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| Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī ( ناصيف اليازجي (1800-1871 |
| Nasif al-Yaziji, Nāṣīf al-Yāziǧī |
| Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī was a Lebanese writer and philologist who contributed to the Nahḍa (‘awakening’), an intellectual current in the long nineteenth century for the renewal of Arab culture. Tremendously erudite in Arabic language and literature, he excelled in many different fields as a poet, philologist, and teacher, but mostly earned his wide reputation from his literary collection *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* (*The Confluence of the Two Seas*), published in 1856 in Beirut. In this eloquent work he both masters and exceeds the classical narrative and language of the *maqāma* and thereby expresses a new cultural self-confidence of Christian Arabs in the nineteenth century. While al-Yāzijī’s work often has been disdained by later scholars as merely conservative and traditional, it implants a subcutaneous newness whose innovative potential has yet to be fully explored. |
| Nāṣīf b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Yāzijī was born in Kafr Shīmā, a village near Beirut, into a highly respected family of Greek Catholic denomination. He was an autodidact who was extremely erudite in Arabic language and literature, memorising large portions of texts, including the Qurʾān – ‘an indication of the esteem, in which the sacred book of Islam was held by at least some of the leading Christian Arab intellectuals of the day as the prime authority for the Arabic language’ (Starkey 377).  In the first half of his working life, he was secretary to Emir Bashīr Shihāb II (1767-1850) until the latter went into exile and al-Yāzijī moved in 1840 to Beirut, the growing intellectual capital of the time. In the second part of his working life, al-Yāzijī took on the career of teacher at the prestigious Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University of Beirut) and the National School of Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883). While teaching, he penned many textbooks, the most famous of which is *Jawf al-farāʾ* (approximately translated as *Combining All Good Qualities*), some one-thousand didactic verses on the Arabic grammar (re)modelling the *Alfiyya* (*Thousand Verses*) of Ibn Malik (d. 1274). His pedagogic works contributed to the nineteenth-century Arab Nahḍa as a project of linguistic and literary education.  Al-Yāzijī was also a gifted poet who composed in his youth vernacular poetry (*zajal*) and as ‘court poet’ of Bashīr Shihāb II panegyric (*madḥ*) and elegiac (*rithāʾ*) poetry. He was also famous for his chronogrammatic poems where each letter of the alphabet has a numerical value and, if counted together, refer to the date of a particular occasion. His poetry, much like his other works, has often been described as entirely conservative and traditional, but such notions overlook the covertly introduced new tones. For instance, in his *badīʿiyya*, a fertile poetic genre normally praising the Prophet Muḥammad by using in each verse a different rhetorical device, al-Yāzijī neither praises Muḥammad nor Jesus, like other Christian poets did before him. By avoiding such sectarian boundaries, he achieved what Thomas Bauer called an ’ecumenical work, or, more precisely, the commitment of an Arab Christian to the Arabic-Islamic culture’. (Bauer 66, my translation.)  During the second period of his life in Beirut, al-Yāzijī turned from ‘court poet’ into an ‘urban intellectual’. He came in contact with growing circles of Western Protestant missionaries, became a leading member of *al-Jamʿiyya al-sūriyya* (Syrian Society of Arts and Sciences), and worked as a proof-reader for the Arabic Bible translation. Though al-Yāzijī did not travel abroad or learn foreign languages, like many of his contemporaries, he had a wide cultural and intellectual horizon. When the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) edited the famous *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122), al-Yāzijī was the first Arab philologist to ‘write back’ to him, unveiling the linguistic errors of this edition. His letter to de Sacy, published later in Leipzig in a revised version as *Epistola Nasifi al-Iazigi Beyrutensis* (*The Letter of Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī from Beirut*), represents an important Arab answer to European Orientalism and to its supposed linguistic and cultural supremacy.  Yet al-Yazijī’s interest in *maqāmas* was not merely a philological one, but also literary. The *maqāma*, literally translated as ‘assembly’, is a prestigious genre of Arabic literature, where a narrator relates the stories of an eloquent but deceitful hero who tricks people for his own profit. The *maqāma* is written in an elaborated rhymed prose with verse insertions, and it is commonly said that the genre reached its perfection with al-Ḥarīrī. Consciously following the model of al-Ḥarīrī, al-Yāzijī published in Beirut in 1856 his *maqāma* collection called *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* (*The Confluence of the Two Seas*, i.e. prose and poetry), its title a quotation from the Qurʾān (Q 18:60). While al-Yāzijī in the introduction fully confirms the superiority of al-Ḥarīrī’s *maqāmas*, his composition of sixty *maqāmas* rather than fifty like al-Ḥarīrī ‘possibly suggests a desire to surpass him’. (Starkey 379). In any case, al-Yazijī earned his fame in the nineteenth century first and foremost because his eloquent *maqāmas* challenge, as scholars point out, the traditional dictum that ‘the Arabic language cannot be Christianized’. (Starkey 380).  