery and aesthetics with reflections on his or her own history and the state of the society in which he or she lives'.[5] Wordsworth's loco-descriptive poems differs from eighteenth-century topographical verse primarily in that instead of celebrating how well a rich patron manages his estate, they 'focus on the speaker's own thoughts amid a journey across a particular rural landscape'.[6] Furthermore, Wordsworth's use of the excursion poem, from early topographical work *An Evening Walk* (1789) and *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) to *The Excursion* (1814), frames pedestrianism as a mark of class: the intrinsic democratic value of experiential effort distinguishes these walks from poetic landscapes apprehended by coach-travel.

Wordsworth also introduced a bifurcation into the typology: his treatment of excursus divides roughly between the more conventional prospect and the disconcertingly new encounter-poem. While the former internalises touristic travel and seeks privacy as an aid to contemplative vision (as in 'Tintern Abbey'), the latter interrupts the solitary excursion with the irreducible presence of the socially marginal and displaced: the leech-gatherer of 'Resolution and Independence', amongst many other such figures, scratches a marginal independence from the exercise of common rights to gather that were being criminalised as parliamentary enclosure played out across much of the landscape. If the former type of excursus sets out to provide an asocial encounter with the non-human

world, the latter is unavoidably social in its confrontation of inhuman treatment within the ethical and political bounds of community and economic change.

Peter Riley makes allusive use of both 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Resolution and Independence', as I shall demonstrate below. Nonetheless, in this article I primarily concentrate on Riley's revision of the former excursive mode, in which the excursion takes the traveller away from the 'inhabitable centres' of metropolitan life to a socially-peripheral, elevated point that appears to signal a distanced removal from modernity, and so affords a marginal vantage that enables political reflection.[7] This self-stationing is also mediative: Riley's poet-travellers are points of transfer and tension, as they are unable to entirely escape implication in the 'unreal structure' of a globalised world.[8] Although both begin with such an elevated and marginal premise, Riley and Wordsworth negotiate the politics of complicity and distance within the excursion differently, as Riley's willingness to contemplate and allow for bathos, lack and failure enables his excursive speakers to address the problems of accumulation and consumption that underlie the excursion poem in a way that Wordsworth's, broadly, cannot.

Celeste Langan (1995) traces the roots of Romantic excursus back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's unfinished autobiographical work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776-78). Rousseau's 'invention of the pedestrian excursion has the status of an excursus, a supplement to or digression from the "proper" text', Langan argues, a sense that draws on the Latin *excurrere*, to run or flow out.[9] *Romantic Vagrancy* (1995), Langan's critique of the liberal voluntarism she perceives as the driver of excursive wandering, unpicks the involvement of the 'liberally educated subject', typically set within the frame of an improvised excursion, in the appropriation of a digressive and

open state from its material base in precarious life.[10] Langan's reading of this dynamic in Wordsworth's excursive encounters with marginal figures sees the vagrants and commoners as expropriated *again* as poetic material, following their initial dispossession by economic rationalisation. In the late eighteenth century these vagrants existed, she argues, outside the labourer/capitalist binary, as 'the hallucinatory double of capital' whose 'endless mobility' makes them 'anticipatory' of 'the condition of the post modern subject'.[11] In this aestheticised condition, Langan contends, 'origin and destination matter less than the fact of travelling', and identity is conferred by 'actual mobility rather than intentional mobility (desire)'.[12] In this sense the poet-traveller, or tourist, writes Caren Kaplan in *Questions of Travel* (1996), 'define[s] the vantage point of modernity' in their 'rootlessness and anomie'.[13] Riley, however, revises the kind of critique Langan makes of Wordsworthian excursus by returning it to 'intentional mobility (desire)' in the form of pilgrimage, in a manner detected by Peter Larkin's critical prose on Riley's *Llŷn Writings*, as I argue below. In a perhaps unfashionable move away from the digressive openness of postmodern drift, Riley's excursive subjects stress origin and destination as the socio-economic and political facts that constitute travel, and undergird reverie.

In the *Reveries* themselves Rousseau finds himself, on the seventh of the ten 'walks' into which the book is organised, alone in a crevice on a mountainside. In tranquil repose, he enters a state of reverie in which he speculates that he might be the first human to sit in that spot. But the moment is disrupted when the philosopher hears 'a certain clicking noise which sounded familiar'; concealed on the other side of the hill lies a stocking mill.[14] In this vignette can be found excursive tropes that interest me in Riley's work: the idea of removal to a site of repose, its corruption by a modern presence

connected to industry or commerce, and the bathetic deflation of the fantasy of exclusive possession of an experience or landscape.

Wordsworth's own later excursive reflection on the relation between 'the world' and the possibility of withdrawal from it, *The Excursion* (1814), interrogates and recapitulates these political tensions. *The Excursion* is a narrative poem in nine books – intended as part of the unfinished philosophical epic *The Recluse* – which tells of the interactions between the Poet, the Wanderer, the Solitary and the Pastor, as these characters meet and discourse amongst the common people and on the open fell sides of Cumbria and Westmorland. Wordsworth's argument with the excursive tradition is brought out in Book II of the poem, in which the Wanderer guides the Poet into the Cumbrian mountains in search of the Solitary, a hermit who lives in a remote upland cottage, disenchanted with the radical idealism of the French Revolution and haunted by the death of his family. The walkers mount 'a Ridge,'

> Pathless and smooth, a long and steep ascent;
> As if the object of his [the Wanderer's] quest had been
> Some secret of the Mountains, Cavern, Fall
> Of water—or some boastful Eminence,
> Renowned for splendid prospect far and wide.
> We clomb without a track to guide our steps;
> And, on the summit, reached a heathy plain,
> With a tumultuous waste of huge hill tops
> Before us; savage region! and I walked
> In weariness[15]

The difficulty and labour of their ascent is rewarded, however, when the pair spy a 'sweet Recess', which seems 'so perfectly secure' in its isolation and yet 'Not melancholy', being

green,

> And bright, and fertile, furnished in itself
> With the few needful things which life requires.[16]

This image of a self-sufficient community that exists independent from the mediation of markets and is gained by difficult ascent through a 'savage region' is cancelled, however, when they meet the Solitary, whose discourse corrects these touristic idealisations. The Solitary reprimands the pair that while the settlement might appear remote, it is really imbricated in modernity's structures as much as anywhere. For while, the Solitary says, 'Outcast and cut off / As we seem here, and must have seemed to you',

> When ye looked down upon us from the crag,
> Islanders of a stormy Mountain sea,
> We are not so;—perpetually we touch
> Upon the vulgar ordinance of the world,
> And he, whom this our Cottage hath to-day
> Relinquished, was dependent for his bread
> Upon the laws of public charity.[17]

The Solitary's emphasis on the mundane yet 'needful' concerns of market prices and poor relief, and the precarious existence of those barely able to provide those few 'things which life requires', revalues these observed virtues in terms of the sufficiency they suggest, but as material rather than ideal. This sense of need and requirement is the material substrate that counters the Poet and the Wanderer's prospect view, which looked down 'from the crag' at what had seemed to them to be an image of communal independence. I will come back to the Solitary's correction later in order to suggest that this negated ideal of self-sufficiency is, for Riley and Larkin, a politics re-calibrated by the quotidian. Now, though, I place further pressure on the prospect that had obscured the

nature of the relations at work for Wordsworth's excursive subjects, examining its treatment by Riley and by J. H. Prynne.

