

Wednesday, July 5, 2006



The Grace of the Road

posted by James Bennet

Paul Holdenraber, the director of public programs at the New York Public Library, just gave something of a clinic in how to conduct a public interview as he questioned Bernard-Henry Lévy, the philosopher and writer, about his new book, *American Vertigo*. The book grew out of the five-part series Lévy wrote for *The Atlantic* last year, “In the Footsteps of Tocqueville.”

No airy-fairy questions about the meaning of America from Holdenraber. He started right off by noting “Not everybody in America loves you,” and asking about a scorching review of the book in the *New York Times* by Garrison Keillor. “My dear Holdenraber,” Lévy replied, “you have asked me the worst question imaginable!” Lévy said that he “liked a verbal duel” and wanted a “man-to-man confrontation” with Keillor, but that his adversary declined.

Holdenraber then reversed field: Was Lévy just trying “to ingratiate” himself with Americans by writing a “love letter” to them?

This volley provoked a burst of eloquence from Lévy about the nature of American nationalism, which, the day after Independence Day, is worth reproducing here. The idea—“idée” as Lévy would say—is familiar but the phrasing was strong. In France, he said, nationalism “means the feeling of sharing the same ground, sharing the same roots, having a long and common memory” and “being the same race.” By contrast, he went on, “Being an American means believing in a community not of soil but of sky, not of blood, but of law.”

Lévy—known to all here, himself included, simply as BHL—had hard words for the American left, which is emerging as something of a punching bag at this Festival, despite (because of?) its large representation here. He said when he asked liberal Americans about their ideas, “they replied about money. Their conviction is that the right generally wins because she has the money.” But while you might say Paul Wolfowitz was wrong, he continued, you could not say he lacked ideas. Yet the left was preoccupied with fundraising (a theme of his fifth *Atlantic* piece)—much of it, he added, intended to pay the costs of further fundraising. All in all, he said, his view of the left “was not so flatterish.”

Other highlights:

—BHL dismissed President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky as “this project of him pinching.”