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In this edition of Bridgewater Review Charlie Angell of the English Department reviews Bernard-Henri Lévi’s new book American Vertigo. Lévi, a French philosopher and cultural critic, traveled in America, roughly (very roughly) following the path previously taken here by Alesio de Tocqueville in the early 1830’s. Tocqueville’s classic book, Democracy in America, would be a hard act for Lévi to follow, considering its revered place in our literature of cultural and political analysis. But Lévi is famous for his confidence, so American Vertigo records his impressions of America gathered from an odd buffet of his interviews and experiences. And I do mean odd.

As it turned out, I knew about Charlie’s writing plans well before Jeanne and I were scheduled to go to Paris this spring. So, I figured that if Bernard-Henri Lévi can draw sweeping conclusions about America based on interviews with the likes of Warren Beatty and Sharon Stone, then I could probably figure out the French by walking around Paris for a week: So, here goes, organized for your convenience by sweeping generalization.

FRANCE IS THE GRANDEST CULTURE

Paris is monumental, in both senses of the word. That is, it is filled with monuments celebrating thousands of French accomplishments, real and aggrieved. It is also a city of grand vistas and architecture of impressive scale. I grew up in New York City; have lived in Boston for forty years, and visited all the biggest cities in America. Clearly, each has its monuments and wonderful vistas, but they do not compare in this regard with Paris. Within the few square miles along the Seine in central Paris from Place de la Bastille to the Arc de Triomphe you can’t cough without infecting a memorial to something glorious in the history of the country. One effect of all this is that a visitor to Paris cannot help but feel that he or she is always inside a “city as museum.”

The Arc de Triomphe is Napoleon’s commemoration of his victory at the Battle of Austerlitz. Only pretty nice as an object, in my opinion, it is made much grander looking by the view of it along the immensely wide Champs Elysées. Everywhere the views along Paris’ broad boulevards and gardens give the city a sense of openness that is almost never seen in American cities. Commonwealth and 5th Avenues are narrow and isolated within their cities by comparison. Place de la Concorde is a many-layered collection of memorials. It began as a site for Louis XV to display his statue in the mid seventeen hundreds. During the late seventeen hundreds it became Place de la Revolution and was the site of more than a thousand executions. Commemorating the hoped-for reconciliation after the revolution it was renamed Place de la Concorde and the magnificent Luxor obelisk and ornate fountains and statues representing major French cities were placed there.

I would need several extra pages to even mention the famous sites we saw in just one week. Among them were bridges (Ponts Royale, Neuf, and de la Concorde) gardens (Tuileries, Trocadero, and Luxembourg) statues on every main and side street (Balzac, Voltaire and Napoleon), museums (Louvre, d’Orsay, Delacroix, Picasso and de la Marine) and countless churches, each of which is a monument to both God and to the generations of clergy and worshipers who made them. What startled and charmed me about Monumental Paris was my sense that all those views, buildings, statues and boulevards were put there for the benefit of the common citizen and visitor. This most democratic of enjoyments, this walking about at will, drinking in

the grand Paris was consistently uplifting. “All this just for me?” Well, of course not, but it felt that way. I think of Monumental Paris as a lucky accident of history. It no longer belongs to the kings, monstrously egocentric emperor and revolutionaries who built and gilded it over centuries. It now belongs to its citizens and to the countless visitors who can afford to walk its streets.

THE FRENCH ARE A PROUD PEOPLE

We were, of course, careful to listen more than we spoke. Otherwise how could we learn anything of how French people saw the world? But even when we were not looking for it, the singular French view of things popped out, sometimes in surprising ways. For example, we visited the museum of maritime history (Musee de la Marine) and were struck by the paintings commemorating the battle of Trafalgar. In that battle 27 British ships encoun-

ered a combined force of 33 French and Spanish ships in the decisive battle of the Napoleonic Wars. I’m pretty sure England won. At least that is what all the books I have read on the subject conclude. But you would never know it looking at the paintings of the engagement in the Musee de la Marine. All of them showed outnumbered French ships of the line surrounded by tattered and shot-ridden British ships, the French ships gallantly pouring shot into their enemies. The French flags were invariably huge and Bowing out above all others. Perhaps all the books I’ve read about Trafalgar were written by English authors. When we returned from a day trip to Rouen, in Normandy, Michele, the very helpful clerk at our hotel desk, asked about our visit. “Did you visit Notre Dame Cathedral?” (Yes, that’s the one Claude Monet painted many times.) “Her square miles, each the old houses?” (Yes, again, I loved the fifteenth century half timber houses and was amazed that people were still living in them.) And last-

ly, “Did you visit the spot where the English killed our Joan?” Uhh, yes. (We kept to ourselves that we thought that whole Joan thing was a bit more complicated than Michele’s tale.) After a week speaking with Michele about our experiences, it was clear that she wanted to hear how much we loved our visit, and the details were not so important.

French, or the young man was practicing his English on her.) At any rate, he was holding forth about some paintings they had seen and he said (exactly this, because I wrote it down, though fortuitously), “Of course who complain that his paintings are boring black and white abstractions are not looking closely. There are many blacks. Yellow blacks and red blacks, green blacks and truly black blacks.” No kidding. I guess you can’t have that many museums without some conse-
quences. Let’s get some strong coffee and talk about it for a few hours.

I couldn’t help thinking about the couples we have seen in American restaurants who could sit at their diners without ever talking to one another. At all. Not once. In fact, they never seemed to look at one another. The anti-Parisians. I’ll take earnest talk, even about not much.

