Alexis de Tocqueville was born in Normandy in 1805, and trained as a lawyer in Paris. As a young man with large political ambitions, he traveled across the United States and a bit of Canada for nine months in 1831, ostensibly studying the prison system, but more generally, becoming an expert on the new republic, so much of which was wilderness and hardly well understood in France (in contrast to the present situation). After Tocqueville’s return to France, he published *Democracy in America*, still widely regarded as the best single book about that historical, political, economic, and cultural phenomenon known as “America.” Clearly the bicentennial of Tocqueville’s birth presents a fine opportunity for another thoughtful account of a trip across the United States. In order to take advantage of this publishing moment, the editors of the East Coast, liberal, and in that sense, quite conservative, magazine of culture and politics, *The Atlantic* (founded by Boston literati in 1857) needed another smart Frenchman to travel about the country, talk to people, and tell us what it all means. And so the “celebrity philosopher” Bernard-Henri Lévy (“BHL” – the acronym is convenient, and lends a certain glow) was sent out to reassess America.

Quite apart from marketing considerations, hiring a new Tocqueville must have seemed like a good idea, because America recently has seemed especially difficult to understand, for citizens and foreigners alike. Moreover, BHL was a good candidate. Americans, at least certain academic types, love French intellectuals, witness the success of Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, etc. Unfortunately, such love is often unrequited. Anti-Americanism is rampant among French intellectuals, some of whom have written entire books on what they understand of and do not like about America. (And reading such books is a shall we say special pleasure of a certain sort of American academic.) BHL has, on the contrary, often spoken against anti-Americanism, and seems genuinely fond of many aspects of American culture. Better still, from the perspective of the social class inhabited by the editors of *The Atlantic*, BHL is what the English would call “politically sound.”

BHL has delivered. As of this writing, four lengthy, interesting, and in places insightful articles have been published in *The Atlantic*, in a series entitled “In the Footsteps of Tocqueville.” The series title should not be taken too literally, of course: Tocqueville traveled with considerable difficulty through wilderness and recently tamed
country; BHL has been flown and driven and perhaps otherwise transported across a much larger, and much more civilized, land. But still, the basic idea is the same – a sophisticated Frenchman should travel through, then explain, America. Moreover, sometimes BHL visits cities that Tocqueville visited, too. At any rate, and whatever the connection to Tocqueville, The Atlantic has commissioned what purports to be a substantial assessment of the significance of America, which is a pretty bold and for that reason admirable idea. Although The Atlantic does not say if more installments of this travelogue will appear, BHL has already said enough to merit consideration and response, comments on the rough draft of the inevitable book, which I would like to see entitled Sophisticate Abroad: The American Adventures of a Celebrity Philosopher.

Perhaps the most dangerous of the many charms that France holds for American intellectuals is suggested by this phrase “celebrity philosopher.” It is so easy to dream that if only I were French: I would sell thousands upon thousands of elegantly written books detailing my opinions, effortlessly dashed off under the influence of amphetamines; I would be on television, and actually watched by my fellow intellectuals; I would engage in vehement debates over national policies, the nature of politics, and indeed the meaning of life in general; my witticisms would be widely repeated; my youthful crimes would be excused as expressions of intellectual ferment; I would be the frequent guest of national leaders in business and especially politics; I might hold a government post, either very important or very easy; I would be famous, even among the not particularly well educated, for being wise yet influential; and best of all, my many mistresses, wives, and children (each more physically beautiful than the last) would all regard one another with at least civility, and me with fond indulgence. I would be, in short, as happy as BHL in France.

Serious jokes aside, BHL self-consciously presents a deeply personalized (egoistic?) model of intellectual life. As with Hemingway the writer, discussion of BHL’s work tends to becomes discussion of BHL. Many of his reviewers reveal irritation at BHL’s numerous and popular books, and impatience with his persona, that seem motivated by envy, while others fawn for apparently similar reasons. Other reviewers are perhaps limited by the impoverished notion that all real thinking is done by experts, most with tenured positions in the contemporary, i.e., bureaucratic, university. Others are irritated (perhaps justifiably) at having to deal with BHL the celebrity, rather than with a text which stands or falls as if it had no author. Others are playing politics, either for or against, and some are simply smitten. None of which says anything about whether or not BHL’s work is worthy; it is hard to get to the work. Indeed, it is hard to understand what BHL’s work is.