'Up the Big Hill': postmodern prospects

The Excursion and Rousseau's *Reveries* essay excursive moves, then, whose continuing relevance Riley's work tests and resists, in which the excursion allows an individual subject to renounce the unsatisfactory world of their 'home' culture, while seeking a more just social arrangement. In Riley this is often framed as a nostalgic gesture, recalling a time when society still existed—'I remember Ordino / when it was a place', he notes bitterly in 'The Glacial Stairway'.[18] Often such a renunciation is frustrated, however, by an inability to shake off the excursive subject's involvement in the cultural dominance they seek to escape. In 'Up the Big Hill and Back by Ten', from *Noon Province*, a climb up 'the hot hill', a work of labour with 'no rests or interludes', builds towards and searches for numerically coded harmony, 'sheer calm continuing while the numbers last'. Playing on the balladic sense of 'numbers' as either components of metre or discrete songs, the implication is that this coded harmony is in some sense musical. The walker is then met with an ambiguous culmination to their climb – we are told simply 'No one / in' – and so they turn and descend, 'count on'. On the way down, however, the previously harmonic numbers take on a malevolent aspect, becoming the 'fearful / Clicking of time in the hills'; a mechanistic 'clicking' not dissimilar to the clicking sound of the stocking mill which disturbed Rousseau's reverie.[19]

This quantified, external measure that seems imposed upon ‘Remote farms up in the hills’ bears uncomfortably close relation to the regular measure and metre of the Wordsworthian pedestrian poet with whom the speaker is aligned in the opening line, which plunges the reader into ‘Walking the mind walking the prosody’.[20] This walker carries a pocket edition of Dante, an important repeated referent in *Noon Province* that resurfaces in ‘The Glacial Stairway’ as another fearful descent into the inverted ‘fiscal paradise’ of Andorra. A vacant centre that occupies the ground of the periphery, Andorra’s empty flats, cappuccinos and bus stops form modernity’s variant of the Dantean pit, ‘The central zone of building and development, the growth hole’.[21] But unlike the more combative stance adopted in ‘The Glacial Stairway’, in response to this change the speaker of ‘Up the Big Hill’ chooses withdrawal to a private space over confrontation, in the awareness of complicity in bringing metropolitan number to a place where ‘much more / Than entire lives have been played out’ without it.[22]

‘The Glacial Stairway’ also re-casts the excursive trajectory of J. H. Prynne’s ‘Thoughts On the Esterházy Court Uniform’, a poem which appeared in Series Two of the Cambridge poetry ‘worksheet’ *The English Intelligencer* (1966-68), of which Riley was the editor. As in Riley’s lyric above, in Prynne’s poem a climb ‘on up the hill, in the warm / sun’, in search of harmony both sacred and musical, is bound by an ambiguous, recursive return ‘back / down’, of which the excursive subject knows ‘that it will not be the same though / I shall be sure it is so’.[23] Prynne’s poem studiously avoids any straightforward summit or prospect, preferring instead ‘the grace & hesitation of / modal descent’.[24] Walt Hunter (2015) argues that such deferral is characteristic of the way postmodern poets – including Prynne – rework the prospect and loco-descriptive

traditions, in what he terms the ‘No-Prospect Poem’. This negated genre, Hunter posits, sees the inherited excursive mode and ‘the hill as an imaginative location for staging the ethical dilemmas of the putative “global citizen”’, so that instead of ‘offering spectatorial mastery […] the hill is transformed into the ground and habitation of precarious life.’[25] This perspective incorporates, Hunter argues, both the verticality of the prospect tradition and a lyric eye/I that strives to renounce its advantage, instead stretching out ‘laterally to accommodate global suffering, inequality, and the lives of others, who, however far or close, shape the contours, the possibilities and dangers, of the poem’s immediate vicinity.’[26] The hill as topos is therefore able to join near and far, local and global, in a spatial and rhetorical figure of imbrication and complicity. Poetry such as Prynne’s, Hunter argues, taps into a ‘deep literary-historical memory behind the topographical sites that contemporary poetry reworks to stage a precarious globality’.[27]

Indeed, Hunter’s argument is suggestively prefigured by an article Prynne published in *Espians* that employs literary-historical memory to question the topographical sites of optical mastery, ‘What is a Classic Poem’ (2011). Prynne gives an example of a minor poem he nonetheless considers as conforming to his criteria as ‘classic’: a pastoral elegy by William Collins, ‘Ode Occasion’d by the Death of Mr. Thomson’. James Thomson was the mid-eighteenth century loco-descriptive poet who did most to formalise and finesse the prospect poem, and whose syntactical rendering of the interwoven but rigid Claudean pastoral landscape set a type, John Barrell writes, in which the

> separation of the poet from the landscape he describes is reflected in the poetic vocabulary of the eighteenth century, and particularly in those words which are more or less interchangeable with the word ‘landscape’ itself – ‘view’, ‘prospect’,

> 'scene' – all of which make the land something out there, something to be looked at from a distance, and in one direction only.[28]

Prynne points out that the point of view allotted to the mourning swain in Collins' ode to Thomson does its best to undercut such stable, scene-making vantage points. Prynne observes that the poem is sung from a boat that is floating down the Thames, past the site of Thomson's demise from 'taking cold on the water between London and Kew', and the churchyard where he is buried, at St. Mary Magdalene in Richmond. Prynne writes: 'As the point-of-view for this poem glides gently and slowly down-stream, carried only by the breeze and the current of the water, we sense along with these currencies of nature the relentless onward pressure of time'.[29] A shifting vantage frustrates any attempt to produce a coherent prospect, so that 'we see by the illusion of seeming to see'; the poem's fluvial vantage point undermines the possibility of singular vision.[30] Rather than static, spatialised and authoritative, as in the prospect tradition, it is passive (borne along at the mercy of wind and current), unstable, uncertain and durational, implying that the experience of looking, like the passing of human life the poem marks, occurs in time and is subject to change. It is, in a sense, a covert admission of weakness-in-prospect that is a paradoxical strength. Prynne's critical comments on Collins here and in his essay 'Huts' (*Textual Practice*, 2008) add up to a considered interrogation of what Prynne has called in his criticism on Wordsworth the georgic 'grammar of vantage' inculcated by eighteenth-century topographical verse.[31] Prynne's 'postromantic' interventions suggest Collins and Thomson as pre-Romantic anticipations of an unfinished excursive poetics.[32]

Riley is perhaps less overtly concerned with the complicities of vantage than Prynne, and more inclined towards the recuperation of elevated self-stationing. When, for

instance, the walkers of 'The Glacial Stairway' approach 'a far point towards / the summit', they are assured by their distance from it that 'The world is a / false place' compared to 'that dance / at the incorruptible bound'.[33] This sense of excursive withdrawal and loco-descriptive vantage is strengthened by the Poetical Histories edition of *Noon Province*, in which the poems are marked with locational tags, textual stationings that doubly situate the speaker and site of the poem as well as that of its composition. These are offset to the right of the page and serve as titles, and may be read in relation to a similar loco-descriptive convention in terms of their form and function. Compare, for example, the titles 'Lines above the house' (later to become 'Roofwatch') or 'The slower walk to Roussillon with Kathy' (later 'Stating the Case') to Wordsworth's use of topographical convention in 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, 13 July 1798' or 'Lines left upon a seat in a yew-tree which stands near the lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, yet commanding a beautiful prospect', both published in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Certainly the feel of this, as the cover declares, 'provisionally published' volume is more akin to the document of a trip, whose stop-start rhythm is demarked by waypoints, which are sites of self-stationing and poetic composition.

