

Tributes to Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq

(Chronological Order)

The diversity of styles and genres within *As-Sāq* parallels the versatility of *al-Fārāyiq* in countering European accusations of native failure. The text's multiplicity parallels the disparate situations in which the protagonist finds himself and his adroitness in translating cross-cultural experiences-all while jealously guarding his Levantine Arab identity. Consequently, Ash-Shidyāq-the-author (the voice of the unconscious) intervenes or rather surfaces to mediate this diversity. He stands as a narrative bridge between the protagonist al-Fariyaq, the narrator al-Shidyāq, and the reader. Hence, his authorial intrusions bring continuity to disparate scenes, genres, styles, and linguistic registers, as well as to the consciousness of a native son outside his homeland.

Stephen Sheehi, Ph.D.

Foundations of Modern Arab Identity, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 2004, p. 125.

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Among the many Arab intellectuals who travelled through Europe in the 19th century, Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq stands out as a dazzling character. He was a brilliant intellectual, and he was a combative spirit.

Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq (1804-1887) was in many ways more progressive than the celebrated pioneers of the *Nahda*, the Arabic Renaissance. He was a writer, journalist, linguist and translator; he was publisher of *al-Jawā'ib*, the first Arabic newspaper not controlled by the government.

A contemporary of Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens, he maintained contacts with European intellectuals and Orientalists as well as to Arab thinkers, especially those of a reformist tendency. As a master of the Arabic language who understood

its subtlest nuances and commanded the art of rhetoric, he was also one of its most important modernisers.

He contributed significantly to the development of a modern (newspaper) language freed from excessive rhetoric, and he coined numerous modern terms, such as the Arabic word for socialism. He led an unusually full and interesting life; here, it is only possible to mention a few of the major elements in it.

Ash-Shidyāq describes his experiences and impressions of Europe with a breadth and depth that puts other travelers' tales in the shade. Entrusted with a multiplicity of tasks, or simply looking for his next job, he moved from one place to the next, often under extremely trying physical and spiritual conditions.

In all this, he represents a striking contrast to (for example) Rāfi'ah Rāfi' at-Ṭaḥṭāwī. This Egyptian Azhar Sheikh, and later government official, remained within the safe but not narrow ambit of Paris for the entire duration of his government-sponsored study-trip. The report he wrote is quite sober and factual. Shidyāq's book is very different.

As-Sāq 'Alā as-Sāq fī ma huwa Al-Fāryāq (One Leg Crossed Over The Other) is a literary masterpiece that transcends and surpasses the purely "documentary". It is a work in four parts, nearly 700 pages long, and the fourth section deals mainly with the periods spent in Europe by the author. It also cuts across all genres: not a classical traveller's tale, not really an autobiography and not a pure lexicographical study, Ash-Shidyāq's book yet manages to be all these things at once.

The protagonist's name is "Fāryāq", easily decipherable as a compound made up of the author's abbreviated first and last names. The book describes his life, but it also offers discussions on philosophical and social matters, and descriptions of places visited, as well as linguistic and literary excursions.

These multifarious themes are often presented in the form of arguments between Fāryāq and Fāryāqiyya, his intelligent, cultivated and self-assured wife. In a work bristling with irony and self-irony, both the achievements and the negative aspects of modern European civilization are subjected to a critical examination; and the social conditions in Europe during the Industrial Revolution are not left out.

It is notable that Ash-Shidyāq does not portray Europe as a monolithic block. Instead he differentiates according to countries and social classes. In comparison to France, England generally comes off better; certainly, Ash-Shidyāq criticizes the way human dealings in England tend to be oriented towards profit; he also complains of a shortage of *savoir vivre*, too little spontaneous expression of feeling, a lack of generosity and hospitality.

Ash-Shidyāq was undoubtedly a combative intellectual, and he was never deterred by taboos. His work includes criticisms of the Bible, erotic descriptions, defenses of the rights of woman, arguments favoring a separation of Church and State, caustic critiques of the Christian clergy in the Lebanon, and condemnations of large landowners and religious sectarianism. For the period in which he was writing, this was extremely provocative - and it still is, in part. This is surely why Ash-Shidyāq has never been granted proper recognition in the Arab world. A full appreciation of his substantial work is long overdue.

Barbara Winckler,

“Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq’s Literary Investigations”

<https://en.qantara.de/content/views-of-europe-from-a-combative-intellectual-ahmad-faris-al-shidyaqs-literary-0>

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An accomplished Lebanese writer arrives in London, the center of the Anglophone publishing world. After a long, uncertain career as a struggling poet, he is informed that a welcoming party has been organized to receive him. He expects to finally experience the glory and appreciation denied him at home. But the British literati, confused by his exotic, gender-ambiguous clothing, are unable to distinguish the poet and his wife, and the whole scene descends into farce. Is it a cautionary parable of cross-cultural misunderstanding and thwarted ambition, or something more complicated?

