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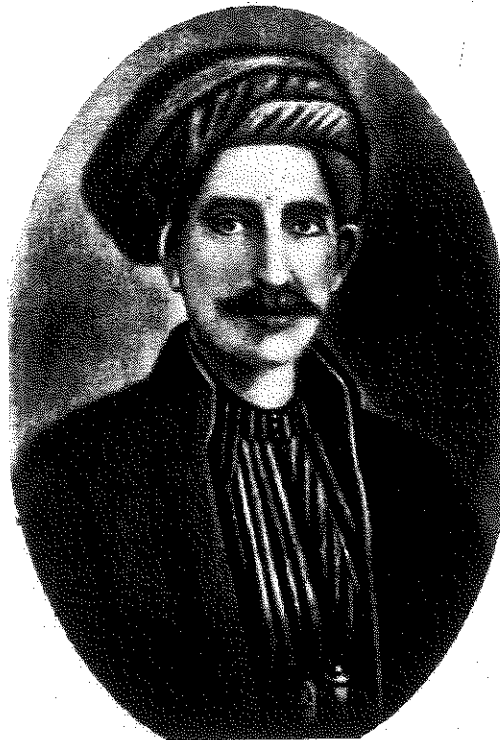
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NĀṢĪF AL-YĀZIJĪ, SYRIAN SCHOLAR AND INTELLECTUAL.
HIS FORTUNES IN THE EAST AND WEST AT THE BEGINNING OF THE *NAHDAH*

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To Paul Yaziji,
Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim,
Paolo Dall'Oglio
awaiting their return home



Portrait of Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī¹

Abstract

This intervention intends to start from a historical approach and consider the relationship between Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī with the European and the Oriental culture, through the relations that he entertained in the course of his life as a scholar and intellectual.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, it is analyzed the contribution of Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī as a writer and Arabist. In the nineteenth century, his fortune was great in the West, especially in France, where he was considered one of the few contemporary Arab writers worthy of note, as attested by some written records. He was placed by the French Arabists amongst the most important Arab poets together with Hamadhānī and Ḥarīrī. To delineate the relationships with the French cultural environment, it will be analyzed his relationship with the French consul in Beirut, Henri Guys, and the orientalist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1757-1838) with whom he got into correspondence.

The second part will examine his relations with the Syrian Protestant College and his collaboration in the Arabic translation of the Bible coordinated by the American missionary Eli Smith. Nāṣīf's biographers say that he did not know any foreign language, but this condition does not seem to have prevented him to maintain excellent scientific cooperation and cultural exchanges with the environment of the Protestant missionaries, who will give birth in 1866 to the Syrian Protestant College, the first nucleus of the future American University in Beirut.

¹ St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre Archives, Tibawi Papers, I/2

In the last part, I will discuss the various opinions proposed by the scholars regarding the political judgment to be given to the work of Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī: conservative or nationalist at an earlier phase? It is appropriate and/or helpful to address such a question?

The revival of the Arabic language and literature served as the basis for the subsequent national awareness of the Arabs. In the same Yāzījī's family one can witness what happened at the level of the country where a generation that had begun to cultivate the interest for the study of Arabic language and literature, developed later on a mature awareness of being part of the Arab nation.

Using a historical approach, this paper will consider Nāṣīf's relationship with Eastern and especially European culture, through the relationships he maintained in the course of his life as a scholar and intellectual. Based on the biographical information about Nāṣīf, there is broad consensus that he did not know any other languages besides Arabic. However, this element, which could have been an impediment, did not limit his activities in terms of his contact with the international environment that in Beirut in the first half of the Nineteenth Century was beginning to enliven the cultural and social life of the country.

Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī is 'one of the «pillars» of the modern Arabic renaissance, but not in the sense that he determined the direction which it was to follow; rather that it was largely due to his lifework that the Syrian school, which played so great a part in the following decades, was saved from the danger that threatened it of declining into a pale reflection of a culture foreign to its nature and traditions, and recalled to a better appreciation of its own history and literature'.² This quotation from Gibb's *Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature* (1928) synthesises in an effective way the contribution of our Author at the beginning of the *Naḥḍah* in Syria.