Moreover, 'Tintern Abbey' is central to Riley's emphatically doubled, recuperative treatment of excursus. Its structuring conceit, of a return to a place that sets up a dialectic of overlaid recollection and change, is that too of 'The Glacial Stairway' and recent sequence *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* (2014). The eponymous long poem that opens *The Glacial Stairway* retraces the path taken by Riley's younger self through a difficult pass in the Pyrenees, opening a gap during which 'something happened in the

world, what was it?'[34] Similarly, *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* retreads both a childhood climb up to a Derbyshire moorland plateau in the company of 'scout leaders and members of Class 2B 1952' and the consciously political act of walking 'up out of Hayfield in the steps of the glorious trespass, April 1932.'[35] The Kinder Scout Mass Trespass was a culmination, in public perception then and since, of the access-to-moorland campaigns and trespass actions organised by the socialist rambling clubs of Manchester and Sheffield and the Young Communist League of Manchester, which aimed to exercise what they saw as the common right to walk in the upland open spaces that had been appropriated by the aristocracy for grouse-hunting.[36] Riley's excursions over the same terrain, while still private re-consecrations of these routes through repeated passage, are also public-minded recuperations of communality through pedestrian excursus.

'The Glacial Stairway' also revisits Wordsworth's central textual site of shifting touristic and metaphysical vantage, 'Tintern Abbey'. Riley's acknowledgement of the breach of time between visits – 'This is me 48 years ago, this 48 of my years, the same valley'[37] – picks up the beginning of 'Tintern Abbey': 'Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!'[38] The connection is strengthened by Riley's older speaker, who finds forms of botanical knowledge not open to his younger self and is prompted to reflect, 'we note as we did not then / the flowers all around'.[39] This collocation has a close phonetic resemblance to Wordsworth's regretful sense that language cannot adequately represent his childhood experiences, that 'I cannot paint / What then I was'.[40] The iambic monosyllables 'paint / What then' and 'did not then', with their almost identical phrasing, lie at the heart of the echoic effect and the allusion.

But Wordsworth's negative, 'cannot', laments the incapacity of the adult to recover youthful perception; Riley incorporates and inverts that negation, as the returning poet-traveller sees more fully what he could not 'note' in youth.

Such self-doubling as a formal attribute draws, in turn, on Rousseau, who says in the *Reveries* that one purpose of his recollections is to give himself pleasure in old age, since 'by thus reviving times past I shall as it were double the space of my existence [...] in my decrepitude I shall live with my earlier self as I might with a younger friend'.[41] Riley's redeployment of Wordsworth and Rousseau's excursive self-doubling fractures into multiple excursive speakers, each with a distinctive register, as I argue below. John Hall (2000) remarks this split in Riley's poetic speakers between a plural, communal public self and a private self, itself divided into the everyday and domestic, and a voice characterised by a spiritual, essentialising register. This may be aligned with another 'pure figure of human possibility, desire, dreaming', just as the public self both is and is not 'the historical "we", Western, post-industrial', mediated by and implicated in capitalist power structures.[42]

'Resolution and Interdependence', from *Noon Province*, emphasises the excursive subject's affiliation with that plural, public self, countering the voluntaristic tendency that Langan sees as constitutive of Romantic excursus. It does so by implicit comparison with the solitary retraction found in Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence', which Riley's allusive title invokes. This poem's speaker, a 'Traveller then upon the moor', encounters a vagrant leech-gatherer. The meeting forces radical reappraisal of the traveller's relation to his sense of joy and sorrow, which is re-valued by comparison with the leech-gatherer's marginal living as he is moved to ask, in the barest terms of social

reproduction, '"How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"'.[43] In Riley's version, this troubling difference is reconfigured; there are no wandering vagrants, but rather a plurality contained within the pronouns that predicates the existence of at least two walkers: 'We are together we are lost' on a 'complicated hill', which confounds the walkers with its 'Limestone / Gullies and terraces'. This 'we' is both Hall's historical 'we' and the private, domestic 'we' that connects two or more walkers. The hikers might be lost in the narrow terms of directionality, but the state of being so places them within a broader constituency, 'together' with the vegetable and animal life of the hill. This work is primarily done by the prepositions, precisely emplacing the walkers within their environment: they are '*In* dazzling light *in* the limestone,' '*under* laden branches' and '*Among* swallowtails' (emphasis mine).[44] An interdependent sense of connectivity, the poem implies, might also allow a more modest positioning of the human contiguously alongside the non-human. The excursion poem is reshaped, then, from independence to interdependence, as a site of human and nonhuman cohabitation and path-making.

Limestone is an impressionable rock, and the 'Goat paths between drystone walls' the walkers follow are also a way of situating their path-following as being at once lost and 'found', in the sense that animal paths, eroded into the soft stone or through the vegetation, are communally made by their users, of whom the walkers in this poem are non-exclusive constituents.[45] In *The Old Ways* (2012) Robert Macfarlane describes the 'preferential pathways' taken by water through limestone: carbonic acid erodes routes that 'in turn attract the flow of subsequent water', creating fissures which often prove 'decisive in the development of terracing and footpaths. Humans and animals, seeking a route, are guided by the preconfigured habits of the terrain'.[46] In this way the processes of

erosion and weathering are open and continuous with participants other than the excursive human, rather than closed and discrete, or indeed exclusively singular.

'Paths', Macfarlane claims elsewhere in *The Old Ways*, 'are acts of consensual making', the 'habits of a landscape'.[47] In 'The Glacial Stairway' this sense emerges in the justified prose block at the bottom of the second page, in which Riley imagines the community of past users of the Pyrenean pass that '*I have now trodden twice*'. The uses of the way have been diverse and plural: commercial at the levels of economic migration and movement of luxury goods; pilgrims on a diversion to Compostela; and cultural information 'from the Al-Andalus courts, manuscripts in astronomy and music, slaves, dancing girls bringing treatises of ecstasies to militarist citadels and kick-starting European poetry'. Stressed above all, though, is the fugitive character of many of the journeys along this 'smugglers' route, escape route for Cathars fleeing the Inquisition, and for Jews and Resistance during the Occupation',[48] much like the Pyrenean path taken by Walter Benjamin, fleeing Occupied France, to the ostensibly neutral Portbou in Catalonia. These are channels of necessity as well as desire, peopled, like the poem itself, by the outcast and imperiled, vestiges of a community which the poem, at times perhaps too simplistically, insists has been lost, resulting in 'Alienation from reality, disappointment, voicelessness'.[49]

