

## Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

### Exhibitionism as a Way of Life



In mid-January, those Parisians (like myself) who are still interested in literary matters were aroused from the smug complacency in which we had been wallowing for several weeks, as dazed survivors of the millennial earthquake and the pyrotechnic cancan put on by a shameless Eiffel Tower, by an unexpected thunderclap. The thunderclap was ignited by Jean Daniel, founder and editor-in-chief of France's leading left-wing weekly, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, with a sensational cover informing us that "After twenty years of Purgatory SARTRE (in huge red letters) is coming back." But—and this was not the least paradoxical feature of this surprising resurrection—the photo illustrating this affirmation showed a somewhat stooped Jean-Paul Sartre, as though burdened by the sheer weight of his existential cogitations, trudging away from, rather than toward, the reader.

The prime mover of this literary "happening"—its Vulcan, if not its Jupiter—was not Jean Daniel, the self-crowned king of France's "progressive" intelligentsia, but rather its most flamboyant spokesman, the most dazzling of the country's once new and young but now increasingly middle-aged *philosophes*, a virtuoso of epistemological dialectics, and (if I may be forgiven for lapsing into French) a veritable *saltimbanque de l'exégèse* (an acrobat in the sleight-of-hand art of exegesis) named Bernard-Henri Lévy. And the thundering bolt with which he aroused us from our after-the-binge somnolence was a 650-page book entitled *Le Siècle de Sartre* ("Sartre's Century"), most curiously illustrated on the cover—one more paradox!—by a photograph of the famous philosopher, shown about to remove an inseparable cigarette from that garrulous mouth, for once elegantly dressed with a white shirt collar and dark tie, and, not least of all, an impeccably cuff-linked shirtsleeve: as

though to remind us that this *enfant terrible* of modern philosophy and self-proclaimed advocate of the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed was, after all, or perhaps one should say *before* so much else, a bourgeois—like the best (or the worst) of us.

In literary, as in political, matters, it is always hazardous to speak of "inevitable" happenings. Particularly when what is involved is a 660-page book that even a genius could not have put together in a couple of months, and which, by the author's own admission, was the product of an intense intellectual "cohabitation" lasting all of three years. But from the moment (I think it was in late summer of last year) that some dimwits working for *Time* magazine decided that the looming *fin de siècle* could not be celebrated properly without the collective "wisdom" of its editors and readers selecting a single "Man of the Century," it was inevitable that some frustrated French super-patriot would come up with a French candidate for this grotesque distinction. And sure enough, that master of the political platitude, President Jacques Chirac, whose simplest statements now have to be read from a prepared text rather than uttered off-the-cuff, again demonstrated his genius for the commonplace by promptly proposing—yes, you have guessed it!—Charles de Gaulle. It was no less inevitable that, faced with the catastrophic prospect of a major cultural devaluation, someone else should come up with the name of a Frenchman capable of symbolizing the luminous intelligence of the 20th century. And so, out of his magician's sleeve, Bernard-Henri Lévy pulled an authentically French rabbit: Jean-Paul Sartre.

If the January 13 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, containing an interview with the author and a number of extracts from "Sartre's Century," was the first thunderbolt launched in this mediatic blitzkrieg, it was quickly followed by a second and even louder bang, when the author-conjurer was invited to take part in a special program exclusively devoted to Sartre by France's most prestigious literary talk show, *Bouillon de culture*.

In France, as in the United States, literary reputations (many of them bogus) are now made on the basis of histrionic

ability, talent for self-advocacy, and, of course, the quick-witted *esprit* that is particularly appreciated in the land that produced Voltaire. The successful author, like so much else in this age of self-serving theatricality, must become an actor, a salesman, a dramatic simplifier, and peddler of his (or her) wares. I must confess that I often find these talk-show sessions excruciatingly painful, so visibly embarrassed are the timid souls (novelists in particular) who, in a couple of minutes, have to provide fast-food résumés of their tales, plots, or themes, and so insufferably pleased with themselves are those who are narcissistically inclined. This said, I must take my hat off to one Frenchman, Bernard Pivot, a talk-show wizard who, over a period of 30 years or more, has raised many of these sessions to the level of high interrogative art.

Years ago, when he began his Friday-evening *Apostrophes* talk show on France's second (partly state-subsidized) channel, Pivot had no idea of what a standard feature it would soon become in the landscape of French literature. The main reason is that, unlike others who have tried their hand at this game, Pivot actually reads (or has clever assistants read) the newly published books of the authors he interrogates (usually four or five at a time). How he manages to read so many books without becoming dazed or dizzy from overwork, and how he manages, with the aid of a few slips of paper, to extract the most pertinent quotations from each book discussed, is a recurring mystery, not to say a weekly miracle. But manage it he does—with the most extraordinary aplomb. And, indeed, with such authority and prestige that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once invited him to come and interview him at his home in Vermont.

