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Cultural Commentary

Le Vin in Paris

William C. Levin

In this edition of Bridgewater Review Charlie Angell of the English Department reviews Bernard-Henri Levi's new book *American Vertigo*. Levi, a French philosopher and cultural critic, traveled in America, roughly (very roughly) following the path previously taken here by Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 1830's.

Tocqueville's classic book, *Democracy in America*, would be a hard act for Levi to follow, considering its revered place in our literature of cultural and political analysis. But Levi 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 Levi 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 aggrandized. 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 worshippers 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 (Musée de la Marine) and were struck by the paintings commemorating the battle of Trafalgar. In that battle 27 British ships encountered 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 concluded. But you would never know it looking at the paintings of the engagement in the Musée 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 flowing 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.) How about the old houses?” (Yes, again. I loved the fifteenth century half timber houses and was amazed that people were still living in them.) And lastly, “Did you visit the spot where the English killed our Joan?” Uh, yes. (We kept to ourselves that we thought that whole Joan thing was a bit more complicated than Michele’s take.) 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.

THE FRENCH HAVE LOTS TO SAY.

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 talk 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 Musée 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



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 furtively), “Of course those 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 consequences. 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 dinners 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.



FRENCH CARS ARE THE BEST.

Fuel 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.

Gargoyles. We should have more here. They’re like those scary characters in our films that reassure us that though there are some very weird characters in the world, they are really harmless in the end. True gargoyles are designed to spit water in their roles as gutter end downspouts. If you see one of these scary looking roof sculptures and it is not the last step in a gutter system, it is called a grotesque. The word gargoyle comes from the old French word for throat. Think of our word gargle. I wish I could buy plastic gargoyles in Home Depot. Just the thing for our center-entry Cape.

THE FRENCH ARE FRIENDLY, EVEN THE PARISIANS.

We were on guard for nasty Parisians. It never happened. In fact, the Parisians we met were unfailingly nice to us. Jeanne 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 help her disappointment that the available pizza was sans pepperoni. *Sacre bleu*. We asked Michele about her experience with the famous “Ugly Americans.” She reassured us that the Germans were uglier.

THE FRENCH ARE SUPERIOR TO AMERICANS IN THE STUFF THAT REALLY MATTERS.

You can imagine that by the end of our trip, our impressions of France formed a lovely, fragrant and incoherent stew. Searching within the week of delights I became certain of only one truth gathered from our visit. We Americans should be ashamed of our bread.

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.