

## cultural geographies in practice

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# cultural geographies in practice

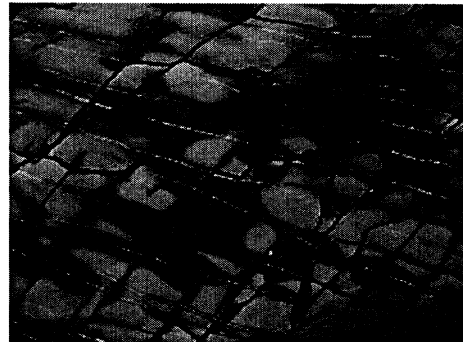
## Smoothlands: fragments/ landscapes/fragments

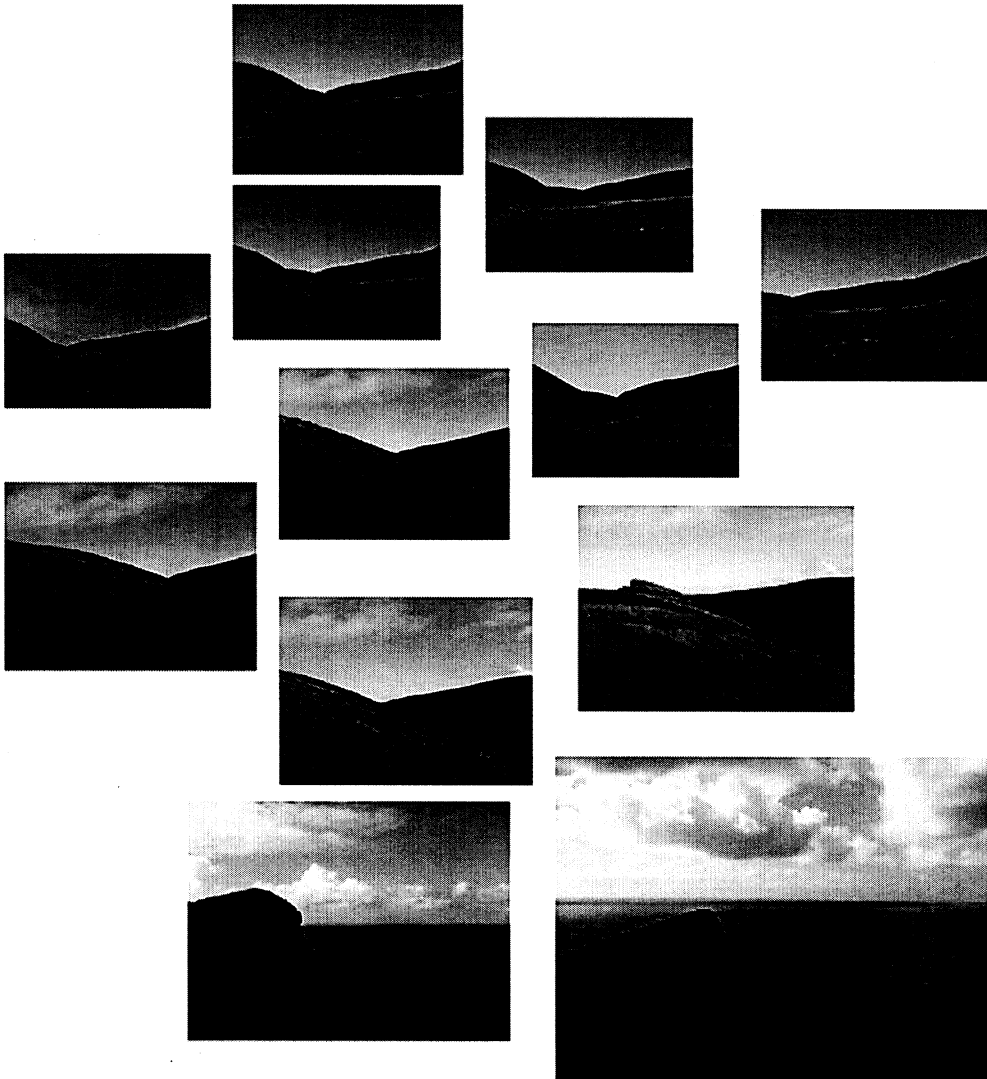
*John Wylie*

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Smoothlands is a sea-dissected valley on the north Devon coast, just south of Hartland Point. It offers topography, atmosphere, distance and exposure. Three days were spent in and around Smoothlands, and phenomenological methods of watching and picturing dovetailed with reading and reflection on the topics of landscape and subjectivity.





