

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

gathered three-score pieces of writing about the Lone Star State. Most are short stories or parts of novels; several are essays. Though the Texas mystique developed during the 19th century, Graham largely restricts himself to the 20th. This leaves enough of the old Texas—including Andy Adams on a waterless cattle drive, O. Henry on the politics of cowboy art, and Walter Prescott Webb on the Comanches—to satisfy traditionalists, but allows Graham to illustrate how the Texas experience diversified after the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901. The voices are as varied as the people of the state.

Graham's Texas is divided into four parts: the West, the South, the Border, and, reflecting the fact that Texas has become one of the most urbanized states, Town and City. Dorothy Scarborough writes of the wind on the West Texas plains, and how it blows away beauty and youth and dreams. Katherine Anne Porter looks east to find the memories that fill the region that was a salient of the Cotton Kingdom. C. C. White's memories of the same district come from the other side of the color line. Ray Gonzalez watches immigrants cross the Rio Grande at El Paso, defying authority as immigrants to Texas have done since the Comanches and Americans pushed into Spanish and Mexican Texas during the early 19th century. Robert Caro—no Texan but a New Yorker on an extended visa—writes about the Hill Country, where Lyndon Johnson grew up without electricity and vowed to ease the burden of women like those who reared him.

Larry L. King ponders the oft-noticed habit of Texans to become more Texan after leaving the state. "Texas remains in my mind's eye that place to which I shall eventually return to rake the dust for my formative tracks," he writes, "that place where one hopes to grow introspective and wise as well as old." Molly Ivins is less lyrical and more put out as she describes the varieties of Texas sexism: "They used to say that Texas was hell on women and horses—I don't know why they stopped."

Short stories and essays anthologize well; bits of novels are trickier. Mary Karr's piece from *The Liars' Club* (1995) is hilariously self-contained, but Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place* (1961), the finest novel of Texas politics, is woven too tightly for clean excerpts. Brammer has to be included, and Graham does his best, but the ragged edges show. In this case, the

plea of all anthologists applies with special force: Go read the original.

Graham is a gentle guide to what he calls the "archeological site" of Texas literature. He suggests themes but otherwise lets visitors ramble. "Readers may make their own discoveries and connections, and they are welcome to whatever insights may arise." It's a rich plot, worth returning to again and again.

—H. W. BRANDS

GODARD:

A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy.

By Colin MacCabe. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 432 pp. \$25

As a filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard, éminence grise of the European avant-garde, presents stumbling blocks. More essayist than storyteller, he has always made films that subordinate narrative to ideas, or else discard narrative altogether. The ideas unfold unpredictably, through images and techniques that are, by turns, evocative, smart-alecky, and silly. To Godard, contradictory impressions represent not incoherence but fidelity to life's tumult. For a time, especially in the 1960s, every new Godard film was an event.

Born in 1930 to a prosperous family, Godard left his home in Nyon, Switzerland, at 16 to attend the Lycée Buffon in Paris. A lackadaisical student, he turned to petty thievery, got arrested, and was disowned by his parents. Godard soaked in Paris's rich cinema culture at Henri Langlois's revered Cinémathèque and the Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin, and got to know Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and



Jean-Luc Godard on the set in 1968