The striking figure of BHL himself is only the beginning of the problem that “celebrity” presents in reviewing his writing. BHL’s status in French culture, and his own fascination with that status, shapes what he writes. Most obviously, BHL has repeatedly cast himself in the role of culture hero: BHL and the Marxists; BHL and the Biblical Tradition; Among the French Intellectuals; BHL and the Muslim Radicals, and now, BHL and the Americans. The French evidently enjoy these performances in great numbers, hence the book sales and the appellation “celebrity intellectual.” And why not? Surely it is to the credit of the French that they lionize intellectuals? In the United States, in the 1950s and early ‘60s, intellectuals were more celebrated than they are today. (The playwright Arthur Miller married Marilyn Monroe.) But that was another era; the social
status of intellectuals in the United States has declined. So for the French to preserve
their intellectual celebrities is perhaps an accomplishment, and BHL is lucky to have such
an audience to address.

Serious critics have considerable difficulty, however, assessing a celebrity’s work
because it is created to please a public fancy. Particularly if he is a professor, a critic is
unlikely to understand who the public is (his entire professional life has been a process of
differentiating himself from the public), and no idea of what the public will want next,
the fashion to come. To make an analogy: Hollywood movies (which BHL seems to
enjoy) should not be understood as if they were independent films or plays, and certainly
not as novels, i.e., in terms of their qualities. The question in “the industry” is how
popular will particular products be? Will this film, song, or novel be a blockbuster, hit,
or bestseller is a question of acceptance, hardly the same thing as quality. More
generally, it is not obvious how to appreciate celebrity, “philosophical” or otherwise –
and therefore it is not clear how to read BHL.

In contrast, Tocqueville’s intention was relatively straightforward. Tocqueville
explored America as a way to learn what it meant to found a society on democratic
principles. He believed democratization was part of the march of history, and considered
the process more advanced in the United States than elsewhere, most simply because the
United States began with less of its society organized along non-democratic lines.
Because democracy was further along in the United States, a study of the United States
could reveal something about the character of the future, not just of America, but of the
world. This “progress” was not an unmitigated good. Democratization resulted in the
loss of much that was valuable in the ancient regime, and democracy has perils of its very
own. Thus the powerful if vague idea of democracy serves to unify Tocqueville’s
account of America, which in the process becomes an inquiry into the character of
democracy in history, ethnography en route to political philosophy.

BHL’s account of America has no unifying concept comparable to democracy.
Instead of treating America in terms of an idea, we get lots of journalism, mostly
descriptions of places or paraphrases of interviews. As they accumulate, BHL’s stories
present a composite account of America, a textual mosaic of the United States.
Inevitably, certain themes assert themselves. BHL reports over and over again on things
he finds important to understanding America, including religion (as actual practice and as
metaphor for other things), minorities ethnic and religious, the politics of left and right,
the city (more as idea than place), and prisons. And other impressions that don’t really
fit, accounts of conversations with a policeman or a waitress or a visit to a brothel or
summertime flags, add color to the background.

These themes are treated in journalistic fashion (after all, the series was
commissioned by a magazine). So, for example, at the very beginning of his journey,
BHL visits a jail, Riker’s Island, which offers the advantage of being in New York’s
harbor, allowing a certain notoriety and a stunning contrast between the city of cities and
the exile of incarceration. Irresistible. Some pages later and on the Pacific coast, BHL
visits another prison, the even more famous Alcatraz, in San Francisco’s even more
beautiful harbor. Of course, Alcatraz is no longer used as a prison, but no matter – the
symmetries were evidently too good to pass up. By the end of three articles, BHL has
visited four prisons. The last two prisons, while not so scenic as Alcatraz or even Rikers,
have prisoners condemned to die, which is interesting. The fourth installment has no
prisons, but a nuclear submarine, in which people are confined to small spaces, is labeled
a prison. In short, BHL trades in rather sensational images.

