**Manuscript Title:** Walking *Through*: Nostalgia, Mythogeography and the Rural Dérive in Peter Riley’s *Alstonefield*

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**Abstract:** Landscape poet Peter Riley uses the Situationist dérive in order to negotiate the cultural landscape of the British countryside, his collection Alstonefield (2002) forming a psychogeographic investigation into spaces of nostalgia, contradiction and pastoralism in British ruralism. This essay will argue that Riley adapts the urban dérive for a contemporary rural landscape, exploring the radicalisms of pastoral tropes and exposing the spectacle in British rural perceptions. Using the framework of Phil Smith Mythogeography, a contemporary theatrical adaption of the Situationist dérive, my aim is to explore the role of walking as a negotiation of rural spectacle within the wider Radical Landscape Poetry movement.

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**Walking *Through*: Nostalgia, Mythogeography and the Rural Dérive in Peter Riley’s *Alstonefield***

I began to think of the place as an arena, a theatre of outrageously manipulated light in which the soul puts on a show for the people... I could see that it would be necessary to enter this scene again and again in search of the plot, threading questions and trials into the labyrinth, the complex displays of rock and vegetation, sheep-pens and graveyards, set up by the masters of the challenge, the pluralities that devised this spectacle and left it there like an open book. (Peter Riley, 2003, p. 1).

**Introduction: Alstonefield and the Rural Dérive**

The poetics of the rural are imbued with a Situationist spectacle, yet mainstream psychogeographic writing tends to focus on the spectacle of the city landscape, reflecting the Situationist call for artists and writers to re-frame their urban environments in an effort to combat the commercial commodification of the town and city. However, a contemporary movement in radical landscape writing, championed by poets such as Peter Riley, Harriet Tarlo and Ian Davidson, seeks to respond to the spectacle of British pastoralism, re-asserting the rural as a space of radical writing and post-pastoral thought. As Tarlo (2011) explains in *Ground Aslant*, this Radical Landscape Poetry seeks to re-balance the perception of the urban as the rural’s radical and progressive counter. Yet the landscape has long caused this questioning of the radical, the serene views of open country juxtaposed with the society and economy they support. Ian Davidson, another of the *Ground Aslant* poets, remarks

...poets often seem simultaneously to produce and inhabit different worlds in their search for a place for themselves, or a search to escape from the place in which they find themselves. In so doing they construct new places and open up new spatial relationships (10).

The spatial relationships in Peter Riley’s *Alstonefield* stem from this complex overlapping of real and imaginary spaces, the boundaries between both in a bewildering flux.[[1]](#footnote-0) The village of Alstonefield lies in the Peak District in Staffordshire, England, but Riley’s collection of the same name goes far beyond the geographical place. *Alstonefield* is a modern epic, a 101 page poem arranged in 10 line stanzas. Spanning across five parts, and after partial publication in 1995 and 1998, the text was published by Shearsman as a complete works in 2003. The length of the sequence allows it to ‘produce and inhabit’ the multiple spaces embedded in a singular place. Riley plays with this concept by drifting through the geographical and cultural ideals of the village simultaneously, innovating traditional sentimentalities of England’s rolling fields. At the root of these poets’ negotiation of place are the traditions and heritage of the pastoral. Barrel and Bull (1984) provide a definition of the term, and a warning against it, in *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*

...the pastoral vision is, at base, a false vision, positing a simplistic, unhistorical relationship between the ruling, landowning class... and the workers on the land; as such its function is to mystify and to obscure the harshness of actual social and economic organization (4).

Barrel and Bull, in trying to put the pastoral to bed, attempted to override this socially unjust perception of the environment. Yet, as critics such as Gifford (2020), whose *Pastoral, A New Critical Idiom* has recently been reworked into a second expanded edition, have argued, the pastoral continues to challenge, seduce and confuse contemporary poets, and the term’s socially unjust traditions don’t alter its persistent presence in the British landscape.[[2]](#footnote-1) Rural landscape poets face a negotiation of this heritage, often turning towards discussions of walking as a way to instil movement and multiplicity in what can be seen as a static landscape.

