



## **Sheikh Ibrāhīm Al-Yāzījī**

### **Biography and Achievements<sup>1</sup>**

**(1847-1906)**

Sheikh Ibrāhīm Al-Yāzījī, God rest his soul, was born in March, 1847 in Beirut where he grew up. His father, the notorious Al-Yāzījī, taught him the rudiments of education, especially the skills and rules of the language. However, he acquired most of the knowledge in sciences and languages through hard work and wit. He inherited the art of poetic imagery from his father, writing poetry in his childhood and composing verses in earnest in his youth. And yet, in his old age, he distanced himself from poetry for another career but only in special events and for special requests. He became so notorious for his fine poetry that scholars sought his view, requested his advice or referred to his judgment in a poem or an issue. Gatherings would include literary or lyric debates, which assembled a circle of authors from Beirut and Lebanon, all ears to listen to his talks and his judgments on poetry or prose. Not to mention the poets' letters or others' in that respect, which was time consuming and distracting from other activities. Thus, he resolved to abandon poetry in favour of studying the language, its philology and sciences. He started reading and studied Jurisprudence according to the Ḥanafī Islamic school under Sheikh Mūḥyī Ad-Dīn Al-Yāfī, one of the most famous Imams in Beirut.

The printed press in Beirut was in its early rise. In 1872, he was entrusted with the editorial section of *An-Najāh* (Success), one of the newspapers then, and he proved his competence in modern composition, and was a pioneer in this skill. Not to mention his mastery of linguistics and semantics. And in the midst of the last century, as American missionaries wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> This biography is based on "The creators and journals book (Al-Mūnshī' ūn wa Kūttāb al-Jarā'id), Sheikh Ibrāhīm Al- Yāzījī (1847-1906), translation of his biography", Jirji Zaydān in Translating the Oriental celebrities in the Nineteenth Century, Part two, Second Edition, Egypt, Dar al-Hilāl Press, Al-Fajālah, 1911, pages 119-126, 129-130, 132-136.

translate the Bible into Arabic, they solicited Sheikh Nāṣīf and Būṭrūs Al-Būstānī and then Sheikh Yūsūf Al-Asīr, to assist them in revising their drafts and correcting the linguistic and syntactic errors. They observed the literal translation and did not allow the correctors to introduce the necessary stylistic changes, which weakened the syntax in the translated texts. Later, the Jesuit Fathers translated the Bible into Arabic seeking the assistance of Sheikh Ibrāhīm and instructing him to revise the syntax, namely the literary expression, and correct the grammatical and linguistic errors, which necessitated nine years of work in addition to the correction of other books. He learned Hebrew as an autodidact in order to achieve an accurate translation in every sense of the word, which rendered the Jesuit translation of the Bible into Arabic the most linguistically correct and the most eloquent in syntax and the most elaborate in style, especially regarding the Old Testament. As for the New Testament, Al-Yāzījī told us that he was not attributed complete discretion to revise it as he pleased. He was meanwhile and later, teaching semantics, rhetoric and philology in the Patriarchal School, tutoring a group of witty young graduates who became famous in journalism for some, in trade and management for others. He also completed some of his father's uncompleted works or commentaries, namely the famous *Sharḥ Dīwān Al-Mūtanabbī* (exegesis of Al-Mūtanabbī's poetry) through which his father commented some of Al-Mūtanabbī's verses briefly and which he decided to achieve in 1882. His commentary, which was achieved and edited in a four-year period, is known for its accuracy and the poetry review he annexed to it.