The Ascent of Kinder Scout lays out even more clearly this dynamic of excursive self-doubling as communitarian gesture. Riley's characteristic second person plural speakers go over the ground of the Mass Trespass' communal defiance of private property as they climb up,

> Wrapped in luminous cloud, pushed by the wind […] The cloud is not a metaphor, the art is terrestrial. Eventually our heads will clear it. Stamping the ground, stamping mystery and privilege into the soil, we walk up into our work, hauled on our breath. The foundation of the state is not violence but education. Thought is free on the wind-steps. Rills under grass arches. It can only be a completely open field.[50]

Riley's conflation of walking with working stamps out aristocratic privilege. The post-industrial pedestrian poet's work of walking is a secondary labour and layer, the best that can be done to re-consecrate an earlier trajectory of trespass. In 'The Glacial Stairway' Riley insists that Olsonesque 'cosmic scope and epic trope / no longer trouble my sleep', rejected on the grounds that 'They never meant anything / but power, but grabbing a space', and here, too, the 'open field' is knowingly not an Olsonian space.[51] Instead, the peat plateau attained by laboured ascent is a democratically level expanse in counter-argument, too, to the summitism of some strands within excursive Romanticism: 'Making no claims. No amount of erudition or vision raises anyone a centimetre over the heads of the people.'[52] Excursus leads not away from the world, but back into what Wordsworth's Solitary saw as its 'vulgar ordinance', both as direct confrontation with the aristocratic sources of power and authority that underwrote the eighteenth-century prospect poem, and as a way of being together across time and held in the moment of ascent, in companionship with other walkers. If the Thomsonian loco-descriptive poem was often in thrall to the gentry who paid for it to be written, then the postmodern pedestrian excursion is at least in one sense radically proletarian in nature, for all that it also implies leisure time and pleasure walking. Riley's poetry brings out, then, the duality of excursive ascent, its capacity to offer both distinction *and* commonality.

Gaining (ad)vantage

Nonetheless, the capacity of the excursion to lend a distinct perspective on the 'vulgar ordinance of the world' is central, if contested, for Riley. As argued above, the loco-descriptive self-stationings of the Poetical Histories edition of *Noon Province* afford shifting vantage points on the landscapes the poems visit. In 'Lines at the Pool above St-Saturnin', though, the prospect view suffers a forced reverse. The poetic observers are left earth-bound by the flight of a swift, becoming themselves observed:

> What do we know of world and detail who can't
> Compete with the Swift for vantage in the
> Dream of earth? That speed of gain and grace
> Leaves us standing[53]

The speakers nevertheless receive an 'Unpolitically tabulated' innocence from the swift – least earth-bound of passerines, living nearly all its life on the wing – that allows them to temporarily forswear 'a life / Fixed in ratio to demand'. Even as the speaker aspires to this ideally self-removed position, though, its impossibility is reinforced by the mechanics of the simile, fixing the human 'like a permanent / Insect-target for the flashing creature'.[54]

The swift's 'Dream of earth' may be contextualised by Prynne's response, in his 'The Ideal Star-Fighter' (*Brass*, 1971), to NASA's 1968 *Earthrise* photograph. That image's 'backwards / glance at the planet' was for Prynne cause to satirise the language of ecological holism and the pretensions of asserting a dominant vantage point on what were then newly evident problems of global environmental responsibility.[55] But while Riley's image of planetary perspective does seem to an extent garnered from its currency

in the late 1960s and Prynne's usage in the early 1970s, Riley does not mean the same thing as Prynne by the concepts of 'earth' and 'world'. Melissa Flores-Bórquez (2007) observes that often in Riley 'there is an idea of the "earth" (also the "world", the "world-sheet" and other composites, sometimes emphasised as *This*, always accompanied by a varyingly explicit sense of being too much with us'.[56] This Wordsworthian ennui positions 'the world' as the commercial obverse of, as I argue below, the ordinary's sustaining power as the mundane, the *earthly*. The excursive impulse to ascend in order to attain a depoliticised aesthetic condition, untainted by 'ratio' or 'demand', is bound back to the earth and the necessity of confronting the political and economic languages that constitute attempts at self-removal.

Those languages underwrite what John Hall notes is a rhetorical analogy in Riley between 'material commerce and the commerce of the soul', in which terms like gain, profit and loss carry dual referents, and 'The very possibility of there being a *false* language relates to these figures as something like counterfeit notes and coins'.[57] Excursive tropes of mountainous ascent or a bird gaining height are placed in tension with the connotatively present gain of capital, connecting the avian exaggeration of the excursive move upwards and outwards to a perspective-granting margin with a more problematic sort of increase: the incremental gain capitalism requires in order to continue to be classed as such. In 'The Glacial Stairway', as the walkers near the summit and conclusion of the first half of the poem – their ascent a form of labour resistant to demand due to its failure to produce a tangible 'show of result' – exhaustion means it is 'time to stop', but the world, when commanded to do likewise, 'won't stop'. The quietism of the 'private person' who 'intrudes here' at the social margins where 'No Name lives' cannot

in itself serve as effective resistance to unchecked gain. What is sought (repose, vantage) is also manufactured by a discursive environment of which the seeker or walker is an active, creative component as a composer of poetry, and in some sense therefore a counterfeit or double of the experience itself.[58]

But resistance to endless accumulation might be accomplished through other means, which do not altogether renounce the poetics of the 'sweet Recess' or private repose, despite the Solitary's reminder that these too depend on the world's 'vulgar ordinance'. Poet and critic Peter Larkin's linked concepts of scarcity, sufficiency and plenitude have a bearing on Riley's doubled usage of 'gain'. Larkin's shifting conceptual ecology proffers a distinct critique of Romantic excursus and accumulation to that put forward by Langan, one which recuperates Wordsworth as a poet of sufficiency shaded by lack – through a "relation of scarcity" with the given-ness of the world – and which sees Riley's excursive verse in terms of spiritual dedication. As Larkin puts it in an essay on Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, by opening 'itself to the trial of a *poetic* sufficiency as intensity and rarity', 'Wordsworth's risk-taking invites us to interpret the "untrodden ways" as *infrequently* trodden, or as a minimal presence that discovers the way of itself.'[59] This is in part a retraction from the historicist and socio-economic critique of gain and the reification of vagrancy-as-freedom that Langan elaborates. But Larkin's critical attention to Wordsworth (and Riley) allows a reading of Riley's excursive poetics in contradistinction to Wordsworth's, through bathos, the worldliness of the world, and a partial repudiation of gain not only by recursive or communitarian re-walking. Instead, the 'minimal presence' of '*infrequently* trodden' ways is not appropriated as exclusively private experience, nor offered up for inclusion in the accumulative 'world' of the market

that the excursion sets out to outstrip, but is indeterminately somewhere between these alternatives.

