Landscape, absence and the geographies of love

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Working out from an encounter with a series of memorial benches at Mullion Cove, Cornwall, this paper develops an account of landscape in terms of absence and the non-coincidence of self and world. Arguing that recent work on the topics of landscape, embodiment, perception and material culture has tended to stress presence in various ways, I seek to explore instead here motifs of absence, distance, loss and haunting. The paper further attempts to combine descriptive and experiential accounts of the memorial benches and the views they open with conceptual arguments regarding the limits of certain phenomenological understandings of self and landscape. In particular, Derrida’s critical reading of Merleau-Ponty is outlined and explored. The final substantive section of the paper then takes a further cue from the memorial benches to discuss what it terms the geographies of love. The argument here is that such geographies constitute a fracture forbidding any phenomenological fusion of self and world, entailing instead a simultaneous opening-onto and distancing-from. It is within the tension of this openness and distance, perhaps, that landscape, absence and love are entangled.

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… to be an ambulant point of view is a familiar mystery, but the existence of infinities of untenanted points of view is a destabilising thought. (Robinson 2006, 68)

The landscape begins with a notion, however vague and confused, of distancing and of a loss of sight. (Nancy 2005, 53)

The memorial benches at Mullion Cove (on the Lizard Peninsula, South-West England)

The light ahead was so compelling that we were unstrapping our seatbelts, reaching for the doorhandles – we were halfway out of the car before it even came to a stop, turned into a small gravel recess there by the cliff-edge. Sometimes you’ll turn a corner and a view will surprise you, but we ran right up to this one, and then stood, together and apart; different angles on the same encircling scene.

We were standing high above Mullion Cove in the clear early morning, looking down into the cove, southward along the coastal cliffs and canyons, and far out to sea. We’d driven for some miles through nondescript farmland to arrive, suddenly, at this vivid, vertiginous scene. And now before us the mass of the sea in particular was a previously unseen and unthinkable electric blue, in response to which all the other colours of the spectrum – and all of the other visible blues, too – shone bright and true. Parts of this could at least be described: pools of bottle-green near the rocky coast; further out, seams of indigo stretching across the water’s surface. And out on the horizon blue sea and blue sky were pasted up absolutely proximate, absolutely distinct.

The overall impression of the scene, though, transcended all particulars. The outlines and shadowed depths of the cliffs seemed archetypal: in all the transience of things, somehow this moment revealed the true and original textures of the
landscape. It was as if I’d been granted for a minute an untarnished perception of things. Or as if my look had been washed clean, disinfected, so that it was precisely no longer a look, and all things could be unfiltered, unaffected by it. The world was then for once no longer a mesh of invisible gazes and visible landscapes, coiling and criss-crossing together, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) puts it. Nothing was hidden: there were no invisible scaffolds at work, no structures of intelligibility or ideal types propping up either the blue morning or the circles of my own eyes. Instead, for a minute, things were coloured fresh and new. Everything was visible, everything was only visible.

But – but these sorts of moments can never last. Or more truthfully, they never really come to pass. An instant of unreflective presence and directly given phenomenality: it beckons and falters in the selfsame gesture. It’s an illusion, really, like all enchantments, and maybe too like all attempts to understand materiality and perception themselves as indubitably enchanting and enchanted (see Bennett 2001; Davies and Dwyer 2007). Something always takes their place, displaces and alienates them; in fact, we can argue, something is always already displacing the moment from both without and within. For a minute I thought I could see the sea-in-itself, unhued by any perception of mine or anyone else. But I was wrong.

Because the hillside we were looking from was already covered with eyes. Dotted here, and there, and there again, by the sides of the coast path as it switchbacked down the slope to the cove below, were a series of seats, benches – lots of them – offering up a whole succession of perspectives on the landscape. There were yet more of these benches at points set off from the path by a few paces, cupped in little hollows of their own or
placed on outcrops and minor promontories. Places to rest, for a minute, and take in the view. Collectively they stood, together and apart; different angles on the same encircling scene.

And I knew from experience that most if not all of them would come with names attached, letters burnt into the wood, or etched onto small brass plates. That is, they would be benches dedicated to somebody, in memoriam. They would be sites set aside for looking and remembering, and in so being they would vex together in complex fashion landscape and gaze, visible and invisible, presence and absence, blindness and flight, love and loss.

So the whole scene was already a watching. Nothing simply visible-in-itself. Without realising it we had been looking at – or, better, looking-with – a host of ghosts and memories. These benches: eyes without bodies, or rather shapes and frames that embodied eyes anew, giving new sites for seeing, re-placing here and prospecting out there too eyes now closed and buried elsewhere. Like a dense net of searchlights sweeping through the dark, sweeping over the waters.

Thus the benches watched, in some cases they watched over. This wasn’t metaphorical, not at all; it was an actual incorporation. We do not simply disappear when we turn into ghosts, Jacques Derrida (1994) notes; rather we pass into and are incorporated by other states and forms. Against any phenomenological naturalism that would confine human perception and presence to living, breathing, organic flesh, Derrida argues that ‘the body’ and its sensibilities are always a matter of prosthetics, augmentations, displacements, substitutions – different ‘appearances of flesh’:

there is no ghost ... without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectrogenetic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical incorporation ... Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in another artifactual body. (Derrida 1994, 126; original emphasis)

That was what we were at Mullion Cove: paradoxical incorporations. Landscape and recollection and perception, none of them fusing or coinciding with each other, nor singly present and replete in themselves, but all held tense and tangled nonetheless.