BHL is interested in religion in America, so he sets off to visit an Amish colony. The Amish are a tiny sect of Protestants who reject modern technology and therefore may be seen living in 19th century fashion, with horses and buggies and so forth. The Amish are sufficiently exotic to be the topic of a Hollywood movie starring Harrison Ford (which, naturally, BHL mentions). Similarly, like Tocqueville and any number of Europeans since before Rousseau, BHL is interested in Indians (usually but not always called “Native Americans”), and so he visits a number of aging radicals in the West to
discuss Wounded Knee, with predictably striking results. Of course, entire states, such as New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Alaska, have substantial native populations, with the usual human variety of experience . . . And again: BHL must say something about black people, so he interviews Barack Obama, son of an African goatherd who immigrated to the United States, a Harvard Law School graduate, and star of the last Democratic National Convention. The United States is huge, and wondrous things are to be found.

Journalism reports, but to what end? Like its signature medium, photography, journalism is rarely completely untrue. The photographed event occurred and was mechanically documented. Even advertisements are true in this sense: a beautiful woman got into a car – that really happened. The implication that one should buy a similar car is a much more dubious proposition. Rikers Island is in America; the Amish are indeed an American sect; Barack Obama is certainly both black and American. But Rikers, the Amish, and Obama are all unusual, even exotic, and oh so vivid, and therefore it is difficult to draw general lessons from them. BHL says some sensible things, and some silly things, but to a well disposed American like me, the overall impression is merely journalistic: a bit sensational, often right but off base in many places, and modestly interesting, even amusing, but not much more.

In an effort to tie his range of images together, and because he evidently thinks it explains American politics, BHL uses “religion” as a master metaphor. In his account, many things are “churches,” including shopping malls, race tracks, museums, and various actual churches. Unfortunately, as a self-proclaimed atheistic Jew committed to monotheism (whatever that means), BHL has almost no understanding of what goes on in churches, a point he confesses by the third article. This admission somewhat undercuts the trenchancy of his metaphor. But no matter – BHL soldiers on, visiting, apart from the Amish (whom he satirizes for their ignorance of electricity), Protestants more or less fundamental (his main political concern), orthodox Jews in Brooklyn (who for some unexplained reason BHL thinks should not rely on the United States), Mormons, and – inevitably – a black congregation. From this experience, BHL reports that he has been convinced that southern black congregations “have an intensity of piety” that northern white suburban “megachurches” do not. At least he does not report his discovery of the clichés that black folks have more rhythm or bigger penises, or that white men can’t jump (but there was a movie about that, with Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes).

The articles are full of such gaffes. Most are minor, and many reveal the faulty knowledge and lack of context that anyone who tries to understand a foreign culture must confront. Quite apart from being generous, a critic should be careful here. Any native is likely to disagree with some of a foreigner’s analysis: it is always easy to be defensive, to say “no, no, you don’t understand.” And much of what BHL has to say may be
suggestive, perhaps even provocative, for his audience. And the usual penalty for being interesting is being incomplete, unbalanced, and otherwise not entirely right. Those things said, and insofar as this is supposed to be a description of America, even a critic as well-disposed as I am might have hoped for a bit more attention to the matter at hand.

For another example: BHL says that the French but not the Americans debate the purposes of punishment. But punishment, including capital punishment, has been a very public debate since at least the ’70s, when much of the American electorate lost faith in the idea of rehabilitation (a political shift symbolized by Clint Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry* and Charles Bronson’s *Death Wish* movies). An enormous legal literature exists, in which Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* is a standard reference. (BHL’s use of Foucault on prisons is, I think, misleading.) And just a few months ago, the Supreme Court decided a major pair of cases, *United States v. Booker* and *United States v. Fanfan*, on criminal sentencing in the federal courts that again brought the issue onto the front page of all the major papers. Capital punishment and the Supreme Court was the topic of an article appearing in the same issue of *The Atlantic* as BHL’s fourth installment. In short, the idea that punishment is not debated in America is just silly.

