

rencontre encounter

At the age of 20, he dreamed of changing the world. 30 years later, ardent defender of justice and dialogue, he is as passionate as ever. Here is Bernard-Henri Lévy, and a look into his spiritual quest and thoughts about history, time and the future of human dignity.

In *Impressions d'Asie* (1985), you write: "Travelers in the future will be Kantian or will not be." What do you mean?

At the time, I was questioning the myth of the innocent traveler, who looks at the world with a virgin gaze. A good traveler never takes off with a blank mind, but with a pre-formed view, colored by a mass of knowledge. And accepts that his certainties and prejudices will be shaken. I believe that the planet is far from unified, that pockets of heterogeneity and otherness still exist, that history has not finished. I do not share the neo-Hegelian idea of an eternal return to the same. A long voyage continues to change me, affect me, as a great book does.

"Traveling the same while being another," wrote Romain Gary. What have you become throughout your many travels?

I become someone else; another. That is the result of traveling. You sense your physiological and psychological dynamic working in a different way. Your identity becomes more complex. Great travelers are weary of being themselves and aspire to be another. When Gary was tired of being himself, he invented Émile Ajar, his literary double, and he traveled.

Would you like to invent a heteronym, other Henri-Lévy's, like Pessoa and Gary?

I dream more of a diverse body of work under the same banner. One name, a diversity of works; one author, different genres, worlds, even sensibilities. The ultimate mask is to stay oneself while being another.

You rarely use the word "I" in your books.

Because the "I" is the product of the book; it does not pre-exist. It is not the condition; it is the result. Sartre proposed a fictive "I," just as the characters and concepts of a work.

Is this to avoid maudlin pessimism and to retain a sense of distance from the events of history?

I wouldn't say "distance." Like certain other writers, I force myself to look at horror in the face. I refuse to accept it, and I fight it, of course; but I feel we should not delude ourselves, and not listen to those who haven't witnessed things with their own eyes.

Your work and your life seem haunted by the figure of André Malraux. Would you, like him, accept a ministerial position to get your message across?

No. I wouldn't know how to do that. I don't have the patience to follow those rules, that discipline. I am too obsessed with freedom—that of others, and my own, of course. I have sometimes advised other politicians. But I have always sought to return to literature, philosophy, poetry and, of course, action.

Aside from André Malraux and Albert Cohen, which are your favorite writers today?

There are many. I am currently writing a preface to the war accounts of a German author, Hans Christoph Buch, which are magnificent.

You also love music.

I played the piano for 20 years. It was very, very important to me, but I stopped, as if literature had taken up all the space, as if one music had replaced another.

What did your father think about the risks you take?

He took risks too, and much more serious ones than I have: the Spanish Civil War, the Resistance. He set the example! We hardly talked about it. But I can well imagine what he might have thought about my commitments, which, in fact, follow in the steps of his own. When I wanted to make *Bosna!*, a hymn to an upright, resistant Bosnia, he did two things: pretend to dissuade me, and then produce the film with his friend François Pinault.

You are relaunching your journal *La règle du jeu*.

Yes, in October. The original series, published from 1990 to 1998, was created after the fall of the Communist world. The new format is being produced in the aftermath of three events: the assassination of Massoud, the World Trade Center and the death of Daniel Pearl. But it's still literature that will have the last word. ●

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