

Paris: Moses and Polytheism

Barbarism with a Human Face
by Bernard-Henri Lévy.
translated by George Holoch.
Harper and Row, 210 pp., \$10.00;
\$3.95 (paper)

Le testament de Dieu
by Bernard-Henri Lévy.
Grasset, 308 pp., 52 francs

Les idées à l'endroit
by Alain de Benoist.
Hallier, 298 pp., 45 francs

Yu de droite
by Alain de Benoist.
Copernic, 626 pp., 150 francs

Thomas Sheehan

"Almost two thousand years, and no new god!"

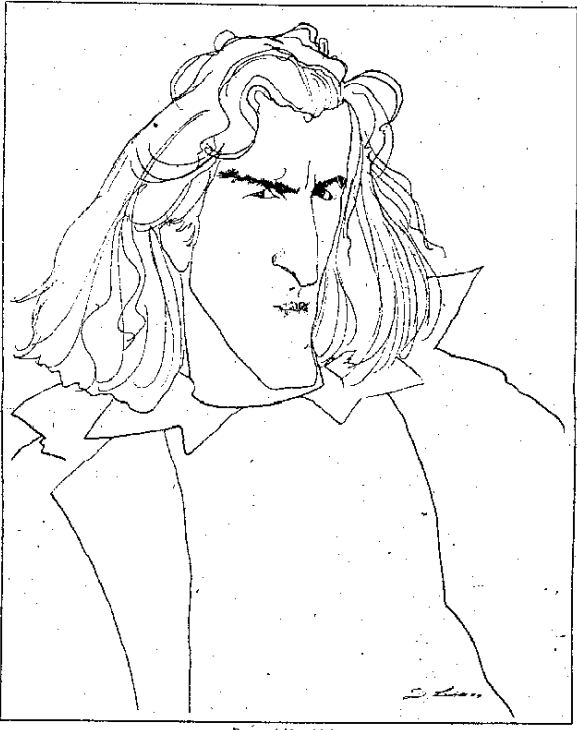
Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*

tive worlds, only a few days after Sartre and Aron had managed to shake hands over the issue of the Vietnamese boat-people. In the course of the exchange Lévy declared himself "shocked by the ideological and theoretical poverty" of de Benoist's writings, while de Benoist found Lévy's books "not worth a trifle." "I am filled with hatred for you," Lévy hissed. "I hate no one," de Benoist replied, for the sixteenth maxim of his code of aristocratic ethics (*Les idées* . . . , p. 52) enjoins: "Never hate, but despise often." It was the best show since Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley went after each other on television over a decade ago. The *nouveau philosophe* and the *nouveau droitier*, the prophet and the druid, seemed to deserve each other.

the revolt of May 1968 was a made-to-order structuralist's delight. More a cultural than a political crisis, more a synchronic liturgy than a diachronic historical event, it could be seen as re-enacting the myths of the French tribe (1848, the 1870 Commune) around a transpersonal hero (the Eternal Child, *le révolté*) within neat classical-unities of time and place (the Left Bank, May 3 through June 16). Although its political consequences were practically nil, this modern ritual did appear to prove what the structuralists had argued at some length: the supremacy of the code—in this case, the media—over the message to be codified. As cameramen freely crossed the barricades, ministering to both sides like priests in medieval wars, the essential point became clear: it is more important to *faire la une* ("make page one") than to win. The coverage

got rolled: by a junkie and, though the son of a millionaire, financed his way home by running booze between Bombay and Goa. Such enterprising skills, combined with his facility with words, served him well once he was back in Paris. One day he walked into Grasset publishing house, discussed some projects off the top of his head, and, *mirabile dictu*, got himself hired as an editor and, a few months later, was appointed the director of two new series of books: He corralled some manuscripts from old friends at the Ecole Normale, rushed them into print, and in 1976 took to the television screens to announce the birth of the "New Philosophers." A year later he crowned these efforts by publishing his own *Barbarism with a Human Face*. At that point he had more requests for newspaper-interviews and TV appearances than he could conveniently handle, and he earned himself the title *pub-philosophe*, "publicity philosopher." Metaphysics, having long been dead and buried, was resurrected as a media hype.

The mood of the French press and public contributed to their success. The appearance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in 1974 severely undermined residual sympathies for the Soviet Union, just as the later revelations about communist behavior in Cambodia shook liberal sympathies for Third World socialism. Moreover, the emergence of France's brand of Eurocommunism—permitting the alliance of communists and socialist parties in the Union of the Left—made many Frenchmen uneasy. The Common Program of the two parties, for example, called for government control over banking and credit. Since newspapers had been suffering the burden of rising costs since 1974, this was seen as an implicit threat to an independent and critical press. The collapse of the Union of the Left before and during the elections of March 1978 seemed to point up the hypocrisy of this uneasy marriage. As the Left's dominance of political discourse in France was increasingly shaken, the New Philosophers found a ready audience, not least among editors and television producers.