The dérive is a popular walking technique employed by walking artists across the world in order to disrupt, reframe and negotiate their environments, generally with a focus on exposing and combating the ‘spectacle’ of a homogenous sense of place (Sinclair (2003), Self (2007), Smith (2010) Papadimitrou (2012)). Stemming from Guy Debord’s Situationist practices in mid-twentieth century Paris, the dérive was engineered as a purely urban practice but contemporary adaptions, particularly Phil Smith’s Mythogeography, have extended this into rural environments, revealing that the spectacle is as embedded and influential in our experiences of the countryside as the city. Many contemporary psychogeographers, including Iain Sinclair and Will Self, two of the biggest names associated with the practice, are attracted to the edgelands of cities, places between the urban and rural. But Smith is one of the only walking artists to conduct extended investigations into purely rural environments. Smith’s practice, focused on a critique of the rural heritage industry and the commercialism of pastoral perceptions, provides a lense by which to interpret the role of walking in negotiating nostalgia, pastoralism, and commercialism in contemporary rural landscape poetry.

The act of moving *through*, rather than dwelling *within* a particular pastoral stance is key to the rural dérive. Riley’s collection presents a place overwhelmed with the slippery multiplicities of pastoralism, the landscape both embodying romanticised visions of a leisurely rural lifestyle, and, on the other end of the spectrum, a commodified spectacle-ridden landscape as commercial as any high street:

the politics of this

carries hope like a feather on the palm:

my country tracks are crossed in oil and

its inhering slaughter (21).

This passage is a typical parody of pastoral images. A gentle and serene atmosphere of delicate hope in the ‘politics’ of the rural (‘a feather on the palm’) and the lush and pleasant promise of ‘country tracks’ are juxtaposed with the pollution and violence of the industry which sustains this place. As a reader of *Alstonefield*, we are constantly reminded that beauty has a commercial value. The livestock and produce which shape the agriculture land exist not for aesthetic reasons, but because they are commodities, a realisation that the narrator is constantly grappling with. Riley is both seduced by pastoral visions and confronted by an anti-pastoral reality, both sides vying for control over the narrator’s perception of the countryside. It’s through Riley’s act of moving *through* these stances and validating these contrasts as having equal presence in the landscape, that the tension of a multiplicitious place are created. The village shifts through utopian and dystopian identities, never landing on any with a convincing consistency. Among the scenes of sublimity, we have other scenes of half-absurd modernity: the locals too busy watching TV to notice that the stone barn shifts position in the night; the ‘fair contours’ of the map robotized by ‘warlords’ (62); the cars running down walkers with ‘the work day whip’ (23), bushes moonlighting as surgeons. This is not a landscape to be defined and shelved into a pastoral to anti-pastoral spectrum. The village itself is the spectrum.

The dérive, or ‘drift’ is central to this meandering. Throughout the collection, Riley’s journey seems to parody a sense of progress, opting instead for a narrative constantly backtracking and doubting itself, refusing any notion of a successful destination or a certain politics of the pastoral. The journey he creates is one of abstract self-discovery rather than a prescriptive goal. He moves through the landscape, both its literal place and its cultural spaces, but the emphasis is on a constantly moving body that does not dwell long enough to commit to any singular sense of place. This mission also rests on the concept of the pastoral construct and Alstonefield exists in a space between reality, fiction and hope:

Welcome home to a fiction of a rewarded labour.

But what a house to die in! What a lay-by in

which to abandon the hopeless machine and

stumble off across fields among the slightly

interested cows begging eternity to a clay bed (80).

