

Robert Harvey, Sharing Common Ground. A Space for Ethics

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REVIEW

Robert Harvey, *Sharing Common Ground. A Space for Ethics*, Broadway, New York & Bedford Square, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, ISBN 978-1-5013-2959-3/9781501329616.

Les conditions de leur rencontre ne seront pas éclaircies dans le film. Car ce n'est pas là la question. On se rencontre partout dans le monde. Ce qui importe, c'est ce qui s'ensuit de ces rencontres quotidiennes.

Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour*

Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch
Friedrich Hölderlin, *Patmos* (1803)

My poor soul
All bruised passivity
All your regrets
Ride rough-shod over me
I'm so thankful
That we're strangers when we meet
I'm in clover
For we're strangers when we meet
Heel head over
But we're strangers when we meet
David Bowie, "Strangers when we meet" (1993)

Kunstwerke ziehen Kredit auf eine Praxis, die noch nicht begonnen hat und von der keiner zu sagen wüsste, ob sie ihren Wechsel honoriert.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970)

Le poète transforme indifféremment la défaite en victoire, la victoire en défaite, empereur prénatal seulement soucieux du recueil de l'azur

René Char, *Fureur et mystère* (1948)

In *Aesthetic Theory* as well as in other works, Theodor W. Adorno pressed the point that the most important challenge for thought is not how, when or where to begin. Insofar as philosophizing has always already begun, the important issue for philosophy is rather where it may be able to take us, in which direction it may be able to lead us. While avoiding claiming that the starting point is immaterial or inconsequential, Marguerite Duras argues a similar point with regard to social encounters and exchange in the exergue quoted above. Most important is not how we happen to meet, nor even the deplorable or

favorable conditions under which we happen to do so; instead, the overriding concern is what follows from what might at first appear to be chance encounters, and in particular what we may be or prove able to make of them when we meet.

In *Sharing Common Ground*, Robert Harvey perseveringly follows through a similar train of thought and forcefully renders intelligible and makes graphic its implications in a number of different contexts, be they historical, literary, photographic, filmic or philosophical in nature. When two or more people meet in inhospitable environments, or spaces that are experienced as not only real but also rebarbative, this may spur a shared imagination-fueled thinking and exchange about such unfriendly settings. Moreover, when experiencing, envisioning, being moved by, thinking about, talking about, reflecting upon and imagining such spaces, people may begin envisioning and projecting meeting-space where they would find themselves getting along; and the exchange and sharing of such spaces may take on a cardinal importance even under dire circumstances.

The term used by Harvey to designate this kind of emerging meeting space is “common ground.” Initially, “ground” here refers to the solid and habitable surface of the Earth that one needs in order to be able to stand, to build a dwelling, to survive and to hold one’s ground, while “common” denotes that which belongs indiscriminately to all members of a population; and consequently, the phrase “common ground” indicates a shared fundament on which people would be permitted to live and to dwell together, and which would thus be propitious to living in a state of mutual aid and moral solidarity.

Nevertheless, when and insofar as we are facing unfavorable or hostile environments that do not serve us and may be even damaging, it becomes excruciatingly clear that such common ground cannot be a place that can presupposed or taken for granted. Instead of being perceived as a starting point that one can return to and fall back on, a place where one can come home to roost or a *cosmos* within one can rest assuredly, such common ground where one consciousness encounters another must be perceived as a site “that is as imaginary as it is real,” as Harvey makes sure to stress. At closer inspection, “common ground is not so much a *place* as it is a *space*: common ground is only tenuously localizable in the real world, operating, rather in our imagination, in our memory, in daydreaming, where it best maintains its power to outstrip accepted reality” (p. vi), as we construct, capture and confront another kind of reality.

When people face inhospitable environments and gritty reality, they may discover a joint disposition to share and explore this other kind of reality, and to experience it in the form of a being moved or transported elsewhere. This shared, dynamic and explorative, moving space is concomitantly conceived by Harvey as a space for ethics. It is also a moving and imaginative common shared site in which we probe non-pre-existing manners of being and relating to one another while we also, so doing, test out and further develop the yardsticks to be followed in this space under construction or development.

Harvey forcefully demonstrates how the alternative approach to reality sketched out at the opening of the monograph opens new vistas. The approach performs a decisive shift of perspective that reveals a new, complex landscape in which we humans are

situated and which calls for further exploration and that is carefully and diligently explored in original and fruitful ways.

Major companions guiding the exploration of this still uncharted territory are Michel Foucault, Marguerite Duras and René Char. Other important interlocutors are Georges Didi-Huberman, Giorgio Agamben, Immanuel Kant, Primo Levi, and Charles Baudelaire. But on the road, we equally encounter Blaise Pascal, Walter Benjamin, Georges de la Tour, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Edward S. Casey, Raymond Queneau, Roger Laporte, Robert Antelme, Étienne Balibar, Dionys Mascolo, Herman Melville, James Joyce, Ernst Bloch, Jorge Luis Borges, Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, François Mitterrand, Francisco Goya, Michel Deguy, Eugène Atget, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze and Dante.