Riley's work allows itself to at least envisage the possibility of a time 'When the gaining stops' and 'we shall all gain some peace', as the fragmentary and many-voiced 'Best at Night Alone' has it.[60] Larkin's critical work on Wordsworth and Riley, along with Riley's engagement over a long period with the idea of the 'ordinary', form a permeable nexus of terms whose definitions resist stability, as when each is restated it affects the others. Indeed, Riley has acknowledged in interview the tendency for certain key words, heavily-freighted with meaning, to recur in his work over very long intervals: another form of recursion, like that of older to younger self.[61]

That a '*poetic* sufficiency' replaces gain is necessary because, as Riley's speaker sees in 'The Glacial Stairway', at the end of the sequence of unchecked gain lurks the comic-apocalyptic 'Tesco of Divine Wrath'.[62] This infernal figure of decline, 'So easily down, like a market-led culture / down into nothing', represents the intrusion of modernity at its most banal into a language and landscape more familiar rendered in a higher register, as

> The plants on the tops of the mountains flower on our breath,
> the gentians and the tulips, when we breathe the language clear
> and benign[63]

In 'The Glacial Stairway' Tesco functions as a verbal import that parallels the actual trade networks its presence implies, tainting the 'vocabulary of pure poetry' and lowering the register. [64]

Indeed, the question of register is formally central to Riley's mediation between the world's 'vulgar ordinance' and the redemptive quality of the ordinary. Langan notes that Rousseau, in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, frames a question that was to haunt the Romantic traveller: 'Amidst so many riches, how may I keep a faithful register?'[65] Riley answers Rousseau through polyvocal self-division: his excursive subject comprises registers drawn from the discursive resources of the lyrically exultant or profoundly spiritual, alongside a daily register that produces a comically self-reflexive effect, as in 'The Shining Cliff': 'The earth must be recognised / The dead must arise and the washing up must be done but first of all / The earth must be recognised'.[66] Failure is built into the poems through insistence on a recurrent, bathetically domestic register, which ponders, 'And where does all this get us where do we go from here where are my glasses what are the practicalities of collective hope?'[67]

Bathos plays a part in the excursion's structure for Riley, too. In the Poetical Histories edition of *Noon Province*, 'Up the Big Hill and Back by Ten' is entitled 'Lines on the attempt to visit Lars Frederikson'. As its title suggests, this excursion fails because it *does not* provide an encounter: Lars Frederikson is not in, and the disappointment the walker feels is like that of the Romantic hiker when s/he meets with what is sometimes referred to as the false sublime: Coleridge's disappointment in the underwhelming nature of the Brocken Spectre; or Wordsworth's frustratingly ordinary experience, in Book VI of *The Prelude,* of crossing the Alps by mistake, feeling in place of the anticipated sublimity only a 'dull and heavy slackening'.[68] The difference between this Romantic model of disappointment and its reappearance in Riley, though, is that while Wordsworth and Coleridge were seeking a non-human sublimity in order to reaffirm the primacy of

their individual experiences of it, Riley's speaker suffers a social failure to connect with another human, bathetically represented by a frustrated social call. This trope is repeated in 'Notes on the failure to visit Lorand Gaspar', where a similar search is confounded by 'Dialling numbers, / Getting recorded messages to say there is / No reply'.[69]

These persistent self-deflations cause the poems to fail, as they must, to meet the lyric demand to be *full* of unironised wonder – what Langan calls the 'transcendental surplus' of sublime experience – which oppresses Rousseau with 'so many riches' and leads him to 'the invention of the solitary walker, the reduction to moi-méme'.[70] In the letters to Tony Baker that preface his long poem *Alstonefield* (2003), Riley found the 'full theatrical suicide [...] of the Lakes' equally oppressive; preferable to the overbearing fullness of Romantic sublimity is the smaller-scale complexity of a Peak District village, which, unlike the Lake District, 'wasn't simple and [...] wasn't enough'. But because of this complex insufficiency it offered a better fit, implicitly, for the 'wandering, and suitably impoverished, definitely proletarian, pastoral or pasteurised, writing person', while the post-industrial privation of those who live there is accepted in return for 'peace, messy and running-failed as it is'.[71] In this field-theatre it is more possible, Riley supposes later in the poem, to

> Think of being
> where people are tired of gain, and bored
> with advantage and want to hunt down some peace.[72]

Again the eschewal of 'gain' is associated with a form of lack that accepts sufficiency for purpose. Likewise 'advantage', equally co-opted into a marketised diction and therefore tainted, is also disavowed because it contains within itself the vantage point and 'full

theatrical suicide' of Lakeland high ground and with it the (ad)vantage of distinction such a self-positioning confers upon the poet.

Dedication: *The Llŷn Writings*

Bathos, and the duality of the ordinary and the spiritual, also shape the excursion's form as pilgrimage in Riley's documentary *Llŷn Writings*, a collation of work written on, out of and about the Llŷn peninsula, in North-West Wales, between 1977-1998. *The Llŷn Writings* are grounded in Llŷn's economic conditions, registering changes to the tourist economy of which Riley is unavoidably a part ('the F&C shop itself is for sale! this really could be the last time').[73] But these observed facts of depression and decline are corollary to and constitutive part of spiritual dedication: as for Byron's Childe Harold on the European Grand Tour, the touristic pilgrimage is seen through doubled vision, Riley's two registers of the mundane and the spiritual.

These repeated holiday visits are orientated towards the pilgrimage shrine on Bardsey Island that lies off the tip of the peninsula and is nearly always visible, though very difficult to access. Bardsey Island remains, as Peter Larkin notes in his essay '*Sea Watches*: Little More than Arrival,' 'a site which attracts all the routes and relics scoring the peninsula towards itself, but is never visited as such.'[74] Touristic and devotional visitation is therefore both imperative and always put-off in *The Llŷn Writings*, a dual relation of the pilgrim-subject to the shrine that forms its delimiting end point, and, Larkin writes, the secular subject's 'small-scale admission of sacral desire, a desire which can't be fully accommodated or naturalised because its prior acceptances were rituals,

outposts, islands, watches.'[75] These vigils are properly *ordinances*, ordinary and ordered diurnal postings, which form 'fixed points in / succession, a chain of stations through the land'. This tapering intensification 'breaks / the disorderly obstructions to desire / and needs constant renewal' in the form of the re-consecration of self towards 'distance / or end, the island, the saints' / repose, the logical outcome.'[76]

For Riley's versions of himself as pilgrim-tourist in *The Llŷn Writings* such ritual outposts occur privately, often overlaid on the same ground as that occupied by the ruins that previously sanctioned devotional experiences on the route to Bardsey. These moments typically take the form of self-abnegating or self-forgetting gestures that are also either 'self-launching,' elevating transmutations into a bird-soul and so a form of death, or sites of marginal contemplation with a paradoxical centrality: 'Battles are lost and won in border-zones but creation takes place at the centre, at the peace at the centre.'[77] The horror of the post-lapsarian world seems to force retreat to a position of spiritual purity and elevation, away from the 'untruthful land' (though this too is balanced or inverted by the 'Duplicitous' sea of 'Sandlogged'), sending

> my consciousness out like a gull
> Over the sea, away from the wasteful and gaudy shops
> Of this life[78]

Both figures reprise the trope of excursive ascent examined in the previous section. Indeed, their projective movement has much in common with Rousseau's description of reverie, in which, 'during these wanderings my soul roams and soars through the universe on the wings of imagination,' a transformed state enabled by the subject's lack of corporeality, as 'my soul could never take wings and soar above the natural world as long

as I felt it to be tied to the needs of the body.’[79] For Riley though, as we shall see below, connection to the needs of the body is an essential component of spiritual reverie.