Again, many of these flaws are minor, but they are plentiful. *The Atlantic* could have had a better product had some of BHL’s impressions been put under more substantial editorial pressure prior to publication. Some of BHL’s mistakes, however, are not minor, at least insofar as the project is to describe America (which, it should be clear by now, I doubt). Addressing his central concern, the politics of right and left, BHL concludes his first article with the sweeping generalization that the United States has recently become ideological, in contrast to the French, who have outgrown their history of ideology. Thus, by implication, the success of President Bush (whom BHL opposes, shocking enough) is explained by a sort of ideological madness. Conversely, in a hilarious passage, BHL can find no higher praise for losing presidential candidate John Kerry than “rationalist” and “European.” (Seattle, a port for the Northern Pacific and for a while BHL’s favorite American city, is also called “European,” which evidently means “good,” and sometimes also means “French.”) Thus, in BHL’s telling, in the last election the Americans turned away from the European rationalist and voted for Bush – only ideology could explain something like that.

BHL clearly believes that the roots of what he considers to be the ideological madness of the Americans lie in the religiosity of Americans. BHL’s understanding of the relationships among politics and faith, in which history, or at least progress, is a process of secularization is highly orthodox for a modern day philosophe. What else would one expect? Since the religious is irrational, however, by labeling American politics as religious, BHL excuses himself from doing any actual political thinking. It would have been interesting to see BHL the philosopher think about the conceptual apparatus with which he himself approaches politics. His self-consciously maudlin fascination with Kennedy’s image, for example, might have provided an occasion for some serious thought about the character of politics in large republics.

Nonetheless, BHL is on to a real, if widely noted, issue. The United States is undergoing a period of political and social polarization, often called “the culture wars” or sometimes the division between the “blue states,” won by the Democrats and coded blue on television maps on election night, and the “red states,” won by the Republicans. (Perhaps recent votes on the European constitution and for the French presidency indicate
something not entirely unrelated is happening in Western Europe, but BHL does not discuss this possibility.) BHL thinks, contra the French cliché about the pragmatism of Americans, that this polarization is caused by the recent discovery of ideological politics.

But, as BHL knows, this is far too simple. While Americans have often resisted using the word “ideology” in its Marxist sense, the United States was founded, like no nation before and probably since, on the basis of argument, rather than shared history, religion, or culture. (BHL made this point himself, in a conversation with New York Times columnist David Brooks, published by The Atlantic online.) As Tocqueville noted, ideas remain central to political discourse in this country whose inhabitants tended to share so little, and differ in so much. The Declaration of Independence starts out with the statement that “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” that is, as an argument, and Americans have traditionally referred to the United States itself as an experiment, a trial of ideas, rather than a patrimony. (Indeed Europeans too habitually discuss America as if it were a set of ideas, with which one is to agree or disagree, more or less, rather than some place, which is simply there, like Norway.) And, of course, ideology in the self-consciously partisan sense is not unknown in U.S. history, especially in the twentieth century’s explicitly ideological struggles in the World Wars and in the Cold War. More particularly, the current ideological polarization between the political parties is widely traced to the defeat of Barry Goldwater’s bid for the Republican party’s presidential nomination in 1964, and the civil rights politics of Democratic President Lyndon Johnson (President from 1963-69). One easily could go on, but in short, claiming that America has recently “discovered” ideology, without more, does little to explain current developments.

