PHILOSOPHY'S PINUP BOY

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Bernard-Henri Lévy is far more than an intellectual matinee idol

Levy: Challenging some hallowed axioms of modern French culture Duclos/Gamma

There was no point in trying to see him, it was said to me of Bernard-Hènri Lévy when I was recently in Paris to interview a number of French-Jewish intellectuals. He was too much of a media star to have time.

I didn't try and it proved sound advice, because a week later Lévy, who is also the author of two novels and five books of political philosophy and intellectual history, turned up in Israel under the auspices of the B'nai B'rith World Center to give its sixth annual Jerusalem Address on the subject of "The Intellectual and the Struggle for Liberty." And so the day after his talk I had my interview after all, even if I had to share it with a reporter from the newspaper Ha'aretz who questioned Lévy about his views on Israeli politics while Lévy's fingers patiently examined the petals of a rose on our table in the coffee room of the King David Hotel.

Lévy, who was being pressed by the reporter for sticking up too much for Israel, has his views on Israeli politics — they are unremarkably centrist, if firmly anti-annexationist — but this is not the most interesting thing about him. Nor is his being an intellectual matinee idol, although it was easy enough to see the night before, as he faced a capacity audience in Jerusalem's Van Leer Institute, what makes him one. Tall and handsome in an open-necked shirt with collar-length black hair whose carefully combed waves fell in breakers by the end of the evening, he has the easy assurance of an acclaimed performer.

And the full repertoire: the perfectly articulated phrases that build into balanced cadences; the athletic half-crouch behind the microphone as he prepares to spring a surprising paradox or conclusion; the meditative staring down at the dummy cigarette he holds as if expecting to find his next thought there; the long-sufferingly raised eyebrows when some member of the audience asks a particularly foolish question. He is clearly someone, as the French say, who feels *bon dans sa peau*, good inside his own skin.

It is doing Lévy an injustice, however, to speak of him in these terms, because he is in fact a serious thinker who has chosen to challenge — not singlehandedly, to be sure, but with the unmistakable courage of his convictions — some of the most hallowed axioms of modern French culture. Ever since attaining nearly overnight fame with his book "Barbarism With a Human Face," which came out in 1977, ("my one book that I do not like," he remarked to me of its youthfully mannered prose, which has since yielded to a sparer, more muscular style), he has hammered away with impressive scholarship, intelligence, and sometimes anger at a set of related themes that he raised again in his Jerusalem Address.

The first and least controversial of these themes is the infatuation and connivance of many prominent 20th-century French intellectuals with the great totalitarian ideologies of our times. A second — and here Lévy begins to step on some rather warty French toes — is the proposition that, far from being a purely German invention that was rammed down French throats by the Wehrmacht and the collaborationist Vichy regime in 1940, national socialism had deep and widespread intellectual roots in France itself that caused it to be welcomed or at least tolerated by a considerable part of the French intelligentsia.

And thirdly — and this is Lévy's unkindest cut of all at a world that he himself came out of — is the argument that the French left did not only consistently sin by supporting the horrors of Stalinism; rather it was from its inception in its anti-rationalism, its corporate vitalism, and even its anti-Semitism, often indistinguishable in its positions from the right. From Voltaire down to Sartre, via such semi-canonized figures as Proudhon, Jaurès, Péguy, Sorel, Rolland, Gide, and still others, the great "democratic tradition" of *la Révolution* and *la Gauche*, Lévy claims in such works as "L'Idéologie Francaise" (1981) and his newly published "Les aventures de la liberté," has in fact been the carrier of a profound contempt for democracy and its values.

In all of this Lévy reminds one of a French-Jewish intellectual of an earlier generation whom he admires, Julien Benda, whose "Le trahison des clercs" ("The Betrayal of the Intellectuals"), published in 1928, made many of the same accusations. But whereas Benda was a French patriot who wanted nothing to do with Judaism, Lévy, although he comes from an assimilated Algerian family and is totally removed from religious practice, has enlisted Jewish categories in his polemic; in his "Le testament de dieu" ("The Testament of God," 1979), for example, he proposes that only the religious universalism and sacralization of law found in monotheism can effectively oppose the totalitarian tendencies in modern thought.

Has the myth of France died for him too, along with the myth of the French left?

"It was never alive for me," he answers. "As a myth it is communitarian, and intellectuals do not belong in communities." Not even, he implies without saying it, Jewish ones. ❑