It may be useful to mention some biographical information about Nāṣīf to introduce him better. A Greek-Catholic Christian³, Nāṣīf was born on March 25, 1800 in the village of Kfarchima, a few miles from Beirut. His father was a doctor who also supervised his education; entrusting him to a tutor, a monk named Matthew al-Shibābī.⁴ The turning point in his life came in 1816-1817 when he was appointed secretary to the Greek Catholic Patriarch Ignatius V⁵, and then, in 1828, his entrance as secretary to the court of Emir Bashīr Shihāb in Bayt al-Dīn, where he remained until 1840, the year in which his mentor was exiled for supporting the Khedivé of Egypt. In around 1830, according to what he himself stated, he started to work for the American missionary Eli Smith as a copyist and author of works about Arabic linguistics.⁶ It is in Bayt al-Dīn that he joined the group of writers and poets that enlivened the court. In 1833, he published an essay on the Druze feudal system, with a description of the customs and traditions in use amongst the Druze.⁷

² See H. A. R. Gibb, 'Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, University of London, 4 (1928), p. 750.

³ A.J. Gully under 'al-Yazidji', E.I.², p. 344a-346a, places him in the Maronite community followed by Paul Starkey, 'Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī', in Roger Allen (Ed.), *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography 1850-1950* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), p. 376-381. For detailed information about his biography see Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī, 'al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī', *al-Machriq* 26 (1928), part I 834-842; part II 923-935; later published in an unabridged edition in *al-Rawā'ī* 21 (2nd edition, Beirut: al-Matba'ah al-Kāthūlikiyyah, 1950).

⁴ Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī, 'al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī', *al-Machriq* 26 (1928), p. 835; Th. Menzel under 'al-Yazidji', E.I.¹, p. 1235a.

⁵ We did not find any information in the Archives of the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide regarding this period spent as secretary at the Greek Catholic Patriarchate. In a letter by Ignatius to his procurator in Rome, he laments the poor financial conditions of his office that force him to write day and night, without the possibility of having a secretary. See Patriarch Ignatius to Father Arsenio Cardachi, 17-8-1817, SCPF, SC Greci Melchiti, v. 12, f. 496 r. After searching in the Archives, through the files of the SC Greci Melchiti, v. 12 (1809-1818) and 13 (1819-1820), we noticed that the calligraphy of Patriarch Ignatius' letters changed in the year 1819, but we could not find any clear proof that this was due to the change of his secretary and that the previous one was Nāṣīf.

⁶ See Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī to Eli Smith, 12 August 1845, St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre Archives, Tibawi Papers GB165-0284, Box II/ file 3.

⁷ Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī, *Risālah tārikhiyyah fī aḥwāl Jabal Lubnān fī 'ahdihi al-iqtā'ī*, edited by Muḥammad Khalīl al-Bāshā, Riyād Ḥusayn Ghannām (Beirut: Dār Ma'n, 2002).

At the age of forty he moved to Beirut, continuing his work as a linguist and scholar and entering the cultural circles of the period, such as the Syrian Protestant College, which would later become the American University in Beirut, and the Jesuits. He was the author of poetry, rhymed prose, books, and essays as well as the editor of some works in classical Arabic. He was active in promoting culture in his day, teaching at the 'National School' founded by Butrus al-Bustānī in 1863 and collaborating in the establishment of the Greek Catholic Patriarchal College in 1866. He taught at the College until his death in 1871.

1 NĀṢĪF SCHOLAR AND ARABIST

Nāṣīf was a famous scholar and a well known Arabist at his time. He made a great contribution to the revival of the Arabic language in the Nineteenth Century and enjoyed extensive fame also in the West, especially in France, where he was considered one of the few Arab writers worthy of note. He was an intellectual and a well-known poet in his time. He corresponded with numerous contemporary artists and intellectuals of the Maghreb and the Mashreq.⁸ A recent comprehensive reconstruction of his literary work in the context of Arabic literature may be found in the essay by Paul Starkey published in the third volume of *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography*, edited by Roger Allen.⁹ This study also includes a general assessment of his contribution to Arab culture.