When, after 20 years of literary interrogations, Bernard Pivot decided that he had had enough, he chose to end his long *Apostrophes* series with a one-man interview accorded to a self-sacrificing non-author: Georges Lubin, the meticulous collector and editor of George Sand's letters (4,000 inventoried letters when he began; 18,000, published in 25 volumes, by the time he was through). It was a fitting finale and a well-earned tribute to painstaking scholarship. But the

news that Pivot was ending his long series of Friday evening talk shows caused consternation in most publishing offices in Paris. In a doomsday article published in *Le Monde*, its leading literary critic, Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, described Pivot's announced departure as a national calamity, since, almost single-handedly, he had with his Friday evening talk shows kept alive an interest in buying and reading books which, without him, might well wither away into collective indifference.

In the end, Pivot relented, and *Apostrophes* vanished from the television screens, replaced by a new, more "flexible" talk show, in which film stars, popular singers, actors, scientists, doctors, politicians turned authors, and of course writers and poets of every kind were invited to submit to intelligent interrogation in a new Friday evening feature cleverly entitled *Bouillon de culture* (a standard laboratory term for the bubbling liquid in which bacteriologists study the germination and cultivation of different kinds of germs).

The *Bouillon de culture* session to which Bernard-Henri Lévy was invited, along with three other authors who had also felt the need to write a book about Jean-Paul Sartre, fully lived up to its bubbling name and effervescent connotation. With his sharply cut profile, mobile eyebrows forever frowning and unfrowning, a floating mane of dark hair, restless orchestra-conductor's hands, and an imperious, air-jabbing index finger, BHL (as he is now popularly called) was more brilliantly emphatic than ever, even if at times far from convincing. For the Sartre, or more precisely the (differently faceted) Sartres he was explaining and defending—warts, defects, deceptions, and all—was the same Sartre against those intellectual tyranny—in praising Brezhnev's U.S.S.R., Mao Tse-tung's China, and Fidel Castro's Cuba—Bernard-Henri Lévy, André Glucksmann, and other young French philosophers had revolted in the 1970's. Without actually extolling this famous phrase, Lévy "understood" those who, in the 1950's and 60's, used to say that they would "rather be wrong with Jean-Paul Sartre than right with Raymond Aron" (or Albert Camus). For what in the "foggy folly of the epoch" in which the philosopher lives is truly "right" rather than "wrong"? Even Raymond Aron was not infallible. And what, after all, was Raymond Aron—a relatively straightfor-

ward professor of sociology and political science—compared to the omni-curious, omni-creating, omni-devouring, omni-experimenting Jean-Paul Sartre? In short, Sartre's errors were part of his polymathic genius—as novelist, playwright, essayist, journalist, philosopher, tireless conversationalist, and, not least of all, an insatiably curious *homme à femmes*, or more exactly a *homme à jeunes filles*, whom he liked to "savor" with the relish of a gourmet, while maintaining a "necessary" (as opposed to "contingent") friendship with his *Castor* (Eager Beaver), Simone de Beauvoir. A polymathic superman of this kind—like Napoleon, Sartre was almost a midget—has a divine right to be wrongheaded. Like so many others, only more so. He also has a divine right to deceive—others, even more than himself.

Ever since he publicly enunciated this basic *modus operandi* with the immortal words "*il ne faut pas désespérer Billancourt*" (One must not drive the automobile workers of the Renault plant on the Seine island of Billancourt to despair by telling them the ugly truth about concentration camps, purges, and other horrors in the U.S.S.R.), we knew that Sartre had arrogated to himself the divine right to tell fibs. But what I did not know until I watched this *Bouillon de culture* was that, from 1962 to 1968, Sartre was having an affair with a lovely young Russian damsel who, Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's U.S.S.R. being what it was, dutifully reported their pillow-cased or unpillow-cased conversations to the KGB. Sartre, it seems, was fully aware of it. Indeed, the two contingent lovers joyously connived to make Sartre's complaints and private diatribes against life in the U.S.S.R. as blunt and unvarnished as possible—Sartre, who was never happier than when wielding a pen, going as far as to record his "seditious" sentiments in some 800 pages of letters dispatched to his beloved. Although this was a very hush-hush "plot," a friend of Sartre's got wind of what was going on, and when he asked Jean-Paul why, if he felt this way about conditions in the U.S.S.R., he did not proclaim it openly, he was given this exquisitely Sartrian reply: "Not on your life! If I did such a stupid thing, I would be praised in the *Figaro*" (France's most respectably bourgeois daily). And for a bona fide, dyed-in-red-wool French intellectual of the 1960's, to be praised in the *Figaro* was tantamount to betrayal of the proletariat.

