

A Passenger from the West

Nabile Farès

Peter Thompson, Translator

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It is strange to place Nabile Farès' *A Passenger from the West* under a genre heading. The work resists categorization. Is it nonfiction? Yes. The friendship between Farès and James Baldwin, which is a main subject of the book, emerged concurrent with the book's writing. Although Farès relays his actual experiences, *Passenger from the West* was first presented as a novel in 1971 when it was originally published by *Editions du Seuil* in French (titled *Un Passager de l'Occident*).

Is the work therefore fiction? Yes, too. The book is poetic, and it refuses to straightforwardly report. A hybrid term like "fictobiography" might seem appropriate, but this word does not account for what reads like philosophy or literary criticism. Farès discourses on, among other issues, literary realism, Baldwin's work, identity, and politics.

One might best say that the book is multi-generic—and, moreover, multifarious in style. There are passages that sound like diary entries, summarizing what the writer "was able to pick up yesterday." Turn a few pages and find an excerpt written in an analytical mode. Then encounter confessions of dreams. Following this morphing main section is a translated interview of James Baldwin conducted by Farès. The transcription, originally published in a 1970 issue of *Jeune Afrique*, gives a direct account of Baldwin's thought. As such, it serves as a kind of counterpoint to the preceding dramatic rendering of the conversations.

In the end, *Passenger from the West* is a composite. Its heterogeneity reflects its motifs—nomadcity, for instance. Farès roams not only in terms of geography, but also in his attention and style. Although themes can be named, *A Passenger from the West* is not limited to a unifying set of positions. This decolonial writer will not be settled.

As much as it is unpredictable, Farès' style is distinctive, marked by ample use of parentheses. Drawn with Farès' pen, this notation can be a means of counterpoint, explanation, recursion, clarification, conversation—or can contentedly point out that "gauche" is a "lovely word." The writing revels in the restless process of associating. "Jellyfish consciousness" sonically leads to "jellified consciousness." These "are in fact the two forms of realism."

The English language is better for its encounter with theses like this and with Farès' sensibility. Not easily claimed as one thing or another, *A Passenger from the West* belongs in many aisles of a bookstore. One should not miss it.

JANELLE ADSIT (November / December 2010)

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