At least, the claim does little to explain current developments to an American sophisticated enough to enjoy BHL’s very good (and it is very good) prose. As I’ve tried to suggest, while BHL’s writing is always engaging and often insightful, his themes do not seem particularly well chosen if the point is understanding America writ large. He devotes almost no attention to, inter alia: democracy; government (except the personalities at the top); the culture of business; the middle class; patterns of work; patterns of consumption; suburbia (though he does visit a mall, his focus is on American cities); education (in which America is spectacularly successful and disastrous); the poor (except as represented in literature or by politicians), various forms of cultural production (despite the constant mention of movies); nature (except storms); and perceptions of space and history and risk and home, all of which are quite different in America than in Western Europe.

On reflection, one comes to understand that BHL’s real topic is France’s imagination of America. More specifically, BHL addresses the tendencies of French thought, including a fair dose of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and the like, that can be expressed in socially acceptable fashion as “anti-Americanism.” This has been one of his topics for many years, but the present assignment gives BHL the opportunity to dispute anti-Americanism through travels, interviews, experience. America, it is evidently hard to remember in certain circles, is in fact a place, with people, not just an idea vaguely synonymous with “imperial” or “consumer,” or “the foreign policy of the Bush administration.” By visiting America, BHL mightily encourages his audience to acknowledge the world, not their world, but the world outside. (Something similar might be said of BHL’s breakthrough book, Barbarism with a Human Face, in which BHL used...
Solzhenitsyn’s testimony as an occasion to interrupt the circularities of Parisian intellectual debate.) This is a worthwhile project, just not the project The Atlantic is advertising. But BHL’s primary audience, it must not be forgotten, is French. After all, BHL is a celebrity philosopher in France, not somewhere else. And for at least this American, what is really interesting is not what BHL teaches about America, but what he teaches about France.

BHL’s major themes all resonate in the French imagination of America. So he obsesses over the conflicts between what he understands to be the left and the right (after attending a class at a good university, he is convinced that the future lies with the left). To his credit, BHL concludes that he does not quite understand what “left” and “right” mean, that especially “the right” seems to be splitting into as yet unnamed factions, which are not entirely unattractive to him (here, again, it would be interesting to press further). BHL is stunned by Kerry’s loss, and keeps coming back to it, as if it were not quite predictable in light of the deepening crisis of the Democratic party, and especially the eclipse of certain elites on which that party has traditionally relied, and as if such things were unimaginable in contemporary European politics.

Similarly, BHL regularly comments on the American failure to tend to cities. For BHL, rather traditionally organized cities are necessary for civilization, culture, indeed the artificiality that sustains BHL himself. BHL is shocked that Buffalo, New York is “dying.” (Full disclosure: I teach at Buffalo, and BHL’s claim caused a minor furor. Buffalo is perhaps the most desperate city in a country of some 300 million, but nonetheless has much to recommend it, even still. Here as elsewhere, BHL overstates a good case.) But for every Buffalo or Cleveland or Los Angeles, there is a city BHL likes, such as New York or Chicago, or even loves, like Seattle or the old fashioned city of Savannah. BHL is a critical, in the sense of appreciative, traveler, like a gourmet. But the things he appreciates best are in some way familiar to him.

As the series progresses and BHL continues to ask French questions in an American context, his awkward emphasis on religion, and especially on how a civil politics is managed among believers, begins to make more sense. Similarly, one cannot be surprised at BHL’s interest in minorities. And, of course, what if the minorities are themselves strongly religious? How do groups such as Jewish or Arab-Americans (especially these two), manage their conflicting identities? How do immigrants (here Mexicans) adapt? These are all very French concerns at the moment, and here BHL gets much right about the American experience of such matters, especially vis-à-vis what I gather are common perceptions in France.

Perhaps as importantly as his consideration of such questions, BHL makes a number of observations en passant that are useful correctives to European stereotypes. For example, in discussing health care, BHL strikes exactly the right note. It is not true, as the European cliche has it, that there is no safety net in the United States. The reality is far more complex: a constellation of federal, state, and local government, private business, private insurance, individual resources, church and other charitable organizations, and health care providers themselves all contribute to the health care of individuals. How well does this work? Not particularly well, in my opinion, but the answer depends on who is asked, and the situation varies wildly from case to case. In a few dozen words, BHL masterfully summarizes an incredibly complicated problem, and
one which tends to be incomprehensible for people who have always known centralized health care systems.