In one of the most profound of these instants, which one might be tempted to call spots of time, Riley’s speaker sits in the still-operative chapel at Llangwnnadl, ‘Doing and thinking nothing for as long / As I can bear it’ in ‘Triple aisled light in which / I lose my name.’ But this meditative attempt at self-forgetting is interrupted by the banally corporeal insistence of hunger and discomfort – ‘my stomach hurts, my nose / Bleeds’ – a bathetic undercutting that is consonant with the structure of pilgrimage, which is also a laboriously *worldly* way of attending to place as it is passed through.[80] ‘Although rooted in atemporal paradigms,’ writes the anthropologist Victor Turner, pilgrimages expose pilgrims to ‘a wide range of geographical, climatic and social conditions’ and are ‘vulnerable to historical accident.’[81] What is more, the sacramental effectiveness of penance and Eucharist – contingent rather than daily, ritualised sacraments – is increased by the ‘accretion of effort, distance, time, exposure to bad weather, loss of comfort, and [...] overcoming temptations on the way.’ Just as important as singular dedication is pragmatism ‘concerned with the day-to-day maintenance of concrete individuals and groups in a state of moral, spiritual and [...] *physical* health.’[82]

Passages in *Sea Watches* seem almost to be parodic versions of the intrusion of such mundane trials into the pilgrim’s spiritual register. The clearest example comes in the sixth of the ‘Eight Seaside Chapels’ at Capel Anelog, which poses ‘the final question [...] on the long / Pilgrimage to Bardsey.’ Riley gives two versions of this question, framed by the dual selves or registers contained within the pilgrim-tourist, so that ‘“Did you remember to bring / The tin-opener?”’ is as valid an interrogation as ‘“If now is

almost time isn't it far too brief?"'[83] In a way the many questions Bardsey asks of the traveller throughout *The Llŷn Writings* themselves accrete, like bodily hardships, to demand in serial variations an answer which, like arrival at the 'unreachable island,' will be forever evaded.[84] The most distilled form of the question asks simply 'What do you bring to bear on this sense of ageing purpose begging to be renewed? [...] What do you say? Ordinary things. Common musings. Focused thoughts such as anyone might have.'[85]

In a sense this is *the* question about Llŷn, and its answer, within the bounds of the common, constitutes the excursive subject as both post-doctrinal pilgrim *and* holiday-maker. *The Llŷn Writings* plays out the balance between two kinds of selfhood conferred by these excursive modes with their political, cultural and theological accompaniment, revealing the self-in-movement as multiply composed of voices and registers that shift between two kinds of excursive subject: one that enjoys the sanctified distinction conferred by the exclusivity of a spiritual quest, and the other the availability of the ordinary person, whose 'Common musings' are nonetheless 'Focused'.

Return: 'and Back by Ten'

The ordinary mediates, then, between self-aware, trivial worries about the minutiae of travel and a selfless attitude of spiritual attention; between the 'Common musings' of the quotidian and the 'Focused thoughts' dedicated to the excursion's object. In the second of these modes, Larkin writes, poetry undertakes a 'scarce granting by means of dedication and renewal: poetry is an exploration of what must not be allowed to be lost'.[86] Meanwhile, the poet as experiential subject is more concerned about their glasses, or

where the next meal is coming from. In this sense the ordinary also negotiates between the registers associated with this self-division, offering a lived alternative to tropic patterns of excursus and prospect.

Riley's poetry glosses Larkin's idea of 'scarce granting by means of dedication and renewal' through its exploration of walking where an earlier self or others have walked, and so renewing and reiterating 'what must not be allowed to be lost'. Doing so is a way of being social that gestures across a time gap, restoring communal and personal loss. But in Riley's revision of the excursion poem, I now conclude by arguing, this communitarian sensibility is channeled back into the private and domestic, shutting itself off from a more public form of political engagement, which implies compromise and qualified failure. 'The Glacial Stairway', for all its range, eventually settles in its last line for 'Ordinary and orderly, acts and failures'.[87]

In *Noon Province*, Riley's speakers repeatedly move from excursion to domestic codas in which the travellers withdraw to a private space, eat and drink. 'Up the Big Hill and Back by Ten' concludes with one such withdrawal, anticipating a frugal but sufficient compensation for the excursion's failure, as 'When

> We get back we'll have bread and cheese with wine
> And count the day to its figured close. [88]

Into the anticipation of bread and wine, particularly in light of the 'book in my pocket / By Dante', can be read a theological sense of sufficient sustenance necessary to prolong life, a trope repeated in several similar codas that conclude the excursions of *Noon Province*.[89] In 'The Glacial Stairway', as well, the labour of the excursive walk is rewarded by wine proportionate to work done – 'Let us therefore / open a bottle of

Spanish wine we deserve it' – but, as with the Eucharist whose mundane double it is, the wine is only a worldly manifestation of the spiritual essence that 'sustains us through the toil, of long-distance walking, of / short-distance confrontation with modernity'.[90]

Prynne's 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' also bounds its excursion with predetermined return. The entire course of that climb is, in fact, a 'pretext for this return through it', which forms the poem, concluding finally by 'going / down the hill, and then in at the back door'.[91] These returns to domestic space are experientially lived within the common: instead of being altered by the journey, the walker brings the trappings of ordinary life into the excursion, which are themselves changed. Larkin's perception that the ordinary is 'before anything a poetic idea, an alternative metaphysics which is a faith in what will suffice', and which 'alone has the power to negotiate with our basic conditions', nuances Riley's commitment to excursive ordinariness by suggesting that 'faith in what will suffice' is the 'alternative metaphysics' his poet-travellers are seeking.[92]

A similar emphasis on the importance of the ordinary is found in 'Arriving at Dawn', where 'Valuable small acts' such as 'the standard breakfast' serve to sustain the travellers, by offering the gift of

> an ordinary thing
> That people believe in
> Such as the day begins[93]

Riley's 'belief' here is in the Wordsworthian temporality of binding each day to the next 'by natural piety.'[94] The ordinary but full – 'the complete, the integral' – breakfast the

travellers receive effects such a linkage of one day with the next by the implication of a repetitive chain of such acts, which are also a kind of private renewal.

In ‘Lines at Night: 1’ the coda comprises the entire poem, with the excursion left implicit and antecedent to the closure and retraction of being ‘Back at evening, a stone room full / Mainly of fireplace’ in which ‘we finish / The wine, foot on sill’ and

> The fire dies down, the fields
> Outside are gradually closed,
> A speaking darkness surrounds us[95]

The play between scarce reduction and plenitude here is heightened by the line break, as the room being ‘full / Mainly of fireplace’ leaves the dual impression of its fullness and emptiness, lacking much else besides a fireplace which anyway ‘dies down’, reduces, as the field-space outside and room-space inside both darken and constrict. These moves to simplify stress the contradiction of barely sufficient conditions chosen within a touristic frame and which, at the same time, shelter the speaker from an outside where even this comfort would be denied. In doing so these repeated simplifications provide the ‘few needful things which life requires’ that the Poet and the Wanderer wanted to find among the Cumbrian mountains, and which Riley relocates to the ordinary.