Themes of the paper

This is a paper about landscape, absence and love. That is what the memorial benches at Mullion Cove are about, although (as I want to explain), it took me months to see it. These benches are about landscape almost per se, because even just coming across them involves being enrolled into a quite particular way of seeing – the visual contemplation of an externalised scene. This is a scene set at a distance, turned into a view, precisely through the installation of the benches themselves, there on the hillside, overlooking the sea. You sit down and look, the view before you is angled and framed in a certain way by the aspect of the bench in ques-
tion, and in this sitting and watching a range of moods and sensations are solicited. Putting this more formally, via one possible definition of landscape (Wylie 2007a), a series of tensions between watcher and watched, interior and exterior, the invisible and the visible, are set in motion. You might seem to feel (for a minute, as I’d done) the living presence of the coastline, the sea and the sky, with this experienced as a sort of sublimely de-personalising tuning-into or becoming-with: phenomenal coincidence of self and landscape. Or else (remembering the dead), the benches might be for you a sort of meditative and reflective resource, a place where things could be put in perspective, and look out there to the far horizon, now it’s truly a vanishing point.

Absence at the heart of the point of view. Just as they are about landscape, the benches at Mullion Cove are about absence and love – and in this sense more widely about memory. They are visible makers or material manifestations of memory and love – very often they are put there precisely in loving memory.2 Remembering love, that is, and not just commemorating it, keeping it alive in other words, because remembering is a sort of loving. But once memory and love are even mentioned in this way, then just as with all the absences constitutively at work in the apparently seamless present landscape, so the purity of these terms is straight-away ghosted: remembering/forgetting, loving/losing.

Absence at the heart of the point of view. But in contrast much recent writing has sought to define landscape in terms of presence in various forms. For example, Mitch Rose argues that landscape can be understood as ‘an imagination of, and a movement towards, presence’ (2006, 538). Here, in this moving and imagining, culture and landscape are together pictured as ‘dreams of presence’:

As a performative binding up of various inclinations, sensations and responses into particular imaginations of presence, they signal a literal operative connection imbricating self and world ... They constitute the affective cabling that connects self and world ... They constitute the work that marks our being as an always-already being-in and attached-to the world. (2006, 545; emphasis added)

Rose is careful to insist upon the aporetic nature of this landscape-presence; as a characteristically Derridean ‘impossible possibility’ (2006, 542), it remains a ‘dream’. This is a position in some ways quite close to that which the present paper will gradually work towards. However, Rose presents ‘dreams of presence’ as necessary and recurrent: landscape is an inexorable movement-towards presence, a building-up-to presence. Invoked here in terms of a ‘literal connection’ in which self and world come close together, and touch each other, and then go beyond even that, and become part of each other, intertwined in a ‘phenomenological collapse of self and world’ (2006, 547), landscape is defined above all in terms of contact, immersion and immediacy. And it can be argued that similar tropes of presence are evident in much of the current literature more broadly framing landscape in terms of process, sensation, performance and experience. Thus, writing in a broadly vitalist vein evokes and vivifies the material presence of landscape itself, in terms of the incessant elemental and ecological agencies of sky, earth and life (e.g. Harrison et al. 2004; Ingold 2005 2008; Whatmore 2006; Clark 2005). The presence of landscape is here a matter of force, energy and process, landscape present and alive in and of its ongoing animation and becoming (see Rose and Wylie 2006). And in a related set of studies, phenomenological accounts of landscape in terms of human dwelling and being-in-the-world commonly emphasise, and ground their arguments through, the evolving co-presence of self and landscape, with this self–landscape nexus being understood in terms of ramifying bodily engagements, encounters and inhabitations – what Lorimer (2005) collectively terms ‘embodied acts of landscaping’. Ever since Tim Ingold’s (1993) influential account of landscape, dwelling and temporality, a succession of...
studies have explored practical enactments of self and landscape, for example walking and looking (Wylie 2002, 2005; Tilley 2004; MacPherson 2005), cycling (Spinney 2006) and various forms of cultivating (Cloke and Jones 2001; Crouch 2003; DeSilvey 2003). In all such accounts, to a greater or lesser degree, stress is placed upon the central role of bodily presence – of sensuous, tactile and experimental being – in the co-constitution of self and landscape (see Paterson 2006). Crucially, the mutual emergence and entwining of self and landscape is not just the object and medium of analysis here – this evolving co-presence also further assumes an enlarged ontological role, as exemplary of the very process of being (or becoming) in-the-world through which existence and meaning are themselves vouchsafed.

A third and associated strand of current landscape writing takes some of its cues from phenomenological and non-representational idioms, but is more centrally concerned with questions of memory, and here it is the looming presence of landscape in memory, and hence within senses of self, identity, community and belonging, that is emphasised. For example, Jones (2005) and Pearson (2007) both offer personal and reflexive accounts of how landscape-memories are, so to speak, ever-present in the performance of emotive self-identities. Equally, Lorimer’s (2003 2006) deft stories of life and love weave together landscape and memory as palpable, haunting presences, registering evocatively in multiple locations and times.