Syrian press had undergone great development. "Al-Jinān" Journal and later "Al-Mūqtaṭaf" Journal were edited and praised by authors for the educational benefit these journals presented. This gravitated Al-Yāzījī to scientific journalism. Thus, he joined his two friends, Bishārah Zalzal and Khalīl Sa'ādah, to edit "Aṭ-Ṭabīb" (The Medical Doctor) journal in 1884, which was originally founded in Beirut by the famous American surgeon Doctor Post. In it Al-Yāzījī published, in addition to his friends' medical and scientific articles, high-levelled linguistic and literary articles. The publication was withheld for the following year, then the journal was re-edited by Doctor Iskandar Bek Al-Bārūdī and it is still presently edited in Beirut.<sup>1</sup>

Sheikh Al-Yāzījī resigned from his editorial job in "Aṭ-Ṭabīb", longing for fame in journalism. And as he witnessed Arabic Literature and journalism converging to Egypt due to

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<sup>1</sup> Keeping in mind that this article was written in 1911.

the freedom of expression and in the movies business, he decided to go there to found a printing house and a scientific journal in collaboration with Doctor Zalzal, his associate in “Aṭ-Ṭabīb” journal. Thus, he spent the year 1894 in Beirut, and then passed by Western countries to prepare all the machines and all that was needed for their project. He, then, came to Egypt to found with his above mentioned colleague Al-Bayān Press and in 1897, they edited Al-Bayān journal which they stopped publishing a year later upon their separation. Thereupon, in 1898 he solely founded “Aḍ-Ḍiyā’”, a journal dealing with sciences, literature, health and industry issues, notorious for its proper syntax, elaborate language and rhetoric as will be explained below. It kept editing for eight years until destiny decided otherwise as Sheikh Al-Yāzījī, God rest his soul, got rheumatism in the late previous summer after editing the last issue. As the disease lingered, he ordered to stop its edition until he would heal, unaware that the disease was over his body like the angel of death who would take the soul of this sixty-year-old celibate in the district of Al-Miṭriyyah, on the afternoon of December 28, 1906, leaving his nephew, Sheikh Ḥabīb, son of Sheikh Khalīl, the sole Yāzījī of the family. The next day his friends and followers organized a funeral worthy of his notoriety, conveying the corpse on a special cart wagon from Al-Miṭriyyah to Cairo, accompanied from the station to his final grave by a large public of eminent authors and renowned people. It was recommended to postpone the memorial service to a further day which would be scheduled later. Some Masonic lodges conducted memorial services in Egypt and Alexandria, in addition to other services and celebrations. His highness Al-Khidyawī “Sirrū Tashrīfātī”, commanded a condolence letter addressed to Sheikh Ḥabīb, and which stated:

“The Honourable Sheikh Ḥabīb Al-Yāzījī,

As soon as His Grace knew that Sheikh Ibrāhīm Al-Yāzījī’s soul had left the world of mortals and attained immortality, a profound tragedy for the Arab language and philology, he expressed his deepest sorrow for the end of that fine life, prosperous with glorious services to Arab sciences in both Egypt and Damascus. His Royal Highness commanded me to convey to you and to all members of the Yāzījī family his solemn condolences. And I join my voice to the readers of the Arabic language, in offering my sincere condolences to you”.

Sirrū Tashrīfātī Al-Khidyawī Aḥmad Zakī.

The late Sheikh Al-Yāzījī, God rest his soul, had received the Ottoman Medal from His Majesty the Sultan, and the Award for Science and Arts from His Majesty the Norwegian

King, and he was mandated by both the Astronomical Society of Paris and Anvers as well as the Astronomical and Air Society in Salvador, to become a permanent member.

### **Character and Attributes**

He was average-sized, gaunt-featured, nervous, sharp-eyed, clever, quick-witted, keen-minded, good-natured, having the sense of humour, attention-grabbing, fond of funny literary humour provoking his laughter. However, he would never make any compromise on his dignity nor would he accept any impairment on it, whether seriously or jokingly, implicitly or explicitly. He had a keen attention on manners expressed through the exchanges in the gatherings. And he had a delicate appetite which enabled him to endure the sufferings of the writing career for around forty years despite his skinniness. During his last years, he merely had a bowl of yoghurt for dinner for fear of hard stomach and relied on mid-day meals to nurture his body though he was not glutton. As for breakfast, he would have a light meal then concentrated on work. And when he had lunch, he would have a coffee, smoke his hookah and nap. Then, he would wake up and spend the day resting or fulfilling a light work then he would go out to enjoy himself in some clubs where he used to play backgammon with some acquaintances for fun or spend that time chitchatting and joking, heading home at dinner time to eat yoghurt and proceed with his work. He cherished hookah when writing as his father cherished coffee and cigarettes during those same moments.