Riley’s journey is one of sublime country vistas and village life. There’s a conscious ‘fiction’ about the village which is both tangible and delicate. He indulges in, while simultaneously criticising, the seduction and empty promises of a pastoral idyll, drifting through a deceptive and uncertain landscape. The dérive, however, was designed by Guy Debord and the Situationists to combat the urban phenomenon of the spectacle. I’ll expand on the spectacle a little later on, but for now, this contradiction needs addressing. Shifting the Situationist mission into the countryside is an ambitious task, requiring a bold challenge to the role of the dérive, and an even bolder challenge to an understanding of the wider radical walking project. Debord believed that drifting in the country was ‘naturally depressing’ (*Theory of the Dérive*, [1958] 2005, 63) as the ‘interventions of chance are poorer there than anywhere else’. The urban, with its constant flows of commercial power, was the reason to drift, while the rural, for the Situationists, held a nostalgic authenticity. Writing in the influential essay *Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism*, Situationists Atilla Kotyányi and Raoul Vaneigem declare the urban at the heart of capitalism:

Modern capitalism, which organizes the reduction of all social life to a spectacle, is incapable of presenting any spectacle other than that of our own alienation. Its urbanist dream is its masterpiece ([1961] 2006, 86).

This ‘urbanist dream’ is what attracts contemporary literary psychogeographers to the historical and political layers of London, the implication being that the city is where capital, and thus Situationism, is concentrated, a claim unravelled by Smith and Riley. Writers such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self have dedicated much of their books to exposing the modern day spectacle of city life, but Smith (2014) highlights that the seeming innocence of the rural is as much a symptom of the spectacle as any city streets:

The underchalk is a notion that circulates among some psychogeographers; that the English rural landscape is a fabrication, a thin surface held up on stilts and braces, through which one might tumble into a void.’ ([Loc 1417] 2014)

The rural as a fabrication is exactly what attracts Smith and Riley to it, this ‘void’ underneath being as rich and promising as any dense city streets.[[3]](#footnote-2) Investigating the spectacle of pastoral perceptions and commodification exposes the countryside as a place soaked with the complications and challenges of a national and historical cultural ideal. Smith’s Mythogeography, a modern adaption of psychogeography which values walking as a way of creating meaning, rather than just uncovering it, provides an illuminating framework by which to contextualise Riley’s collection. Mythogeography is an experiment in placing ‘the fictional, fanciful, mistaken and personal on equal terms with the factual, municipal history”’(2015, 167). Unlike the Situationists, who guarded their theories and definitions, Smith invites walkers to stretch his concept by creating their own ‘fanciful’ and ‘mistaken’ ‘Mythogeographies’ of place, artistic projects that challenge a commodified sense of place in favour of a more personal and creative interpretation of a location’s history. This same valuing of subjectivity and the fantastic spaces of the pastoral is exactly what drives Riley on.

**Smith, Riley and The Spectacle (why we derivé)**

Debord’s Situationists saw the Spectacle as embodied in the banalization and modernization of 1950s Paris, a result of mass urban re-planning. Bonnet (2012) explains that ‘Twenty- four percent of the surface area of the city was demolished and rebuilt between 1954 and 1974’ (75)[.](#_heading=h.gjdgxs)[[4]](#footnote-3)Smaller, more winding, roads were replaced with the long wide boulevards which now dominate central Paris. In response to this homogenisation, Guy Debord called for a method of walking which re-introduced ‘a spirit of discovery’ in the streets (Quoted in Coverley, 2010, 81). The Spectacle is about control and manipulation of place, a systemic overwriting of individual experiences of the environment to make way for a more commercially viable collective commodity. The architecture of the streets direct your attention toward shops and restaurants, suggesting that there’s a right and a wrong way in which to travel. The dérive champions a more aimless engagement with place, denying the usual flows of pedestrian traffic and their commercial underpinnings. Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias (2020) state that ‘The Spectacle is the dictatorship of social life by the economy’ and thus ‘we are reduced to its passive ‘spectators’ (152). Smith’s *Anywhere* (2017), moves this aimless-ness firmly into the countryside. The novel demonstrates Mythogeography in practice. *Anywhere’s* narrator, Cecile, wanders through the cities, towns and villages of South Devon, exposing the commercialism dominating the rural as much as any city. At one point, in the village of Cockington, Cecile highlights the role that international shipping, feudalism, and mass-tourism have played in shaping the supposedly well-preserved village we see today. Smith describes how the site has been overwritten by a singular sense of heritage, that of the calm and serene slice of country life. The village is the epitome of rural spectacle, used to sell a national or regional identity, a vision dependent on a stasis.[[5]](#footnote-4) Riley similarly aims to burst through this passivity of a singular ‘heritage’:

As I pass down the valley each bush calls my name

and clearly states its thesis in the available space

Of the night... (84).