These forms of landscape-remembering – and in turn this paper also – have a close epistemological and procedural affinity with current writing on ‘spectral geographies’ concerned with the haunted and haunting aspects of place, materiality and memory (examples not further discussed here include: Pinder 2001; Wylie 2007b; Maddern and Adey 2008; McEwan 2008). Sitting slightly adjacent to the now-large and well-established geographical literature on the cultural politics of place, memory, commemoration and forgetting (see, just for example, Legg 2005 2007; Johnson 2005; Blunt 2003; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004), work by geographers such as Caitlin DeSilvey (2006 2007), Dyvia Tolia-Kelly (2004), Karen Till (2005) and Tim Edensor (2005) has found distinctive ways of exploring and expressing the physicalities and haunting tangibilities of memories – of folk and diasporic identities, industrial and avant-garde cultures – as these precipitate into, disperse throughout and linger within landscapes and objects. In this way, such writing works creatively and critically at a threshold of presence/absence. The shreds and patches of things, whether treasured possessions or soiled ephemera – handled, venerated or discarded – all the traces of presence of those now absent are worked in such a way so as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence, the presence of absence, and so in the final analysis the threshold assumes the status of an enlarged, uncanny zone of indiscernability and dislocation, disrupting all distinctions.

In this paper I want to align with and hopefully further such an analysis. However, despite recognition of the constitutive ambiguities and tensions of the absence–presence nexus, I think it can also be argued that the accent of much of this recent work is still upon a certain bringing-to-presence – upon, in other words, bringing to light things previously hidden or lost, unearthing memory, making the invisible visible. For example, in Edensor’s (2005) study of industrial ruins, and similarly in DeSilvey’s (2006 2007) curatorial work on a derelict Montana homestead, it is the very materiality of memory – its presence, tangibility and there-ness – that remains a touchstone, even if the matter in question is tarnished, disordered, forgotten, hidden or irreversibly decaying. The texture, tactility and storied depth of things is what this work wants to realise, it seems to me. The sensuous, mossy, crumbly, rusty feel and smell and taste of memory – this is what is most memorably evoked. And this agenda of making-present, re-presenting, is further characterised in some instances by a pervasive use of archaeological metaphors. The depth and richness of memory-places and memory-objects demands in turn the attentive empathy of the researcher – they have to, for example, dig, recover, salvage and rescue (see Lorimer and MacDonald 2002).

Here, while hopefully contributing to such spectral geographies, I want also to try to drift somewhat against the current, and offer instead an account of landscape, matter and perception couched more explicitly in terms of absence, distance, displacement and the non-coincidence of self and world. I want to think about absences at the heart of the point of view. Landscape and place may commonly be matters of involvement and immersion; it’s just that the entire experience of the memorial benches at Mullion Cove seemed to me to be sensed more in terms of a slipping-away, a letting-go, a failing to grasp or even to touch. In
turn this would demand a different approach, a re-think of some of the conceptual motifs of some current landscape geographies. Not a disavowal of the emphasis that landscape phenomenology often places upon the touch and touching of landscape, but rather a constructive criticism of this via a different, oblique and attenuated form of practice.

Specifically, in terms of style and approach, instead of delving and unearthing buried stories, I want to pass over the surface of these memorial benches in a particular way. I would like, even if this is oxymoronic, to let go, for now, of the urge to search for hidden depths, and even the axiomatic need to provide an ‘in-depth’ account. Thus this paper does not discuss in detail those individuals remembered through these benches; it is not a historical or biographical study, it does not aim to reveal the intricacies of ‘lives lived’ (Lorimer 2006). More than anything else, it seemed to me, the benches had an untethered quality, free-floating; there was something oneiric and aerial about their situation high and lost on the hillside, pitched open to the elements. And in this way they in turn demanded something lighter, a drifting account, a passing-through and a passing-over.

So in what follows I intersperse further descriptions of the Mullion Cove benches with a specific line of conceptual argumentation. This consists firstly and primarily of an elaboration of Derrida’s (2005) critical account of Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) phenomenology of flesh and touch. If Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of embodiment, vision and practice have become a cardinal reference point for landscape phenomenology (e.g. see Ingold 1993; Tilley 2004; Cresswell 2003; Wylie 2002 2005 2006), then Derrida – whose extensive and widely influential work has of course contributed centrally to a critique of notions of presence – may be used, I think, to offer a sort of ghosting and dislocating that disrupts Merleau-Ponty’s presence, and that thus entwines landscape with absence. And in turn, as I want to show through this lens, the absencing fracture of landscape is simultaneously a sort of openness, and can be thought anew in terms of love.

Looking at / looking with

We worked our way slowly down the hillside. The morning had stilled further, the sea and sky became yet more delphic. Until a small boat with an outboard motor droned slowly into the harbour far below the scene was as silent as it was lonely. Whichever way you turned, the world looked lovely. I found myself taking several pictures at each bench we came to – pictures of the benches themselves but also others of the various views they gave onto, looking outward. They all faced out to sea, south and south-westward, in accordance with the aspect of the land itself. But where some gazed almost directly out and up into the empyrean, others, especially as we moved further down into the cove, had a more inward, downward angle.