Harvey's own translation of Marguerite Duras' short story "Les Chantiers" ("Construction Sites") into English opens the first rather long chapter equally entitled "Construction Sites" (pp. 1-62). Included at the end of Duras' collection of novels entitled *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (*Whole days in the Trees*), published as early as 1954, this short story has been somewhat neglected. Yet, Harvey manages to demonstrate that it not only exhibits crucial characteristics of what will later become recognized as trademarks of Duras' unique voice in *The Square* (1958), *Moderato Cantabile* (1958) and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964). More importantly in this context, a theme begins to emerge with "Les Chantiers" that will become an over-arching pre-occupation in Duras' subsequent œuvre, including *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). This is the exploration of how the confrontation with problematic, precariously ill-boding and threatening or traumatizing sites may cause characters to become pre-occupied with investing the space of such construction sites imaginatively in ways that make them invest in each other and come together in mutual fascination, at times resulting in such an intense dialectic of love and life or death that it borders on madness.

In addition to digging out, translating and interpreting Duras' short story, the chapter adds depth and range to readings of "Les Chantiers" and *Hiroshima mon amour* by situating the distilled and purified narrative rendering the sharings of a he and a she in these texts within the larger context of Duras' other works. In particular, Harvey calls attention to an enigmatic typescript entitled "Les Chantiers de Monsieur Arié," published in the second volume of Marguerite Duras' *Oeuvres Completes* (in the Pléiade edition to which Harvey has contributed). Here the construction sites that the woman faces with horror are characterized as "chantiers de la mort," or by the usual phrase in French for the Nazi *Vernichtungslager*, or extermination camps. Read in the light of this typescript, the published short story may indeed be perceived as a staging of the spectacle of a woman who is trying to gain mastery over a recollection of horror. In addition, Harvey discusses a number of less well-known, more openly autobiographical texts where Duras discusses personal traumatic experiences. These include stories of Duras patiently nursing her husband Robert Antelme back to life upon his return from Dachau after WW II and of Duras vividly recalling a troubling and unnerving relationship to a Gestapo agent during the last days of the occupation.

The second chapter, "Empathy and Kantian Sublime" (pp. 63-100), describes how Duras' articulation of the experience of the construction site follows a course reminiscent of the itinerary of the sublime as it is described in Kant's *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*. Here Kant describes how a subject feeling threatened and awed out of its mind strives to regain its senses by moving back upon itself and reaching out beyond itself towards a space where it can recognize itself on a common ground shared with other likeminded beings. According to Kant, the experience of sharing an anticipation of mutuality that arises from shock and terror can also be interpreted as a reaching out toward a shared morality. This sublime becoming otherwise when faced with an insupportable elsewhere is exemplified in Didi-Huberman's, Duras', Antelme's and Mascolo's renderings of their experience of the concentration camp.

The third chapter, "Of Spaces Otherwise" (pp. 101-139), focuses on Foucault's "Des espaces autres," where cemeteries are indicated as a paradigmatic example of this kind of space that, as a result of its presence, inflects my way of being, thinking and judging. Since the crucial characteristic of this kind of space is not so much that it is situated apart from the rest of the world, in an elsewhere that we can go visiting, but rather that it possesses an elusive power to act upon us and causes us to function everywhere otherwise in such a manner that we come to respect and act out other manners of being, "des espaces autres" should be rendered in English as "spaces otherwise", rather than "other spaces," or "spaces elsewhere." And the phrase may even be rendered as "these spaces otherwise," rather than "those spaces otherwise." Thus, while construction sites for ethics are at first perceived as apart from us, they become by dint of the imagination a part of us: a common ground that is established in a psychic, emotional and moral relationship to spaces otherwise shared by two or more subjects across a divide (p. 138).

The fourth chapter, "Zones of Indistinction" (pp. 141-190), describes how the "zone militaire non aedificandi" declared around the fortifications of Paris, completed 1841-1845, subsequently became *la Zone*, a vast shantytown belt surrounding central Paris, that served as a large construction site for a number of writers. While the phrase "zones of indistinction," as it was coined by Giorgio Agamben, makes us become inclined to perceive drab and dreary spaces such as the concentration camp or the Parisian Zone as indistinct places, offering no way out, denominations such as "the grey zone," coined by Primo Levi, by contrast, depict them as spaces otherwise, offering possibilities of distinction and discernment of light.

Starting from a letter in which Foucault pays homage to and declares his affinity to Duras, also by stating that his reading of her *Abahn Sabana David* moved him so much that "it left him speechless," the fifth chapter, "Foucault's transgression" (pp. 191-241), continues the discussion of the character of the distinction by which one can distinguish oneself from the indistinction that threatens when one faces threatening, sickening or demoralizing circumstances.

