

Another Shocker for France

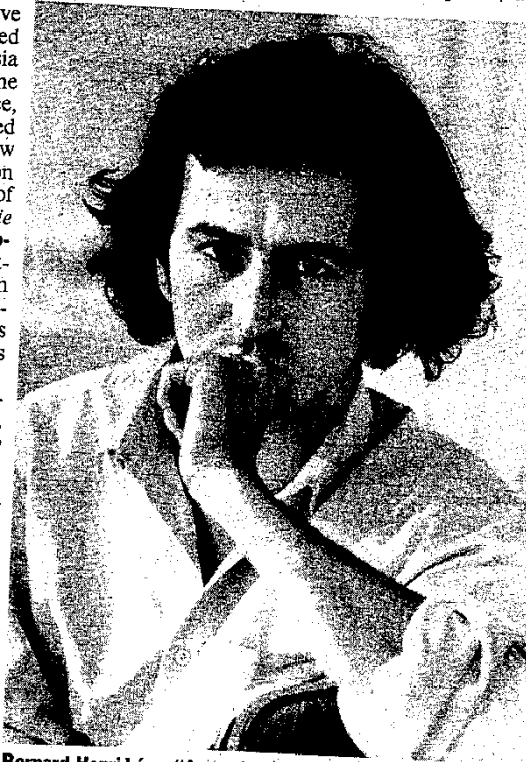
The enfant terrible of letters strikes again

With what sometimes seems labored cleverness, Bernard-Henri Lévy cultivates a role as France's intellectual peer by trying to shock his country—again and again. The wonder is that he succeeds so often. In the book that brought him celebrity seven years ago, *La Barbarie à Visage Humain* (Barbarism with a Human Face), Lévy, then one of France's fashionable *nouveaux philosophes*, announced the death of Marx with the glee of a child puncturing the myth of Santa Claus. Belated as the discovery may have looked to many others, it appeared to startle a French intelligentsia long imbued with Marxism; the iconoclastic author's young face, framed in wavy dark hair, graced just about every bookshop window in the country. In 1981, rounding on the right, Lévy hit the pay dirt of controversy again with *L'Ideologie Française*, a book that charged, provocatively enough, that a fascist-like, anti-Semitic strain has run through France for the past two centuries. Once again, French readers delightedly split into vicious critics and hysteric admirers.

With hardly an ideological target of note left unscathed, Lévy, 36, has now produced his first novel, *Le Diable en Tête* (The Devil Up Front), which aspires to be nothing less than the fictionalized history of the 20th century's destructive political passions. Almost from the day it was published two months ago, the 500-page tome moved toward the top of the bestseller list, selling 160,000 copies so far and becoming the season's most discussed book in a country where people still talk a lot about books. Lévy lost out on the prestigious Prix Goncourt—it went to Marguerite Duras for her novel *L'Amant*—but was given the Prix Médicis for his sprawling novel of ideas. The book has received favorable reviews from, among others, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde*; *Le Matin*'s Françoise Xenakis suggested that "if people don't like Lévy, it's probably because they are jealous, ugly and pimply." Underdeterred, Daniel Rondeau of *Libération* called the novel mediocre "in plot development and narrative structure." Wrote Angelo Rinaldi of *L'Express*: "Lévy has aimed too high for the literary means at his disposal."

From the start the reader is fairly warned of Lévy's grand ambition: the novel begins, "At the end of this voyage, there was the century." Five people, all with close links to the protagonist, then proceed to tell the story of the son of a French collaborator with the Nazis dur-

ing the occupation of France. The young man, called Benjamin C., discovers his true identity only when his mother dies and he comes across her diaries. Although he seems destined for a bourgeois existence, he grows up to partake of every political extreme he can fit into his short life. During the student-worker uprising of 1968 that almost toppled Charles de Gaulle, Benjamin is on the barricades. He is also involved with Algerian indepen-



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dence fighters, Italian Red Brigades terrorists, the Palestine Liberation Organization and a hazy Gallic version of Maoism. By the novel's end the pure revolutionary has become a ruthless terrorist. At 42 he retires to Jerusalem, hands over his confession to the narrator, who is coyly described as "a new philosopher neither very new nor very philosophical." Benjamin then kills himself, thus bringing his evils—and by implication those of the century—to rest.

With its theme of atonement and redemption, Lévy's book generates considerable moral power. What ultimately proves too much for him is the epic proportion of the century's struggle between good and evil. Lévy is clever, but he is neither a Leo Tolstoy nor a Thomas Mann,

and he cannot muster the imagination to create realistic characters out of his allegorical types.

Asked why he has turned to fiction, Lévy replies that "in the battle against barbarism [fascism and Stalinism], a novel is more efficient than an essay. Reason is never right. The great rationalists of the 1930s could not fight Nazism." A spectacular example, Lévy says, is provided by Alexander Solzhenitsyn because "he was able to convince people of the evils of Stalinism after hundreds and hundreds of essays failed. Fiction has a more intimate rapport with perversion than reason."

The perversion of political idealism is at the heart of Lévy's book. His hero "represents the limit of what I could have become myself. In the '60s many of us believed that man had to be changed, history broken in two to start humanity over again. Those were the slogans. But beyond this pure and idealistic ambition lies murder. Look at the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia." With his flair for self-dramatization, Lévy declares that "our generation of leftists was the most radical of all French intellectuals."

After Lévy's revolutionary period, though, came not the deluge but the drought. Says he: "For years the French were drunk on ideologies. Now we are having to live with the hangover. We've put ourselves on an ideology-free diet." For Lévy this explains why President François Mitterrand, for whom the author worked during the 1974 campaign, seems to have abandoned many of his socialist theories to pursue what appears to be nonpartisan economic and foreign policies. Lévy, who today describes himself as a left-of-center pragmatist, finds Mitterrand's present policies the least of all possible evils, "but whatever he does, he is hated by the French. By some sort of infernal dialectic, everything he does turns against him." Lévy insists that there is no ideology ready to take the place of Marxism, including the

present French intellectual fad for so-called New Conservatism (known in France as New Liberalism), which he dismisses as "an empty collection of slogans based on the re-election of Reagan."

In the meantime the author presides busily over his own museum to his century's political forces. His novel will be translated into English, and may be turned into a film. Lévy was recently seen lunching with Italian Director Bernardo Bertolucci at the Hotel Pont Royal, one of Paris' many gathering places for the intelligentsia. An epic film on the violent career of a reformed revolutionary might be in the offing with—why not?—Bernard-Henri Lévy in the starring role.

—By Frederick Palton. Reported by Alexandra Tuttle/Paris