I was struck at the time, and again on reflection, by how different these benches were from other common forms of personal or familial commemoration – at least those most familiar in European and Western contexts. They were different from graves (even though, with all these benches, the hillside in some ways resembled a graveyard), because a grave will tend to direct your eyes downward, to the earth, to the inscription. A grave – even a solitary one – will place something, someone; will gather the earth around itself in a circling, environ-
ing movement. A graveyard as a whole (see Eliade 1973) will act as a symbolic centre of the landscape, as a place to gather together, and as a zone of connection between our surfacing lives, the earth below, and the sky above. But with the memorial benches movement seemed primarily centrifugal rather than centripetal, radiating outwards and dispersing rather than enfolding or gathering. Displacing as much as placing. Equally, the benches were distinctive from the practice of placing or scattering ashes, whether in a private garden, on a mountainside, or at sea for example (see Maddrell 2006). If that practice is sometimes, arguably, premised upon a wish to return a ‘self’ to ‘nature’, to achieve a sort of oneness or re-unification, then the benches, whatever the intentions of those who placed them may have been, worked rather differently. While on one level they sought to identify person with place, to personify place through love and memory, then on another, through their distinctive visibility and tangibility, and through the very act of inscribing with words, names, dates, they kept their distance. They were simultaneously placed and placed at one remove; opened out onto the elements and pulled back away from them. In this way and others they were also further distinguishable from the practice of planting memorial trees (see Cloke and Pawson 2008). It seemed to me that the benches could not be fully understood within the context of the relational and performative evolution of intertwined nature-cultures; or to put this another way, they pointed in the direction of decay and dereliction rather than re-growth and the accumulation of layers of re-signification. Deadwood, barked by winter storms and bleached by summer suns, with some older examples listing and tilting as gravestones also do, they outstayed and were, so to speak, indifferent to their transient occupancy by coast walkers, local residents and those staying in nearby hotels and holiday homes – indifferent even to their presumed occupancy by friends and relatives – in other words their role as places for someone, anyone, to occupy was only one aspect of their overall function and meaning.

And lastly the benches could be differentiated from the sorts of temporary and sometimes today in the UK more permanent memorials you pass on the roadside. While perhaps any memorial will evoke senses of mortality, roadside memorials, it could be argued, are driven by a sense of immediacy and a vulnerability straightaway imparted to the bodies of drivers, cyclists and passengers.

In sum, a certain specificity distinguished the benches as a memorial practice. The loss they articulated had a particular quality, a particular sense of something slipping away and being carried beyond. You must have had the experience sometime, on a breezy day, or maybe even on a day that seemed quite still, of something – perhaps a crisp packet, a sheet of paper, a photograph, a five-pound note – being snatched from your grasp and taken, suddenly, out of reach. And so you run and grope to catch it, but you can’t catch it, because it will flutter and skitter away, almost on purpose, as if alive, such that when and if eventually you do catch it, it still remains, even in your hands, something essentially lost and out of reach.

It was this quality that made me feel that the memorial benches had the potential to offer scope for more general reflections upon relationships between self and landscape, subject and world. Because when you sit down at one or several of these benches, as I did through the course of that bright spring morning, you are at one and the same time looking with and looking at the person (or sometimes couple) being commemorated. You are looking with them because the bench is theirs, it has become the embodiment anew of their now-in-one-way absent perspective, and so when you sit it is as though you are sitting beside them, with them, conversing, sharing the view. There is something convivial about these benches: places to sit and watch and talk and maybe even rest in peace for a while.

But, then again, you are simultaneously looking at rather than looking with those being commemorated: they are the view that you see. That is one crux of this particular form of commemoration. The benches, in their form, aspect and situation, and also through their inscriptions (the phrase, so common, ‘in memory of X, who loved this place/these views’), open outwards, like an opening envelope, like a bird released. They project the person commemorated outwards, and so they become the view itself, in the same way that if you ever look at a work of landscape art you are looking as much if not more so at the painter’s vision rather than the visible world depicted. The benches remember via landscape, in one sense they turn living eyes into scenes beheld, or they realise the external landscape as somewhere once seen by someone. And so perhaps you feel, strangely, that you are looking at them from their place.
This essential conundrum, looking at/looking with, further redoubles and recoils upon itself. The benches operate according to a logic of displacement and absence, at once unsettling and yet serene, as the precondition of their articulation of viewer and viewed, gaze and landscape. They displace self into landscape, landscape into self. They can only ever present, here and now, an absence. And although placed in loving memory, and in the hope of continued communion and exchange with the other’s point of view, it is in fact unlikely that the person being commemorated would ever have actually sat there – exactly there – while alive (although this does occur on the seafronts of popular resorts); the bench and its views being therefore subsequent, surrogate eyes for those now closed elsewhere, somewhere out of sight. Yet in their absence, which here is constitutive of the entire experience, you nonetheless see them and see with them. They are absent yet present; their absence is, precisely, presented, as the condition of a present-day experience which, in consequence, ceases to be entirely or even essentially present. They are both viewer and viewed, yet neither fully or truly. If we accept that the term landscape names a ‘way of seeing’ the world and also, consequentially, a way of seeing-with the world (see Wylie 2005) – then here we are seeing-with them and taking leave of them, all at once. Looking at landscape is always looking-with-landscape. But looking-with landscape will always also, or so it seems (see Merleau-Ponty 1968; De Certeau 1983; Nancy 2005), convoke a certain distancing in which a ‘subject’ and a ‘world’ are separately articulated. What happens, though, when these subjects and worlds are predicated upon loss, absence, blindness?