In Foucault's "Preface to Transgression," this division is also characterized in terms of a possible "partage": "le seul partage qui soit encore possible," or "the only division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings, and spaces to desecrate." Foucault

further characterizes this “partage” in his extensive review of Roger Laporte’s first novel *La veille*, published under the title “Guetter le jour qui vient,” where Foucault also praises Laporte’s work as “one of the most original texts that our time has given us to read, one of the most difficult yet most transparent.”¹ In this review, Foucault takes pains to emphasize how “to keep vigil for Laporte means to be not after evening but before morning, without any other ‘before’ this lead that I myself am on all possible days. And in this night, or rather (because the night is thick, closed, opaque; the night partakes of two days (la nuit partage deux journées), draws, limits, lends drama to the sun that it restores, prepares the light that it restrains for a moment) in this ‘not yet’ of morning, which is gray rather than black and as though diaphanous to its own transparency, the neutral word *vigil* glistens.” As Harvey indicates (197-198), Foucault in this manner stresses that the night is at the cusp of two days and that during this night there are moments when I do not know whether I am still in ‘today’ or already in ‘tomorrow,’ a circumstance that was also accentuated in the polysemy and undecidability of the title of Laporte’s novel, since *la veille* means the day before this night and this day, the watch where one sits up at night to pray for the dead or to be on the outlook for the enemy, the state of insomnia and the state of being wide awake. Thus, even in the darkest hour, the night partakes of two days; and, even when we mourn the deceased or watch out for fear of the enemy, the night watch is an in-between that partakes in both the preceding and the following day, remembers the setting and looks forward to the rising sun. Exactly his or her partaking of or sharing in two spaces separated by a divide is what enables the night watch to “stand vigil for the day to come,” as is the title of Foucault’s review.

Contrary to what is to be expected if one follows a commonsensical understanding of the term transgression, Foucault’s transgression is not to be understood as a going beyond the limits set by law, moral principles or customs to a place situated beyond pre-established law, creed or commonality. Rather, Foucault’s preface to transgression consists in a partaking in the partitioning or sharing of the two spaces separated by a divide, as described above: in a partaking of a spatiality that is also a double shared temporality. By partaking in this double shared temporality (of a setting and a rising), one can also become enabled to partake in these spaces otherwise, to take part in the already existing spaces in another manner.²

Harvey makes it plain how the described idea that the cleaving of an immediately given space and of oneself permits to relate differently to oneself and to others is closely related to Foucault’s experience of and relationship to literature and the literary. It is an experience that literature may be a distancing from the preconceived world and an

¹ First published as “Guetter le jour qui vient” in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* no. 130 (Octobre, 1963), 709-716, the book review of Roger Laporte’s *La Veille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) was re-edited in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits I* (1994), no. 15, vol. I, pp. 289-296. Translated by Elise Woodard and Robert Harvey, the review was published in English in *Foucault Studies*, 19 (2015), 217-223, as “Standing Vigil for the Day to Come”.

² Cf. also Sverre Raffnsøe, Marius Gudmand-Høyer and Morten S. Thaning: *Michel Foucault. A Research Companion. Philosophy as Diagnosis of the Present* (2016, 12-15) for a congenial interpretation of “Standing Vigil for the Day to Come.” The authors of the monograph are most grateful to Woodard and Harvey for drawing attention to this important but usually disregarded article by Foucault.

ethical opening towards another shared manner of being. By far exceeding an early passing fascination that would mark only Foucault's early works in the 1960s, as it is often claimed in secondary literature, the fascination with literature and an ethically charged fictionality in the literary committed to resuscitating the world remains emblematic for Foucault throughout his oeuvre, as Harvey also rightly claims.

This is also evidenced in the fact that the poet René Char remains a true inspiration cited and honoured implicitly as well as explicitly from the very beginning to the end of Foucault's oeuvre, as well as a major source of Foucault's use of the term "partage," as Harvey takes great pains to demonstrate in chapter five and six of *Sharing Common Ground*.

