

**Nader El-Bizri. 2022. *On Being and Time: The Section on Heidegger in Charles Malik's 1937 Harvard Thesis*. Beirut: Texte und Studien 143. Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut. 178 pp. ISBN 978-3-95650-985-8.**

Above all philosophy is a lesson of life, living, and freedom writes French philosopher and public intellectual Michel Onfray (b. 1959). In other words, philosophy is a quest to study, evaluate, scrutinize, and understand man, nature, reality, existence, humanity, and the human condition. Even in its etymological sense, philosophy is 'love of wisdom', ergo 'love of knowledge' and a quest for knowing and understanding 'being and time'.

Prefacing with Michel Onfray a review of a study on 'Charles Malik's Heidegger' is, I thought, not only appropriate, but indeed righteous. This is so given both Onfray and Malik's approach to philosophy not merely as a 'quest for knowing and understanding' in the arcane academic sense, but indeed 'knowing and understanding' at the popular level, on the plane of 'philosophy for the masses' as a massive, accessible, popular endeavour, all-encompassing and intelligible to the 'common man'; in sum, an 'unaffected and unconscious "love of men and subject matter"' as revealed in a description of Heidegger attributed to Malik (p. 20). And although Charles Malik the thinker—let us say his interpretation of Heidegger—might have been 'accessible', Heidegger himself, and his philosophy according to Michel Onfray, were anything but. Relying on the description of one of Heidegger's former students, Onfray relays a portrait of the man as follows:

A brilliant teacher, [Heidegger] was nevertheless impenetrable... I remember distinctly that I understood very little of his commentaries [in the classroom.] I would intently follow his train of thought for a moment, then lose track of what he was saying. Yet, what I never lost track of was that what he was saying must have been of import, even if I was unable to understand a word of it... He was a sombre man of small physical stature, who was quite at ease ensorcelling his interlocutor. The basic technique of his courses consisted of erecting complex scaffoldings upon which his ideas would be lain, only to subsequently dismantle the entire structure



leaving his students utterly dumbfounded, stunned, bewildered by the enigma that lay before them. This artistry of the sorcerer's apprentice, carrying with it great risk, attracted a breed of disciples that cannot be described as anything but a breed 'deranged' followers. Indeed, one of Heidegger's female students chose suicide three years into her course with him [presumably out of despair]. (Onfray 2015)

In sum, Heidegger was impenetrable; puzzling; but he mattered. What he said might have been unintelligible, but it was important. How then could he have been a 'brilliant teacher' had he been inaccessible to his charges? This contradiction was never resolved, until perhaps Charles Malik came along, breaking the Heideggerian spell, resolving the enigma that he was to those who still admired and valorised him. This is precisely what Nader El-Bizri's learned intellectual biography of Charles Malik reveals.

A doctoral student at Harvard University since 1932, with a stint in Germany beginning in 1935 where he studied under Martin Heidegger, Charles Malik became over the course of his career a notable essayist, diplomat, political thinker, historian, academic, and one of the principal authors of the United Nation's 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Early twentieth-century Lebanese journalist and politician Georges Naccache described Malik in a 1948 essay as a 'simple neo-Thomist teacher from Koura who, on a bank of the River Hudson, presided over the debates of 108 nations'.<sup>1</sup> Malik's life's work intruded on many disciplines spanning History, Theology, Sociology, Political Thought, Political Science, and of course Philosophy. As a teacher and public intellectual who held for many decades a professorship at the American University of Beirut,<sup>2</sup> Malik's concerns were those of Humanity and Man as a whole; in other words 'being and time'. Nader El-Bizri's annotated intellectual biography of Malik's is (perhaps to a fault) a fastidious and exhaustive confirmation of the preceding profile of Charles Malik the Humanist; that as pertains to 'being and time' nothing was beyond the pale for Charles Malik; that he was naturally curious about all pre-occupations pertaining to Humanity and Man; that like Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos* (1921: 58–59), Malik avidly sought out all thoughts and actions relating to Man; thoughts that questioned and answered one another with alacrity and clarity. Even 'questions of war and peace would continue to leave a mark on Malik's

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<sup>1</sup> Naccache refers here to Malik's presiding over the thirteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1958. Prior to that, Malik was Lebanon's representative at the 1945 San Francisco conference at which the UN was founded. In 1948 he would become one of the eight drafters of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, succeeding Eleanor Roosevelt as the Human Rights Commission's Chair. See Naccache (1983: 49–50).

<sup>2</sup> Malik also held concomitant professorships at Harvard, Dartmouth College, the American University in DC, Indiana's University of Notre Dame in addition to other elite institutions around the world.

thinking' notes El-Bizri, stressing that to Malik '[...] the life of action is superior to and more complete than the life of thinking. A General or a prophet is superior to a poet or a philosopher' (p. 35).

