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Nathan Bracher, *Through a Glass Darkly: History and Memory in François Mauriac's "Bloc-Notes"*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004. 240 pp. + xii, \$65.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-813-21380-0.

Review by Samuel Moyn, Columbia University.

Christian intellectual life of the French twentieth century rarely figures in Anglo-American historiography, in spite of its considerable significance in its time, not simply in France but around the world. The topic of Nathan Bracher's noteworthy study is François Mauriac's *Bloc-Notes*, a longstanding series of regular newspaper columns by a Christian man of letters hugely influential in his day. Written in Mauriac's full maturity, at a later stage from the interwar novels that originally won him fame, Mauriac's journalism appeared first in *La Table ronde* then in *L'Express* and *Le Figaro littéraire* between 1952 (the year Mauriac won the Nobel prize for literature) and 1970 (the year he died). The columns were only partially gathered together for publication in Mauriac's life, and Bracher, a professor of literature, has relied exclusively upon the *Bloc-Notes* as collected more recently by Jean Touzot in five annotated volumes in 1993.[1] He cites them at great length and in dual language format throughout this book, though because he does not usually interpret the diction or style of his passages, one usually feels that the translation would have sufficed.

Bracher's thesis is that Mauriac's *Bloc-Notes* were in effect the forum for an unusual and compelling stance towards history. Bracher wants to offer Mauriac's temporal consciousness as a neglected alternative to the Marxist philosophy of history, once fashionable and now consigned to the dustbin of a "past imperfect," that dominated French thought of the era and determined its Anglo-American importation. The thesis of the book, as Bracher formulates it, is that "a close textual study of the *Bloc-Notes* will reveal a coherent, reasoned approach whose basic tenets have withstood the test of time much better than the Marxist paradigms dominating the discourse of [Jean-Paul] Sartre and the Parisian intelligentsia" (p. 95).

Of course, being against Marxism is not itself a theory. So Bracher spends much of the study establishing the positive elements of Mauriac's alternative. First, people are implicated in history. Though they can and must seek the shelter of timeless French and Christian values for the sake of reflection on the present (symbolized by Mauriac's frequent contributions from his southwestern estate of Malagar where he often retreated), the point of such shelter is never exemption from one's time. Sadly, history is a vale of tears, a fact ultimately rooted in original sin and a martyred savior; Mauriac, Bracher emphasizes, repeatedly referred to it, in a Goethean formula, as "an imbroglio of errors and violence." But if a quick revolutionary fix to suffering is unavailable--such a cure always worsens the disease--God, who is love, definitely has a purpose for his sinning children. Of course, it is not foreordained: history does not run on the wheels of inevitability and human choice, rather than some hidden design, moves events. So providence is less legible and necessary than obscure and postponed. Instead, the burden is placed on individuals to adopt an ethics that makes room for all--to advance freedom and affirm brotherhood in a turbulent world. This morality must cover everyone, including history's diverse subjects, who have been the frequent victims of Western values rather than the recipients of its promised blessings. Up to a point, as this rendition might suggest, Mauriac's philosophy of history can seem eerily familiar. Though historians might prefer to see a vision like Mauriac's as just as much a Cold War relic as the philocommunist it opposed, Bracher is right that--for better or for worse--the approach remains a live option, at least in some quarters.

But in the most compelling dimension of his study, Bracher documents that Mauriac took the philosophy of history of his Cold War Christianity in a direction often critical of his time and his nation. The pessimistic foundations of his approach—with humanity ensnared in sin—meant that Mauriac could often take his skepticism towards “civilization” very far, indicting any excessive confidence about his nation’s embodiment of Christianity or humanity. (More implausibly, Bracher goes so far as to say that one could “almost” see Mauriac’s occasional critique of civilization as reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s acid insight) (p. 77). In mounting his case, Bracher’s predominant focus is on Mauriac’s attitude toward the struggles of colonialism, and toward the Algerian war in particular, which burdened Mauriac with the responsibility of moral intervention, and forced him to think about contemporary politics in relation to his nation’s long-term vicissitudes. And, as Bracher stresses over and over, in the 1950s Mauriac deployed his philosophy of history in a way that made him an early and passionate critic of torture. As Bracher reconstructs his itinerary, Mauriac turned to this attitude late, after he endorsed the prosecution of the Indochinese war, on anticommunist and patriotic grounds, and defended the attendant brutality. But beginning with a January 1955 installment of the *Bloc-Notes*, Mauriac violently criticized the French regime for its depredations. As Bracher emphasizes, Mauriac related the question of torture to France’s historical failure, in the Dreyfus affair, to clearly and consistently avoid injustice and live out its proper destiny of defending human dignity. Spurred on by his rehabilitative and apologetic agenda, however, Bracher does not remark on the apparent irony that Mauriac attacked torture in the name of the civilizing mission that he continued to see as France’s birthright and destiny and that had ideologically justified colonialism in the first place; he simply praises Mauriac’s perception and prediction that colonialism could no longer remain part of this mission.