Yes, not only does a polymathic superman of thinking have a divine right to deceive others as well as himself; he also has the right to stage a personal "cultural revolution" by dynamiting his own philosophy and blowing it sky-high. This of course requires real courage, a special kind of heroism. For it is one thing to *épater le bourgeois* (dumbfound the bourgeois)—this is virtually second nature to any bona fide French left-wing intellectual—but it is quite another thing to dumbfound and dismay the members of one's ideological "family." Which is precisely what Sartre set out to do, in March 1980, a few weeks before his death, when he began sending *Le Nouvel Observateur* a series of "subversive" dialogues with a friend (whom he chose to rename Benny Lévy), and which indicated, to the consternation of his closest friends, that he was parting company with what up until that moment had been regarded as his philosophy.

Faced with this extraordinary case of philosophical *hara-kiri*, what is Bernard-Henri Lévy's reaction? One of pained disapproval? Of regret? Of disbelief? Not at all. Quite the contrary. But let us listen to his reaction, gushing forth spontaneously in a torrent of tumbling, somersaulting words, as recorded by a *Nouvel Observateur* reporter:

What an extraordinary adventure, after all! Like Lacan, like Mao, Sartre, in the evening of his life, decides to smash everything. To the great dismay of his intellectual family, he chooses to dynamite Sartrism. He takes a bet—what a magnificent event!—on a new youth and lays the cornerstones of a third edifice [the first being Heideggerian "existentialism," the second his belated espousal of the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed, of Franz Fanon's "the damned of the earth"]. In a word, he again sets out on the roadways of his freedom. Finally, with Benny Lévy acting as a smuggler's guide or mediator, he effects, without saying so clearly, a strange philosophical junction with Emmanuel Levinas. All of this is stupendously romantic: a young Maoist chieftain plots his last conspiracy and passes on to the old philosopher [i.e., the aging Sartre] concepts—those of Levinas—with which his dismantled thinking is going to be rebuilt. The demoli-

tion and the reconstruction of one of the strongest philosophies of the twentieth century. And then finally, a haphazard and yet necessary, a clandestine and yet avowed meeting with . . . Judaism. This was not of course a conversion. But Sartre, having recovered his philosophical appetite, devours with voracity and as usual makes another's philosophy his own. He kneads it. He transforms it. He has the nerve to become a young man again, causing grief or wrath in his own tribe. Very young or very old, as is well known, he is born once more in the same life and reverts to the dandyism of his origins. What a story! What panache!

*"Quelle histoire! Quel panache!"* There are words which, spontaneously erupting in quickly uttered speech, reveal more than entire sentences, paragraphs, or chapters. What *panache!* One of Edmond Rostand's favorite words, and thus too of his flamboyant hero, Cyrano de Bergerac. A favorite word with arch-romantics who would like nothing better than forever to be up front, on the breach, and, if only for a fleeting moment, living dangerously. As Bernard-Henri Lévy did and was ostentatiously seen to be doing, some years ago, in strifetorn Sarajevo.

Like Alfred de Musset, who spent much of his life regretting that he had

## LIBERAL ARTS

### YOUR CHEATIN' HEART

**J**erry Harvey, a business professor, adopts an uncommon definition of cheating in his classes.

"Cheating is the failure to assist others on an exam if they request it," he tells his students. . . .

"Harvey says his policy brings out the best in his students because they are able to think creatively without the stress of working on their own . . . .

"Students think it is wrong to ask other students for help on tests and assignments because they are never presented with a different perspective on cheating, Harvey says."

—from the *CW Hatchet* (March 2, 2000), the student newspaper of George Washington University

been born too late to serve under the great Napoleon, Bernard-Henri Lévy has often given one the impression of being an intellectual in desperate search of a noble cause—such as that of the Spanish Republicans which, in 1936, transformed André Malraux, the dynamic novelist, into a dynamic "man of action."