Or, what do all these unravelling tensions of presence/absence add up to? For me, this: running through these memorial benches, through all of their doublings and displacings of viewer and viewed, landscape and gaze, there is a necessary failure to coincide. There is here no full coincidence or co-presence of self and landscape, no fulsome being-in-the-world. Equally there is no coincidence of self with itself, no pure ‘auto-affection’ as Derrida (2005) puts it. No unitary gaze and no unity of viewer and viewed either. The field of vision is instead constituted and traversed in its entirety by absences, blind-spots, lost horizons.

When in the past I have thought about landscape, about how in reciprocation we perceive it and it shapes us, I have always done so from an initial presumption of connection and immersion. As was noted above, the analyses of landscape phenomenology in general proceed from an assumption regarding the primacy of embodied engagement with and by the world (e.g. Ingold 2001; Tilley 2004). Landscape is thus understood as a milieu of engagement, involvement, immersion, connection – a living tapestry of practices, imaginations, emergences and erasures. Thus it functions as a conduit through which claims concerning distinctions of image and reality, mind and body, subject and object are disputed and refuted. A well-known difficulty with this vision, however, is its association with a romanticised account of being-in-the-world, one troubled by both myths of primitivism and baleful notions of authentic or proper dwelling – a coincidence of people with both the land and themselves. Landscape phenomenology, I would argue, is not in any simple way invalidated by these associations. But nor can it easily elude them. Therefore the key point is that even if this coincidence of people and land, culture and nature is posited as either a lost and inaccessible origin, or as an unattainable end, it nevertheless functions as an ideal that constitutively haunts phenomenology. Even if, with respect to the specific
instance of envisioning landscape, any ‘phenomenological collapse of self and world’ (Rose 2006, 547) was rendered ineffable by the apartness that vision induces, still some moment of co-presence and connection beckoned from the horizon.

But I was wrong in this assumption, I think – just as when an initial sense of Mullion Cove in terms of an as-it-were prototypical sublimity of tuning-into and emerging-from was thrown by chancing upon the memorial benches, with their assembly of spectral gazes. Just so, in the ambition to write landscape via a language of connection and coincidence, ineradicable figures of absence, distance and non-coincidence were neither by-products nor merely intriguing facets of a more basic, underlying and a priori intertwining. Instead they were constitutive of landscape.

It could be argued that these thoughts were already being pursued by Merleau-Ponty (1968) in The Visible and the Invisible. The text does indeed speak about ‘non-coincidence’: when my two hands touch each other there is an intertwining of (active) subject and (passive) object, but Merleau-Ponty equally notes that an absolute coincidence of subject and object, and by imputation of self and landscape, never actually occurs in practice. It remains imminent, always-yet-to-arrive, and ‘I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation’ (1968, 147). However in On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida (2005) demonstrates that this recognition of non-coincidence is subverted and circumvented by Merleau-Ponty, such that instead of remaining as a constitutive absence or outside of the sensing body, it is re-fashioned, always, as a possible-in-principle coincidence of self with itself, and self with world. Thus, Derrida writes, for Merleau-Ponty it is always a case of seeing ‘non-coincidence as ever-imminent coincidence … irreversibility [as] always on the verge of becoming reflexive reversibility’ (2005, 213). And because of this drive towards an ontology of co-presence there was no means for Merleau-Ponty to think the law under which he was placing himself – always, in fact, and all things considered, preferring ‘coincidence’ (of coincidence with noncoincidence) to ‘noncoincidence’ (of coincidence with noncoincidence). (Derrida 2005, 211; original emphasis)

In the final instance, then, phenomenology – and thence phenomenological articulations of landscape – remains wedded to at least the promise of coincidence.

Derrida’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of self-other and self-world relations proceeds by demonstrating that these are founded upon a principle of ‘auto-affection’ – a process in which I seem to coincide with myself, for example by touching myself, by hearing my own voice, or by thinking that I am thinking. His key objection is that Merleau-Ponty attempts to address the issue of my relationships with others, and with the ‘outside’ world by analogising these relationships with my relation to myself – my auto-affective coincidence with myself when I touch or see parts of my own body. Thus on one hand Merleau-Ponty argues for the indubitable existence of a shared, common world of seeing and touching, an intersubjective world of intertwining bodies and gazes. But on the other this shared world can only be posited, in existential phenomenology, from the basis of a primary presencing of me to myself – a givenness of the auto-affective, perceiving subject. For Derrida, of course, it is precisely this assumption regarding self-coincidence, this ‘metaphysics of presence’, that is the problem. How could I ever coincide with myself, be myself, in any fulsome way? How – at Mullion Cove for example – could I ever talk about my gaze upon landscape without understanding that, from the very start, this rested in various externalities, alterities and absences (the coastline, the sea and sky, absent/present others)? Time to start all over again. Analysis anew of self, body, landscape, would proceed from a recognition that, as Derrida puts it, ‘the constitution of the body ... already presupposes a passage outside and through the other, as well as through absence, death and mourning’ (2005, 180). I am haunted from without, constitutionally:

