

Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's designer-clad 'philosopher prince', has reviewed his country's intellectuals and found them wanting — with the exception of himself. Kate Muir meets a man who knows his own worth. Portrait by Alastair Miller

THE INVESTIGATION commences into why France considers itself a country of great intellectuals, and Britain merely one of minor academics. The site of the inquiry is a grand stone building on Boulevard St Germain, home of Paris's most prominent intellectual in every sense. Up the marble staircase, the double doors are answered by an Asian butler in a white Nehru jacket. He shows me into the salon, for Bernard-Henri Lévy, author of the definitive book on the French intellectual as a species, is occupied elsewhere on the telephone. The butler silently unlocks an enormous wooden cabinet to display a collection of hundreds of onyx and marble eggs — turquoise, emerald, coral — each perched on a silver bird's-foot stand. He bows out of the doors.

Has Madame — Lévy's actress-model wife, Arielle Dombasle — given instructions that all visitors must appreciate the eggs for five minutes on arrival? I stand cowed by the opulence of the room, which is half-chapel, half-brothel and the size of a tennis court. There is a religious painting so vast that steps lead up to it. The windows are beswagged beyond belief. There are rich reds and oranges, enormous sofas, antiques, silver, a multi-armed brass Shiva and an outbreak of little Louis-something gilt chairs. In the bookcase: early leather-bound editions of Racine and *Les Châteaux de France*.

Lévy is, of course, one of France's best-known lefties, but he is not living rough.

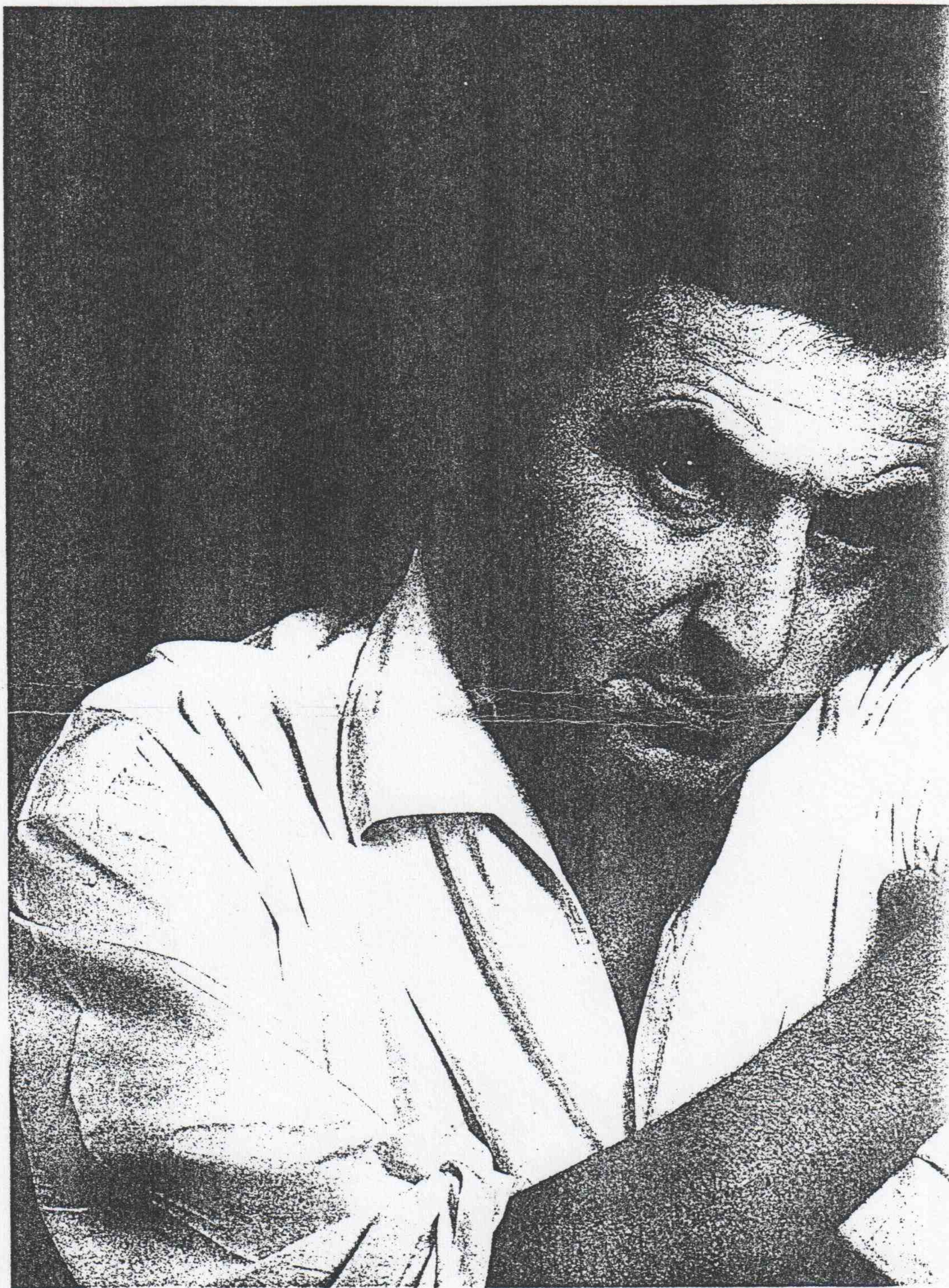
The doors burst open and the high priest of France's "new philosophers" makes his entrance. Author of an early iconoclastic book on communism, a series of philosophical works, one play, two novels of ideas, maker of respected documentaries and a propagandist film supporting the Bosnians, Lévy has also collaborated with Françoise Giroud on a controversial book about men, women and love. He was recently voted one of the ten men with whom French *Elle* readers would most like to have an affair.

Why? Today, with his fashionable bobbed haircut, his usual D'Artagnan-style floppy white shirt open to within inches of the navel, slim black trousers and ankle boots with dinky buckles, he is in full finery — a Fabio with faculties intact.

Lesson number one: Academics wear tweed. Intellectuals wear costume.

We pass into Lévy's booklined study. "The antiques are my wife's," he says. "I need only my books." There we discuss his portrait of the French intellectual, *Adventures on the Freedom Road*, just published in Britain. He pats the sofa beside him invitingly.

In 1991, when the book was first published in France, Lévy declared the intellectual on his (certainly not her) last legs.



PRETENTIOUS, IV