

ARTS & LETTERS

**REPORT FROM A
PARISIAN PARADISE:**
Essays from France, 1925–1939.

By Joseph Roth. Norton.
301 pp. \$24.95

When I lived in Paris during the 1950s, I wished I had been there a couple of decades earlier. That was the era when the effulgent city radiated with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Josephine Baker, Henry Miller, Jean Renoir, Picasso, Chagall, Dadaists, and surrealists. I ingenuously imagined myself mingling with them on the terraces of their favorite cafés, the Flora and Deux-Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, or the Dome and Select on the Boulevard Montparnasse. Or we might dine at such fancy restaurants as Chez Maxim's or the Grand Vefour. Joseph Roth's essays evoke that exhilarating time, and I devoured them.

A Jew born in 1894 in Galioia, at the frontier of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Roth moved first to Germany, arrived in the *ville lumière* in 1925, and died there in 1939. France enthralled him from the start. He tirelessly roamed its towns and villages, hobnobbing with artists, cabdrivers, merchants, peasants, priests, teachers, and workers, and poking into studios, markets, farms, churches, schools, and factories. His narratives, primarily published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, are meticulously and at times tediously detailed. Paid by the word, he was one of the most affluent journalists of the period.

Scanning the Marseilles harbor, he counts the ships, lists their flags, and itemizes the cargo piled on the docks: "crates, beams, wheels, levers, tubs, engines, ladders, tongs, hammers . . . Bengal tigers, hyenas, goats, Angora cats, oxen, and Turkish carpets." He explores the Côte d'Azur and climbs over the Roman ruins in Nîmes, Arles, and Aix-en-Provence. Visiting the seaside resorts Deauville and Trouville, he observes the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie in their swish villas, playing baccarat at the casino or riding in carriages along the beach, a scene Proust had brilliantly portrayed. Roth can make Walt Whitman seem laconic.

Naturally, Roth was intrigued by the Jews in Paris. Many were immigrants from Eastern

Europe, and, he reported, they rejoiced in freedoms they had been denied in their native lands. They attended Yiddish theater, frequented kosher bistros, and were molested only by a lunatic fringe of boisterous right-wing neoroyalists "without influence." To the extent that anti-Semitism existed, it was far less brutal and widespread than the Jews had experienced elsewhere. In France, Roth rosily maintained, they "are perfectly happy." He was mistaken. In 1940, a year after his death, the Germans marched into Paris and, with the complicity of their French collaborators, deported 75,000 Jews to concentration camps. Hardly any of those responsible were ever brought to justice.

Suffused with enthusiasm for his "paradise," Roth failed to perceive the troubles plaguing France. The flower of its youth had been slaughtered during World War I. As a result of the bloodbath, men were scarce and the birthrate sharply declined, leaving the country dominated by the elderly and infirm. Persistent strikes and bitter industrial disputes crippled the economy. Mismanaged by corrupt politicians and bureaucrats jockeying for power, the government was a shambles. Yet the French adamantly refused to recognize these realities, and instead nursed the illusion of grandeur—a conviction they still hold today.

But it would be churlish to impugn Roth for his myopia. Like other foreigners before and since, he idealized France, and, as an excursion into nostalgia, his pieces are irresistible.

—STANLEY KARNOW

LONE STAR LITERATURE:
From the Red River to the Rio Grande.
Edited by Don Graham. Norton.
733 pp. \$29.95

David Crockett called it the "garden spot of the world." Union general Philip Sheridan said that if he owned hell and Texas, he'd "rent out Texas and live in hell." Crockett and Sheridan fairly bracket the reactions of outsiders to Texas; the feelings of Texans themselves are more complicated but no less extreme.

Don Graham, who teaches American literature at the University of Texas at Austin, has sampled the collective mind of Texans and