I ask whether there is any pure auto-affection ... and therefore any pure, immediate experience of the purely proper body, the body proper that is living, purely living. Or if, on the contrary, this experience is at least not already haunted, but constitutionally haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality – where an intruder may come through, a host, wished or unwished for, a spare and auxiliary other already having at its disposal a dwelling in this place inhabits one’s heart of hearts as a ghost. (2005, 179–80; original emphasis)

The language of ghosts that Derrida here and elsewhere develops (e.g. Derrida 1994) seemed especially apt to the case of the memorial benches at Mullion Cove. It was haunted, like every landscape
(displaced, like every place). It loomed with presences, ached with absences (my own, for instance). It was heartache. The entire analysis of landscape henceforth would thus arise via consideration not only or just of entanglements and ‘lived’ performances, but of two entwined vanishing points, that of the gaze and the horizon, between and through which ‘visible spatiality’ (as Derrida puts it) emerges as already a figure of mourning and distance. And the more I mulled it over – the more I subsequently delved into these arguments after having been to Mullion Cove, and then thinking of returning – so the more I began to think about something that perhaps was essential to the manner of being/not-being of these ghosts. Something that recurred time and again in the inscriptions upon the benches: the word ‘love’.

The geographies of love

It was on a night flight back to England from San Francisco, in late April 2007, that I first began to think about the geographies of love. Taking off, the plane unzipped the earth, outran the sun, and rose up into the blue-walled night. Then for a long time we hovered, star-like in the dark, set high in a curved and roaring aerial world with properties quite distinct from those of the ground, several miles below. We were captive first in the cabin’s dark and shuttered cone. Much later, we were released abruptly into blinding light. But when we finally descended to or rather rematerialised upon the grey English tarmac, it felt not so much a homecoming as an exhausting entrance into another exile. It felt as though body and soul has been only reluctantly and imperfectly rejoined.

Nothing particularly special about this experience, of course, and nothing new either about the internal displacement I endured in the days and nights that followed, an ongoing disturbance of me from myself. But still I carried about with me a strange sense of lightness. The world was still an immense ball to which I was chained, but now it felt as if I could be untethered, to float and fly … And all this was because, for a time up there, it seemed I had never felt such love – such loss – before.

What could the geographies of love feel like? The very first and most important thing to avoid here would be a counterposing or juxtaposing manoeuvre, in which they would be set against, or in opposition to, some perhaps more familiar things: geographies of hate, fear, exclusion – or even geographies of terror or violence. Such juxtaposing would make it seem as though, in contrast to spatialities of division, separation and segregation, the geographies of love would involve an embrace, a gathering-together, or at least some movement of positive, affective bonding and sharing, reaching across the space between us (see Harrison 2007). The meaning of love is bedevilled, it could be argued, by varied cultural associations with unity, communion and absorption: a purported unity of self and other (as in requited, romantic love), a seeming state of grace or spiritual communion (the ‘love of God’), a sense of shared belonging and affiliation (as in love of kin, place, nation etc.), or even a sense of community gathered by a common love (as in the community of philosophy, as Nancy (1991) notes – those who love knowledge).

But maybe it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder. Love may commonly be conceived in terms of fusion, of self with other, with self, even with place and landscape (as for example with ‘topophilia’; Tuan 1974). But it is actually this fusion of self and landscape, person and place, that love shatters (Nancy 1991). Far from being a gathering, the geographies of love might instead describe a separation or rupture – another articulation of distance, absence, dispersal. To be ‘in love’ would be already to be lost, or lonely. The memorial benches at Mullion Cove, for example, spoke of love in various ways, or rather they always only spoke of love, sometimes promising a love that would last forever, but nevertheless their constitution arguably lay in an unrequitable gap, in a love founded in loss, withdrawal and absence.

To put this more positively perhaps, the geographies of love would describe a certain exposure to the other. The gap, fracture or absence that is their origin equally and always entails an openness, an originary exposure of the self to externality and alterity. In terms of the exact phrase ‘I love you’, for instance, Ware notes that, when it is uttered, such ‘love speech is a kind of performative, and what it performs is the speaker’s openness to the other’ (2008, 492). This claim rests in a broadly Derridean understanding of language and subjectivity, and in a similar vein John Caputo argues that ‘deconstruction is a work of love’ (2004, 40), insofar as for Derrida, especially in his later writings, it is precisely the inaccessible and inassimilable nature of the other that deconstruc-
tive or aporetic thought seeks to at once announce and cherish. As Caputo expands:

The other is the shore I can never reach, the recess to which I never have naked access .... So to love the other on this model requires always to respect that distance, which means that love is not the desire to have the other for oneself or to get something back from the other in return, but the unconditional affirmation of the other. (2004, 41)

Derrida himself invokes a love on these lines, beyond jealousy and appropriation, a letting-go and a letting-be:

to surrender to the other, and this is the impossible, would amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming towards the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible. (1995, 74)

Such love would be – is – impossible, and yet in the aporetic sense always insistently at work here, it would in consequence be that which impels us. A love that let the other be. A love in which, as well, you would find yourself, that is, fully coincide with yourself.