A quarter of a century ago, in 1977, Bernard-Henri Lévy established himself overnight as the most dazzling practitioner of philosophical interpretation, with a book cleverly entitled *La Barbarie à visage humain* ("Barbarism with a human face")—clearly inspired by Alexander Dubcek's "socialism with a human face" and perhaps too by the "Charter '77" movement of protestation launched by dissident Czech and Slovak intellectuals in Gustav Husak's "normalized" Czechoslovakia. Although it had been preceded, seven years before, by Jean-Marie Benoist's *Marx est mort* ("Marx is dead"), Lévy's book, with its strikingly topical title, was an immediate best-seller. It offered hundreds of thousands of young readers "proof" of what they had vaguely begun to realize, so blatant was now the evidence: that Marxism had lost its revolutionary fire and, as in Brezhnev's U.S.S.R., had sunk into a state of bureaucratic lethargy. But how many of those who bought the book really understood it? I doubt that the ratio was as high as one in ten. But, in a sense, "comprehension" was not what was demanded of the readers. They were invited to admire the author's elegiac lamentation bemoaning a socialistic "God that had failed"—one which, as Lévy noted with stenographic concision in the preface, was "born in Paris in 1848, dead in Paris in 1968." In strict historical fact socialism, unquestionably a French invention, was first propounded in the late 1820's. When Karl Marx published his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, he had left Paris and was already living in London. But never mind the historical pedantry! What mattered then, and still matters most today for Bernard-Henri Lévy, is the lyrical *élan*, the polemical verve, the poetic *soufflé*, the rhetorical *emphase* (those untranslatable components of French revolutionary grandiloquence), adroitly mixed into a spicy *bouillabaisse* of philosophical ingredients borrowed from every conceivable name-dropped source—from Plato, Spinoza, and that arch-romantic dreamer, Jean Jacques Rousseau, down to Marxism's last great French advocate, Louis Althusser, Gilles

Deleuze, and the inevitable Martin Heidegger, who, in Lévy's *Siècle de Sartre*, is declared, *urbi et orbi* and as so self-evident as to require no proof, the greatest philosopher of the 20th century.

(To refresh my memory, I have just taken another look at *La Barbarie à visage humain*—and, sure enough, in the first 30 pages the word "ontology" is repeated no less than four times, enough to persuade the most skeptical of readers that BHL is a serious philosopher who has really done his homework.)

It would be paying Bernard-Henri Lévy too high an honor to credit him with having made fashionable a philosophical style aimed at swift rhetorical brilliance rather than at plodding profundity. The romantic-revolutionary vocabulary goes back at least as far as Jules Michelet, the historian-prophet of the French Revolution, and was provided with its first motivating slogan by Danton, with his galvanizing exhortation: "*l'audace, encore l'audace, toujours l'audace!*" And what could be more audacious, at any rate, for a sedentary thinker like Sartre than to make one's principal aim in life the *épatement* (dumbfounding) of the smug and intolerably self-satisfied bourgeois? Sartre's early infatuation with Heidegger's philosophy may well have been due to its almost total opacity for the ordinary middle-class reader, thus conveniently made to look like a dunce, compared to the "progressive" wielders of an admirably esoteric vocabulary. Inevitably, however, this got Sartre into serious trouble when he made himself the philosophical spokesman of France's "proletarians," who turned out to be even dimmer in their incomprehension of existential-Heideggerian terminology than the most obtuse bourgeois reader.

I shall never forget the Master's stammering embarrassment when, having consented to "meet the people" in a jam-packed amphitheater of the Sorbonne during the "May revolution" of 1968, he was asked by a genuine proletarian in the audience, "Why, Monsieur Sartre, do you use a language that we workers cannot understand?" It was a good question and one which, despite his verbal brilliance and an expository style that is far less woolly and long-winded than that of Sartre, Bernard-Henri Lévy has so far been unable to answer, since he feels the compelling need to dazzle his guilt-ridden middle-class readers who are allowed to atone for the "original sin" of having been born into a relatively well-to-do

bourgeois family by being plunged for an hour or two into an ice-cold bath of philosophical erudition.

Nietzsche, with little doubt the most spontaneous of great modern philosophers, spent much of his life trying to combat the volcanic impetuosity of his intellectual “eruptions.” And the conclusion he reached, beautifully expressed in the preface he wrote for *Morgenröte* (“Morning Glow” or “Daybreak,” depending on whose translation one uses), was that *profound* thinking is above all *slow* thinking. He even suggested, in another of his books, that hasty and above all *strident* thinking was a sign of intellectual immaturity.