He was a virtuous man, showing contemptuous pride, especially with regard to money-making for he considered indulging people to earn a living as flattery and the less money he made the prouder he felt and his honour greater. His friends would try to convince him that to earn one's bread presumes to indulge people and to connect with the most notorious. He might have followed the advice for a while then would change his mind and show reluctance in response to his pride. Notwithstanding that, he could have led a comfortable and easy life. However, contentment was one of the main pillars of his happiness.

He considered writing as a path to pleasure which had seduced and yet, exhausted so many talented authors constraining them to live in poverty and die with illness. Would he have wished merely for earning a living, he could have fulfilled his wish as he was a naturally gifted artisan or he would not have dropped many governmental positions as he was assigned

in 1882 to the position of Qā'im-Maqām (Governor) of the city of Zaḥlah in Lebanon, which he declined.

His honour and dignity showed in the various aspects of his conduct, he neither pledged nor deceived. True to the opinions or words he transmitted or quoted, he gave credit to their authors, though he showed an opposite reaction regarding his deeds, namely the correction of an article or the revision of syntax, as he denied any assistance to the author. However, his precludes were unmasked by his style which reflected through the lines.

He was righteous towards his father, magnifying his name and growing his reputation through the completion of his works or the commentaries of his books, thus, spending most of his time to fulfil that aim. He also completed all Mūtanabbī's commentaries or more precisely he achieved them entirely and attributed the work to his father, keeping the credit of completing them.

### **His genius and talents**

His main genius was artistic perfection for he was an elegant perfectionist through his crafts, literature or poetry either he crafted them with his hands or drew them with his pen or composed them with his genius, in other words he was what Westerners called Artist. His elegance and perfectionism were detectable in each of his works and even in the way he dressed, sat, walked, talked and ate. And all of these merged with his elegance in craftworks as he was a skilled carver, a perfectionist illustrator whose talent had grown since his youth. Our friend, Mr. Edward Van Dyk, son of our master Doctor Van Dyk, told us that he had known the late Sheikh Al-Yāzījī for about forty years as he frequented the American printing house in Beirut when Doctor Van Dyk was the manager. Sheikh Naṣīf was in good terms with the Americans since he worked as an instructor in their schools and a corrector in their printing house. Our above mentioned friend said that since that time he noticed that Sheikh Ibrāhīm had a particular penchant for carving and he often engraved the seals as a passion then he started carving images and engravings. One day, he came up with the idea of designing an Arabic wall calendar in vogue then, though not in Arabic. He took Doctor Van Dyk's permission to use some of the printing tools to carve the letters and glyphs necessary for that work. Thus, Doctor Van Dyk ordered the chief of staff, Mūsah 'Āṭā back then, to fulfil all his demands for that purpose. Sheikh Al-Yāzījī drew the letters and figures of the

calendar with such elegance that they looked perfectly fascinating and it was the first calendar its kind.

And yet, his elegance first displayed through his Persian-style calligraphy for he kept a fine calligraphy from his youth and all through his life. And those who read a letter written by his hand would be as fascinated by his calligraphy as by his elaborate stylistic. Likewise, his elegant sketches. He even drew his own-mirrored self-portrait, a talking image hung at his home. One of his greatest genius inspirations was the creation of the modern Arab font that we would mention among his diverse legacy.

