

becomes the "London school"; its director Anthony Giddens becomes Christopher. Leytonstone is spelled "Leydenstone." This may just be poor editing, uncorrected in the French, American and British editions (though the LSE professor Fred Halliday may be grateful that for the British edition someone has at least removed two adjectives used to describe him in the French: *inepte* and *con*). But if the devil is in the detail, how are we to trust Lévy later on, in Pakistan?

Omar's parents came to Britain from Lahore in 1968, and their son was born in London five years later. So, for Lévy, Omar is English, with an "English" passport. Lévy's failure to distinguish English from British is an excusable technical confusion, but it is one which creates a stereotype, particularly for the French reader. Lévy describes Omar as "the perfect Englishman and the ultimate enemy." This inaccurately monocultural characterisation is in stark contrast to Lévy's description of Pearl's widow: "such an odd mixture of French, now American, and a little bit of Cuban, and Buddhist, and Jewish because of Daniel."

But there is a more serious problem with Lévy's treatment of Omar Sheikh. When Pearl met his future kidnapper on the 11th January 2002, it was well known that in 1994 Omar had kidnapped four tourists: three British and one American. He had been imprisoned for this. Five years later, fellow jihadists hijacked an Indian Airlines plane and threatened to kill the 155 passengers unless Omar Sheikh and two other militants were released. Omar and the others were freed, marking him as an extremely significant figure in the militant Islamic world. In October 2001, four months before Pearl fixed his meeting with Omar, the press reported that the same Omar Sheikh was personally involved in financing 9/11. So when Lévy, at the start of his book, writes "The Hotel Akbar, where [Pearl] met for the first time his future executioner Omar Sheikh," you wonder if Pearl was naive or stupid. Either way, we need to know why he put himself in danger.

Lévy doesn't offer an explanation, and 150 pages later he goes back over their meeting in the Hotel Akbar, still maintaining that Pearl spent three hours with Omar Sheikh. During the build-up to the execution, Lévy creates a fictional scene in which Pearl refers to Omar Sheikh, who is not present ("He wants to shout: 'Would a spy have trusted Omar Sheikh?'"). It is only on page 408 that Lévy tells us that Omar Sheikh never used his real name with Pearl. For their meeting, he called himself Bashir or Shabir. This is not merely sloppy writing. To put Omar's name into Pearl's mouth during the execution verges on dishonesty.

In his eulogy to Daniel Pearl,
it is easy to make out Lévy
gazing into a mirror, but less
easy to make out Pearl

"It happened like this, or some other way, it doesn't matter," wrote the master, Sartre, describing how Jean Genet became a thief. Lévy borrows this mode of literary licence to justify what he calls, in the French version, his *romanquête* ("fictionvestigation"). "My aim was to cull through the evidence for the most factual account possible. And when the tracks were missing, I did my job as a writer: the method of *romanquête*—never give in to the imagination when reality is there, but give it a role when reality eludes you." In other words, you've spent months looking for evidence to support what you want to say and you don't have enough facts to prove your point, so you embellish them. After all, you're in the third world, the interviews are conducted through an interpreter, some details have become confused, and such anonymous sources aren't going to read the book anyway. So Lévy tells us that Pearl's murder was a "state crime," committed because he knew too much—that Pakistan's bomb is no longer controlled by the "duplicitous" government but by the bearded ones, hand in glove with the secret service. Lévy tells us

that Saddam was yesterday's tyrant, that Bush chose the wrong target, that Pakistan is the true rogue state.

Some of this may be true, but even when Pearl was alive it was not new. The *New Yorker* ran a story in November 2001 about the risks of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal; the

Washington Post had an article in December about Bin Laden's nuclear connections. With Pearl dead, Lévy takes the liberty of alleging that his protagonist was on the trail of a great story for which he was killed. The *WSJ* has formally denied any such possibility, and Pearl's father told the *Los Angeles Times*, "it doesn't gel with the facts." So let's take Lévy's lead and "fabricate" an explanation for his explanation; maybe he was in a hurry, needed a thesis for his book, and made it up.

Bernard-Henri Lévy does still take risks with his life, but no longer with his ideas. Here is a respected French philosopher, a man of experience and conviction who has spent a year investigating militant Islam, at times with diplomatic access. Yet he brings no convincing thought to bear on the subject. The French have often criticised the Americans for lack of subtlety in their thinking, but if this is the alternative, we should be grateful for US sophistication. There is no clear global analysis, no grasp of militant Islam in general nor Omar Sheikh in particular. And, perhaps most disappointingly, there is no real insight into the violence which Lévy has made the centre of his philosophy. He might learn as much about brutality on a visit to the Left Bank as he did by poring over the grotesque video footage of Pearl's decapitation. ■