This is a village landscape which speaks back to and contradicts its own serenity. Whereas the Spectacle suppresses the complexity of the village, Riley calls for ‘less fairground and more circus’ (24), an injection of Mythogeographical theatre and subjectivity in a détournement of the chocolate-box village. This stems from a personal disappointment in the rural, a place already too cut up by ‘Westminster’ ‘mafioisi’ (22) and modernity to foster any kind of hope for an equal future. At one point Riley encounters the owner of a phantom café who refuses to take any payment, and explains his lack of business acumen as follows:

...the principle

is very clear. To construct a space in which

worth is realizable and whatever anyone is bears

its meaning forward so that time lived, always

at an end, holds at any point its own prize where

the transaction is returned across hope. This is simple,

is virtue, is the act of the unacknowledged giver (65).

This ‘space’ can be taken for Riley’s mission for *Alstonefield* as a whole, a refuge from the spectacle. The simple act of giving away a product, in this case a sausage, is a symbol for a new economic system, one based not on commodities, but a looser sense of hope and value in individuals. ‘Time lived’ holds its own prize. This will be a place beyond monetary value, where life fulfils itself and transactions are replaced by gifts, a Situationist reframing of commercial streets. Money is a persistent theme in *Alstonefield*. The valley has never ‘suffered profit’ (34). The villagers smile and dance ‘in the face of profit’ (39) whereas the ‘machine’ (39), the ‘production unit’ (47) of modernity is fed by death and cash. In response, Alstonefield maintains an aimlessness, a fight against the despair of ‘work and structure’ (42). In Riley’s vision, it becomes a ‘plural space’ (43) where you can feel like a ‘citizen not a subject’ (43), and Riley’s act of walking becomes a Mythogeographical method of creating this space. And yet, this will never be a complete or sustained construction, and Riley follows the earlier observation with a turning away from the idyll it suggests. To the phantom café owner, he replies, ‘I know, but my heart shakes for the cold world (65).’ A sense of personal realism surfaces throughout Riley’s encounters with this new space, and a tormented and regretful self resurfaces:

…I don’t blame you

for running love against profit, O lubric self

In other words, ‘Pennies are good shit’. These shifts of utopian visions and regretful realities burst any hegemonic sense of place, an endeavour at multiplicity which underpins the act of Mythogeography. As Smith explains in the origins of the term:

In place of Utopia arose the idea of ‘anywheres’... the very unevenness of what has been explored, the bittiness, the unsatisfying half-interwoven, the tangle, the dissipation, these all began to seem hopeful, even utopian in an unutopian way, when subjected to wandering (2012, Loc. 2267).

Both Smith and Riley focus on these details and contradictions of place, bursting any sense of a coherent whole. This ‘anywhere’ is created by the fragments of place, the ‘dissipation’ of geography that allows a more subjective experience of place to emerge. As a creative writing technique, searching the page for the spaces of place in this way is full of potential. It forces writers to shake off any expectation to describe places accurately, or any notion of ‘capturing’ a place in writing. Instead, a mythogeographical poetry frees the writer to explore the wild and wonderful worlds at the edges of the actual.[[6]](#footnote-5)

If walking is a performance of disparate narratives of landscape, Alstonefield provides the perfect setting. As the poem develops, the fantastical becomes more complex and sustained, and Riley is thrown into the landscape as much as it throws itself at him. The poem grows increasingly into a Mythogeographical ‘Anywhere’, a place held together by a tangle of disparate rural elements: ‘We solve into bits and pieces’ (58). By increasingly relinquishing a sense of a coherent place, Riley’s drifting enables him to become part of his subject:

letting the questions pass. I intend no lessons,

I figure policy by the cramp of my toes (59).