In the nineteenth Century, René Basset, the eminent French Orientalist, was an admirer and considered him one of the great exponents of Arabic rhymed prose along with Hamadhānī (d. 1007) and Ḥarīrī (d. 1122).¹⁰ Some of his *maqāmāt*, were published or translated in Europe while he was still alive, something that guaranteed the rapid spread of his fame throughout the West. Victor Chauvin cites one that was translated by the German Arabist Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer in 1851, as well as some articles which cite some passages.¹¹ According to Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī, the warm reception received by this *maqāmah*, entitled *al-maqāmah al-aqīqiyyah*, in the East and West encouraged the author to publish the entire collection. It is interesting to note that Fleischer himself financed the publication, confirming the close relationship he had with our author.¹² Fleischer, in fact, a student of Silvestre de Sacy¹³ in France, in the years between 1835 and 1888, enlivened the German Arabist school, paying particular attention to the living Arabic language, not only to the classical language, along the lines of the study of Greek and Latin. He also developed a keen interest in the study of the Arabic language spoken in its various vernaculars. It is no wonder then that he came into contact with Nāṣīf, one of the most important representatives of Arab culture in his time.¹⁴

The *Journal asiatique* talks about his work in a note with a translation by Kremer in 1871, the year of Nāṣīf's death. The high regard he received as an exponent of pure and refined language is testified, amongst other things, by the fact that his work was included in the university Arabic language courses in France. At the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the analysis of his collection *Majma' al-Bahrayn* was part of Professor Guyard's third year courses in 1880, nine years after his death.¹⁵ Thirteen years after Nāṣīf's death, Professor Guyard cited him again in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.

⁸ A list of his epistolary Arab contacts in al-Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī*, p. 8.

⁹ See Starkey, *Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī*.

¹⁰ See René Basset, review of E. Crussard, *En lisant Hariri* (Tunis 1923), *Revue africaine* 64 (1923), 175-176. On the genre of *maqāmāt* see Alfred Felix Landon Beeston, 'al-Hamadhani, al-Hariri and the Maqamat Genre', in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, 15-32; Abdelfattah Kilito, *Les seances: recits et codes culturels chez Hamadhani et Hariri* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983); Jaakko Hameen-Anttila, *Maqama. A History of a Genre*, *Diskurse der Arabistik*, 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2002).

¹¹ See Victor Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885*, volume 9 (Liège: H. Vaillant-Carmanne, 1905), p. 122-123. [Online facsimile] <<http://archive.org/stream/bibliographiedes09chauuoft#page/n5/mode/2up>>. All access to online resources date to 21 May 2013.

¹² al-Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī*, p. 19-20.

¹³ al-Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī*, p. 19-20.

¹⁴ al-Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī*, p. 19-20.

¹⁵ See *La Revue politique et littéraire: revue des cours littéraires*, 2nd ser., vol. 18 (2^e semestre 1880), p. 716.

He mentioned the author yet again along with Hamadhānī and Ḥarīrī as rare examples of authors of prose in Arabic literature. In fact, he maintained that the 'Belles Lettres' in Arab civilisation at that time were limited to poetry, which was lively and prosperous, while examples of narrative style were very rare.¹⁶ Nāṣīf was also chosen as the author of reference in the third year courses in Arabic language schools that France had organised in Algeria in 1900, again along with the classical texts of Ḥarīrī and Hamadhānī.¹⁷

The trio of writers, Hamadhānī, Ḥarīrī and Yāzījī, is again cited with a certain regard even in the severe presentation of the Arabic literature of the period in the *Grande Encyclopédie*¹⁸ published a few years after the death of the poet. It is said of Nāṣīf that he was a great connoisseur of Arabic literature and his correspondence with Silvestre de Sacy is mentioned. The author of the note, who does not seem to be an expert Arabist, expresses a rather negative opinion about the contemporary production of Arabic literature, but devotes a note that states his appreciation for Nāṣīf's work, of which he recalls the collection of rhymed prose *Majma' al-Bahrayn* (translated as *The confluent de deux fleuves [sic]*) written in a style that he defines as 'agréable.' Other than our author, the encyclopaedia names only Fāris al-Shidyāq and Butrus al-Bustānī as exponents on the Syrian Arab literary scene are worthy of note. Of the former, his work with Dugat in the writing of an Arabic grammar in French should be remembered. Of the latter, it is noted that he was the founder of the Syrian Society in Beirut and author of an encyclopaedia and an Arabic dictionary of a certain value.¹⁹

