



Bernard-Henri Lévy poses after winning a literary prize in 1988

# Leaders of the Left Bank

Ian Irvine considers a survey of the intellectuals by a Parisian media-star

BERNARD-HENRI LEVY is the ageing matinée idol in that long-running Left Bank farce which is French intellectual life. He emerged in the *moi* decade of the 1970s, as one of the *nouveaux philosophes* who had lost their faith in Marx. His dark good looks allow him to fancy himself a Byronic figure, and his exceptional self-regard and total absence of humour has made him the target of half-a-dozen flans in the face from the Belgian anarchist M. Noel Godin.

Although his book is subtitled "The French Intellectuals in the 20th Century", any reader who expects a straightforward history of the subject will be disappointed. Despite some footnotes and short biographies which have been added to this English translation, a substantial knowledge of French literary, political and intellectual life is required. If the lives and works of Bataille, Brasillach

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

by Bernard-Henri Lévy  
tr by Richard Veasey  
Harvill, £20

and Klossowski are not yet familiar to you, you will make little sense of the book.

Far from coolly explicating the Byzantine complex of personal and political rivalries among Paris's *maîtres à penser*, Bernard-Henri Lévy merely adds another layer of his own deeply subjective opinions. Thus, although inadequate as a guide to French intellectual life, it provides an excellent sample of the self-reflecting hot-house world of the Parisian *savant*.

The eclectic contents of the book — interviews, the author's dialogues with himself, letters, rhetorical expos-

tulations — are explained by the information that BHL, *bay-ash-ell* as he is known, made a film on the subject, and these are its literary remains.

French history in the 20th century has offered a greater range of excitements for intellectuals than our own rather modest domestic events. BHL marks their cards through the Dreyfus case, the military defeat in 1940, occupation, Vichy collaboration, the Algerian War, *les événements* of 1968.

Few come out of it well: from out-and-out fascists like Drieu La Rochelle ("I shall die an anti-semitic") to the wide *galère* of far leftists: the political philosopher and wife-murderer Louis Althusser trying to reconcile Marx with St Teresa; Michel Foucault, historian of sexuality and gay sadomasochist praising the Islamic revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini; and, of course, Sartre, the lecherous

alcoholic and bourgeois-detesting revolutionary. A worship of revolution and a belief in the necessity of violence binds both Left and Right.

Those who come off best are those one suspects BHL would rather like to be, like André Malraux or Albert Camus ("I have the feeling he had the same sense of humour and liked the same kind of women as I do. I'm also certain that, had he still been alive, [Camus] would have been the intellectual — perhaps the only one — to whom I would have shown the proofs of my book *La Barbarie à visage humain*.")

This English edition was published with the assistance of the French Ministère de la Culture — but seems a bizarre object of national self-promotion. The British Council might as well distribute biographies of the Yorkshire Ripper to encourage foreign visitors.