This vision of walking as exposing multiplicities and thus bursting any sense of coherency is inherently mythogeographical, the performance of the walk itself creating and re-creating the landscape. This method of traversing place relies on a yielding to its elements, a more personal engagement with place and our role in its perception. The walk, in other words, movement, becomes the site itself. As Smith explains

I wonder if I have ever properly understood what research is. That only if I put myself at the mercy of my subject, only when I am caught up and becoming part of my subject and only when that subject is caught up and disrupted and diffracted by me – leaving a footprint, climbing a fence to trespass – am I really researching (2012, Loc. 1718).

This ‘caught up and disrupt[ing] and diffract[ing]’ of the subject and the self is a practice embedded in Riley’s multiplicitious journeying. Riley sees the Spectacle as a challenge, a performance that beckons us to join in. For Riley, it’s the tensions of the pastoral and its cultural and personal resonances, narratives forced into fantastic re-makings. Reflecting the quote at the head of this essay, it’s this searching for the plot, the threading of our own questions into the labyrinth of the rural landscape that makes Riley’s walk a stand against the spectacle.

**Restorative Nostalgia and Cultural Memory**

Sveltyana Boym (2001) writes that nostalgia can fit into two categories: restorative and reflective, categories that are ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. The distinction between them provides an insight into Alstonefield as a tense blend of tangible pasts and their impossibility:

Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time (41).

Restorative nostalgia demands a strict understanding of truth, a belief that a slice of the past existed completely as we understood it to. Only then can it be recreated in its entirety. As explored earlier, Riley’s truths are too multiple and contradictory to be this perfect. Restorative nostalgics also deny the cracks and imperfections of time and desire an environment that looks both old and new at the same time. Boym puts forward the example of the restoration of the Sistine Chapel in the 1980s, in which the Vatican faced a choice of restoring Michelangelo’s work in such a way that it reflected their interpretation of his original aims for the chapel, or to restore it with new artists, a kind of ‘creative collaboration with the masters of the past’, as many sixteenth and seventeenth century artists had done before. The Vatican opted for the former, and Boym outlines the concerns this raises:

What is more authentic: original images of Michelangelo now preserved through time, or a historical image that aged through centuries? What if Michaelangelo rejected the temptation of eternal youth and instead revels in the wrinkles of time, the future cracks of the fresco (46).

This is not to say that Riley’s village aims at a restoration of the cultural ideal of the English village, more that he recognizes glimpses of that construct, some real and some fantasy, in the landscape around him. Riley gives agency to those ‘wrinkles of time’, forever questioning the future cracks of the countryside, cracks which widen with drifts through time and place. Yet the poem’s form suggests the opposite. *Alstonefield* is arranged in a consistent sequence of ten line stanzas, a steady and predictable form, which, visually at least, suggests an imposition of order, an effort to contain and articulate its subject in a way that could be ‘restorative’ of a sense of pastoral order. Yet the highly-controlled form is an ironic juxtaposition to its contents – a utopia ‘wrinkled’ with reality. As the poem’s scaffolding, Riley’s stanzas tower up the page, but the fragments of *Alstonefield* bounce and tear at these barriers, growing wild in contrast to them. Instead of the restoration suggested by the form, Riley pokes fun at the sense of a coherency of subject, giving us a text which sprawls and pushes against even itself.

*Alstonefield* refuses a ‘restorative’ heritage village vision, but doesn’t deny its right for a place in the landscape. This is akin to Smith’s Mythogeography and its emphasis on the rich potentials of rural ‘wandering’, namely the construct of an Anywhere and the embracing of the ‘half-interwoven’ fragments of place. The pastoral idyll exists, albeit in fragile glimpses, and should be acknowledged, but ultimately overridden by images of 21st Century reality:

... Soon the farmworkers

will be out in those mobile telephone booths spreading

hip-hop music on the land (100).

Riley may be joining the spectacle of rural ‘restoration’, but he does so in order to subvert it, acting as a kind of undercover nostalgic. In one sense, Riley mirrors Debord’s belief in the rural as a return to authenticity in the face of the spectacle-riddled city. As Bonnet explains:

...a number of important Situationists ended up as escapees from the city, going to live in rural locations that they imagined, as René Riesel puts it, as places where one can ‘relearn practices’ that in many respects make up the genuine riches of humanity’’ (Bonnet, 2012, 78, citing Léauthier 2001, 13).’