Before moving on to the best known episode of his connections with French culture, I would like to talk about the meeting that allegedly took place between Nāṣīf and the French poet Lamartine during the latter's voyage to the Orient. The poet says he had met a famous local poet at the court of Emir Bashīr Shihāb who dedicated some pompous and affected verses to him. Based on this judgement, which seems in keeping with Nāṣīf's reputation in Nineteenth-Century Europe, many felt they could identify Nāṣīf as the poet met at court by Lamartine.²⁰

Returning to Nāṣīf's cultural activities, another aspect that linked him to European Orientalists regards the publications of classical Arabic texts. We have some comments in the Spanish edition of the famous work *Calila wa Dimna* published in Madrid in 1917. The reviewer, G. Cirot, in his analysis of the various editions, cites a letter from the French Orientalist René Basset addressed to him in which he criticises the Arabic edition by Nāṣīf with these words: 'Tandis que l'édition de de Sacy est composite, provenant d'un accord entre mss. différents, celle de Yazidji provient d'un ms. sur lequel l'éditeur ne nous donne pas de renseignements, mais qui devait se rapprocher du ms. du Vatican étudié par Guidi et de la version syriaque. Il contient de longs passages qui manquent dans de Sacy, et qu'on retrouve plus ou moins modifiés dans le texte de Cheikho. Malheureusement, l'éditeur, un chrétien de Syrie, a cru devoir atténuer quelques traits un peu crus dans certaines histoires. Je suppose, mais je n'en ai pas la preuve, que c'est lui et non son manuscrit qui est le coupable'.²¹ This mention of the inaccuracies of the edition of the text edited by Nāṣīf shows an attitude which is not uncommon in Arabic editions of classical texts that were being published at the time.

Nāṣīf was one of the few contemporary Arab intellectuals who were well known in the West, however, there was the additional difficulty, compared to others like Ṭaḥṭāwī, in that he had never travelled to the West nor ever learnt any language other than Arabic. A detailed biography about him

¹⁶ Stanislas Guyard (1846-1884), *La civilisation musulmane. Leçon d'ouverture faite au Collège de France, le 19 mars 1884* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1884), p. 54. The author obtained this academic position after the death of the Orientalist Charles-François Defrémery.

¹⁷ See Edmond Doutté, *L'islam algérien en l'an 1900* (Alger: Imprimerie Moustafa Giralt, 1900), p. 155. It is a brochure published for the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900.

¹⁸ J. Preux, under 'arabes', *La Grande Encyclopédie: inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts*, sous la direction de MM. Berthelet et al., tome 3 (Paris: H. Hamirault, 1885-1905), 501b-502a.

¹⁹ *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*, Beirut 1867/1870. [Online facsimile] <<http://archive.org/stream/kitabmuḥitalmuḥi02bustuoft#page/1/mode/2up>>.

²⁰ See *Voyage en Orient in Œuvres d'A. de Lamartine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1887), volume I, p. 279, quoted in Henri Pérès, 'La renaissance littéraire en Orient', *Annales de l'Institut d'études orientales* 1 (1934-35), p. 240.

²¹ G. Cirot, 'Review of *Calila y Dimna. Fabulas, Antigua version castellana. Prólogo y vocabulario de Antonio G. Solalindé*', Madrid 1917, *Bulletin hispanique* (Bordeaux) 24 (1922), 168.

is found in 1912 in the *Revue du Monde Musulman*, the only Christian intellectual of the second half of the Nineteenth Century along with Butrus al-Bustānī to be mentioned.²²

In the literary genre of travel writing in the East which was prevalent in the Nineteenth Century, the figure of Nāṣīf can sometimes be found, like in the case of the volume of the French journalist and writer Gabriel Charmes. He speaks of our author as the most prominent modern poet of Syria, although he laments that there were few translations available in other languages.²³

