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The Way of the World by Nicolas Bouvier, New York
Review Books Classics, 2009

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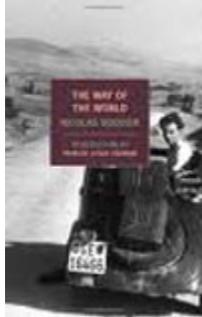
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Recommended Readings



The Way of the World

by Nicola Bouvier (translated by Robyn Marsack), New York Book Reviews Classics, 2009

Reviewed by Tiberiu Popa

In the summer of 1953, while still a student at the University of Geneva, Nicolas Bouvier embarks on a long and often perilous journey together with his friend, Thierry Vernet, who would later provide the illustrations for this book. In about a year and a half the two young men, driving an unimposing and fairly unreliable Fiat Topolino, explored postwar Yugoslavia, northern Greece (fleetingly), northern and western Turkey, before venturing around Iran, and into Pakistan and Afghanistan (about as dangerous back then as it is now). The narrative line is just as captivatingly sinuous, often accelerating in unexpected directions, for the poignant tale of some misadventures in Anatolia or in the desolate Iranian mountains, or slowing down occasionally so that the author can properly convey his impressions arising, for example, from the archaic ambiance in the camp of nomadic gypsies or from some otherworldly landscape. The vividness of the author's observations and the evocative force of the narrative episodes make it easy for the reader to forget that this book is not a journal; indeed, Bouvier allowed no less than 10 years to pass after his and his friend's exploits and tribulations, before he published this volume (à propos, if you are in good command of French, you may want to savor it in the original). As a result, his initial impressions became more crystallized and his reflections gained depth without, however, losing the appearance of spontaneity. The book may charm its readers with its youthful taste for conquering unknown worlds and with its keen 'ethnographic' snapshots. Still, its literary worth may lie chiefly in its reflections on the inner trajectory taken by that journey, an occasion as much for discovering exotic lands and cultures as for self-discovery, and in the hauntingly lyric tone that infuses most of the chapters and renders the substance of this book atemporal and very much worth reading.

- Tiberiu Popa is associate professor of philosophy at Butler University.