

Workshop

The Life and Work of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq

Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin

March 6 - 8, 2008

Convenor: Fawwaz Traboulsi

Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1805-1887) was a belles-lettrist, poet, grammarian, lexicologist, philologist, translator, travel-chronicler, educator, journalist and editor of the first modern Arabic-language newspaper. He is known for a translation of the Bible into Arabic, considered the best until the present, and for his masterpiece, *Al-Sâq `alâ-l-sâq fi ma huwa al-fariyaq* ("The Life and Adventures of Faryaq") considered by many as the foundational text of modernity in Arabic literature. Written and published in Arabic in 1855, the book is subversive for its radical ideas and its biting satire against social hierarchy and conventions. Among the works of Shidyaq, many of which remain in manuscript form, or are simply missing, are two books relating his travels in Europe *Al-Wâsita fi ma`rifat ahwâl Mâlta* and *Kashf al-mukhabbâ `an funûn urubbâ* ("An Introduction to the Currents in Malta" and "Uncovering the secrets of European Arts"; both published in 1863). His writings on philology, lexicology and grammar include a number of dictionaries from French and English into Arabic, and *Al-Jâsûs `ala-l-qâmûs* ("The Dictionary Spy"), a monumental critique of Fayrûzabâdi's classic dictionary *Al-Qâmûs al-muhît* in addition to two books on grammar and rhetoric.

In spite of his enormous output, his colourful and wide-ranging career across three continents and his importance as a seminal modernist who critically engaged both Arab and European social thought and literary traditions in the long 19th century, Shidyaq has remained largely neglected by scholars and contemporary audiences. In Lebanon and beyond, where many have still not forgiven his attacks on sectarianism, his secular, anti-clerical positions and his conversion to Islam, his work continues to be censored and marginalized. Moreover, the little that is known of his eclectic and somewhat mysterious biography, and the difficulty of placing his body of work within standard, easily recognizable modern categories of genre and national affiliation have also contributed to his neglect by scholars over the past century.

The workshop "The Life and Thought of Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq" was designed to address this lacuna, and to initiate a preliminary inquiry into the current 'state of the field' of Shidyaq studies. The workshop was the first workshop ever to be dedicated to al-Shidyaq. It brought together two categories of scholars and researchers: 1) scholars who have worked on specific aspects of Shidyaq's writings: his literary and linguistic output, his social and political journalism, his travel writings, and his writings on religion and secularity and 2) scholars and researchers contributing to the reconstruction of his biography in the major cities he visited or in which he resided: Beirut, Cairo, Malta, London, Paris, Tunis and Istanbul.



The workshop was also intended to investigate the possibility of designing and seeking funding for an extended international biographical, bibliographical and literary/critical research project on Shidyaq as a central figure of the modern Arab renaissance.

The workshop, which took place at the Wissenschaftskolleg from March 6-9, 2008, was organized in the framework of *Europe in the Middle East - The Middle East in Europe* (EUME) and convoked under the aegis of its literature module, "Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Middle Eastern Literatures". The workshop was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Middle East Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Beirut. It was convened by Professor Fawwaz Traboulsi of the Lebanese American University and Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg 2007-2008, and brought together the following group of international scholars:

Radwa Ashour (Ain Shams University, Cairo)
Aziz Al-Azmeh (Central European University, Budapest)
Nadia al-Baghdadi (Central European University, Budapest)
Sherif Hassan (Ain Shams University, Cairo)
Christian Junge (Free University, Berlin)
Simon Mercieca (Director of Mediterranean Institute, Malta)
Eman Morsi (Cairo University)
Angelika Neuwirth (Free University, Berlin)
Kamran Rastegar (University of Edinburgh)
Geoffrey Roper (London),
Samah Selim (IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence; EUME)
Shirine Abou Shaqra (Arab Image Foundation, Beirut)
Malek Sherif (American University, Beirut)
Barbara Winckler (Free University, Berlin)

A report of the proceedings follows:

In the first session on 6 March, chaired by Aziz el-Azmeh, Fawwaz Traboulsi ("Shidyaq as a Social and Political Critic and Reformer") welcomed the participants and described the two major goals of the workshop. Traboulsi emphasized Shidyaq's singular approach to East/West relations, both seen as plural. A rebel against the domination of the Church, against social hierarchy and political privilege in his own country, Shidyaq was also critical of the debilitating social and human effects of industrialization and capitalism in Europe. Yet this did not prevent him from adopting universal values of democracy, social justice (he would later coin the Arabic word *Ishtirakiyah* for 'socialism') and gender equality.

Radwa Ashour ("Literary History and the Institution of Criticism: the Case of Shidyaq") explored the question of Shidyaq's literary-historical marginalization, which she mainly attributed to the domination of the 'colonial model' of literary history that has produced a rupture with the Arab literary tradition. Ashour analyzed a number of influential 20th century literary and cultural figures who attacked Shidyaq for deviating from the dominant modern literary form of the novel, and alternately proposed that through his organic relationship to the classical tradition and his defense and revival of the Arabic



language, Shidyaq represents a “viable modernity” as opposed to an “impossible” colonial one.