He was also well-known and appreciated in Rome, at the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, and in 1880 some of his books were ordered for the library of the Greek College in Rome, where the future priests and bishops for the Greek Catholic community in the East were sent to study. From Lebanon, Cardinal Simeoni, the Prefect of the Congregation, asked for some books by Nāṣīf and the Bustānī's dictionary *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*.²⁴

2. NĀṢĪF YĀZIJĪ AND SILVESTRE DE SACY

The relationship between Nāṣīf and the famous Orientalist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1757-1838) is the best known episode that attests the liaison Nāṣīf had with the French cultural milieu. Silvestre de Sacy (1757-1838) was the French Arabist who also met Rifa't al-Ṭaḥṭāwī during the latter's sojourn in Paris.²⁵ Despite the fact that Nāṣīf did not know any language except Arabic, he was put in touch with the European scholar thanks to the initiative of the French Consul in Beirut, as reported by Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī. According to him, the Consul was one of the de Lesseps family.²⁶ Actually, members of the de Lesseps family were well known diplomats in the Orient during the 19th Century. Théodore de Lesseps was consul in Alep between 1825 and 1826. Mathieu de Lesseps was also a consul in the Orient, and the famous Ferdinand de Lesseps was vice consul, then consul in Egypt between 1829 and 1836.²⁷

But there is evidence that Nāṣīf also had the opportunity to get in touch with another French personality and French Consul in Beirut at different times between 1824 and 1858.²⁸ The diplomatic was Henri Guys, who had been a disciple of the French Orientalist.²⁹ Guys had sojourned for long periods in Syria-Lebanese towns, and was a member of the Société orientale de France. The Consul Guys had had the opportunity to get to know and appreciate Yāzījī's work to which he devotes a few lines expressing his admiration in the memoirs of his travels in the East. In the chapter Guys devoted to Arabic language and literature, we find some interesting statements about the state of culture in Syria at the time and about the attitude of superiority from which the Consul considered the

²² See K. T. Khairallah, 'La Syrie', *Revue du Monde Musulman* 19 (1912), p. 51-52.

²³ See Gabriel Charmes, *Voyage en Syrie. Impressions et souvenirs* (Paris: Calman Lévy, 1891), p. 147 and 235.

²⁴ The Apostolic delegate of Syria to Cardinal Simeoni, Beirut, 30 January 1880, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 2, ff. 868 r. v. The three books of Nāṣīf Yāzījī were *al-Maani abbajani* (sic), *al-arui* (sic), *al-mantic* (sic), and the book of al-Mutanabbi with explanations. In a second message the Apostolic Delegate says to have sent to Propaganda a second copy of all the books, as requested, and added some information about the prices: *al-maani al-bajani* (sic), *al-arud* (sic), each for 12 piastres, *al-mantic* (sic), 3 piastres, al-Mutanabbi with explanations, 30 piastres, *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*, 247 piastres, all books for 292 piastres, corresponding to 55 French francs. The Apostolic delegate of Syria to Cardinal Simeoni, Damascus, 4 May 1880, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 2, ff. 888 r. - 889 r.

²⁵ About the relationships between Ṭaḥṭāwī and de Sacy see Mohammed Sawaie, 'Rifa'a Rafi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and his contribution to the lexical development of modern literary Arabic', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), 395-410.

²⁶ Fu'ād Afrām al-Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf Yāzījī*, al-Rawā' 21 (2nd edition, Beirut: al-Matba'ah al-Kāthūlikiyyah, 1950), p. 19.

²⁷ S. Bertant, *Ferdinand de Lesseps et son oeuvre* (Marseille: Cayer, 1874). It is known that Ferdinand de Lesseps was in Syria where he met the Algerian Emir Abd el Qader, and he was responsible for the idea of a road linking Beirut to Damascus.

²⁸ He left some books and memoirs of his activities in the Orient. See *Relation d'un séjour de plusieurs années à Beyrouth et dans le Liban*, 2 tomes (Paris: Librairie française et étrangère, 1847). We have a severe judgment on his character and his attitude in diplomatic affairs in a correspondence between Mgr. Pietro Losana to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Beirut, 29 June 1829, SCPF, SC Siri (Soriano), v. 10 (1828-1831), f. 263 r. - 264 v.