## Day 1: Disquiet

What he most wants is:

to live a dispassionate and cultured life in the open air of ideas, reading, dreaming and thinking of writing... To live this life far from emotions and thought, living it only in the thought of emotions and in the emotion of thoughts. To be in the whirl of the worlds like dust of flowers, sailing through the afternoon air on an unknown wind and falling, in the torpor of dusk, wherever it falls, lost among larger things.<sup>1</sup>



But Fernando Pessoa knows this is impossible. Every time one of his many narrators – they pass through one another like ghosts – reaches for this sort of epiphany, they fall.

They collapse back into themselves like black holes, they drift through the universe like neutron stars,

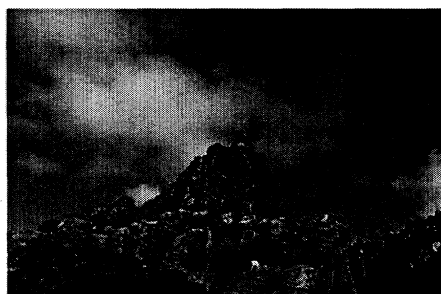
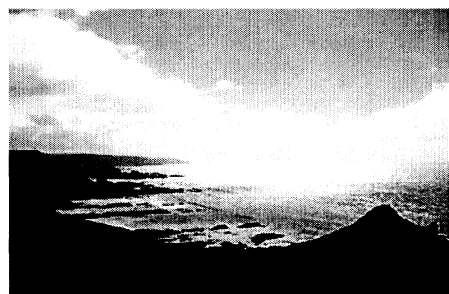


never able to connect but disrupting orbits everywhere. And inwards there are only 'dolorous interludes' and 'rainy landscapes'.



'Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves.'<sup>2</sup> Heteronymy is ontology for Pessoa, but as a kind of auto-deconstruction, an ongoing dislocation and substitution; his work is an 'incomparable phenomenology of heteronymic depersonalisation.'<sup>3</sup> Everything is self, but the self is unknowable, absurd, pitiable.

*Disquiet* is the precondition of this multitudinous inner life, ceaseless disquiet: 'we never know self-realisation. We are two abysses – a well staring at the sky.'<sup>4</sup>

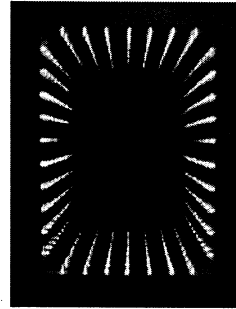


Only the evening assuages disquiet, allowing space and time, world and self, to coincide again:

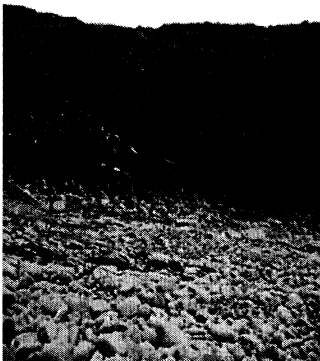


'the tilted urn of twilight pours out on us an oil, in which the hours, like rose petals, separately float.'<sup>5</sup>

## Day 2: Crossings



For Jean-Luc Marion there is no doubt: the gaze out and over the world is best understood as *The crossing of the visible*.<sup>6</sup> The landscape is organized, pulled together, by the very look upon it, and in doing so it is anointed and blessed. The sign of the Crossing covers all.

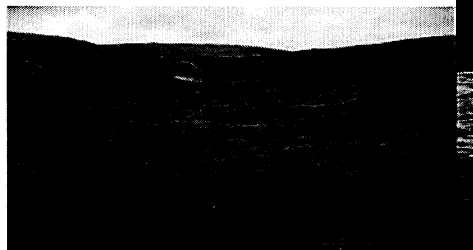


Perspective – *my look, which cannot itself be seen* – crosses the visible world and 'renders it for us vast, inhabitable, organised... in perspective my gaze invisibly traverses the visible in such a way that it becomes that much more visible.'<sup>7</sup>

Without this benediction, 'we would be stifled by the promiscuous lack of differentiation of surfaces... anguish would beset us.'<sup>8</sup>



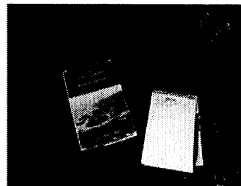
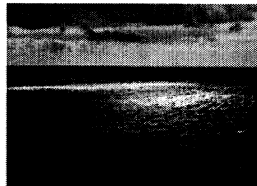
'Whatever my travels might be, depth will always remain in front of me as that which I will never be able to traverse, since, if I advance myself toward and within it, it will deepen itself that much more.'<sup>9</sup>



'Perspective becomes an *a priori* condition of experience...beyond its historical aesthetic meaning. [I]t produces the phenomenality of phenomena: by it, the invisible of the gaze is stretched out...The relief of the visible comes to it from the invisible, which lifts it by deepening and crossing it, to the point of uprooting it from the *humus* of flatness.'<sup>10</sup>



But for Marion, a theologian, we will only find fulfilment beyond perspective, in an extra-mundane sphere, beyond all being-in-the-world, surpassing all objectivity and subjectivity through 'the commerce of two invisible gazes – the one from a praying man, taken through the painted icon, to look upon an invisible saint, the other the gaze of the invisible saint.'<sup>11</sup> This look from one to another transcends the whole world.