Again, in ‘Counting the Cost (Syllables at Night)’ ‘We are back and silent, no / Fire tonight, dull light’,[96] while the speaker of ‘Recalling Lacoste’ ends up ‘Back at night in an old room’, a ‘Dim bulb’ refracting the ‘dull light’ of the above poem and, once more, the sacramental meal and the Dante:

> bread and cheese,
> Cótes du Rhone Beaumes de Venise 1985
> Cheap but delicately heartening.

> Silent tonight, reading a pocket
> Guide or Dante and thinking of home.[97]

The lack of main verbs here bespeaks inactivity. The two auxiliary gerunds in the last two lines of the stanza provide minimal motion, but only to index the reflective mood of the poem: reading and thinking are activities that bring the action of these lines down to a resting pulse and nearly efface the text through meta-poetic commentary. If the speaker is reading and thinking only, why should one read about it? A contracted succession of noun phrases and qualifiers mimic the reduction of the excursion to the withdrawn site of its recollection. The missing verb in most cases is 'to be', with an implied person or people grammatically excised from the room, such that it is left indeterminate whether we are to read a singular or plural presence into the absence. If, as John Hall argues, Riley's poetic self is both private and historical 'we', what can be made of this scrupulously bare lack of specificity over the number of excursive subjects, as with the ambiguous 'we' of 'Resolution and Interdependence'?

'What is scarce', says Larkin, 'should relate to plenitude on the one hand and to rarity on the other', and these moves to reduce and deprive of excess also find their plentiful opposite within *Noon Province*.[98] In the rural superfluity of 'Market Day', where the mouth 'Pulses in tune to the pocket, / The ordinary day that earns it', the local market itself

> fills the town to its purpose,
> Stalls heaped with olives, cheeses,
> Chickens and doves, fills the squares with
> Garlic and mushrooms, ordinary things
> As we speak them, full of knowledge
> And desire[99]

'Purpose' in the case of the market is both too much (with us), heaped stalls and filled squares a daily modulation of the transcendental surplus, and just enough, the sufficient quantity to which the town is filled. Both town and market square are containing units, passive recipients of the gift of plenty which, because they set the bounds of 'purpose' on what is accumulated, do not fall into the trap of gain. What is there is given to be used, as 'ordinary things', via a process of exchange which still performs a social function at the centre of the community, unlike with the village market's extrapolation into the market economy. Gift is only wasted or lost, Larkin contends in his essay on Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, if it is not used up; to use up all there is without the subsequent necessity or desire for further increase demonstrates its sufficiency, whether tending towards scarcity or superfluity, towards a private, bare meal or a public, overflowing market stall.

Conclusion

In Larkin's terms such using-up is a consummation that allows the gift to be re-granted, according with his idea of the 'closural': a conclusion that is not closure, but which does not go in for post-structuralist 'enigmatic deferral'.[100] The self-sufficient community that Wordsworth's already belated poet-traveller wanted to find among the Cumbrian mountains is reformulated by the small-scale sufficiency of the domestic, in a limited, partial manner. The 'vulgar ordinance' of the world, which Wordsworthian excursus wants to exclude from its communitarian ideal of sufficiency but cannot, *may* be readmitted to the excursion as *ordinary* ordinance. Doing so does not counteract the broader scale of liberal voluntarism and choice Langan argues is inseparable from

touristic movement in Wordsworth, but it partially repudiates its terms within the reduced arena of return, and in the refusal of gain. But do Riley's codas, circumscribing the end of the excursive trajectory with a return, equate to a closing-down, and in doing so do they seal the subject off from experiential or political engagement? The emphasis on lived detail would suggest not, or at least an anxiety about the possibility of scarce reduction giving onto a less desirable reductiveness.

The structural reduction and retreat to an idea of the ordinary in so many of these poems, whether through withdrawal or by recourse to bathos achieved by disjunctive registers, lends much of Riley's work a dropping, cadential inclination, which he has himself noted as integral to the intonational structure of the English language.[101] Deliberate privation and reduction is a perversely political gesture through its refusal to engage. Proximity to the 'basic conditions' of scarce life offers a possible path out of the liberal subject's negotiation of travel and excursus: intentional desire, or dedication daily renewed, refuses the refusal of purpose. In doing so it partially redeems excursus from Langan's critique of vagrancy's appropriation for poetic material, or reification as postmodern drift. Riley's mixture of a plain lexicon with an elevated register, corresponding to dynamics of scarcity and plenitude, can at times sound banal. But the flatness is a necessary component of the style, its presence an indication of the work's willingness to contemplate its own limitations and failures. The several registers' uncertain valences suggest a space more open and flexible than fixed points of vantage and return might indicate, capable of negotiating not only with our lived-out 'basic conditions', but with the vexed question of what poetry might be, or be for, if its

symbolic language has been tainted by the political forces from which the excursion attempts to withdraw.

My argument strives to account for the way Riley writes through the language and figures of Wordsworthian excursus that Langan sees as too imbricated in a liberal teleology to be fit for reuse. As well as alluding to Wordsworth, he does so by presenting excursive subjects that are sensitive to communal experience yet unavoidably divided from it, in the guise of the postmodern tourist. Riley's emphasis in the codas of *Noon Province* on 'the few needful things which life requires' pushes back against accumulation and gain with the sufficiency of *just enough*. In the poetry of Riley and Prynne, to contest the meaning of movement through landscape with that drawn from the accumulation, consumption and voluntarism of tourism and the market is pressing, indeed 'needful'. But in Riley's revision of Wordsworthian excursus, as well as Larkin's attention to a poetics of *just enough* and *not enough* in Wordsworth and in Prynne's critical movement further back, to the eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poem, there sits an uneasy wrestling with the shifting vantage points of the excursive mode. This tension cannot be resolved as simple critique, but rather by bodily working- and walking-through, due to unavoidable participation in the 'unreal structure' of that 'world'.