At other times though, it is important to note, Derrida seems to want to emphasise the more baleful and stark consequences of the fracture – simultaneously exposure – that sunders self from other, ourselves from the world. The constitutive fissure of the geographies of love thus becomes the ruination of any phenomenological sense of the ‘world’. This is made explicit in the following, as Hillis-Miller (2007, 266) notes, ‘amazing’ passage:

Neither animals of different species, nor men (sic) of different cultures, nor any individual, animal or human, inhabits the same world as another, however close and similar these living individuals may be, and the difference from one world to the other will remain forever uncrossable...

... Between my world, the ‘my world’; what I call ‘my world,’ and there is no other for me, every other world making up part of it, between my world and every other world there is initially the space and the time of an infinite difference, of an interruption incommensurable with all the attempts at passage, of bridge, of isthmus, of communication, of translation, of trope, and of transfer which the desire for a world ... will attempt to pose, to impose, to propose, to stabilize.

There is no world, there are only islands. (Derrida 2003, unpublished, cited in Hillis-Miller 2007, 265-6; my emphasis)

There is a strangeness and even, as Hillis-Miller notes, a wildness to this passage. It is haunted by spectres of solipsism and narcissism. But of course Derrida is not staking a claim here for solipsism, or unfettered subjectivism. The largely anti-phenomenological rhetoric of the passage serves instead as a sort of nagging reminder of a constitutive loss, a necessary failure-to-connect that, in its refusal of any move towards communion or being-in-the-world, is just as much part of an ethos for the subject as every equally necessary gesture in the other direction; towards, for example, hospitality and community. Just as Derrida argues that the trace of the other or the outside always abides within any claim to inviolate presence, then so, on the flipside of the coin, it is also clear that no complete coincidence of self and other or self and world is possible. The originary fracture that forbids phenomenological fusion of self and world entails a simultaneous opening-onto and distancing-from, and it is within this tension, perhaps, that landscape, absence and love are entangled.

When I returned to Mullion Cove, this time to find love instead of ghosts, I drove through fog for much of the way. By the time I approached Mullion, however, the fog was very quickly clearing, as sometimes happens by the coast, and mid-morning sunlight was breaking through. I sat on one of the benches near the hilltop for a while and watched the horizon gradually draw itself ruler-sharp in the haze. As I sat, a small bird joined me, perched on the farther arm of the bench, and in the light, crisper almost by the second, our shadows took shape together. Then it abruptly flitted off to search and nestle, I guessed, somewhere.
further down the gorsy cliff. But several seconds later it or another much alike re-emerged and caught my eye far below, a black speck tracking out of the cove’s now-brilliant blue throat. And then it suddenly took off, flying very fast and very low over the taut blue sail of the sea, and etching in its escape (as I stood up to watch), a breath-taking arc, with its flinted wings at an angle as if tracing like a skater on ice. And in its wake a wash of iridescence chandeliered the morning sunlight out to the horizon, an Olympic opening ceremony of flashbulbs sparkling all over the sea. For a second I was fairly blinded.

All across the hillslope the memorial benches basked in the light. They stood (or so it seemed to me) as sentinels of love, and now even more than before in this marking the landscape was made something constitutively inaccessible, non-coincident with itself and with the gaze of any onlooker. Without losing anything of their power and sincerity the benches withdrew the entire scene into absences, distances. For it’s love that will tear us apart – love is a tearing-apart. Like Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) phrases love in terms of fractures and exposures, and he too also looks inside, as it were, to the question of how love might further reconfigure notions of subjectivity. If, qua love, we take the heart to be the essence of the self, rather than the eye or the mind, then, Nancy argues, we are always already broken-hearted. Because the heart beats, or is rather perpetually suspended between two beats, and beyond any dialectical relation of heart and mind, emotion and reason. If love is ‘always the beating of an exposed heart’ (1991, 90), then ‘love represents I to itself broken (1991, 96). This is because

it is the break that makes the heart … ‘I’ is broken and traversed by the other where its presence is most intimate and its life most open. The beating of the heart – rhythm of the partition of being – cuts across presence, life, consciousness. (1991, 99)

The geographies of love, in other words, would speak against any solipsism or narcissism, and equally against any sublimation of self and other, any abolition of the spaces between us, any coincidence of self and landscape. They would introduce an element of difference, distance and absence anterior to any claim to presence or communion.

As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and disconnects the elements of the subject proper – the fibres of its heart. One hour of love is enough, one kiss alone … (1991, 96)

Conclusion

Just as Derrida’s remark that ‘there are only islands’ invites accusations of solipsism and narcissism, so any first-person account of a particular landscape is haunted by similar spectres. More pointedly perhaps, studies of landscape couched within literary, phenomenological or non-representational idioms may be felt to neglect or underplay both the contested historicities of specific landscapes and the highly differential nature of the landscape experiences of different cultural and social groups; in the latter case leaving themselves open to a misinterpretation in which the narrative voice appears to universalise specific ways of seeing and experiencing landscape (see Nash 2000; Tolia-Kelly 2007 – but for an example of a richly embodied landscape historiography see in particular Pearson 2007). One response might be to say that the sheer breadth of contemporary landscape studies, in terms of both definitions of the term itself and the variety of approaches to landscape, in a way takes care of the
issue, insofar as breadth and variety on this level does straightaway render any ‘universalist’ claims (though none to my knowledge are actually being made) absurd. Another would be to petition on behalf of plurality of approach, noting that not all landscape research is conducted with similar or even commensurable goals in mind. A third response might be to concede the point to a degree, albeit by delving yet further into the fractured constitution of subjectivity, as this paper has tried to do, in the hope of exposing further the inadequacies of any universalist, humanist or naturalist account of self–landscape relations.