In *Majmaʾ al-baḥrayn*, a narrator called Suhayl ibn ʿAbbād conveys the stories of the eloquent trickster Maymūn ibn Khizām and his daughter Laylā and son Rajab. Gifted with linguistic and rhetorical talent, they play tricks on people in order to earn their living. For instance, in the third *maqāma*, a traveller fervently exhorts the grieving people at a funeral not to live for the world but for the world thereafter. Believing him to be a pious man, the people give him money to pray for them. When they see how rudely he treats his wife exhausted from the journey, just like a pious man who does not care for women, they even endow her with a horse. The narrator Suhayl, however, recognizes him as Maymūn and follows him only to find him later in a tavern drinking wine and enjoying the companionship of his wife, who turns out to be his concubine. Too drunken to respond to the narrator’s reproaches properly, he promises to explain himself another time.  These narratives certainly follow conventional patterns, but offer interesting variations, like remodelling a hero that sometime fails in his trickery and eloquence or foregrounding the hero’s children. At the same time, the narratives seem to echo, though often from a distance, contemporary debates on language, religion, or, as in the mentioned *maqāma*, the status of women that arouses people’s compassion. However, compared to neo-*maqāmas*, like the iconoclast *maqāmas* of Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (ca. 1805-1887), al-Yāzijī’s approach to the *maqāma* fell under the above critique as ‘more a traditionalist than a modernist [approach] and arguably little to modern taste’ (Starkey 379). But al-Yāzijī’s modernity stems not from an overt rupture but rather a covert transformation. Presenting himself in the introduction as a Christian from Mount Lebanon, who has always sought the sites of Arabic literature and language, al-Yāzijī consciously ‘recoded classical genres (form) with a new, expanded sense of secular Arab culture (content) that would be most appropriate for the new subjectivity that would emerge’ (Sheehi 122). Not religion but the Arabic language becomes the basis for the Arab community – and therein lies al-Yāzijī’s uncontested mastery.  Al-Yāzijī’s knowledge of Arabic language and literature as well as his cultural awareness made him a cornerstone of the nineteenth-century Nahḍa, but his role in it is yet to be fully explored by modern scholarship. Though he was not the first Christian to master Arabic or appropriate the *maqāma* genre, he implanted a subcutaneous newness whose innovative potential came to full fruition in the Nahḍa. When Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī died in 1871 in Beirut, he left behind his daughter Warda al-Yāzijī (1838-1924), who as one of the first Arab women authors published her own volume of poetry, and his son Ibrāhīm al-Yāzijī (1847-1906), who became, like his father, a renowned philologist whose concept of language paved the way for Arab nationalism.  Works (Selection):  *Epistola critica Nasifi al-Jazigi Beyrutensis ad de Sacyum* (*Critical Letter of Naṣīf al-Yazijī from Beirut addressed to de Sacy*), Ed. August Ferdinand Mehren, Leipzig 1848.  *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*:مجمع البحرين (*The Confluence of the Two Seas*). Beirut 1856 (and later editions).  *Diwān al-ʿālim al-ʿallāma al-šāʿir al-šayḫ Nāṣīf al-Yāziǧī* (*The Poetry Collection of [...] Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī*). Beirut 1898. |
| Further reading:  Bauer, T. (2006) ‘Die badīʿiyya des Nāṣīf al-Yāziǧī und das Problem der spätosmanischen arabischen Literatur’, in: A. Neuwirth and C. Islebe (Eds.) *Reflections on Reflections. Near Eastern Writers Reading Literature*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 49-118.  Hämeen-Anttila, J. (2002) *Maqāma: A History of a Genre*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 351-357.  Hassan, K. J. (2007) ‘La *Nahḍa* par l’*iḥyāʾ*?’, in: B. Hallaq and H. Toelle (Eds.) *Histoire de la literature arabe moderne.* Vol. 1*: 1800-1945*, Arles: Sindbad, 115-149, here 125-128.  Kāẓim, N. (2003) *al-Maqāma wa-l-talaqqī. Baḥṯ fī anmāṭ al-talaqqī li*-Maqāmāt al-Hamaḏānī *fī l-naqd al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīṯ*, Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabīya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Našr, 101-110.  Moosa, M. (1997) *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, Boulder: Rienner, 123-125.  Patel, A. (2013) *The Arab Nahḍa. The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.  Starkey, P. (2010) ‘Nāzīf al-Yāzijī’, in: R. Allen (Ed.) *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography. 1850-1950*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 376-382. |