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In Paris everyone seemed to be deep in animated conversation all the time. They lingered for hours over small, intense cups of coffee engaging in what could only have been equally intense talk. It looked so exciting. Jeanne and I walk at meals, but this looked somehow better. Perhaps they were discussing philosophy, politics or the merits of the great art that surrounded them. We don’t speak French, so who knew?

In a restaurant at the Musee d’Orsay I overheard a conversation that gave me an idea about Parisian linger-talking. A young man was talking in English to an equally young Asian woman. (Perhaps she spoke no
THE FRENCH ARE FRIENDLY, EVEN THE PARISIANS

We were on guard for natty Parisians. It never happened. In fact, the Parisians we met were unfailingly nice to us. Jeannie thinks it was because we looked so pathetic, with our maps and comfortable shoes. I think it was because we learned just enough French to be polite and to apologize for our lack of French. At any rate, four times Parisians stopped to ask if we needed help finding our way, without our having asked for help. One stopped her motorcycle, got off and directed us to a better café than the one we were trying to find.

We were eager to avoid engaging in bad tourist behavior. We saw very little of it, but cringed when it was an American who was guilty. At the Eiffel Tower there was a snack bar part way up, with lots of tourist food. One young woman loudly expressed to the counter her disappointment that the available pizza was sans pepperoni. Sacré bleu. We asked Michele about her experience with the famous “Ugly Americans.” She reassured us that the Germans were uglier.

THE FRENCH ARE AFRAID OF NOTHING. Gargoyles. We should have more here. They’re like the French. They don’t mind the rain. They don’t mind the wind. They don’t mind the snow. We say among ourselves, “The French are afraid of nothing.” They sit in their café, smoking their cigarettes, even when it is raining. They sit in their café, smoking their cigarettes, even when it is snowing. They sit in their café, smoking their cigarettes, even when it is raining and snowing.

FRENCH CARS ARE THE BEST. Feel is terribly expensive, much more than in the United States, and there is not nearly enough parking. We saw lots of cars parked bumper to bumper, literally touching. We wondered how they got out of those “spaces” without lots of yelling. Smart cars, like the one in the picture, are coming to a city near you, as soon as they pass American emissions standards.

THE FRENCH ARE AFRAID OF NOTHING. Deconstruction in America


Charles Angell

Bernard-Henri Lévy finally gets around to explaining the title of his rather petrified travelogue, American Vertigo, on page 238. He writes of “these myriad Americans who continued to be viewed as an elite people, sure of itself and domineering, whereas in reality no large modern nation today is as uncertain as this one, less sure of what it is becoming, less confident of the very values, that is to say, the myths, that founded it; it’s a certain disorder, a disease; a wavering again that sees the observer as well as the observed…”

Certainly Lévy found himself seized, but then after interviewing James Ellroy, Warren Beatty, Jim Harrison, Charlie Rose, Russell Means, Sharon Stone, Woody Allen, and assorted strippers, trippers, and zippers who wouldn’t find himself vertiginous. As for “the observed,” in this case an American reader, difficult to say. Lévy’s scattergun and dizzying prose style creates more glare than clarity. Remember that Lévy resides in a country that recently awarded the king of dizzy, Jerry Lewis, its highest honor for artistic achievement. Deano!

Lévy undertakes to repeat Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1831-32 travels in the then fledgling United States to observe its prisons. What resulted from his journals was Democracy in America which examined the strengths and weaknesses of democratic institutions. Tocqueville observed the United States from the perspective of a post-Napoleonic Frenchman who attributed the success of American democracy to its vast landscape available for settlement and its citizens’ optimism about the future; western Europe, particularly France in Tocqueville’s view, found its liberal democratic impulses thwarted by the constricting influence of the past and a conservative move toward reinstating constitutional monarchies.

In a recent Paris Match (April 13–19, 2006) interview, Lévy was asked why American reviewers have not spared him. Lévy responds that “Why haven’t they spared me?” The American press has been universally kind to “fathom the intellectual weight of Lévy’s transactions between Tocqueville and the present.” Peretz finds Lévy’s observations about the United States “suffused with that wrenching Tocquevillean tug between liberty and equality—the very drama of America, which is still the arbiter, for better or for worse…”

Book, in other words, hasn’t left Americans indifferent. Some have been pro, some con—a true political battle around some of my theses. On the whole, those I attack in American Vertigo, the America I denounce, that is to say the left and right sides of the political chessboard, have responded virulently along the lines of “what right does he have to meddle?” But OK, that’s precisely the point I’m aiming at” (my translation). But Garrison Keillor, who reviewed American Vertigo for The New York Times and must be Lévy’s resoundingly false note, accuses Lévy of “tedious and original thinking” that is “short on the facts, long on conclusions,” resulting in writing akin to “a student padding out a term paper.” Martin Peretz uses his “Cambridge Diarist” column in The New Republic (2/13/2006) to take Keillor to task for his inability to “fathom the intellectual weight of Lévy’s transactions between Tocqueville and the present.” Peretz finds Lévy’s observations about the United States “suffused with that wrenching Tocquevillean tug between liberty and equality—the very drama of America, which is still the arbiter, for better or for worse…”

Lévy invokes Tocquevillean precedent early in American Vertigo when he asks rhetorically: “Isn’t the author of the two volumes of Democracy in America the inventor, after all, of this modern form of reportage where attention to detail, the taste for personal encounters and circumstantialities, did not prevent—quite the contrary, made possible—faithfulness to a fixed idea?” Lévy’s fixed