For an intellectual phenomenon like Bernard-Henri Lévy, whose thoughts are so rapid that they keep outstripping the words needed to express them, it will not be easy to reach this higher level of slow, profound thinking. It may prove impossible for a man of such an effervescent temperament. In this sense, one can say that it was inevitable that he should one day pay his personal tribute to the brilliant, tirelessly talkative, and incessantly writing “pope” of French existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, who to the end of his days remained an intellectual adolescent and *enfant terrible* (his description of himself in the autobiographical *Les Mots*), forever on the lookout for conventions to flay, stolid readers to shock, causes to espouse that were “heretical” to most *bien-pensant* members of his own middle class.

Years ago, in one of the most devastating essays written about Sartre (“The Void of Sartre,” published in 1957 in the second number of *The Anchor Review*), the wise Swiss historian and critic Herbert Lüthy noted: “In essays or polemics a gifted dialectician like Sartre can go on defending a vicious circle for years without being budged from the convenient perimeter. He is far too busy proving his points to have time to think about them.”

Is this perhaps why, toward the end of his life, Jean-Paul Sartre decided to abandon his all-too-fashionable expatiations and, in an extraordinary act of intellectual subordination, to adopt the more seriously and slowly elaborated philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas? Perhaps. But the price that France—more exactly two philosophically “lost generations”—had to pay for the privilege of being so brilliantly misled was assuredly a heavy one. With devastating consequences, particularly in the field of French education.

As Claude Imbert, the editor of the weekly *Le Point* (to which Bernard-Henri Lévy contributes a weekly commentary), observed, describing French intellectuals who go on believing that it is their sacred duty to indoctrinate the public:

Blinded by the Idea and systems, they see nothing of the changing reality of the world. Our luminaries, as is well known, before the war betrayed their duty of fair examination in favor of a more or less extreme right wing, then, after the war, in favor of a more or less extreme left wing. In truth, extremism is their vade-mecum. Convinced, ever since the romantic age, that genius unfurls itself only in revolt, and human progress in the one and only Revolution, they practice an abasement of the Ego and the love of a certain idea of the People—in which the people no longer recognizes itself.

Sartre, precociously blind, an aged Oedipus in a century of the Atrides, ends up extolling Mao and adoring Castro. He ends up, finally, falling back on the Bible, as one tumbles back into second childhood. What a life! A torch of liberty drowned in the great error of the century!

How many readers of Bernard-Henri Lévy’s incredible apologia of this philosophical masochist will reach a similar conclusion is anybody’s guess. Beguiled by BHL’s superlatives, dazzled by the verbal panache, they may well feel flattered that France, during the recently ended century, was after all able to bring forth such a polymathic genius.

As I write these lines, a large crowd of howlers, many of them sporting “*Contre Haider*” badges (for spontaneous demonstrations of this kind need careful preparation), have gathered in the Abbey square of Saint-Germain-des-Près to denounce the governor of Austrian Carinthia, as though his jackbooted stormtroopers were about to cross the Danube and march on Munich. Claude Imbert, I feel sure, was not one of them. Nor, for that matter, was Bernard-Henri Lévy. Forever on the move, forever on the breach, he was once again “up front”—this time in Vienna. Accompanied, no doubt, by several of his *gauche caviar* friends, not all of whom, alas, are

rich enough to own a palace in Marrakesh. And with them too was France’s former Grand Master of Pop Culture and now chairman of the National Assembly’s foreign-affairs committee, Jack Lang, who after briefly touching down at Huntsville, Alabama, to put in a plea for a condemned criminal and to deliver an anathema against the barbarism of capital punishment, managed to jet-race his way back to Vienna in time to take part in the anti-Haider jamboree. But what, after all, could be more natural, more predictable, more “inevitable”? For there is nothing that these restless egalitarians more enjoy doing than publicly showing off their moral as well as intellectual superiority.

*Curtis Cate in the author of biographies of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, George Sand, and André Malraux.*

## Letter From Town Line

by Richard Davis

### Copperhead Road



I grew up in Alden, New York, a small town about 20 miles east of Buffalo. My parents still live there, and they (especially my mother) are very active in the town historical society and its museum.

In that museum is a worn old wooden desk, unremarkable except for the sign that explains that it was used, in late 1861, to count the votes (85 to 40) whereby Town Line seceded from the Union. (Town Line is a small, unincorporated collection of homes and stores at the crossroads of what is now U.S. 20 and Townline Road, which separates the towns of Alden and Lancaster. In 1861, it was a farming hamlet of around 300 people.)

The reasons for the secession are not clear. According to newspaper clippings from much later, the area was settled by Vermonters and Germans with no ties to the South. One house was an Underground Railway station, and there is mention of an undocumented legend of some violent act or acts by escaping slaves pass-