In sum, Malik's 'primary concern was the truth', he would write in 1982, that

[...] the truth of man, history, and destiny is not only complex but multi-layered [...] that] there is truth and truth, and [that] the truth to be sought [...] should be such as to govern all truths, including the operations of politics and diplomacy and the vagaries of the will. Truth alone liberates and saves. (Malik 1983: 2)

Born in 1906 in the Koura district of the Ottoman Vilayet of Beirut (present-day Lebanon), lulled between ebbs and flows of Mediterranean and the rootedness of snow-capped Mount-Lebanon, Malik was perhaps destined by these natural surroundings to wed his 'Christian onto-theology' to Heideggerian theological interpretations of 'being and time' (p. 14). El-Bizri notes that 'Malik described himself as *'a Christian thinker who seeks to "Heideggerize theology" or "theologize Heidegger"'*' (p. 19). Like his great-uncle, Lebanese Christian author and polymath Farah Antun (1874–1922), and oddly enough *unlike* his famous great-nephew-by-marriage Edward Said (1935–2003), Charles Malik was at ease shying away from approaching knowledge strictly 'from the point of view of the *saecularis*'—which is to say the purely temporal and profane (Malik 1982: 109). In that sense, his approach to 'time and being' stemmed from an almost religious (not to say Christian) 'curiosity about *all* being' and *all* things related to man and being; a fearless quest for knowledge in the Greek sense; knowledge *in toto* (Malik 1982: 18–19). To this point, he notes that it is interesting that non-Western (and therefore non-Christian) seekers of knowledge may 'enter Freiburg University or the Sorbonne or Oxford or Harvard... and specialize and earn a universally respected academic degree in their own [*native* non-Western, non-Christian] culture', whereas no Westerner may enter a non-Western university expecting to 'specialize and earn a universally respected academic degree' in his own Western culture (Malik 1982: 18). This is how Malik viewed and decorticated Heidegger. Rather than depicting him as an indecipherable enigma as did his students, Malik saw his teacher simply as a deconstructionist of Western tradition who was still deeply indebted to Judeo-Christian tradition, ergo Western tradition, even if he did not discern or acknowledge that debt to Christian values (p. 21).

A humanist at heart, who might have ignored Heidegger's Nazi proclivities, Malik was a vocal opponent of resentful nationalisms, Arab nationalism in particular, which he viewed as a calque from German Romantic ideas that might have led to organic national movements such as Nazism. Like his ancestor Farah Antun, who rejected the idea of the Near East as a uniform Arab-defined preserve, Malik believed the region—with his native Lebanon at its forefront—to be 'an entity apart', unassimilable, immune to absorption by larger monolithic

pan-movements, or fusion into dominant entities extrinsic to its humanist nature (Malik 1983: 4–5). ‘The future does not belong to oppression but to liberation’ he wrote in 1983,


The future will not bring about a contraction of existing freedom but a widening of its scope. The future will not conduce to the enlargement and grounding of slavery but to diminishing its sway and getting rid of it altogether. The future does not belong to discriminating against the religious minorities [of the Near East] but to these minorities themselves winning complete equality in their responsibilities, rights and obligations. The future does not belong to the realm of darkness but to the realm of light which shone and continues to shine in Lebanon. (Malik 1983: 17)

Obviously much has changed in the forty years since Malik penned that confident text. Freedoms are contracting and their converse are expanding, but it remains that Malik’s indictments of despotism and valorisation of humanism are sentiments he draws from a deep reservoir of Christian faith, as values worth conserving, defending, and aspiring to. What is more, Malik’s time at Harvard, and later Germany during the 1930s, confirmed his confidence in the power of ‘hope’ (p. 27). ‘Malik sensed since 1933’, writes El-Bizri, ‘that the time ahead was that of days of moral trial in Europe; yet he believed that the essence of humanity was to be found in hope as manifesting its highest expression in the love of God’ (p. 27).

In these times, when ‘the time ahead [seems to be] that of trial in Europe’, *indeed* trial in the world and for humanity as a whole, rereading Charles Malik’s Heidegger under Nader El-Bizri’s pen seems not only imperative and opportune, but indeed salutary. Nader El-Bizri’s *On Being and Time; The section on Heidegger in Charles Malik’s 1937 Harvard Thesis* is certainly *not* an easy book; but it is a crucial book. Learned, meticulous, exhaustive, didactic (half of the book’s text is footnotes, so the reader is struck from the first pages with the author’s fastidiousness and devotion to his subject) this is a welcome guidebook of a Humanist assisting humanity on the path where a novel and ominous ‘transhumanism’ lurks; a veritable *tour de force* that not only ‘democratizes Malik on Heidegger’, but which also brings back to life a major (but occulted) figure of the Near East’s twentieth century intellectual history.

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