²⁹ The relation between the two is reported in Marçais, *Silvestre de Sacy arabisant*, p. 85.

population. First of all he stated that 'Dans l'Orient on s'instruit avec les hommes, et non pas avec les livres'³⁰, on the one hand, stressing the importance of oral transmission in the culture, but also the poverty of work written in Arabic at that time, especially dictionaries which would have allowed the Arabic language to be studied with more accuracy. With the dearth of written works, the only option was to resort to the few living writers. After a few observations about the tendency of Arabic discourse to be allegorical, he passed on some considerations about the present age, where he finally mentioned Nāṣīf: 'Quant à présent, la littérature en est toujours au point où l'ont laissé les dernières auteurs, et si l'on cite, ça et là, quelques écrivains, ce sont de petits poètes. Nous en avons deux chrétiens à la montagne, Nāṣīf el-Yadji (*sic*) et Boutros Karamé, et Homs possède cheikh Hessein dont les chansons jouissent d'une grande vogue'.³¹ This attitude of mild contempt for the poverty of the local culture is reaffirmed a little later when Guys states that if there are no contemporary writers in Egypt you could not realistically expect to find any in Syria.³²

Therefore, through the French Consulate, Nāṣīf got in touch with the French Orientalist who had just published the French edition of Ḥarīrī's *maqāmāt*.³³ The evidence that Nāṣīf's writing was requested by certain prestigious French circles is offered by the author himself in the brief note that put before his writing: 'I have bothered you with this [book], despite the hesitation I feel, because you should not be reciprocated so, and because I would not have made a similar choice if it were not to meet the request expressed by one of your honourable men to whom you can not avoid answering'.³⁴ The two writers had a common interest in Ḥarīrī's classical work. Nāṣīf wrote his comments on the Frenchman's work in the form of a letter addressed to him.³⁵ We know that a copy of the manuscript was kept by the American missionary Eli Smith and that he later entrusted it to Professor Fleisher, the German Orientalist from Leipzig. It was in that German city that a copy of the letter by Nāṣīf was published with the Latin translation, from which it can be deduced that the corrections proposed by Nāṣīf mainly concerned questions about grammar and style.³⁶ In the opinion of one of his contemporaries, the French Orientalist Reinaud, it was a very thorough revision.³⁷

In addition, there is further support for the connection with the French Orientalist. As we know, in his youth Nāṣīf had been secretary to the court of Emir Shihāb. At the suggestion of Silvestre de Sacy, he wrote a description of the feudal system of the Chéhab Emirs, describing the territorial organization, the traditions and customs in use among the Druze in his time.³⁸

³⁰ Henri Guys, *Relation*, p. 152.

³¹ Henri Guys, *Relation*, p. 155-156.

³² Henri Guys, *Relation*, p. 156.

³³ See Starkey, p. 378. *Les Séances de Hariri*, publiées en arabe avec un commentaire choisi par Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, 2 vol. (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1821). See also *Les Séances de Hariri*, publiées en arabe avec un commentaire choisi par Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, deuxième édition revue sur les manuscrits et augmentée d'un choix de notes historiques et explicatives en français par J. Reinaud, membre de l'Institut et J. Derenbourg, membre de la Société Islamique, Imprimerie Royale, 2 vol. (Paris, 1847-1853).

³⁴ *Epistola critica Nāṣīfi al-Iazigi beyritensi ad de Sacyum versione latina et adnotationibus illustravit indicemque addit A. F. Mehren haumiensis*, Lipsiae, sumtibus Guil. Hentelmann, typis Caroli Tauchnitii, 1848, p. 4.

³⁵ According to Bustānī, a copy of the original manuscript is conserved in the library of the Monastery of Deyr al-Shīr of the Aleppians Catholic Monks. See Bustānī, *al-Shaykh Nāṣīf Yāzījī*, p. 19.

³⁶ See *Epistola critica Nāṣīfi al-Iazigi*. It contains the text in Arabic with the Latin translation. The German Orientalist Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801-1888), to whom Mehren dedicated the work, was in contact with de Sacy having studied under him in Paris, see Holger Preißler, 'Les contacts entre orientalistes français et allemands dans les années 1820 et 1830, d'après la correspondance de Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801-1888)', *Revue germanique internationale* [online journal], 7 (2008), 15 mai 2011. <<http://rgi.revues.org/399>>.