With similar rhetorical panache, BHL addresses other French prejudices. He points out that many ordinary Americans are fairly well educated, e.g., at least some policemen know who Tocqueville was. College students are well read and thoughtful, even critical thinkers, hardly ideologues. Americans are friendly, and bear no general hostility to the French, BHL reports over and over again. He discovers no trace of militarism at the Air Force academy. This is perhaps overdone, but the point that the US military is not composed of glory hungry imperialists is well-taken. And with regard to at least one stereotype beloved by Europeans, BHL goes too far on America’s behalf: he maintains that Americans do not have a problem with fat. BHL is correct that weight loss has become an industry, in profitable symbiosis with the business of selling lots of fattening food. BHL is also correct that the issue has not been handled very well by the government or the medical establishment. Those things said, Americans, especially children, have in the last few decades grown measurably fatter. There are already serious health consequences (notably diabetes and hypertension), and the problems are expected to worsen. But here again, BHL is not attempting to provide a nuanced assessment of the situation in the United States; he is responding to the European stereotype that all Americans are fat.

In general, the American people emerge from BHL’s portrait as friendly, energetic, even passionate, and basically good hearted. They are open, quite willing to share, but also very credulous, and so sometimes very wrong. They are more than a little primitive, especially politically and intellectually. They are polite, tolerant rather than domineering. Americans even drive politely, sharing the road in egalitarian fashion. Though many people tell him what they think, BHL reports few arguments in the sense of debates. At one of the new breed of modern suburban churches, inflected by middle class business culture (which BHL loathed), he was urged to “say the atheist’s prayer.” A tiresome hostess at a “bed and breakfast” inn told him of the necessity of liking almost all one’s guests. And so forth. Although he is very often harshly judgmental in print (he is a Parisian intellectual), BHL seems to get along with most of the people he meets.

Journalism presents the news, but in a way we are predisposed to understand. BHL could not, as an intellectual, write that all of his reader’s prejudices have been confirmed by his trip to America. That would be uninteresting, and more importantly, not what is expected of him. So BHL writes that many of the specific prejudices, especially the negative ones, of his audience are overdone. Thus BHL informs the reader that, e.g., the U.S. military is not imperial, and the American people are not fat. But at the same time, he confirms a familiar big picture – the French image of Americans as a strangely childlike religious people, simply not as civilized as the French. This warm portrait of the Americans must be quite comforting to certain French audiences. When Tocqueville wrote, France was arguably the second most powerful nation on the planet, even after the defeat of Napoleon. The geopolitical situation has changed, and so it must be good to hear that the Americans are nicer than many people say, and that real sophistication, indeed modernity and so implicitly the future, are to be found in Europe, chiefly France. And perhaps this comfortable view of the world is correct.
But other possibilities merit thought. BHL could (still?) write a book on America that would be far more challenging for his French and American audiences than “In the Footsteps of Tocqueville.” Let me suggest four ways one might write such a book.

First, BHL could write much more deeply about how multiple political identities work in America. BHL at least recognizes and struggles with this issue, but with mixed success. For example, he implies to a Mexican-American officer of the border patrol that Mexicans are not really Americans, or should at least feel loyalty to their fellow Mexicans who are trying to get across the border. (This causes some offense, which the officer suppresses in order to be polite.) But Spanish speakers have lived in what is now the southwestern United States for centuries; their cultural identity is not centered on the relatively new nation state of Mexico. Even for most immigrants from Mexico, Mexico City is not Paris, the capital of the culture. BHL implies that the officer is a second or third generation American, but even new immigrants become “American” very fast. In so doing, however, they do not necessarily abandon their old identity; their old identity is recontextualized. The United States is that big. To be overly schematic, American identity happens on another plane from cultural identity – hence the conflicts that BHL expects between American and Mexican, or even American and Arab, identity are rare. One is Mexican or Jewish or Arab, or something non-national, like gay or “Asian” (a political category which doesn’t exist in Asia, of course), as well as American. Thus it is subtly wrong to understand flags, or the military, in the sense of competition among nations in a European sense. Most Americans have little serious cognizance of other nations; there is therefore no competition. This is, of course, beyond arrogant. It is an echo of the revolutionary presumptions of the United States (and one of the things Tocqueville was trying to capture); an analogy might be drawn to the French tendency to use “French” and “European” interchangeably, and mean “civilized.”

