

A Young Philosopher's Grim Renunciation

By Anne Crutcher

"BARBARISM WITH A HUMAN FACE," by Bernard-Henri Levy (*Harper & Row, 210 pp., \$10*).

Socialism has been debunked before. It has crossed literate minds, even among those who have not lived in China or the Soviet Union, that when the government owns everything and has the right to tell everybody what to do, a certain jailhouse atmosphere is going to come over life for one and all. What makes this book news is that it's the first time we've had these insights from a French philosopher of the *enrage* generation.

Bernard-Henri Levy, only 31 now, was a child of *les evenements de mai*, the French version of the campus uproars that made the '60s what they were in the United States. Trained in the baroque symmetries of French philosophy, he began as a Marxist's Marxist in practice as well as theory. He was an adviser to the government of Bangladesh and an intimate counselor of Francois Mitterand, head of the French Socialist party.

But he is a truth-seeker as well as a ratiocinator. He is also imaginative enough to experience revelation through someone else's vision. For him, on socialism, the vision was Solzhenitsyn's, communicated to Levy most powerfully in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Levy makes it clear that what he got from Solzhenitsyn was not facts—there were plenty of those around before his writing—it was the conviction of meaning only a great artist can convey.

It caused Levy to change his entire intellectual orientation. This book, which has been a big best seller in France and has turned its handsome young author into an international media personality, describes his altered state of mind. It was written two years ago, although it is only now translated.

It's not pure Solzhenitsyn—it would be too

much to ask for even as volatile a contemporary consciousness as Levy's to go all the way to Orthodox Christianity. It is instead the Solzhenitsyn message by way of a great deal of metaphysical froth and fury. "History does not exist," Levy trumpets. "The individual does not exist . . . The proletariat does not exist . . . The social contract does not exist . . . Reality does not exist . . ." It's a rampage of ontological mayhem all the way.

It is also a jungle of high-colored metaphor: "There is no state of nature, nature does not exist, before power there is nothing out of which we must bring society to birth with the forceps of liberation." There are a great many sentences of that sort to get through in pursuit of his thought.

What makes the struggle worthwhile is that there are genuine insights in those thickets. Original ones at that. Bernard-Henri Levy has a strong and independent mind of his own to apply to what he learned from Solzhenitsyn.

Discovering that socialism is an untenable ideal rather than a realization *manque* has not made him a friend of capitalism, to be sure. In fact, he regards socialism and the new barbarism he sees it producing as the last decadence of bourgeois culture.

Where does that leave him? Renouncing all utopianism and every form of faith in revolution as the source of the Good Society. Clearly, in giving up on the dream of earthly perfectibility, he has not lost the anarchist yearning that lurks in so many revolutionist hearts. Yet, however reluctantly, he does give it up: the withering away of the state, the modern Marcusean notion that there can be freedom from cultural control, all of it. The state

Continued on Page 17



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Grim Renunciation

Continued from Back Page

must be viewed as the labor of a Sisyphus, who knows the stone will roll down the hill but is willing to go pushing it up again and again forever. Levy calls upon his fellow intellectuals to "think without believing it, the impossible thought of a world freed from lordship." He also urges upon them an "atheist spirituality" and the necessity of art, "the rampart built in every age against the emptiness of death, the chaos of shapelessness, the quicksand of horror." He says he is going to study ethics.

At its best, the book shows the panache of the French mind dealing with brute fact, and, as well, a humility before the dark glass that is almost Christian and not very French; the sort of thing you most conspicuously don't get from a Voltaire or a Sartre. The book's importance goes beyond its intrinsic merits, though. The thing is, a lot of people who wouldn't pay any attention to an expose of socialism by a middle-aged conservative may be prepared to listen when the word comes from a brilliant young French philosopher with the best of leftist credentials in his background.