Bracher dwells on Mauriac’s writings about torture so repeatedly—if also valuably and with much current resonance—that it is not always clear how plausible it is to generalize from them in order to find in his thought a winning perspective on the French past in general (much less on human affairs as a whole). Since Bracher has translated works by Henry Rousso and Renée Poznanski on the Jews in France during World War II and the Vichy syndrome, it is somewhat surprising that he deals so little and perhaps not adequately with Mauriac’s reflections—which were of extreme importance at the time—on the Holocaust.^[2] Mauriac, for example, prefaced Elie Wiesel’s *Night* on its original 1959 publication. Is this because, however much Mauriac did to promote sensitivity to the Jews’ plight in the war (because he could represent them as Christ-like sufferers and martyrs for a future Christian redemption), Mauriac did not, at least to my knowledge, emphasize French participation in causing that plight? The point of saying so is not to moralize anachronistically but to wonder how viable it is to retrieve Mauriac as a contemporary guide. Mauriac, Bracher shows, did indict historic French antisemitism, and wrote that the ubiquity of the fall meant that Frenchmen could not get away with projecting malfeasance on exterior Germans but must recognize the sinful crimes of which they too were guilty. Bracher therefore insists that “Mauriac continually confront[ed] the darkest episodes of France’s past” (p. 131; cf. pp. 24–26, 218). But such comments are a far cry from the more focused indictment of one’s countrymen, not just for their occasional xenophobia, or for their sinfulness as humans, but also for the specificity of their World War II complicity. In the only installment of the *Bloc-Notes* I know well, a response to Jean-François Steiner’s 1966 bestseller that help draw widespread attention in France to the exterminatory project, Mauriac could write that emerging Holocaust memory served at its best “to remind the West of the abomination of which it was the *witness* and thus the accomplice, and to forbid the West from forgetting it.” The comment is inculpatory and exculpatory at once, and such a combination of denunciation and defense arguably characterized Mauriac’s overall agenda as a moralist. In the “sin” of the Holocaust, in any case, Mauriac was willing to take his implication of his own community—France specifically and the Christian West generally—only so far.^[3]

Bracher admires Mauriac deeply. As noted, he is willing to state his esteem quite openly. But the commonest rhetoric in the book is one of defense or defensiveness. One of the basic goals of the book is

to “dispel” (Bracher’s usual word) interpretations of Mauriac as a Gaullist loyalist, politically reactionary, formulaic doctrinaire, or sanctimonious bore. Bracher’s thorniest challenge for establishing his case for Mauriac is his hero’s essentially unwavering support for Charles de Gaulle, beginning with his 1958 return to power and amplifying as the years passed. Bracher argues that Mauriac, though a fervent Gaullist, dissented from the general’s presentation of a “mythic” history of France unsullied by crimes and sin. His overall approach required him to do so, after all, since no men are pure. But Bracher recognizes that Mauriac remained moved by and supportive of the Gaullist idealized vision of his nation, explaining that the novelist rallied to the general for effecting “a unity, continuity, and connection to the past that compensate[d] for civil strife, political instability, and historical amnesia so characteristic of the disheartening present” (p. 183). But in what sense is historical myth really a plausible way to counteract amnesia? Bracher likens Mauriac’s ultimate endorsement of de Gaulle for his construction of epic legends to his complex admiration for Maurice Barrès, who flirted excessively with nationalism but at least—so Mauriac thought—provided an idealistic alternative to a depressing vision of life as “horseraces, food, and television” (cited on p. 188). Indeed, Bracher records that Mauriac’s support for de Gaulle competed with his solicitude for tortured “others.” At times, in fact, Mauriac came close to the Marxists in suggesting that making an omelette requires breaking eggs, saying in 1958 that state violations were the expectable fallout of a conflict that de Gaulle, at least, promised to end (pp. 89-90). Bracher calls Mauriac’s position “reasoned,” challenging his protagonist’s affection for the French leader only when he went so far in the *Bloc-Notes* as to excuse the capture and murder of Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka by French policemen in 1965. For Mauriac, such crimes were a regrettable but unavoidable result of politics, and to indict the French state for spilling blood seemed like blaming a car for inadvertently spattering mud (pp. 193-94). For Bracher, these writings were mere lapses, regrettable transgressions of the very standards for reading the present in light of the Christian philosophy of history that Mauriac himself outlined.