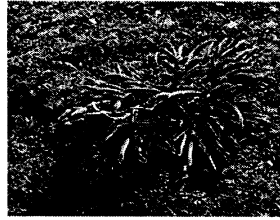
If the order of the visible is given *to* us from somewhere ineffable and invisible, then it would follow that there is something blasphemous about self-portraits.

### Day 3: Remnants

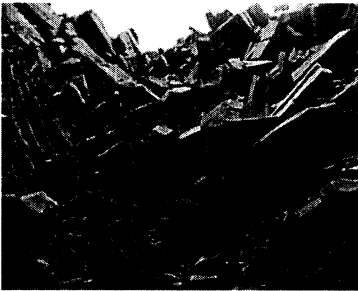
In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Giorgio Agamben notes the paradoxes of testimony, and notions of the self as witness. Witness is clearly and irrefutably borne here, but a 'threshold of indistinction between inside and outside' must still form 'the structure of testimony.'<sup>12</sup> This is because the act of witnessing from the inside entails obliteration, while the onlooker or survivor is by definition in some sense placed outside the event.



So 'every testimony is a field of forces incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification.'<sup>13</sup>



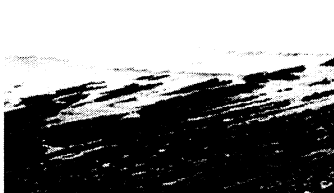
A paradox haunts everything: to bear witness is to no longer be a subject, and yet testimony, which occurs, yes, is the very basis of subjectivity, of seeing and speaking.



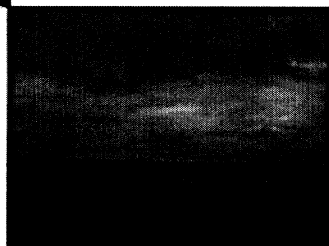
'the subject of testimony is constitutively fractured; it has no other consistency than disjunction and dislocation – and yet it is nevertheless irreducible to them ... this is why the wit-



ness, the ethical subject, is the subject who bears witness to desubjectification.'<sup>14</sup>



*Something always remains:* 'the paradox here is that if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always *remains*. *The witness is this remnant.*'<sup>15</sup>





## Conclusion

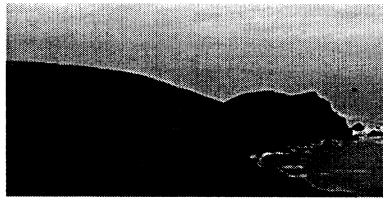
Pessoa's shredded introspection, Marion's confident transcendentalism, Agamben's fractured testimony – each distils from this: watching/watched.

Landscape is tension. The term precisely denotes the tensions through which subject and object, self and world, find their measure, balance and attenuation; their coil and recoil, proximity and distance. The whole value of landscape now lies in this tension and this precision.

This is how landscape is distinguished with respect to space and place. Despite attempts to fill it, or view it as a product not a setting, space still speaks of emptiness, absence, interval. The stillness and silence of juxtaposition. Place, by contrast, and even despite attempts to think it differently, relationally, is always already too full, too full of itself and the others, a whole congregation, everyone present. Even after all that has become clear about the non-coincidence of self with itself, all that we now feel strangely sure of as regards the fragmenting of a stable and unitary sense of self.

Only landscape works amidst and through both of them: presence/absence – tear things apart and even thread them together again.

*(...and it was only later, as I was climbing back up the slope on the far side, walking back to Hartland Point, that I saw the tide had gone out much further than before, so far out that, if I'd only noticed earlier, I could've clambered over the rocks, and walked right up to where the waves usually beat, there, at the bottom of the slate-grey cliff-face of Smoothlands – I could've reached out with my hands and touched it).*



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F. Pessoa *The book of disquiet* (London, Penguin, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York, Zone Books, 1999), p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Pessoa, *Disquiet*, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 301.

<sup>6</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The crossing of the visible* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *Remnants*, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133–34 (emphasis original).