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| Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq أحمد فارس الشدياق (ca. 1805-1887) |
| Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, Aḥmad Fāris aš-Šidyāq, Ahmad Faris Chidiac |
| Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq was a Lebanese writer and journalist and one of the most provocative figures of the Nahḍa (‘awakening’), an intellectual current in the long nineteenth century for the renewal Arab culture. With a life on the move, religious conversions and public controversies, he appears as an idiosyncratic, uncompromising critic of Arab and Western societies and cultures alike. His deep knowledge of the Arabic language made him both a skilful moderniser and a passionate defender of the classical Arabic language. His masterpiece *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq* (*Leg Over Leg*), published in 1855 in Paris, is a dazzling experimental work that conveys an unprecedented critique of his age. In Istanbul, al-Shidyāq founded in 1861 *al-Jawāʾib* (*The Traversing News*), the first independent newspaper in the Arabic language, which made him into an influential yet controversial public intellectual. |
| Fāris al-Shidyāq, later Aḥmad Fāris Efendi, was born around 1805 in a small village in Mount Lebanon into a Maronite family of high renown. Following a family tradition, he worked as scribe and copyist, where he developed a deep insight and lasting passion for Arabic language and literature. When his brother Asʿad converted to Protestantism and was persecuted by the Maronite clergy, Fāris became an ardent critic of the Maronite Catholic Church, converted to Protestantism and exiled himself to Malta in 1826. Until 1848, he worked in Malta for various Protestant missionary circles as teacher and proofreader, where he pioneered composing textbooks to teach English and Arabic for non-native speakers. At the same time, he began to dissociate himself religiously, intellectually and morally from Protestantism, celebrating the pleasures of life. His stay in Malta was interrupted by an interval in Cairo from 1828 to 1835 where he worked for the first Arabic newspaper *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-miṣriyya* (*The Egyptian Affairs*) and pursued studies in Arabic language and literature.  In 1848, al-Shidyāq moved to England, where he later gained British citizenship. In England, he co-translated with Samuel Lee (1783-1852) the Bible into Arabic, which earned much respect for its excellent language. At the same time, he clandestinely penned a critique of the Bible called *Mumāḥakāt al-taʾwīl fī munāqaḍāt al-Injīl* (*Controversies of Interpretation. On the Contradictions in the New Testament*), which was only published posthumously. Though he was in close contact with many European scholars, writers and politicians – he even composed a panegyric poem for Queen Victoria (1819-1901) – he failed to get an adequate position at the university or elsewhere. The literary work *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq* In the early 1850s, he lived for some years in Paris, during one of the most productive periods of his life, where he wrote his literary master piece *al-Sāq ʿalā l-sāq fī mā huwa l-Fāryāq* *aw ayyām wa-shuhūr wa-aʿwām fī ʿajm al-ʿarab wa-l-aʿjām* (*Leg Over Leg. On the Person al-Faryāq. Or, Days, Months and Years in Critical Examination of Arabs and Non-Arabs*), which was published in 1855 in Paris. This huge volume of some seven-hundred pages is one of the most daring Arabic works of the nineteenth century: experimental in its form, provocative in its content and later often assessed as the initiation of Arabic literary modernity. Conflating and mocking such different genres as autobiography, travelogue, poetry, erotic tract, lexicographical study or philological treaty, it resists any generic classification and becomes, as Nadia Al-Bagdadi states, ‘a unique literary expression of its time.’ (Al-Bagdadi 395).  *Al-Sāq* basically narrates the life, adventures and opinions of the protagonist al-Fāryāq, a compound of the author’s name (*Fār*-is Shid-*yāq*), who travels and lives in Lebanon, Egypt, Malta, England, and France. As the author’s picaresque alter ego, he scathingly describes various social and cultural issues of East and West, like the despotism of the Eastern Clergy or the prudishness of British Victorianism. Besides the male alter ego, this fictional autobiography offers also a female alter ego called al-Fāryāqiyya, who is the wife of al-Fāryāq and the ‘antithesis of the conventional stereotype of the submissive and downtrodden Oriental woman’. (Roper 220). Assessing East and West from a woman’s point of view, she voices Arab women’s rights for education and self-determination, while she unveils the poor living conditions of the lower class in England and their consequences especially for women. *Al-Sāq* offers a secular, early socialist and proto-feminist critique of the Arab and European nineteenth century that oscillates between a differentiated analysis, a taunting parody and a scathing polemic. It unsettles common dichotomies like East vs. West, Catholic vs. Protestant, or modernity vs. tradition by a heightened awareness of intersections of gender, class, religion, education, and language, and by ambiguous and self-conflicting (re)presentations, as for instance in the sparkling dialogues of the couple.  