In general, it is convincing to interpret Mauriac, as Bracher does, as having anticipated some strands of the more recent ethical turn. After all, parts of the core rhetoric of the latter, its anti-Marxism not least, originated with Cold War conservatism, and frequently derived from—or at least retroactively claimed—religious sources. (In a few passages, Bracher interprets Mauriac as a kind of Christian version of the Jewish ethical thinker Emmanuel Levinas, who was developing his moral thought in the same Cold War atmosphere, even if he only won fame later) (pp. 54 and 65). But the flaw in this book is that it affiliates Mauriac with the recent and contemporary moralistic turn on the assumption that that turn needs little defense now that Marxism is dead. Bracher has restricted himself to textual (or intratextual) reconstruction, from the mess of occasional pieces Mauriac left behind, of a philosophy the Christian moralist never developed systematically. But simply teasing a philosophy from a set of texts, while an estimable accomplishment in itself, is not a defense of that philosophy. It is here that Bracher’s disciplinary background may show most. The historian of France might complain that the “reading” of the *Bloc-Notes* and the retrieval of Mauriac in this book shun the details of historical context and the search for historical sense, just as the historian of ideas will wish for a better account of Mauriac’s place in the long and complex tradition of the philosophy of history or some study of his Christian and other sources. But, more troublingly given the overall purpose of the book, the philosopher or theorist may wonder if a more developed argument is available for why Mauriac’s vision was and remains persuasive or even plausible. Still, Bracher deserves considerable praise for reminding contemporary readers not simply of the power, but also of the existence, of that vision.

Did Mauriac offer a lasting vision of history, as Bracher clearly thinks, in spite of his hero’s acknowledged and excused errors? Of course, a lot depends on how you define “history.” And for Mauriac, the courageous moral intervention in turbulent events that Bracher emphasizes presupposed a suspect distinction between the constant and the changeable in time. Bracher, as noted, sees the critique of Marxism, along with the related turn to ethics and responsibility, as forcing a revival of the neglected alternative that Mauriac’s position always represented. Yet not just for Marxists, but for anyone with a

rich social theory, there is no defensible way to draw a line between the great events of history and the everyday texture of life; one could not claim to strike a moral position in response to the one without extending one's critique to the institutionalized texture and small events—including the hierarchies and subordinations—of the other. But Bracher often seems simply to take Mauriac's rather restrictive definition of the zone of acceptable and necessary moral intervention in history at face value. At most, he faults Mauriac for his mistakes on his chosen terrain, accepting his original delimitation of it. Bracher plausibly portrays Mauriac as a person nostalgic for a France lost as modernization proceeded, perceptively seeing Mauriac's turn away from fiction towards a world lost as typical of an increasingly memorial culture. Absent from the book, however, is much consideration of the "moral" status of Mauriac's views not about high politics but about social life generally (but cf. pp. 49-51). In a revealing footnote, Bracher acknowledges Mauriac's social and cultural conservatism (it could take the form, for example, of a ferocious public indictment of materials from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that contested the limits of expression about sexual matters and challenged gender relations).^[4] And one must grasp that the appeal of a figure like Mauriac as a journalist in the 1950s and 1960s depended not only, and perhaps not really, on his courageous stands on history understood as the adventures of high politics, but also on his conservative beliefs about the realities of everyday life, which aligned with those of so many bygone readers. Along with others of his place and age, Mauriac reinvented the Christian outlook to address some moral problems, like torture and racism, in pioneering ways. Here, his contributions were creditable, if sometimes ambiguous. But the appeal to a fundamentally interpersonal morality, an ethic of kindness and charity, will not effectively address structural issues. The "other" may need an institutional fix, not just ethical solicitude. And if the everyday realm of interpersonal interaction turns out to be not the locus of timeless values from which to judge the events of the day but equally "political" and "historical" in its constitution, shot through with less flagrant but more endemic moral problems also in need of denunciation, then it may start to seem that moralists who restrict their courageous stances to high politics are—well, not moral enough.

NOTES

[1] There were installments left out of the edition Bracher used, just collected as François Mauriac, *D'un bloc-notes à l'autre*, ed. Jean Touzot (Paris: Bartillat, 2004).

[2] See Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, 1998) and Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2001).

[3] François Mauriac, "Bloc-Notes," in *Le Figaro littéraire*, 5 May 1966, rpt. in Mauriac, *Bloc-Notes*, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 4: 255-58, emphasis added. Bracher does not deal with Naomi Seidman's controversial argument that Mauriac acknowledged the Holocaust only on condition of Christianizing it. See Seidman, "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage," *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s., 3, 1 (Fall 1996): 1-19. Both Mauriac and Seidman are discussed in my book *A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2005), chap. 3.

[4] See now Ingrid Galster, ed., *"Le deuxième sexe" de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004), a dossier which usefully collects the 1949 controversy.

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