The conceptual aim of this paper, as noted in the introduction, has been to pinpoint a tendency within current forms of landscape phenomenology and cognate studies of materiality and memory – corporeal, affective and experiential/historical – to valorise presence, via tropes of immersion, engagement, coincidence and excavation. Making this claim involves grouping a series of studies quite diverse in inspiration and purpose. But it remains crucial I would argue, because otherwise a coincidence or co-presence of self and landscape is inscribed as either a lost origin or final goal of phenomenological analyses. Without attentiveness to the constitutive aspects of absence, dislocation and distancing, notions of authentic dwelling-in-the-world, of ‘proper’ placing and belonging, or even in extremis notions of immanent community coinciding with itself and with the land (the target of Nancy’s (1991) important writings on ‘inoperative’ community), will continue to murmur within otherwise-open accounts of landscape, subjectivity and practice.

In this paper, the memorial benches at Mullion Cove have served as a conduit for articulating a hopefully different account of self–landscape relations, one in which no enclosure or communion is articulated, and in which absences at the heart of the point of view are explored instead. This is of course a difficult ambition, since the act, especially, of imaging the benches and the views they give onto in a standard ‘landscape’ format itself risks surreptitiously re-introducing a sense of steady gazing and settled horizons. But I hope to have been fair to these memorials and to the remarkable distances they open. Partly, as noted, this has involved a deliberate drift away from archival or ethnographic research, which would of course unearth quite different stories and meanings. Here, with a certain sense of the irretrievability of the lives of others in mind, the memorial benches serve as an encounter which sparks, rather than as a rich resource to excavate. They spoke of love – they made me see that like love itself, landscape is a sort of blindness, or a ‘loss of sight’, as the quote from Nancy at the start of this paper suggests. Just as no collapse or fusion of self and landscape would be possible, so a blind-spot, an absence, would haunt every way of seeing.

And yet the message of the memorial benches at Mullion Cove was that this impossibility of coinciding with landscape, of unifying the visible and the invisible, seer and seen, was in fact the precondition, the very possibility of all and any hopeful accounts of landscape and love. Because as Derrida writes,

> when my gaze meets yours, I see both your gaze and your eyes, love in fascination – and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they visible (things or objects in the world) as much as seeing (at the origin of the world), I could precisely touch them, with my finger, lips or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you – if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared. (Derrida 2005, 3; original emphasis)

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Notes

1 There is a switch in narrative voice here, of course, from ‘we’ to ‘I’, which requires explanation. I travelled to Mullion Cove on this particular occasion with two companions, and walked through the landscape with one of them. The use of ‘we’ at the beginning of the paper, and in places throughout the opening section, is intended to convey a sense of this companionability – and what began as an excursion of sorts later became an academic paper. The use of ‘I’ however, for the most part simply indicates that the opinions and arguments expressed here are my own: we drifted apart, and became preoccupied with different things, I with the benches in particular. The shift from ‘we’ to ‘I’ is of course another sort of absencing, and themes of togetherness/apartness, isolation etc. run throughout this paper. One of my companions was the geographer Paul Harrison. I remember that as we walked he spoke at one point about Maurice Blanchot’s concept of the ‘disaster’ – a loss of one’s guiding light, one’s place, that is originary; a catastrophe that precedes and conditions all ‘dwelling’. Loss-of-dwelling is the condition of possibility of dwelling (and see Harrison 2007 and also Dubow 2004).

2 Of course, there are many and varied reasons for commemorating an individual, couple or family via benches like these. While it may indeed often commemorate shared experiences and attachments to certain places/vistas, it may also be the case, for example, that the bench has been placed there out of a sense of duty or guilt, or in the absence (in some types of cremation, for instance) of any other comparable material memorial elsewhere. My interest was sparked here by the conjunction of vision, absence, memory and love in the common phrase ‘in loving memory’, but I would not wish to simply infer from this that the person/couple/family in question were loved (if indeed this were something easily definable), or are actually remembered anymore for that matter.

3 It is partly for this reason, but mostly of course to preserve anonymity, that the words and names inscribed upon the benches depicted here have been obscured. I am conscious that there are ironies within this further erasure, but still feel that anonymity and confidentiality must be assured.

4 In shifting locale and situation rather abruptly here I am at once trying to catch and re-focus the reader’s attention, and also give a veracious account of how the arguments presented in the paper actually germinated. In San Francisco I’d bought Derrida’s On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy, wherein many of the arguments presented here regarding Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on ‘coincidence’ are articulated, and also Nancy’s The Inoperative Community – a book which contains an essay called ‘Shattered Love’ – an essay I read for the first time on this flight home.

5 Love is of course a central theme of centuries of philosophical and theological thinking. I focus here upon the work of Derrida and Nancy, as should hopefully be clear, because of their critique of phenomenology. It should also be noted that much of Derrida’s thinking on love emerges in the context of a critical engagement with the work of Levinas, in particular the Levinasian Phenomenology of Eros outlined in Totality and Infinity (1969). Thanks to Mitch Rose for highlighting and discussing this.

6 Thanks to Arun Saldanha for highlighting this point when I presented this work at AAG Boston.

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