

**LEG OVER LEG, OR THE TURTLE IN THE TREE,
CONCERNING THE FARIYAQ, WHAT MANNER OF
CREATURE MIGHT HE BE**

Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq
Edited and translated by Humphrey Davies
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Reviewed by Tarek El-Ariss

When I visited Humphrey Davies in his apartment in Cairo in November 2012, he was hard at work translating Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's *Saq 'ala Saq* (*Leg over Leg*), a highly experimental work that portrays the trials of a character named al-Fariyaq and his wife, al-Faryaqiyya, as they move back and forth between Europe and the lands of the Ottoman Empire in the 1840s and 1850s. Looking at Davies's desk, I saw lists of words, which he had extracted from the text to look up their meaning. We started discussing these words, al-Shidyaq's style, and the logic of association and rhyming (*saja'*) that the author incorporated into his literary work. Al-Shidyaq, it seems, was doing the same thing: producing lists of words and employing them in his text, a phenomenon quite familiar to those of us who teach language. This process of word activation (*taf' il al-mufradat*) is at the core of al-Shidyaq's text. In collecting words through these lists, Davies was re-creating the scene of writing *Saq*, its degree zero, restaging al-Shidyaq as a way of entering his text.

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Taf‘il al-mufradat is a process of activation that renders words effective by finding their meaning and then using them in a sentence in order to retain them. But what would it mean for an author to incorporate these words into meaningful sentences while also keeping them as lists of definitions (*rahida*: “pounded wheat over which milk is poured;” *shahida*: “grilled lamb;” *qadid*: “jerked, sun-dried meat” [2:259]) and lists of words that unfold for pages upon pages throughout his text? In the translator’s afterword, Davies states that, drawn from Fairuzabadi’s fifteenth-century *Qamus* (Lexicon), al-Shidyaq’s “lists are not intended to convey information about the world but to impress the reader—firstly, with the inexhaustible resources of the classical Arabic language and secondly, with the author’s mastery thereof; perhaps they also simply reflect the author’s fascination with words per se, irrespective of any intention to edify or impress” (4:489). Al-Shidyaq, the lexicologist-author fascinated by the meaning and sounds of words, exposes in his text the process of production. *Nahda* literary modernity thus consists, in al-Shidyaq’s case, in bringing the premodern into the modern, activating it in new and exciting ways, thereby obliterating the temporal boundaries that separate the *nahda* from the era that precedes it, and the classical from the modern. This is the degree zero of *nahda* language and literature—its “making of.”

Mimicking the author’s practice, Davies was required to turn to Fairuzabadi’s and Ibn Manzur’s lexicons, both available online, in order to translate *Saq*. Starting with a scientific and lexicological act of collecting and listing words, the translation process extends to an act of listening and capturing different rhythms and sounds, heeding the call of the text, “Gently! Hush! Silence! Quiet! Cock an ear! Listen up! Hold your tongue! Quit talking! Hear! Hark! Hearken!” (1:37). And thus begins *Saq*, as if to make room for a musical performance in which the audience needs to listen but also suspend judgment, fasten their seatbelts, and expect something new, bizarre, and scary, for al-Shidyaq will take them on a journey, a trip on the stage of fiction. The experience of listening, watching, and reading is essential to the work’s unfolding. Davies takes up al-Shidyaq’s challenge and listens to the sounds and reproduces them as musical notes, phonemes, guttural sounds: “Bleth! Bleth!,” “Yetch! Yetch!,” “Retch! Retch!,” “Ptui! Ptui” (1:59). Davies translates by upholding the untranslatable. Re-creating the primordial scene of writing *Saq* is a way to train the ear. The act of

translation thus requires accepting the logic of association, of Glassian (as in Philip Glass) variations, given that the repetition of what appear to be the same inches ever more closely to create a sound capsule that both unsettles and entrances both author and reader. The outcome is a feat, a symphony, a *musique contemporaine* that gives life to al-Shidyaq's text and moves the contemporary reader to the core, this time activating the senses (*taf' il al-hawas*).

Presented as an en-face, bilingual translation in four volumes, *Leg over Leg* captures al-Shidyaq's humor, excess, and outrageousness. Davies boldly and tirelessly brings the English reader closer to the text's linguistic play, fascination with words, and deconstruction of the rules of writing. The libertinage of al-Shidyaq's language and literary performances comes to life with the main character, al-Fariyaq (Faris + Shidyaq = Fari-Yaq), as he travels across Europe and the Middle East, mocks and parodies political and religious authority, interprets dreams, cures bad breath, and translates and writes official reports for the British administration of the island of Malta. Al-Shidyaq relates the episodes, encounters, trials, and tribulations of al-Fariyaq, then digresses and goes on for pages listing words depicting culinary dishes or sexual organs, describing their different states, putting them into music and sound as if to inscribe them in the language and the cultural imaginary of the reader. Al-Shidyaq's mixing of genres performs literary virtuosity yet undermines the very authority of the literary. As Rebecca Johnson writes in her excellent foreword to Davies's translation, "Language itself is the key to dissidence" (1:xxviii).