Yet Riley plays on this same rural/urban dichotomy, and, as we’ve seen, exposes the rural spectacle. Nostalgia is at the heart of this multiplicity of place, and Riley frequently parodies a rose-tinted view of the past. This taps in to a wider cultural perception of the rural as embodying a kind of national memory of origin, a pre-modern and pre-capitalist closeness to the soil. This is a vision drifting across the fields of Alstonefield, plaguing, delighting and ultimately disappointing our narrator who must grapple with a landscape saturated with contradiction. As often as Riley sets up the journey as a pastoral ‘restoration’ (‘to set the burden of technology aside like a wet rucksack’ (83)), he punctures that ‘globe of love’ (11) to deliver a home truth of the countryside:

...It would be specious to pretend

That any bit of British Countryside is anything

But an agricultural factory marked Piss off (23).

Anger over a mis-sold or let-down rural is especially emotional in a British context, and the concept of a ‘restored’ rural is a powerful one. As Tim Edensor (2002) explains, as a concept, the British rural has an enduring presence in our society, writing that such landscapes are...

so ideologically charged that they are apt to act upon our sense of belonging so that to dwell within them, even for a short time, can be to achieve a kind of national self-realisation, to return to ‘our’ roots where the self, freed from its inauthentic – usually urban – existence, is re-authenticated (38).

The rural as a re-authentication of self, a Situationist ideal, haunts Riley’s walk, but crucially, as explained above, Riley does not dwell in any one space for long. This is in order to engage with what Gifford (2020) highlights as a key tension underlying rural writing: ‘The difficulty for the anti-pastoral writer [is] in finding a voice that can be celebratory whilst corrective, that does not adopt the very vices it is criticizing...’ (135). Again, we come back to the role of moving *through*. In Riley’s dérive, he’s free to indulge in nostalgic ideals but pull away before it dominates his journey. Considering the landscape’s intense multiplicities, Riley suggests that it’s the act of picking up a collective or national memory that makes it real, not its historical or political basis in fact. The text of Alstonefield creates a stage in which the retreat in cultural fictions and half-truths can be indulged yet simultaneously denied:

…a completed memory

compassed by care makes a globe of love.

Very little I can do with it, alone. But it is like

a repair depôt that continues through governments

and wars at the end of a small back road where

carefree labourers stroll around dark and competent (11).

The pages of the poem form this ‘completed memory’, a consciously unreliable space in which nostalgia is both readily indulged in and rejected, the closest we get to any sense of a ‘restoration’. The village, in Riley’s text, is a construct of personal and cultural hopes and stereotypes of country living, and its Riley’s moving *through* that reframes the British countryside as a site of resistance. As the poem develops, it delves into more and more fantastic and surreal rural tropes, forever mixing real and imaginary geographies in a bewildering blend on the page. That this memory can be completed is a more complex idea, and suggests a kind of disembodied restoration, a memory made real in the mind but not actualized in the world, in other words, ‘compassed by care’. This is part of a wider pattern of longing in the poem and represents the primary tension underlying Riley’s encounter, between an urge for a restorative realm and the knowledge of its impossibility.

**Conclusion: Love and Reflective Nostalgia**

*Alstonefield* disrupts the cultural village construct more than restores it, but Riley’s elegiac imagery frequently plays with the idea of an idealized simpler time, an aspect of the rural similarly critiqued by Smith in *Anywhere* (2017). The slippery and deceptive nature of the rural landscape is demonstrated by Riley in sustained and bizarre scenes of an impossible perfection. Passing a cave rumoured to be where ‘A cobbler/his wife and seven children lived within living/memory’, Riley describes:

...wattle awnings over the entrance and

in the evenings they sat round a fire singing

a narrative polyphony in divided head-tones

while the weather suited itself and death hung

suspended (37-37).