³⁷ See J. T. Reinaud, 'De l'état de la littérature chez les populations chrétiennes arabes', *Journal asiatique* 9 (Juin 1857), 476-477.

³⁸ See the French translation *Le Liban à l'époque des émirs Chéhab. Notice historique traduite du Cheikh Nacif el-Yazidji* (Beirut: 1943), p. 3.

3. MAJMA' AL-BAHRAYN, THE CONFLUENCE OF THE TWO SEAS.

NAŠĪF'S MASTERPIECE BETWEEN THE EAST AND WEST

Majma' al-Bahrayn is the title of the collection of *maqāmāt* composed by Nāšīf and published in 1856³⁹. We do not believe it is a mere coincidence that this work, which was, according to Fu'ad Afrām al-Bustānī, finished in April 1855 with the title *The confluence of the two seas*, bears the same title of the name chosen by Ferdinand de Lesseps for the bi-monthly publication dedicated to the Suez Canal, published in Paris from 1856 to 1871, *L'Isthme de Suez, journal de l'union des deux mers*.⁴⁰ In fact, the theme of the union of the two seas through the creation of a canal was defined as 'une idée du siècle'.⁴¹ It was a great topic of discussion and interest for European society of the time. Joining the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea was a symbol of the union between East and West. The fact that Nāšīf chose it as the title for his collection of *maqāmāt* shows that the subject had the same popularity in the East. By choosing this title, Nāšīf fully inserts himself in the wave of modernity, respecting the literary forms of Arabic tradition.

We could say that it is for this work that Nāšīf is best known, appreciated and sometimes criticised by European Orientalists. Some of these judgments are characterised by the way of relating to the Orient some Europeans had which Edward Said defined as 'Orientalism'.⁴²

The French orientalist Reinaud was surprised that a Christian Arab, one of the 'vanquished' as he called them, could become so passionate and specialise to such a degree in the language and literature of the 'victors'.⁴³ The French Orientalist seems rather harsh in the judgement he gives in his description of Nāšīf, reproaching him for having missed an opportunity with his *maqāmāt*: in trying to attain the fame the great poet Ḥarīrī had, he launched himself into the same field, falling into repetition, when he could have embarked, in his opinion, on a more original work.⁴⁴ In fact, Reinaud offered Nāšīf advice on how he could, without offending Muslim sensibilities, have made his compositions more original by adding some elements from the ancient Christian tradition. He compared Nāšīf's work to that by Khalil al-Khouli, with which, in his opinion, there was a passage from the old to the new world.⁴⁵ Here, the Frenchman did not take into account the generational difference between the two and the fact that the latter had been a student of the former. He was right in saying that there was a passage from the old to the new world, but it was the passage from one generation to the next.

So Nāšīf himself, in his *maqāmāt*, followed the traditional model, or rather, according to some scholars, he even tried to surpass it, inserting sixty compositions into his collection, while al-Ḥarīrī's only contained fifty.⁴⁶ In the 1930s there was another harsh judgement about Nāšīf's work, who was accused of making formal imitations of ancient models, without any contact with the reality as experienced by the author.⁴⁷

³⁹ Nāšīf Yāzījī, *Majma' al-Bahrayn*, (2nd ed., Beirut: Miḥā'il al-Garzūzī wa Fransīs Šam'un, 1872).

⁴⁰ This peculiar coincidence is added to the one noted by Bruno Étienne regarding the choice of the title of the journal of the Suez Canal Company. The title in fact refers to the esoteric sense indicated by the place where Moses met al-Khidr, the green initiator. This episode in the life of the prophet is also recalled in a poem by the Algerian Emir Abd el Qader, who de Lesseps spent time with during his stays in Syria. See Bruno Étienne, 'Les projets d'un « royaume arabe » au Bilād al-Shām: histoire d'un malentendu entre la France et l'émir Abd el-Kader', in Ahmed Bouyerdene, Éric Geoffroy, Setty G. Simon-Khedis (eds.), *Abd El-Kader. Un spirituel dans la modernité* (Damascus: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2012), p. 69-82 (pub. online 4-5-2012). <<http://books.openedition.org/ifpo/1772>>.

