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Routes of Passage: Emil Draitser's From Here to Wherever

An academician and a prize winning writer, Draitser is the author of ten volumes of literary criticism and fiction published in Europe and the United States. In American literary circles he is regarded as one of the most accomplished and significant authors of Russian émigré literature and is among those authors whose books are eagerly awaited. With his impressive creative and intellectual range, Draitser writes fiction distinctly personal but also persistently examining the Jewish experience in Russia and in emigration. Writing with elegance and precision, Draitser is a masterful storyteller and a mocking satirist, and his new book (Seagull Press: Baltimore 2012) provides an excellent sampling of his remarkable talent.

From Here to Wherever is an appropriate selection for a wide audience because it represents the literature of exile and its multifaceted nature which frequently means a vision of self-definition and effort to see that self as capable of endurance and adaptation. Announcing exile as a controlling idea, the title of Draitser's novel is not just a reference to Jewish emigration from Russia; it resonates as a metaphor capturing the outlook of all displaced exiles in the face of the unknown.

A destructive portrayal of the Soviet society in 1970s, the story allows contemporary reader to see oppression and discrimination against Jews due to long-standing ethnic prejudice and state-promoted anti-Semitism. Focusing on that society with a sharp and critical eye of an insider, the novelist brings vividly to life the pain and resentment of the Jewish Others toward their life in its marginality and hardship. Nevertheless, the comic element infuses Draitser's novel in which his well-known wit and irony shine through. Present is the satirical depiction of Soviet officials exercising their power to humiliate and rob the exiles, self-deprecating Jewish humor, and the bitter-sweet humor of unrequited love.

Structurally, we see a non-traditional approach to the novel, as Draitser is telling two stories at the same time, chopped up in pieces and intermingled. Two finely crafted personalities stand out. Boris, the novel's central character (probably the author's alter ego), is a free lance journalist whose main task is to write propaganda materials for the masses on behalf of the Soviet regime. Boris's is the fate of the intellectual in a totalitarian state, to be denied adequate publishing and persecuted for nonconformist writing. Crushed by the restrictive society which thwarted his ambitions, his Jewishness pursuing him as a lifetime torment, Boris sees emigration as the only response to the injustice of repressive Russia.

The author moves to the second figure, the similarly disadvantaged hapless Yurik, who is obsessively attached to his ex-wife. We see Yurik, restless and troubled about the future, desperately search for his bearing or some meaning in life, and emigration offers him a chance to remake it on his own terms. The two narrative strands mirror each other throughout the novel, the sectional jumps establishing a complex matrix, playing off one another in intriguing ways. The two lines come together in the book's last part that takes place in Rome, where uprooted emigrants, crowding the city, knock at the doors of the civilized world.

Draitser's ability at rendering past memories in almost photographic detail - demonstrated in many of his works - is as impressive as ever and often reaches artistic perfection. His description of Rome is the portrait of a southern world through the observer's northern eyes, which capture everyday activities in the streets, the bustle of the sun-drenched city, joy of life, but also unfamiliar customs, incomprehensible and alien to the émigré's mind.

The book manages to preserve the immediacy and powerful flavor of a "borderline situation," as Draitser presents a large cast of refugees, vulnerable, displaced, never fully unpacked and fearful of the future, who share their life stories and reminisce about their now faraway home. The various speakers emerge through accounts and letters, and the reader interweaves that multiplicity of voices into a coherent whole. The fact that most of Draitser's characters are not depicted in great detail but rather possess a collective, flock-like quality enhances the work's attempt to embrace the totality of the emigrant experience. These people enjoy our sympathy for the loss of their motherland, which nostalgia renders even sweeter as their present life tastes bitter. To his surprise, Boris also misses the country he left behind, and his memories of Odessa, "my city", are particularly appealing. Odessa itself emerges here as a living presence, magical and fascinating, and, fittingly, Draitser's dedication to his hometown prefaces the novel. Such nostalgic musings suggest a further framework for understanding the landscape of exile.

There is a closure at the end as Boris, on the plane to America, feels a connectedness to the larger world; he likes to believe that it is full of happiness and is for him to enjoy. The experience of exile, the distancing displacement, has given him the insight and courage to see and confront what lies ahead. The novel's merit is the vivid and colorful language, as Draitser employs bits of Jewish folklore that give a particular flavor to his writing. The novel is a remarkable achievement in many ways but particularly because, building on his autobiographical foundation, Draitser gives voice to an "unheard" group, opening up their experience for readers, so one is led to believe that it may well be Draitser's best work so far.

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