

Inexplicable confession

Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectual in the 20th Century

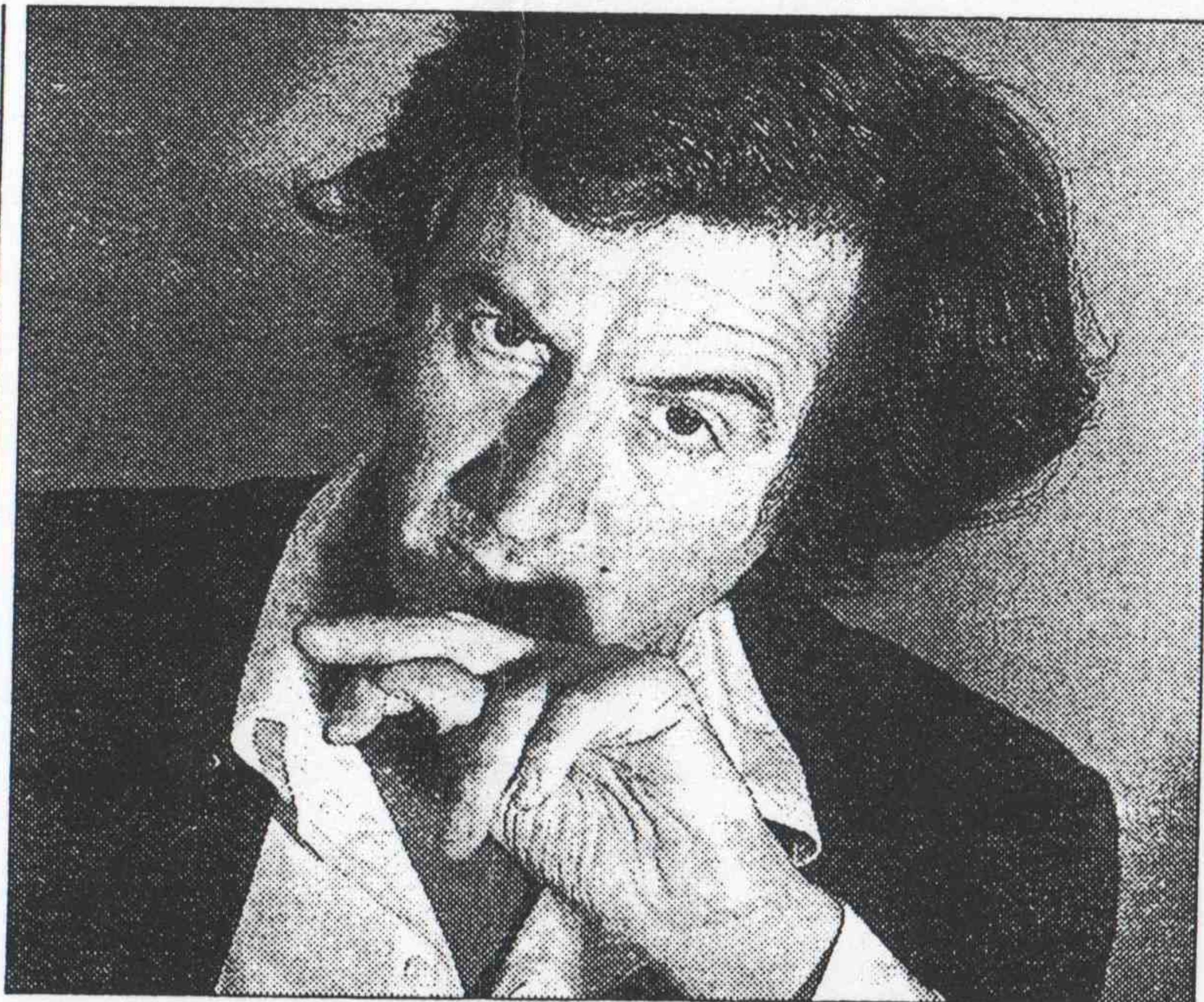
by Bernard-Henri Lévy,
trs & ed Richard Veasey

448pp, Harvill, £20.

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ALL intellectuals find themselves from time to time involved in appalling political contradictions. It's just a hazard of the trade that ideas will become snarled by a thinker's hangups and by the prejudices of the age. Yet it is a rare intellectual who has the courage to apologise for his or her mistakes. Full marks, then, to Bernard-Henri Lévy for the following marvellous *mea culpa*.

The time: the middle 1980s, the period in which Lévy's "nouvelle philosophie" appeared in France to fill the vacuum left by the death of Foucault. The occasion: a TV show in which a celeb — in this case, Lévy — is featured surrounded by his favourite things. The problem? As a philosopher, BHL wanted to find a "Weltanschauung" — as he puts it — linking his commitment to anti-racism with his fondness for expensive Japanese suits. Et donc: "What I suggested was that someone who voted for Le Pen could not, in my view, buy their furniture from Starck or their clothes from Yamamoto . . ." Not, you understand, because they wouldn't be able to afford them, but because fascists just obviously



Lévy: 'no sexy woman should ever pay for dinner' PHOTOGRAPH: HERVÉ BRUHAT

have to have bad taste. "If I were invited to appear on the same programme today, I would avoid idiotic statements of that kind." It takes integrity to publish a confession as embarrassing as this.

Adventures on the Freedom Road was originally published as *Les Aventures de la liberté* in 1991, companion piece to a television documentary and it shows. The book is irritatingly piecemeal. After a couple of chapters of epoch-by-epoch overview, the story degenerates into dozens of inconclusive fragments. BHL does, however, have a flair for meeting interesting people. Take this curious exchange

with Maurice Blanchot, apostle of all that is most silent and dead: "I no longer see even my closest friends, although our friendship has not diminished. Today my thoughts are only of Auschwitz," Blanchot obliquely writes. Neither this communion, nor others with Barthes and Foucault, Pierre Klossowski and Régis Debray, are especially trenchant. But it must have been wonderful to watch them on TV.

In his preface, BHL describes the book as his "confession", "an attempt to sketch in the genealogies of those who have made me what I am". What does he mean by

this? Like Britain's own Paul Johnson, BHL is a thinker famous for having begun as a lefty firebrand, only to have grown increasingly rightwing. *Les Aventures*, then, like Johnson's *Intellectuals*, is meant as an exposition of why this process has to happen, by dint of exposing the moral contradictions found in the life and works of all the young lefty firebrand's favourite figureheads, Breton, Sartre, Aragon and so on. This is an interesting topic, or would be, if Lévy really got to grips with his subject.

Only he doesn't. "How come that I'm not prepared to offer on (the fascists') behalf the same kind of explanations I've shown the communists in the first part of the book, though it will seem unjust? . . . I can't explain the reason for my bias . . ." What are we to make of a philosopher who "can't explain" his fundamental bias to his material? We must surely question his right to call himself a philosopher at all.

That anyone has ever taken Lévy seriously says more than Lévy ever does about that curious need in French culture for intellectual heroes, no matter how full of nonsense those intellectuals may be. Lévy, quite simply, is there to fill the hole left behind by the collapse of communism, a relationship formed on the rebound by a culture which has not yet come to terms with the fact that its expectations of its intellectuals were unrealistic in the first place. Had BHL used his rendezvous with fame as an excuse for doing some serious work, he might indeed have trumped Breton and Sartre and Foucault at their own game. As he has but published the offcuts of a television script in book form instead, it is difficult to see him as anything other than a victim of the very process his history is ostensibly about.