An animated and rich discussion followed which touched on three main points of debate: a) Representations of Shidyaq as an anti-colonial intellectual, an Ottoman reformer, a 19th century Romantic; b) whether *Al-Saq* is an autobiography or a work of fiction; c) to what extent is it correct to apply postcolonial theory to Shidyaq and his times and to use such concepts as rupture and continuity in describing his relationship to hegemonic colonial literary genres as well as the Arab heritage.

In the second session, chaired by Angelika Neuwirth, Christian Junge (‘Shidyaq Meta-fictional Modernity’) defined meta-fiction as fiction that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact and provides a critique of its own methods of construction. He pointed to two main meta-fictional elements used in *Al-Saq*: the meta-poetic, which manages the mood and expectations of the reader and provides a device for the authority of the narrator, and the meta-linguistic, produced in word lists and juxtaposed poems.

Barbara Winckler (“Shidyaq's Travels: Comparing France and England”) considered whether *Al-Saq* is travel literature or an early form of exilic literature. In either case, she concluded that it is a work of fiction rather than an autobiography. She further emphasized the fact that Shidyaq saw Europe not as a monolithic block but as a multitude of entities.

Sherif Hassan (“The Life of al-Faryaq and Tristram Shandy: Towards a Comparative Reading”) dealt with the ‘contextual affinities’ between *Al-Saq* and Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, both having created literary genres that subverted the dominant ‘bourgeois’ model of the novel.

The many issues raised in the discussions revolved around the reasons for Shidyaq's religious conversions; the novelty of his ideas about women; Shidyaq’s emulation of the Arab *hakawati* or storyteller; his defense of the Arab linguistic and literary heritage; in addition to the ongoing debate about rupture and continuity.

In the third session on 7 March, chaired by Samah Selim, Simon Mercieca (“Al Shidyaq and Malta: a love/hate relationship”) placed Shidyaq in the context of the sociopolitical scene in Malta during the 19th century and the ongoing debate in that country on the relationship between language (in this case the large Arabic component in Maltese) and national identity. Mercieca added new elements to Shidyaq’s biography on the island such as Shidyaq’s contacts with the Mazzinian revolutionaries and the probable influence of Italian republicanism on him.

Kamran Rastegar (‘Literary Modernity and Faris Shidyaq’) questioned the validity of the imposed post-colonial choice: either colonialism or nativism. Following Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural production’, he emphasized the subjective and the ‘individual becoming’ in *al-Saq* and explored the twin tropes that run throughout the text: language and women.

Geoffrey Roper (“Faris Shidyaq as Translator and Editor”) offered a detailed account of Shidyaq's life in Malta, England and Istanbul; one that shed new light on Shidyaq’s journey from scribal to print culture; his career as a translator of religious texts (including his famous translation of the Bible) and as editor of some 75 classics of Arabic thought and literature.



In the fourth session on 7 March, chaired by Georges Khalil, Nadia al-Baghdadi (“Retracing Shidyaq Between Evidence and Disguise”) discussed Shidyaq’s recently published pamphlet, *Mumahakat al-Ta’wil fi Mutanaqidat al-Injil*, which analyses the contradictions of the Gospels. Al-Baghdadi described the work as one of the first books to revive Bible critique in the nineteenth century and wondered why the author did not publish this manuscript during his lifetime.

Malek Sherif (“Shidyaq: Perceptions of Eastern and Western Cities”) addressed the many-faceted definitions Shidyaq gave to the notion of *tamaddun* (civilization) in his writings in *al-Jawa’ib*. Sherif proposed that Shidyaq’s notion of civilization was closely related to local concepts of urbanity and urbanization. This offered a way of reclaiming modernity to a millennially ‘civilized’ Orient.

Eman Morsi (“Faris al-Shidyaq in Egypt”) reported on the results of her research into Shidyaq’s residence in Egypt; a formative period of his life, both intellectually and personally. She cited his views on Egypt and the Egyptians and concluded with an enumeration of the many blind spots in the documentation of this part of his biography.

Discussion centered on Shidyaq’s relation to tradition and to a re-imagined classical heritage; his role in relation to a newly emerging regional hegemony; the relation between literature and the marketplace in the context of capitalist modernity, and the role of modern Arabic in the formation of Arab nationalism and the Arab nation-states.

In the fifth and concluding session of 8 March, Shirine Abou Shaqra presented her working script for a documentary on Shidyaq’s life, which was subsequently discussed and commented upon by the participants.

Finally, plans for on-going research on Faris al-Shidyaq were discussed and the meeting closed with the following concrete recommendations: 1) Publication of the proceedings of the workshop, and 2) the compilation, in view of eventual publication, of a Shidyaq reader in English. The participants agreed to reconvene as a working group in October of 2008.