This is a life so idealized that it can only ever be looked back on, a death-less pastoral existence. Without the latter two lines above, Riley could be taken as a hopeless nostalgic, perhaps even contributing to the ‘false vision’ Barrell and Bull warn us about. But the final two images, a ‘death’ hung suspended and an inconsequential relationship to the weather, remind us that this utopia is a construct, one that, as explained earlier, exists only in the ‘half-interwoven’ aspects which Smith’s Mythogeographic wandering facilitates. The construct of a ‘globe of love’ rural weaves itself throughout the collection, but, as above, is consistently burst. At one point, Riley suggests that the country is for an idealised guiding workforce, whose walking is an act of returning to values:

They are working people, the musicians

and plasterers who guide us back to where we live in a dawn halo

of old and tired devices – see how they walk with their

consorts on the sweet paths of earnest learning and learned earning.

You who die by my compass this curling morn (99).

There’s no restoration here, only an endeavour that leads beyond the geographical village and into pastoral constructs. These ‘earnest’ people are phantoms symbolizing hope in a renewed sense of values, reminiscent of the gift economy mentioned previously. But *Alstonefield* highlights the fleeting nature of these visions. They are fragile constructs which can’t survive sunrise, destined to live or die by the ‘compass’. The owner of the compass reflects a wider political system that wields control over the populace. The village is no longer a haven from ‘urban despair’, if it ever was, but a theatre of itself, a spectacle of modernity against a backdrop of the sublime.

Riley champions the role of love in a landscape poetry that Alexander and Cooper (2013) describe as pivoting on ‘process and flux’ (Kindle Loc. 237), commenting that contemporary landscape poets are looking for places that are ‘unsettled, in process and radically open to change’. For *Alstonefield* this is exactly why love is needed. It forms a human grounding to the pastoral shifts that complicate the British rural. Riley’s frequent use of love demonstrates that the vision of Alstonefield we’ve experienced relies on a basis of hope and love because it has no historical grounding. The story he puts forth ‘collapses nightly’ and ‘someone has to/walk it into day’ in order to sustain it (93). This complication brings *Alstonefield* firmly into a reflective nostalgia, which, as Boym explains

...is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. Re-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis (49).

This new flexibility towards the past is characterized in the village’s multiplicity, a multiplicity facilitated by walking, by moving *through*. In *Alstonefield*, love is bound up with hope. It’s a strength from which a new world can be built, one that takes on the pastoral tropes of innocence, community and the corruption of the urban. As Riley explains, ‘virtue is what people return to’ (58).

If, as Smith (2014) says, ‘The feeling body, alive with thoughts, is a resistance; theatre and insurgency combined’ (186), then Riley’s journey is categorized by such resistance. In *Alstonefield,* the landscape spills across narratives, savouring the tensions and contradictions that walking opens up. Riley offers a renewal of Situationist dérive that echoes Smith’s rural mythogeography, providing an elegy for a multiplicitious cultural landscape and a reframing of the urban dérive. His practice questions the Situationist’s obsession with cities, acting out a psychogeographic investigation that proves the rural as an environment as commodified, bewildering and powerful as any city street.

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1. For clarity, I’ll refer to the Alstonefield text in italics (*Alstonefield*), and the village of Alstonefield in a regular format (Alsonefield). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. For further discussions on the dangers of the pastoral see Williams (1973), Taylor (1994), Siddall (2009), Edensor (2003), Outka (2009) and Matless (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See also Nick Papadimitrou’s Scarp (2012) for an example of a heavily storied and complex engagement with the edgelands of semi-rural Essex. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Bonnet cites Pinder (2000) for these figures and the above quote is taken from Bonnet’s chapter, *Critical Nostalgia and the City* in Tina Richardson’s *Walking Inside Out* (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. For more on commodification and the static rural, see the aforementioned Bonnet and Outka. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. For more on mythogeography, and an insight into its influence on my own creative process, see *The Documentary Drift: Lutyens, Cockington and Poetry* in *Walking Bodies* ed. by Helen Billinghurst, Claire Hind and Phil Smith (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)