Already Foucault's speech pronounced as preamble to the defense of his dissertation, published as the preface to the first edition of *Histoire de la folie* in 1961, had ended with an unreferenced quotation from a suite of prose poems articulating a poetics in Char's *Seuls demeurent* (1938-1944) entitled *Partage formel*. In the face of the Nazi threat, "partage formel" here names the absolute divide between the poet and Nazism, but also the visceral sharing of existence that unites the poet to language and the poem, links the resistance fighter to his co-combatants and permits to unveil and recollect a certain brightness in the midst of all drabness. Displaying what Harvey describes as "eleventh-hour hope" (199), a hope characteristic of a temporality "before hope and fear separate" (217), the passage of part XXII of *Seuls demeurent* cited by Foucault runs like this: "Pathetic companions scarcely murmuring, go on with your lamp extinguished and give back the jewels. A new mystery sings in your bones. Develop your legitimate strangeness." Harvey joins in with Timothy O'Leary "when the latter asserts that René Char's 'imperative could stand as an epigraph to Foucault's entire work, a series of books that in their effort to 'think otherwise' constantly explore whatever is foreign to our ways of thinking and acting' " (200).³

Situated on the opposite end of Foucault's oeuvre, the second and third volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, published in the year of his death in 1984, likewise has a telling citation from Char. Here perspicuously listed on the back of the cover, the quote from *L'âge cassant* in *Recherche de la base et du sommet* reads as a similar exhortation to the unreferenced quotation in *Histoire de la folie*: "The history of men is the long succession of synonyms of the same term [vocalbe]. To contradict them is a duty". The same goes even for the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, appearing earlier this year, 34 years after Foucault's death. In accordance with Char, Foucault's "partage" and "transgression" thus implies a division from the existing, but also a division sutured by a search for inclusiveness in separateness and alterity.

The common ground between Foucault and Char is further explored in the sixth chapter, "The Cleave Informs: René Char and the Hope of Heresy" (pp. 243-291). Harvey underlines how Char's *Fureur et mystère*, of which *Formal Cleave* is an essential part, is shot through with hope and the struggle for a new dawn. As Char makes graphic in another part of *Fureur et mystère*, entitled *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (paragraph 168), "resistance is but

³ Timothy O'Leary, "Foucault, Experience, Literature," *Foucault Studies* 5 (2008), 7.

hopefulness (*résistance n'est qu'espérance*)," even and especially when one is facing an enemy as formidable as Nazism. Foucault seems to be in agreement with this assertion, as is also evident when he claims that what prompted him to take an interest in further investigating the Iranian revolution was his reading of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*.⁴ Likewise, this assertion is in accordance with Foucault's conception of critique as inherent and affirmative, with his endorsement of a kind of criticism that would try "to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms."⁵

In a number of ways and contexts, thus, *Sharing Common Ground* manages to reveal how the urge to think and imagine in common when faced with existing places and their challenges is essential culturally, artistically, theoretically, ethically and existentially for human beings if they are to recreate these places as spaces that they can inhabit together. Equally, Harvey lays bare that the sharing of common ground is a joint endeavor linking crucial figures within literature, art, theory, philosophy and ethics together.

In addition to digging out, translating and interpreting Duras' early, somewhat overlooked short story "Construction Sites," Harvey's ongoing discussion throughout the book also repeatedly makes decisive and well-considered contributions to the translation and understanding of French theory and literature. In particular, it makes substantial offerings to the rendition of a number of crucial and at times somewhat quite enigmatic French terms and concepts in the English language.

One example is Harvey's suggestion to translate Foucault's term "des espaces autres" by "spaces otherwise," rather than often-used translations such as "spaces apart" or "spaces elsewhere." Whereas "Les Chantiers" has previously been translated as "Building sites," Harvey argues convincingly that the term should instead be translated as "sites under construction" or "construction sites" (24, 26) in order to capture the sense of a messy site that points towards a yet unknown possible future and gives warning of possible disaster. As already indicated, Harvey repeatedly builds a very strong case against the widespread understanding of "partage" as mere disjunction and the connected suggestion to render it as "division" when Foucault's and Char's work is translated into English. Since this translation is simplifying, insufficient and misleading, it should be replaced by other terms able to render both the division and the sharing, such as "cleft," representing a cleaving from that which enables cleaving to and interrelationality (54).

⁴ Farès Sassine and Michel Foucault, "There Can't Be Societies without Uprisings," *Foucault Studies* 25 (2018), 234.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Le philosophe masqué" (1980), *Dits et Écrits IV: 106*/"The Masked Philosopher," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (2000), 328.

Sharing Common Ground shows considerable erudition; and Harvey's scholarship is meticulous and detailed. While his writing may be demanding and his argument may at times be somewhat convoluted, he does not show off but rather focusses on illuminating the points he is eager to make. By contextualizing the text and authors discussed, digging out a number of whole arrays of hitherto overlooked connections and establishing a number of family resemblances, he manages to cover a lot of (common) ground and to make a number of very important points.

Throughout, reading *Sharing Common Ground* is a most rewarding, enlivening and enlightening experience. In this manner, the monograph also succeeds in making it graphic that (even) reading and writing can be (particularly) exhilarating experiences, despite the fact and due to the fact that we are here (in a pre-eminent sense) strangers when we meet.

The author Robert Harvey is Distinguished Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Stony Brook University, USA. He is the author of *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility*, Broadway, New York & Bedford Square, London: Bloomsbury, 2010.

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