French Philosophers Lament Intellectuals' Demise

By Richard Bernstein

New York Times Service

PARIS — He is known just by his initials, B.H.L, in the way some of the legendary film actors of France, like Fernandel and Raimu, used to be called only by single names, which were emblems of nationwide recognition.

Bernard-Henri Lévy, the writer and philosopher, is not a movie star. But he is often pictured in the glossy French magazines in carefully framed profile, or staring slightly downward at the camera with a look of calculated intensity in his eyes, his long hair silhouetted against background lights and his shirt unbuttoned nearly to the waist.

Mr. Lévy, 38, is a commentator and thinker about town very much in the French mold, a man who writes about such difficult subjects as Marxism, structuralism, existentialism and freedom, while living a publicly flamboyant life. He admits to a certain narcissism. He is always studiously casual, and is frequently on television and setting all sorts of fashions.

His 1977 book, "Barbarism With a Human Face," was a sensation in France, a point of repair for the group that was then coming to be known as the New Philosophers, still the dominant current in French intellectual life.

The book marked a decisive rejection of Marxist totalitarianism, which it described in entirely negative terms, something the previous generation of French thinkers, dominated by leftist sentiment, had been loath to do.

Now Mr. Lévy has created new controversy, by publishing two weeks ago a slender volume called "Eloge des Intellectuels," or "Elegy for the Intellectuals."

The book is both a lament and an accusation against his own kind, in which he argues that the serious thinkers on moral and political issues in France have in recent years lost their historic role. They are suffering a "disgrace, a discredit, a muted disqualification" such that France, the country that invented the concept of the intellectual, "does not know what to think of them anymore."

"Intellectuals are neither hated nor vilified nor even really denounced," Mr. Lévy writes, lamenting past days when French political thinkers were taken seriously enough to be made to suffer for their ideas.

"Elegy for the Intellectuals" is one of two works attracting attention in Paris these days that, taken together, reflect a kind of pause, a sense of alarm, and maybe even a new stage in the life of the mind in France.

Both are marked by varying degrees of nostalgia, pessimism and disillusionment over the intellectual profession, which has been both worshiped and ostracized with a heated sort of passion that in itself is one of the chief characteristics of the French people.

The other book, "La Défaite de la Pensée," or "The Failure of Thought," by Alain Finkielkraut, being reviewed together with Mr. Lévy's slender volume, is a somewhat thicker, more deliberate, and, according to some, more probing work. One of Mr. Finkielkraut's themes, at times overlapping that of the Lévy volume, is the decline of cultural standards.

Mr. Finkielkraut, a 38-year-old writer whose previous books have been widely admired in France, concentrates on what he sees as an attack on the fundamental values established in the 18th-century French enlightenment.

But his historical excursion is

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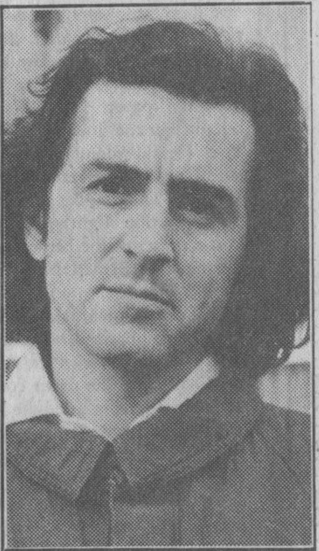

Bernard-Henri Lévy

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Herald Tribune Friday 30. Ap. 87

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