### **His literary style**

Among his talents was his astonishing lyric expression with a refined choice of words. His style displays a palette of accurate, elaborate and fluid choices similar to Ibn Al-Mūqaffa's in the whole though particular to Sheikh Al-Yāzījī in almost all aspects. However, we did not get Ibn Al-Mūqaffa's authentic works for they had been polished by neologists and revised according to the linguists' genius for more than ten centuries whereas no one manipulated Sheikh Al-Yāzījī's syntax but him. Not to mention the new semantics the eldest were not familiar with and that dictionaries do not mention, which constituted an obstacle for the neologists.

The late Al-Yāzījī overcame these obstacles smoothly and his syntax does not comprise any odd or randomly compound word. However, he might have used an odd word and yet, placed it in a structure to make it familiar, rendering it pleasant to the ear and easily understood. Hence, his style is elaborate though not distorted or complex; fluid though not weak or poor; sequenced, coherent, harmonious, corresponding to his sense of elegance and perfectionism we mentioned previously. This desire for perfection prompted him not to thrust in publishing his works. Thus, he used to send his articles for printing only after revising and polishing them, then inscribing them in a crystal clear calligraphy, reaching the utmost in precision as regular gold chains, in order to prevent errors, which hindered the pace of his conception and reduced the expected conceptions of his science and studies.

He exaggerated in hindering for he criticized straightforwardly linguistic mistakes he read through newspapers and books, which is natural for someone who specializes in a precise branch of science, exploring it and studying every little detail of it. He would find the fly in

the ointment as regards what others write about this branch and would not turn a blind eye to it, mainly if he has a temper and is accustomed to elegance and perfectionism as our late Cheikh was. Deviating from the right path hurt him and only criticism would heal his pain. His criticism was harshly-worded through sour language, with no regards to friendship or covenant. That sternness was very often the result of his concern for the language and his devotion to it. Hence, when he wrote “The errors of the linguists”, he did not exclude himself or his father for he considered the linguistic or grammatical errors as main flaws and avoiding them a main quality, which impelled him to praise the poetry of Ibn Al-Fāriḍ and to value the poetry of Al-Mūtanabbī, mainly for they did not present many of those errors. He might have loathed a printed poem or a scientist’s article if he detected linguistic or grammatical errors, which would lead him to exaggeration in revising his writings, and to elegance in his proficiency for fear of criticism. Or he might have heeded that, mainly when he started defending his father against Sheikh Aḥmad Fāris’ criticism, and bore down on it. Sheikh Ibrāhīm who was in his youth, excelled in his defence and since then, he made it a habit to avoid errors through proofreading and revision. Let’s consider then, how proper his language must be and how elaborate and literary his syntax is, when he is so literate in morphology and so eloquent in stylistic that his usage of the language has become an argument stated and his narratives a rule applied. No wonder then if we call him the argument of the language and the Imam of the narrative. Almost all his writings are fluent and fluid, and whenever he uses assonance, his rhymes are never artificial. Hereafter, some examples of prose poems: [...] and he said in a farewell article to the nineteenth century:

“We said goodbye to the nineteenth century as one says goodbye at the finale of each day, overwhelmed by the remembrance of the time lingering between dawn and dusk, balloted on the waves of its trouble and serenity, glimpsing through the crawling dark of its night a beam of hope in the flickering light of sunrise, offering the promise of joy and quietude missed that day. Hence, we promised ourselves dates and saw each wish closer to us than our jugular vein. And almost all of us, stood bewildered as we said goodbye to a part of our life and it could be for some the best two parts. For if we look back, we would see the phantom of our growth and youth with shadows of pleasures and family reunions, the page which bears the drawing of our date of birth and the words which tell the memories of the merriest anniversaries. And we would long to the foregoing days as the lover longs for his departing



love when romance is no more requited, as she is wrapped in the cloth of death, as she moves forth to eternal life, and there she remains till the reunion day”.