Bernard-Henri Lévy

Voltaire said that if God did not exist, man would have to invent Him. If we are to believe the French press, 1979 may be remembered as the year when two very different Parisian intellectuals applied for their respective patents on their own brand of deity.

With *Le testament de Dieu*, Bernard-Henri Lévy, thirty-one years old, ex-Maoist, ex-journalist, and self-proclaimed "New Philosopher," has become the latter-day prophet of a God who, though now deceased, was kind enough to leave behind His last will and testament, the Bible, as a bulwark against totalitarianism. With *Les idées à l'endroit* Alain de Benoist, ex-Catholic, ex-reactionary, and self-proclaimed "theoretical journalist," has presented a compendium of essays that attempts to lay the sociobiological foundations for a new religion, one of *deity* and *what is called the "New Right."* "The debate between monotheism and polytheism," de Benoist writes, "is a truly essential discussion." But strangely enough, neither man actually believes in the deity or deities he proposes: they are merely convenient foils to help man muddle through the mess of the modern world. Nietzsche was right after all. You can take your pick: the barren heights of Mount Sinai with Lévy, or the misty haunts of Celtic forests with de Benoist—a dead Yahweh or a vitalistic Wotan. In either case, to adapt a phrase from James Joyce, these are very post-humous gods.

For all their differences, Lévy and de Benoist have a lot in common. Each declares himself a moralist in philosophy, a nominalist in world view, and an antidotalitarian in politics. Both are skillful Parisian publicists (Lévy is an editor at Grasset, de Benoist at Copernic), and both have written much-acclaimed books (*Barbarism with a Human Face* won the 1977 *Prix d'Honneur de l'essai*, and *Yu de droite* won the 1978 *Grand Prix de l'essai* from the *Académie Française*). Each has set flame to his recent past (for Lévy, Maoism, for de Benoist, the "Old Right") and risen like a Phoenix from the ashes to go on to condemn Marxism and modern liberalism, the Gulag and Coca-Cola, fascism of the left and right, the Inquisition, the Enlightenment, and the rule of the masses.

Yet as we might expect from these heralds of monotheism and polytheism, they have spent much energy excommunicating each other. There they were last July in the offices of *France-Soir* for a round-table discussion, glaring at each other uncivily from their respec-

It is not easy to place Lévy and de Benoist in recent French philosophy, not least of all because it is stretching the word to call either of them a "philosopher." To be sure, Lévy studied under the Marxist Louis Althusser at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and claims to be a Lacanian. De Benoist, who studied law and letters at the Sorbonne, is an autodidact in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The range of books that they cite is immense (but de Benoist, unlike Lévy, seems actually to read them), and the urgency with which they press their points would have you believe that the fate of the West hangs on the result of their debate.

Lévy, unlike de Benoist, is a child of the student revolution of 1968. After structuralism's Gang of Four—Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, and Althusser—had "displaced" the human "subject"—the individual thinking consciousness—in favor of the linguistic code, and that subject's alleged history-making in favor of invariant structures,

of the event is the event. The point, we may imagine, was not lost on the then twenty-year-old Bernard-Henri Lévy, who followed the action not in the streets but in his room, by television and radio, with a map of Paris across his lap. Without his skillful use of the press and television some seven years later, the so-called "New Philosophers" would never have been launched. In fact, Lévy, who is dramatically handsome and remarkably fluent, seems to have been made for television from the start (he acted in a TV film between writing his two books), even if it took him some years to get there.

After the debacle of May 1968, Lévy, then a Maoist, heeded André Malraux's call and went off to Bangladesh. There he awakened from his dogmatic slumber and discovered that there was no difference between "progressive" and "reactionary" corpses. After spending a week posing as a journalist in a group of lackadaisical "guerrillas" (they never fought), he took off to India where he

It is impossible to discuss the New Philosophers as if they represented a unified viewpoint on anything. While they were all deeply affected by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's work, their only point in common may be that they have recently been issued by the same publisher. Some but not all were Maoists in 1968; one, Jean-Marie Benoist (not to be confused with Alain de Benoist), sat out the revolution as a diplomat in London, while another, Jean-Paul Dollé, fancies himself a Heideggerian. André Glucksmann, who publishes with Grasset but not in Lévy's series, refuses even to be grouped with them. Therefore, in discussing Lévy's two books (they have to be read together), I have no illusions

The "New Philosophers" include Jean-Marie Benoist, *Marx est mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); André Glucksmann, *Le Discours de la guerre* (second, expanded edition, Paris: Grasset, 1979); *La cuisine et le mangeur d'hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), and *Les maîtres penseurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1977); Jean-Paul Dollé, *Voies d'accès au plaisir* (Paris: Grasset, 1974), and other works; Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'ange* (Paris: Grasset, 1976), and others. For a (not very helpful) critique see François Aubral and Xavier Delcourt, *Contre la nouvelle philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).