References

[1] A textual note: I will refer primarily to the version of *Noon Province* found in *Passing Measures*, which dates and locates itself 1986-1989, 'Les Bassacs /Cambridge', although with a comparative excursion of my own into the Poetical Histories edition (1989), as this volume contains certain poems pertinent to my argument in a significantly different form to those in *Passing Measures*.
[2] Peter Riley, *Passing Measures: a Collection of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 71. Hereafter abbreviated to *PM*.
[3] Jonathan Skinner set out the intent to revitalize this field in his editorial to *ecopoetics* no. 1 (Winter 2001), which lamented that 'walks do not make it into the embattled environment of today's best poetry'. ('Editor's Statement', p. 5). Sixteen years on, Skinner's critique has been thoroughly met by a plurality of pedestrian ecopoetries, such as that collected in Harriet Tarlo's *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (2011), in which Peter Riley and Peter Larkin, whose work I consider in this article, feature prominently.
[4] Peter Larkin, *Sea Watches*: Little More than Arrival,' in Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Poetry of Peter Riley*, *The Gig* 4/5 (November 1999/March 2000), 115-123 (p. 116). I see the concept of 'the ordinary' in light of Stanley Cavell's insistence that the 'everyday is ordinary because […] it is our habit, or habitat', but which is 'from time to time perceptible to us—we who have constructed it—as extraordinary'. Stanely Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 9.
[5] Toby R. Benis, 'Excursion Poem', in Frederick Burwick (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 444-452 (p. 444).
[6] Benis, p. 445.
[7] Riley, *GS*, p.8.
[8] Peter Riley, *The Glacial Stairway* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011), p. 17. Hereafter abbreviated to GS.
[9] Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), p. 28.
[10] Langan, p. 12.
[11] Langan, p. 12.
[12] Langan, p. 16.
[13] Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 57.
[14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker,* trans. by Peter France (London: Penguin 1979) [1776-78], p. 118.
[15] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book II, in *The Excursion*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, Michael C. Jaye and David García (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 86 (ll. 336-46).
[16] Wordsworth, *Excursion*, p. 87.
[17] Wordsworth, *Excursion*, p. 99.
[18] Riley, *GS*, p. 17.
[19] Riley, *PM*, p. 74.
[20] Riley, *PM*, p. 74.
[21] Riley, *GS*, p. 18.
[22] Riley, *PM*, p. 74.
[23] J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Highgreen, Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2015), pp. 99-100.
[24] Prynne, *Poems*, p. 99.
[25] Walt Hunter, 'The No-Prospect Poem: Lyric Finality in Prynne, Awoonor, and Trethewey', *minnesota review* 85 (2015), 144-152 (pp. 144-45).
[26] Hunter, p. 145.
[27] Hunter, p. 146.
[28] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: an approach to the poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 23.
[29] J. H. Prynne, 'What is a Classic Poem', *Espians*, Vol. One 2011(1), 83-117 (102).
[30] Prynne, 'What is a Classic Poem', p. 109.

[31] J. H. Prynne, *Field Notes: The Solitary Reaper and Others* (Cambridge: Barque Press, privately printed, 2007), p. 23.
[32] See Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson (eds.), *Poems for the Millennium Volume Three: The University of California Book of Romantic & Postromantic Poetry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2009).
[33] Riley, *GS*, p. 8.
[34] Riley, *GS*, p. 7.
[35] Peter Riley, *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* (Sheffield: Longbarrow Press, 2014), unpaginated.
[36] For a myth-busting account of the Mass Trespass that sets it in the context of socialist rambling club activism from which it was an outlier rather than organic development, see David Hey, 'Kinder Scout and the legend of the Mass Trespass', *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 59, Iss. 2 (2011), 199-216.
[37] Riley, *GS*, p. 7.
[38] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797 – 1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 116.
[39] Riley, *GS*, p. 7.
[40] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 118.
[41] Rousseau, p. 35.
[42] John Hall, 'On Lines on the Liver and Tracks and Mineshafts', in Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Poetry of Peter Riley*, *The Gig* 4/5 (November 1999/March 2000), 35-42 (p. 38).
[43] William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800 – 1807*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 124.
[44] Riley, *PM*, p. 75.
[45] Riley, *PM*, p. 75.
[46] Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 228.
[47] Macfarlane, p. 17.
[48] Riley, *GS*, p. 8.
[49] Riley, *GS*, p. 9.
[50] Riley, *Ascent*.
[51] Riley, *GS*, p. 15.
[52] Riley, *Ascent*.
[53] Riley, *PM*, p. 71.
[54] Riley, *PM*, p. 71.
[55] Prynne, *Poems*, p. 166. For a full elucidation of these contexts see Joe Luna, 'Space | Poetry' *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Autumn 2016), 110-138.
[56] Melissa Flores-Bórquez, 'General Remarks on the Poetry of Peter Riley: *The Llŷn Writings*', *Intercapillary Space* (2007). http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/general-remarks-on-poetry-of-peter.html [Date accessed 8 June 2016].
[57] Hall, p. 40.
[58] Riley, *GS*, pp. 12-13.
[59] Peter Larkin, 'Scarcity by Gift: Horizons of the "Lucy" Poems', in *Promising Losses: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 93-105 (p. 97).
[60] Riley, *GS*, p. 37.
[61] Riley said that 'elements that recur through a book like this aren't structures but more like things which I have been unable to escape from or resolve over the period [...] So they return, like people returning.' Keith Tuma, 'An Interview with Peter Riley', in Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Poetry of Peter* Riley, *The Gig* 4/5 (November 1999/March 2000), pp.7-27 (p. 23).
[62] Riley, *GS*, p. 16.
[63] Riley, *GS*, p. 10.
[64] Riley, *GS*, p. 17.
[65] Qtd. in Langan, p.15.
[66] Riley, *GS*, p. 31.
[67] Riley, *GS*, p. 36.
[68] William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by Mark L. Reed (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), Vol. 1., p. 190.
[69] Peter Riley, *Noon Province* (Cambridge: Poetical Histories, 1989), unpaginated.

[70] Langan, p. 15.
[71] Peter Riley, 'Excerpts from two letters to Tony Baker', *Alstonefield* (Manchester: Carcanet 2003), p. 2.
[72] Riley, *Alstonefield*, p. 30.
[73] Riley, *The Llŷn Writings* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), p. 102. Hereafter abbreviated to *LW*.
[74] Larkin, *Sea Watches*', p. 115.
[75] Larkin, *Sea Watches*', p. 116.
[76] Riley, *LW*, p. 35.
[77] Larkin, *Sea Watches*', p. 122; Riley, *LW*, p. 87.
[78] Riley, *LW*, p. 14; p. 12; p. 14.
[79] Rousseau, *Reveries*, p. 107; p. 111.
[80] Riley, *LW*, p. 21.
[81] Victor Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1979), p. 132.
[82] Turner, pp. 136-37.
[83] Riley, *LW*, p. 22.
[84] Riley, *LW*, p. 113. Although perhaps an answer is to be found in the prose piece 'Llyn in the Rain', where the continuing presence of seals, 'rolling about on the sharp rock needles with nothing but seaweed to comfort your hides. Snorting and puffing and calming down as the light goes' is comforting in the face of so much change, to the extent that 'being there, at rest on a known point, being there tonight again' is 'a great achievement, seals. Can you hear me? We think it's the answer."' (p.103).
[85] Riley, *LW*, p. 113.
[86] Larkin, 'Scarcity by Gift', p. 94.
[87] Riley, *GS*, p. 19.
[88] Riley, *PM*, p. 74.
[89] Riley, *PM*, p. 74.
[90] Riley, *PM*, p. 16.
[91] Prynne, *Poems*, pp. 99-100.
[92] Larkin, '*Sea Watches*', p. 116.
[93] Riley, *PM*, p. 67.
[94] William Wordsworth, 'My Heart Leaps Up', in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800 – 1807*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 206.
[95] Riley, *Noon Province*.
[96] Riley, *PM*, p. 73.
[97] Riley, *PM*, p. 72.
[98] Hardy, 'Less than, more at'.
[99] Riley, *PM*, p. 67.
[100] Hardy, 'Less than, more at'.
[101] Riley made this observation in a letter to Andrew Crozier, 8 August 1968.