### **His poetry**

I knew he wrote poems in his youth and distracted himself from poetry in his adulthood. And yet, his genius for poetry is apparent through his read poems. Among his composed verses a handwritten book that has remained intact and in which he gathered talks that people used to share such as proverbs. A book that he did not want to disclose but meant to deprive people of. Hereafter, the opening verses of his most famous tail rhyme poem:

Forsake the company so amiable so tender    Forsake its cherished moments as they slumber

And a similar tail rhyme poem which opens with:

O Arab, alert, arise                                  as in trouble you capsize

And the two revolution inciting poems are extracts from his engaged poetry that he wrote impelled by the political conditions in Syria to incite people to revolt. The late Sheikh Al-Yāzījī could have been compelled to compose them upon a group’s demand or by order of a notorious personality; hence, the elaborate rhetoric.

And he wrote on romance and flirting:

Every single thought of you                          unveil my longing for you

I succumbed to my love, and whatsoever love                          body and soul I would sacrifice to you

And about governing, he wrote:

Funeral and lamentation is                                  our home, or so-called

Each sunrise moans souls                                  whom to earth have recoiled

Two of the verses, he wrote to respond harshly to Aḥmad Fāris As-Shidyāq when he criticized his father’s works, have become common quotes and are worth to be written in gold letters. He wrote:

Brutality is not mine. It comes,                          I retrieve, shame prevailing



My honour, I save jealously                      then, how could I willingly be failing

And in some compositions to carve on a lute, he wrote:

A twig to comfort the conscience              and still the companions comforting

By birds cherished if green                      by feathers missed if drying

And among his poetic jokes:

They wondered about our decline              but no wonder we are in the rearward

Since our tails transformed into heads              no more natural than to move backward

He also had a genius for mathematics and great knowledge in astronomy which owed him contacts with famous French astronomers. And he strived to find a solution to the famous mathematical problem, namely the division of a circle into seven parts. A few years before his death, he would reach an almost logical solution that he sent to the Academy of Sciences in France, though no news has been reported since then. He was fluent in French language, had some command of Hebrew and Syriac, and had a proper level in Natural Sciences.

### **His works and legacy**

Sheikh Al-Yāzījī was so elegant and perfectionist, so precautionous and accurate, as stated earlier, that the resources of his genius did not flow as hoped especially that as a youth, he was absorbed with carving and drawing which, nevertheless, was valuable to the Arabic language since he designed the Arabic font in Beirut. For as soon as printing in Western typography emerged in Europe in the midst of the fifteenth century, printers showed interest in the Arabic font and designed letters to print books in Venice, Rome, Paris, London, Oxford and other cities, all similar though presenting a slightly different shape. Later, the Arabic printing broke through in Astana presenting the Simplified Arab font which typeface is similar to the one read on this page. In the early eighteenth century, printing broke through in Syria using the Roman typeface as a template. And in the early previous century, American missionaries came to Syria. They had established the first Arabic printing house in Malta in 1822, using glyphs from London printing houses, and printed books under the watchful care of the late Sheikh Ahmad Fares. Later, in 1834, they moved it to Beirut. Four years later, the late Ali Smith, who was its managing director then, intended to design new letters. Hence, he

solicited a writer from Astana to write graceful letters he casted in Leipzig and which remain the famous American letters.

However, the American typeface, though graceful and splendid, was expensive to produce for the wide variety of forms, which favoured the Simplified Arabic typeface though it showed less assets in other aspects. Thus, in 1886, Sheikh Al-Yāzījī, who achieved the translation, undertook the design of a new typeface to join the advantages of both fonts, which ended into the design of what is known as the Sarkīs font as it was casted in the foundry of Khalīl Sarkīs Afandī, owner of *Lisān al-Ḥāl* in Beirut. This typeface is the most common presently in most Arabic printing houses in Syria, Egypt and the United States and glyphs manufacturing requires precision and dexterity that only punch cutters are aware of through their endurance, for the glyphs are not adequate for printing unless they are engraved meticulously on top of a steel bar, known in the terminology of printing as “punch”. The resulting punch was then struck into a soft metal such as copper, creating a sunken, right-reading impression, called the “matrix”. Lead was poured into this matrix, casting the glyph in relief found in printing houses. Sheikh Al-Yāzījī used a steel bar for the punch which he struck into a copper matrix. He designed glyphs of various sizes and when he came to Cairo, he designed average-sized glyphs, ranging between big and small glyphs, known as font 20. It was adopted by most foundries in Cairo where suitable matrices were manufactured and has been prevailing widely in its print houses. It was used to print this translation.