This scene occurs late in Fāris Ash-Shidyāq’s four-volume masterwork *Leg Over Leg*, after the reader has followed its writer-antihero on a halting, chaotic journey across the Middle East and Europe. Ash-Shidyāq himself was one of the major literary instigators of *Al-Nahda*, the “renaissance” or “revival” of Arabic culture in the 1800s. One of the more audacious works ever produced in modern Arabic, *Leg Over Leg* both articulates his ambivalent response to Western literary innovation and gives fresh force to classical Middle Eastern

literary forms. First published in 1855, it might be singular in 19th-century fiction for tracing its influences to both *Tristram Shandy* and al-Hamadhāni.

Ash-Shidyāq arrival in English-language bookstores has a special timeliness in the fourth year of the Arab Spring; a poet, essayist, publisher, and newspaper editor, he is known as a pioneer of modern Arabic literature, and the father of Arabic journalism. He coined the modern Arab words for democracy, socialism, newspaper, and election. Perhaps portentously, his neologisms were threaded with subversive irony. He derived the translation for the thoroughly modern “newspaper” from a Classical Arabic term for Medieval Ottoman accounting books (*jarīdah*). The word he chose for election (*entikhab*) shares a three-letter root with the word for “ant-bites.” Not for nothing did Ash-Shidyāq work for one of the Ottoman Empire’s propaganda organs, though that newspaper, *Al Jawā’eb*, was one of the more contrarian official publications.

The full title of this work is startling: *Leg Over Leg, or The Turtle in the Tree, concerning The Fāriyāq; What Manner of Creature Might He Be; Otherwise Entitled Days, Months, and Years spent in Critical Examination of the Arabs and Their Non-Arab Peers*. The title’s physical and semantic evasions (one leg folded behind the other, or another’s, leg), the explicit eroticism, and the superabundant logo-philia are evident on every page, which would not make it any easier to translate.

John Yargo,

Leg over Leg, Volume 1, August 23, 2013

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/steps-stairway-minaret-humphrey-davies-translation-faris-al-shidyaqs-leg-leg/>

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Aḥmad Fāris strongly defended use of the Arabic language and its heritage and Arabic culture against the Turkization attempts of the Turkish reformers of the 19th century. Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq is considered one of the founding fathers of modern Arabic literature and journalism.

Since 2001, scholars around the world seem to have rediscovered Aḥmad Fāris Shidyaq. Several books have been published about his life, thought and unpublished works. Shidyaq's major works were dedicated to the modernization of the Arabic language, the promotion of

the Arab culture in opposition to the *turkization* movement of the 19th century Ottoman Empire, and the modernization of the Arab societies.

Among the publication of his fictional works, in 2014, New York University Press published Humphrey Davies's English translation of *Saq 'Alā al-Saq* as *Leg over Leg*. This lengthy, digressive novel can be seen as in the tradition of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmad_Faris_Shidyaq

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What else should we call a fiction with chapters of rhyming prose, countless dirty jokes and digressions, an elegy for a donkey, long lists of rare words for genitalia, perfumes, and games played by children, all hung on the frame of a travelogue to Egypt, Malta, England, and France? Al-Shidyāq knew that he was up to something new. He called his book “an innovation singular beyond *compare*.”

In *Leg Over Leg*—a punning title that suggests amorous entwinement, among other things—he compares the work of al-Hajjaj to the obscene writings of Laurence Sterne and John Cleland, whom he considers even more licentious. So al-Shidyāq’s innovations are not creations out of nothing, but reminders of what was already there, like rare words in an old dictionary.

Al-Shidyaq meant for these reminders to be more than titillating. His aim was to show up the provincialism and prudishness of his contemporaries when measured against the past—a past richly alive in the Arabic language itself. Elsewhere in the novel, he lists the names of dozens of idols worshiped by pre-Islamic tribes. These idols were destroyed by the early Muslim conquerors, who wanted to erase all traces of the old cults. But they couldn’t erase the names....

Robyn Creswell,

The First Great Arabic Novel, *Leg Over Leg, or the Turtle in the Tree: Concerning the Fariyaq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be*, by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, edited and translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies, Library of Arabic Literature, New York University Press, four volumes, 1,784 pp.

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/10/08/first-great-arabic-novel/>