

Book Reviews

Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America

Jean-Philippe Mathy

University of Chicago Press, 1993. [307 pages]

Students who go abroad learn as much about themselves as about the host country. A perceived tendency to focus on the independent self while ignoring or misunderstanding the host culture was the subject of a recent critique of study abroad (Ben Feinberg, "What Students Don't Learn Abroad" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 3, 2002.) According to Professor Feinberg, the foreign setting is, too often, merely a backdrop for an individualistic, triumphalist, autobiographical episode. One may consider Feinberg's view jaundiced and exaggerated. We hope that each of our students comes to a truer and sharper sense of self while also observing, absorbing and participating in the host culture. Nevertheless, we know that a foreign culture is a mirror in which the self is reflected, and displacement from the home culture can lead to reflection on home, its meaning and its peculiarities, as never before.

What is true of student travelers is true of any sojourner, and of anyone who comes in contact with a foreign culture. Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* shows how the educated elite of France has used another country as a screen on which to project its ideas and ideals, as well as its phobias and prejudices. Although first published 10 years ago, this study is newly relevant. It is useful to be reminded of the long-standing background against which American actions are viewed by the French. More than an actual nation or national culture, "America" carries the weight of its meaning. America is idealized as an "incarnated idea" of freedom, prosperity, egalitarianism and pleasure, and it is vilified to the extent that it does not fulfill its own ideals or those projected on it.

Among the sojourners whose views are examined in this work in some detail are Alexis de Tocqueville, René de Chateaubriand, Georges

Duhamel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Butor, Saint-John Perse, Paul Claudel, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Alexandre Kojève and (stretching “French” to include “European”) Umberto Eco. What aspects of American culture spark the interest of French intellectuals, and what does their interest reveal about France and its educated class?

According to Mathy, America is seen as “an incarnated idea, endowed with mythical status as the repository of the hopes, desires, fantasies and phobias of millions of freedom-loving, money-grubbing or pleasure-seeking individuals around the globe” (p. 47). At the same time, it is condemned as prosaic, pragmatic and boring: “American political principles, frozen as they are in the bourgeois optimism of the late eighteenth century, are totally lacking in the sublime and romantic elements that used to appeal to large parts of the progressive clergy: the American past is as boring as its technological mass-marketed present” (p. 47).

For a number of thinkers, from the 1920s onward, America represented mechanization, industrialization and consumption, in contrast to a French ideal of individuality, freedom of thought and a sense of the tragic. According to the author “what is peculiar to many French descriptions of American culture is the critical *hauteur* from which they engage their subject matter. From the perspective of an old skeptical wisdom only one diagnosis is possible: Americans are condemned to deal unsatisfactorily with the eternal recurrence of the tragic because they will not conceptualize it” (p. 124). In addition, Mathy identifies in French thinkers a “paradigm of cultural continuity” that would like to maintain American indebtedness to European culture, even after the fact, despite obvious examples to the contrary. As an example of European thinkers recognizing their American sources, Mathy points out, “Poe came before Baudelaire and Emerson before Nietzsche, and both acknowledged their debts to the former” (p. 136).

The Cold War of the 1950s and beyond found “America” to be a convenient political concept for the French Right as well as the Left, the former decrying America’s moral decadence and the latter its political hegemony. Another paradox is offered by French views of physical space in America: although its urban industrial landscape is described in dystopian terms, its open spaces (plains, desert, wilderness) have been the subject of eloquent poetic and philosophical celebration.

Finally, America is the subject of a theme popular among French intellectuals of the post-modernist period: the end of history. “The homogenization of thoughts, tastes, and behaviors by mass production and mass consumption leads to a systematic erasure of all differences between individuals and cultures” (p. 219). American economic hegemony is seen as the harbinger of a post-historical universe devoid of cultural distinctions.

This dense and eclectic work draws on philosophy, political theory, poetry, novels, autobiographical writing and literary criticism to shed light on the web of interactions connecting an influential social group in one country to another country that, since it came into existence, has always been a privileged “other.” Mathy’s book is relevant to study abroad because it reminds us of the complexity of cross-cultural interactions between the perceiver and the perceived. Further, for Americans whose first foreign experience was in France, and whose views of their own country and the world were irrevocably affected by French sources, this work offers a fresh perspective on those influential ideas and their cultural context.

Sheila Bayne, *Tufts University*

*The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in
America*

Louis Menand

New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 2001. (546 pages)

Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club*, daunting in its choice of subject matter, closely aligns itself with the ancient sense of the word ‘history’ as a fluid, almost epic narrative. The Metaphysical Club of the title was a conversation group that met in Cambridge for a few months in 1872. Its membership roster listed some of the greatest intellectuals of the day: Charles Peirce, William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Chauncey Wright, amongst others. There is no record of the Club’s discussions or debates—in fact, the only direct reference to the Club is made by Peirce in a letter written thirty-five years later. Menand utilizes the Club as a jumping-off point for a sweeping analysis of the beliefs of the day. The subtitle