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Suffering from 'American Vertigo'

By Alex Beam, Globe Columnist | January 25, 2006

Sophisticated people everywhere -- Tina Brown! Adam Gopnik! -- are taking French celebrity philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy's new book, "American Vertigo," very, very seriously. BHL, as he is known chez lui, figuratively retraced the 1831 American journey of his countryman Alexis de Tocqueville, spinning out his impressions first in a series of Atlantic magazine articles and now in a book.

Color me skeptical. I can't take Levy seriously at all. I stuck with his first Atlantic article until I tripped across the phrase "Detroit, sublime Detroit." I burst out laughing. At another stop, Levy checks in with actress Sharon Stone ("She unfolds her legs, refolds them, then pulls at the hem of her skirt") to hear her fascinating "hypothesis" about the Bush administration. For Levy, Bush is "this little man, a child that never grew up and now rules the United States."

Not long after I punted on the Tocqueville trip, I read that Levy, who must have been the drama queen of the Ecole Normale Superieure, had once reported showing signs of the stigmata -- Christ's wounds on the cross -- after a particularly trying conversation. His interlocutor was Dominique de Villepin now the prime minister of France. I know God works in mysterious ways, but this is ridiculous.

To be fair, which is not my intention, BHL has his moments. It's amusing to imagine him at the back of a Pittsburgh auditorium, watching Christopher Hitchens heckle Henry Kissinger's audience: "You're all toads who've come to listen to a toad!" Later that evening, BHL describes Hitchens as "suddenly energized, not drunk at all."

I heard Levy talk last spring at the New York Public Library, and it was magnifique. Catch him if you can. Levy's English is quite good, but even he couldn't decipher a meandering inquiry from his acolyte, loony-left actor Richard Dreyfuss, who seemed to want to talk about the First Amendment. "What did he say? What did he say?" Levy kept asking his handlers, but alas no English-to-English translator was present.

Ultimately, I discovered that the best way to keep track of Levy's wanderings was in the letters-to-the-editor pages of the Atlantic. Quite reliably, a month or two after BHL visited some forlorn corner of America, some real-life American would write in to correct an error, little or big.

Invoking Mark Twain's comment that "foreigners pronounce better than they spell," a reader from Washington state noted that Levy bungled the spelling of the town of Wenatchee. Another reader regretted to inform that Levy had botched the address of the storied Nelson Algren-Simone de Beauvoir love nest in Chicago. Also in the Windy City, Levy breezily called Chinatown "the neighborhood of the insane, released en masse from asylums during the Reagan years." But it was not the hardhearted Republicans but the hardhearted Democratic presidents and congressmen who initiated mass de-institutionalization in the 1960s, a reader pointed out.

A former resident of Fort Worth felt that Levy's "characterization of the city as 'empty' seems particularly curious, as well as inaccurate, and his association of Fort Worth with fascist imagery and ideals strike me as simply bizarre." Prisoner Shane Williams ("an incarcerated reader conversant with Bernard-Henri Levy") penned an erudite critique of Levy's near-obsession with American prisons from inside Los Angeles's Metropolitan Detention Center.

An exchange that provoked more hilarity than even l'affaire Dreyfuss concerned Levy's visit to New York's Rikers Island prison. The state's commissioner of correction insisted, not very convincingly, that two of the gamier incidents in Levy's narrative never happened. Levy invoked his right of reply: "I stand by what I wrote." He continued: "Regarding the masturbation scene. . . pas de chance! -- I caught a sequence of it, as I did other aspects of prison life, on my little pocket video camera."

Let's go to the videotape. Or perhaps not.

Levy has begun his publicity blitz cum book tour, and I spotted some early preening in New York magazine. Asked to summarize his trip, the quondam philosopher replied: "America was a great mistress. I had a great [expletive] with America. It was like a weekend in the Hotel du Cap."

Thanks, Bernard. I wish it had been great for us, too. C'est la vie.