At his coming back to Egypt, he introduced into Arabic press transliteration rules needed for the translation into Arabic. And when the Egyptian government decided to design a practical simplified typeface for Būlāq Printing House in 1903, they were all eyes for Sheikh Yāzījī as he was the most competent in precision and splendour. To commission him for this work would be a favourable choice and a beneficial worth of his genius for the Arabic language as a whole. Concerning Arabic philology, he poured himself out to it through his writings, revisions, criticism or through the new terminology he introduced. [...]

We owe him the legacy of a lexicon comprising Arabic-language equivalents of scientific terms in Arabic selected with a fine taste when new sciences were translated into Arabic. Hereunder, examples listed in alphabetical order with their French origins:

|                   |               |             |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Cravate           | Tie           | الأرْبَة    |
| Assurance         | Insurance     | الاستعْهاد  |
| Plombagine        | Plumbagin     | الأمرب      |
| Bacilles          | Bacillus      | الأنبوبيّات |
| Dot <sup>1</sup>  | Dowry         | البائنة     |
| Milieu            | Background    | البيئة      |
| Phosphorescence   | Radiance      | التألّق     |
| Balcon            | Loggia        | الجناح      |
| Phonograph        | Phonograph    | الحاكي      |
| Soupe             | Soup          | الحساء      |
| Myopie            | Myopia        | الحسر       |
| Cocher            | Coachman      | الحوذي      |
| Bicyclette        | Bicycle       | الدراجة     |
| Ecran             | Screen        | الدريئة     |
| Microcoque        | Micrococcus   | الذّريرات   |
| Bacteries         | Bacteria      | الراجبيات   |
| Rhumatisme        | Rheumatism    | الرثية      |
| Torpille          | Torpedo       | الرعاد      |
| Tache (du soleil) | (Sun) Spot    | السّفع      |
| Poratonnerie      |               | الشاري      |
| Chimpanzee        | Chimpanzee    | الشبنزي     |
| Police            | Police        | الشحنة      |
| Armoiries         | Coats of arms | الشعار      |
| Brosse            | Brush         | الشّعريّة   |
| Fuseau            | Fuseau        | الضلع       |

<sup>1</sup> [trousseau or dawry].

|                           |              |           |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|
| Colonie                   | Colony       | الطارئة   |
| Gutta-percha <sup>1</sup> | Gutta-percha | الطبرخي   |
| Vernis                    | Varnish      | الطلاء    |
| Cadre                     | Frame        | الكفاف    |
| Valve                     | Clapet       | اللةهة    |
| Vis                       | Screw        | اللؤلؤ    |
| Tragedie                  | Tragedy      | المأساة   |
| Vibrions                  | Vibrios      | المتمعجات |
| Revue                     | Journal      | المجلة    |
| Granit                    | Granite      | المحَبَّب |
| Impermeable               | Waterproof   | المصلد    |
| Buffet                    | Buffet       | المقصف    |
| Guillotine                | Guillotine   | المقصلة   |
| Douche                    | Shower       | المنضحة   |
| Ressort                   | Spring       | الناضب    |

Hence, the creation of the word “An-Nawwām” to define the disease of sleepiness which spread lately in Africa and the word “Al-Midād” to indicate the famous pen and many other incalculable number of words.

<sup>1</sup> [rubber-like gum made of the juice of some trees].