Second, by paying attention to traditional cities, and in falling in love with the beautifully archaic old port of Savannah, in Georgia (my home state), BHL misses one of the largest migrations in human history. Millions upon millions of people have been moving to lower density living and working environments. Not merely moving to suburbia, i.e., outside cities, but moving to places where there is no city, or the city is functionally irrelevant. Much of America is booming, and has been for decades. (The difference in a few percentage points of annual growth rate, compounded over a decade or more, is huge, and visible to anybody who has traveled in the U.S. and Europe over the past two decades. Not that BHL mentions this.) Most of the Pacific Coast, the Southwest, and the South (including Florida) have all grown. Much of the upper Midwest and the Northeast have lost population. (This migration has tended to shift power towards red states, i.e., Republicans.) The enormous growth tends to be organized around freeways. Factories are built in fields, and housing, churches (importantly), schools, retail services and the like are built within driving distance. Very small towns are undergoing a renaissance of sorts, but as pleasant places to live while working in the new economy. Suppose cities, instead of being the site of civilized life, are just an arrangement dictated by the needs of commerce at a certain level of transportation technology? Suppose Atlanta, hundreds of kilometers of trees and traffic and structures with no discernible center, a forest whose population has roughly tripled over the last generation, represents the future of cities, as Tom Wolfe suggested in his novel *A Man in Full*? What would this mean for the United States? For France?
Instead of considering how people tend to live in the United States, BHL writes a love letter to Savannah, a romantic city of the Old South, lately fashionable for its beauty and sensual languor (this is a huge selling point in relatively nearby Atlanta, which is providing the demand that is driving up real estate prices and where even hedonism is hurried, because time is money). For the sake of argument, let us bracket the slavery question: it is still striking to read BHL praising this unmodern city, with its insistence that culture is essentially aristocratic. Perhaps this dangerous argument is true, which would be one way of understanding modernity as tragedy, a major theme of Southern literature, especially William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, both in the first rank of American writers of the 20th century. Indeed, immediately after discussing Savannah, BHL turns his attention to Asheville, N.C., the home and subject of Thomas Wolfe. Strangely enough, however, BHL does not use Asheville and Wolfe to talk about past and present in the South, but meditates upon F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote *The Great Gatsby*, a lyric novel of northeastern capitalism, and who spent some time in Asheville (where his wife Zelda was in a sanatorium) near the end of his career. (Again, *The Atlantic* editors appear to have been a little sleepy.) Atlanta, Savannah, Wolfe (and the even greater Faulkner) – one wonders how BHL evades thinking hard about where America, as a culture, is going.

Third, and as perhaps suggested by the fact that so much of the built environment of the United States is new, there is a sense of physical energy in the United States – and particularly among the sorts of people who do not read *The Atlantic* – that is difficult to articulate, but very real. This energy is expressed in all sorts of ways. For example, BHL goes to a small car race. Typically, his attention is drawn by a prayer, which leads to yet another meditation on religion. Lost in these thoughts, BHL seems not to have understood what a huge phenomenon car racing in America is. And not just watching car races: this is a really big country, and engines and gas are cheap. Ordinary people, carpenters, race cars, or trucks. Bruce Springsteen sings about racing in the streets; dentists buy Harley Davidsions and ride around in packs in celebration of motorcycle gangs and Vietnam veterans. Similarly, guns and other weapons: BHL goes to a gun show, and in fine European fashion, is mesmerized by the Nazi fringe (who do need to be watched, as demonstrated by Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City bombing). Far more significant, however, is the fact that there are large areas of the country where people of all classes have guns in their cars, and where hunting provides meat. Not just guns: to kill a deer with a bow and arrow, one must “Speak the Language” – a popular bumper sticker in my village, and a trademark of Primos hunting calls. What I am trying to suggest with these violent images is that there is a lustiness at large in the United States, a sense of risk and possibility and adventure. And something like this lustiness typifies American capitalism, characterizes the swashbuckling entrepreneurialism that so enchanted the economist Joseph Schumpeter. In comparison to this ethos, much of bureaucratic modernity (and therefore European elites, and indeed the East Coast academic and literary establishment with which BHL, and for that matter, my European friends and family, seem most comfortable), seems rather pallid. Rephrased, BHL’s praise of Kerry as a rationalist European goes a long way toward explaining why Kerry lost.