In a chapter entitled "A Dish and an Itch," al-Shidyaq begins: "I must go on at some length in this chapter, just to test the reader's endurance. If he gets to the end of it at one go without his teeth smoking with rage, his knees knocking together from frustration and fury, the place between his eyes knitting in disgust and shame, or his jugulars swelling in wrath and ire, I shall devote a separate chapter to his praise and count him among those readers 'who are steadfast'" (1:176). Here, al-Shidyaq presents the reader as a daredevil embarking on a *Survivor* episode that he must endure. The audience, again, is constituted in the text itself, taunted and teased, praised and mocked. But what is al-Shidyaq getting the reader into? In this particular episode, al-Fariyaq, taking a break from his work on grammar, goes out to "take care of some business" (1:177). As night falls, he passes a

monastery and decides to enter, seeking shelter for the night. For dinner, the monks served him

a dish of lentils cooked in oil and three “cymbals” of that bread and placed them before the Fariyaq, who then sat down to eat, taking a piece of bread and whacking it against another until it broke. When he took the first mouthful a sliver of the bread caught against a tooth and almost carried it off. The Fariyaq tried to prop it up and fill the holes in the tooth with lentils but hardly had he finished his meal before the heat of the lentils started to grow in his body and he took to scratching with his fingernails and fragments of the loaf until his skin was in shreds. This upset him greatly and he said to himself, “That crust almost dislodged my tooth, so I’m going to dislodge one of the monastery’s.” (1:179)¹

What happens next is nothing but pure revenge—a revenge against the monks and the entire religious authority that props them up both as fine cooks with fresh produce and as men of learning. Later that night, al-Fariyaq knocks at a monk’s door asking for a *qamus* (dictionary) to which the latter replies: “In the monastery we have neither *qamus* nor *jamus* (‘buffaloes’) nor oxen.” He tries his luck with yet another monk, who answers: “Hang on till midnight, for the *kabus* (‘nightmare’) never comes at any other time” (ibid.).

Davies keeps the words *qamus*, *jamus*, and *kabus* in transliterated Arabic with the translation in parentheses in order to capture the humor of the linguistic play of al-Fariyaq’s encounter, alienating the reader but suggesting another meaning adjacent to the one based on paradigmatic relations between words and sentences. Al-Shidyaq trains the reader to understand the text at another level, revealing an underlying terrain where meaning becomes possible—where rhythms and intonations and the breaking of the bread pieces resounding like cymbals travel from one language to another, through the walls, through the pages of the text. Al-Shidyaq’s fascination with words and sounds gives rise to a literary and musical performance that unfolds across periods and styles, the novel and the lexicon, the *maqama* and the travelogue. Davies’s translation not only brings al-Shidyaq’s text into English but also brings the *nahda* to the English reader, allowing her to savor and experience the modernity of al-Shidyaq’s text as a multisensory performance and an amalgamation of genres. The translation, therefore, as it

evolves and plays, debunks the idea that the *nahda* was merely a borrowing of Western genres, like the novel, for instance. Davies's translation rids us permanently of the myth of the origin, moving us beyond text zero (is *Saq* the first Arabic novel?) to the degree zero of writing the modern.

Compounded by his polemical persona, anticlericalism, and life in exile, al-Shidyaq's irreverent and hard-to-categorize work—*Saq* as well as his other writings—fell by the wayside. Early on, al-Shidyaq was excluded from the conventional “*nahda* narrative” both at the literary, linguistic, and intellectual levels. In his 1910 anthology of modern Arabic literature, Louis Cheykh dismissed *Saq* for its failure to abide by prevalent literary standards, or *adab*. Even Albert Hourani dismissed al-Shidyaq from the intellectual history of Arab modernity. But al-Shidyaq's work witnessed a revival with the critical anthology of his works edited by 'Aziz al-'Azma and Fawwaz Trabulsi in the mid-1990s. Since then, a wider audience has been rediscovering his work and appreciating its innovation and brilliance. Now with the translation of *Saq*, which has been compared to *Tristram Shandy* or *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, al-Shidyaq is finally being recognized as a great literary thinker. By allowing al-Shidyaq's language to proliferate, echo, and travel, Davies's translation encapsulates *Saq*'s modernity through play, sound, and rupture. NYU Press's Library of Arabic Literature provides the stage for this performance. This edition, with its foreword, footnotes, glossaries, and beautiful font and organization, is made for expert and non-expert alike. The end result is a literary treasure and a feast for the senses.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Quotations do not reproduce the diacritical markings that appear in the published text.