The narrative of *al-Sāq* is interwoven with ‘digressive’ reflections of the self-conscious narrator whose irony spares neither the two alter egos nor the text’s own genres. For instance, when the narrator presents four *maqāmas*, a highly renowned genre of Arabic literature in rhymed prose, in order to show off his literary and linguistic skills, he ridicules the *maqāma* (and himself) with a lisping narrator. Importantly, *al-Sāq* is also interwoven with long lists of rare Arabic words carefully chosen from al-Fīrūzābādī’s (d. 1415) dictionary *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (*The Encompassing Ocean*). By exposing these words, the text draws attention to the wisdom and beauty of the classical Arabic language, the epistemic and aesthetic background for the text’s comprehensive cultural critique. Revisiting for instance its vast erotic lexis with nearly one-hundred words for ‘steatopygous’ women (i.e. with large bottoms), the text fervently argues against the prudish morals of the nineteenth century and pens an apology for sexual pleasure – both for men *and* women. The premodern Arabic language becomes here fertile ground for what Tarek El-Ariss calls the ‘trials of Arab modernity’, i.e. the performances and challenges of nineteenth-century modernity.  Though this book definitely found a contemporary audience, it failed to achieve a greater success because it was too provocative in regard to religion, society, and especially sexuality. In the second half of the twentieth century, *al-Sāq* constantly grew in stature due to its experimental and ironic style of writing and unprecedented and differentiated critique. It is now accessible to English readers in an outstanding translation by Humphrey Davies.  In addition to this fictional travel account, al-Shidyāq authored two more factual accounts, one of Malta, namely *al-Wāsiṭa ilā maʿrifat aḥwāl Malta* (*The Mediating One. Conveying Knowledge on the Conditions of Malta*), and of England and France, namely *Kashf al-mukhabbā ʿan funūn Ūrubbā* (*Disclosing the Hidden Crafts of Europe*), published together in 1863 in Tunis. They complement the observations of *al-Sāq* with statistics and figures, historical sketches, and personal anecdotes.   The newspaper *al-Jawāʾib* In 1857, al-Shidyāq moved to Tunis, where he embraced Islam and adopted the name Aḥmad. In 1860 he moved to Istanbul, the centre of the Ottoman Empire, where he established in 1861 the newspaper *al-Jawāʾib* (*The Traversing News*), often referred to as the first independent newspaper in the Arabic language. Publishing on politics, history, literature, and language, the newspaper found a wide readership in and beyond the Ottoman Empire, though it later had financial problems and lost some of its independence. Through his newspaper, al-Shidyāq became a public intellectual who formed public opinion and was engaged in many public debates, and was feared too for his merciless and polemical critique. In *al-Jawāʾib*, al-Shidyāq also acts as a modernizer of language, coining and introducing many new words that entered modern Arabic, like the term *ishtirākiyya* for ‘socialism’.  Though an influential modernizer of the Arabic language, he was at the same time a passionate defender of the classical Arabic language. In 1867, al-Shidyāq published in Istanbul *Sirr al-layāl fī l-qalb wa-l-ibdāl* (*The Secret of the Nights. On Metathesis and Permutation*), where he develops a genuine theory of the origin of the Arabic language and its etymology in order to unveil the ‘secrets’ of its beauty and wisdom. In 1882, he also published in Istanbul *al-Jāsūs ʿalā l-Qāmūs* (*Spying on al-Qāmūs*), a critical treaty on al-Fīrūzābādī’s dictionary *al-Qāmūs*, that calls for a modern dictionary for the classical language. In 1870, al-Shidyāq founded in Istanbul the al-Jawāʾib press to make the literary and linguistic heritage accessible to a wider public.  When al-Shidyāq died in 1887, Christians and Muslims in Lebanon quarrelled over the religion to which he truly belonged. In the end, al-Shidyāq had an interdenominational ceremony and was buried, according to his will, in the cemetery of Ḥāzimiyya, a neutral space between the Christian and the Muslim districts. This incident appears iconic for a life and work ‘in-between’ the common dichotomies. Al-Shidyāq was a controversial and eccentric key figure of the nineteenth-century Nahḍa whose work hasn’t lost its relevance, originality and even provocation for a twenty-first-century audience.  Works (Selection):  *Kitāb al-Sāq ʿalā s-sāq fī mā huwa l-Fāryāq*: كتاب الساق على الساق في ما هو الفارياق (*The Book:* *Leg Over Leg. On the Person al-Faryāq*). Paris 1855 (and later editions; *Leg Over Leg, or: The Turtle in the Tree Concerning The Fāriyāq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be.* 4 vols. Transl. H. Davies. New York: New York University Press.).  *Kitāb al-Riḥla al-mawsūma bi-l-Wāsiṭa ilā maʿrifat aḥwāl Mālṭa wa-Kashf al-mukhabbā ʿan funūn Ūrubbā*: كتاب الرحلة الموسومة بالواسطة إلى معرفة أحوال مالطة وكشف المخبا عن فنون أوربا (*The Book: The Travelogue called: The Mediating One. Conveying Knowledge on the People of Malta. And: Disclosing the Hidden Crafts of Europe*). Tunis 1863 (and later editions).  *Sirr al-layāl fī l-qalb wa-l-ibdāl*: سر الليال في القلب والإبدال (*Secret of the Nights. On Metathesis and Permutation*). Istanbul 1867 (and Beirut 2006).  *Kanz al-raghāʾib fī muntakhabāt al-Jawāʾib*:كنز الرغائب في منتخبات الجوائب (*A Treasure of Desires. Selections from* al-Jawāʾib). 7 vols. Istanbul 1871-1881.  *al-Jāsūs ʿalā l-Qāmūs*:الجاسوس على القاموس (*Spying on the Dictionary*). Istanbul 1882.  *Mumāḥakāt al-taʾwīl fī munaqaḍāt al-Injīl*: مماحكات التأويل في مناقضات الإنجيل (*Controversies of Interpretation. On the Contradictions in the New Testament*). Amman 2003. |
| Further reading:  (Al-Bagdadi)  (Al-Bagdadi, Trablousi and and Winckler, A Life in Praise of Words! Amhad Faris al-Shidyaq and the Nineteenth Century)  (Ashur)  (Dāghir)  (El-Ariss)  (Hallaq)  (Hamarneh)  (Kilito)  (Peled)  (Sacks)  (Sawāʿī)  (Ṭarābulusī)  (Zakharia) |