In fairness, in the fourth installment BHL at last seems to get some sense of the sometimes terrifying vitality of America, during his visit to Norfolk, Virginia, where he
tours a submarine. Can one imagine a representation more male than nuclear weapons, on ballistic missiles, launched from a submarine? It is only poetic justice that BHL’s guide aboard the submarine is a “pretty” woman (“shoulder length blonde hair” and a “military cap cleverly tilted”) who is “surprisingly charming” as she tells “for the umpteenth time about the force of a cumulative strike of the MK-48 torpedoes . . . “ Gender bending fun, in which America (“Mars”) “frankly” parades its submarine before an undeniably impressed representative of France (“Venus”) – and here I will stop, but again, apart from the not inconsiderable pleasure of some very witty writing, we do not learn much.

Fourth and in closing, BHL of all people should write, after Tocqueville, Celebrity in America. Celebrity plays a huge if ambiguous role in large polities composed of diverse peoples like the United States and Europe. BHL himself visits striking places, meets all the right people, and shamelessly drops names. At one of Kissinger’s speeches he gets thrown out and goes drinking with liberal essayist Christopher Hitchens; then he meets with arch neocons Richard Perle and Bill Kristol. Such access! BHL introduces places and topics with references to movies, and generally burnishes his persona as the famous intellectual, at ease and at large, attended, we are told, by a comely assistant named Anika. This is very funny, and at times descends, no, ascends into farce: trying to get an interview with Kerry during the Presidential campaign, BHL complains about being put “in the second plane, the wrong one, the one without the candidate.” Is nothing sacred for these Americans? Don’t they understand who I am? But more seriously, perhaps celebrity is inevitable in a world in which communication and political organization encompass people who share so little? And perhaps political thought, if it is to be heard under present circumstances, must compromise with celebrity? Rousseau wrote novels, after all. What does this mean for the politics of a “rationalist,” as BHL claims to be? And so forth – but who better to explore such questions than a celebrity philosopher?

BHL may yet write such a challenging book; America is an uncomfortable problem for the Americans as well as the French. But perhaps this is the wrong thing to ask of BHL. Tocqueville and BHL are not really very similar. Tocqueville went to America in 1831, when he was 25. He spent nine months traveling, and published Democracy in America in two stages over the next nine years. BHL has traveled through America in considerable comfort over the last year or so, and almost immediately began publishing his impressions. While BHL had a driver named Tim and the lovely Anika for traveling companions, Tocqueville was accompanied by his friend Gustave de Beaumont. Heine, the German poet, much preferred Beaumont, superficially judging Tocqueville to be all head and little heart. It must be admitted that Tocqueville was taciturn and aloof, struggled with deep melancholy, and was usually in bad health, perhaps exacerbated by overwork. On their American journey, Tocqueville worked incessantly, while Beaumont often relaxed, sometimes playing a flute. Tocqueville was dead of tuberculosis at fifty-three. In contrast to Tocqueville but like Beaumont, BHL is a conversationalist, a socialite, mediatique rather than aloof. BHL is already in his latter fifties, appears to be in excellent health, and by all accounts leads a sunny life. I am not about to argue that BHL has made a mistake.