⁴¹ Jean-Louis Marcot, 'Abd el-Kader et la modernité', *Studia Islamica*, new series, 2 (2011), p. 194.

⁴² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1978).

⁴³ J. T. Reinaud, *De l'état de la littérature*, p. 483.

⁴⁴ J. T. Reinaud, *De l'état de la littérature*, p. 480-481.

⁴⁵ J. T. Reinaud, *De l'état de la littérature*, p. 483.

⁴⁶ See Matti Moosa, *The Origin of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997), p. 124-125.

⁴⁷ See Henri Pérès, 'Les premières manifestations de la Renaissance littéraire en Orient au XIX^e siècle', *Annales de l'Institut d'études orientales* 1 (1934-35), p. 237.

The contemporary discussion of the literary genre of *maqāmāt* and the role it played in the development of modern Arabic literature is beyond the scope of this paper. I would just like to mention that Roger Allen highlighted the importance of such studies in the rewriting of the history of Arabic literature, in order to reconsider a 'renewed and different approach to the pre-modern era'.⁴⁸ The studies that are being carried out on the pre-modern period of Arabic literature, in his opinion, 'justify a greater emphasis on continuities rather than «ruptures»'.⁴⁹ For Allen, Yāzījī's *maqāmāt* should be considered as an example of continuity of literary genres as Arabic literature passes into the modern age. Indeed, as already sustained by Badawi, Nāṣīf's poetic work had the merit of purifying the poetic language in use by his contemporaries ridding it of linguistic artifice and excess, even though he did not bring innovation to the literary genre in which he expressed himself.⁵⁰ Badawi feels he harks back to the classical 'Abbasid style of poetry and, in prose, his contribution does not bring innovation and should be evaluated more negatively than positively, when compared to some of his contemporaries: 'The historian of modern Arabic literature must, therefore, give more space to his prose than to his poetry, and even in the former, as in his collection of *maqāmāt* (*Majma' al-Baḥrayn*), his contribution is also more negative than positive, when compared with a remarkable creative prose writer like al-Shidyāq'.⁵¹ The novelty that Nāṣīf does not bring is identified by this scholar as the inability to express personal feelings and individual experiences, and spontaneity, which only come with al-Barūdī, who is regarded as the founder of the renaissance of modern Arabic poetry.

Instead of discussing questions of literary criticism, I would rather talk about how Nāṣīf's fame spread from the Mid-Nineteenth Century throughout Europe, especially in France, where the purity of his literary compositions and language was appreciated and he was considered one of the few contemporary Arab writers worthy of note.

In short, we feel it can be said that the European Orientalists who were contemporary to Nāṣīf knew him and valued him as a scholar and linguist, but placed him in the category of antiquity, as an exponent and imitator of tradition, in a simplified judgement between traditionalists or modernisers which also included moral judgement and one of value. This perspective should be seen in the spirit of a time in which Europe had faced and was still going through rapid political, social and cultural changes. This attitude did not allow them to assess the innovative scope that, in the Middle-East, an apparently traditionalist attitude like that of Nāṣīf Yāzījī's represented. Nowadays he tends to be given a role of precursor and facilitator of the Arab national awakening in the political sense which had its necessary antecedent in a cultural, linguistic and literary rebirth. This point will be taken up again in the following pages.

4 NĀṢĪF AND THE SYRIAN PROTESTANT COLLEGE

The origin of Nāṣīf's collaboration with the missionaries who were to found the Syrian Protestant College in the following years was his move to Beirut with his family in 1840, at the end of his service with Emir Shihāb. At the time the Levantine city was not only developing as a major port and commercial centre for the Syrian area but was also becoming a vibrant cultural centre due, in part, to the work of Catholic and Protestant missionaries.⁵²

⁴⁸ Roger Allen, 'Rewriting Literary History: The Case of the Arabic Novel', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 38 (2007), p. 259.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ See M.M. Badawi, 'al-Bārūdī Precursor of the Modern Arabic Poetic Revival', *Die Welt des Islams*, new ser., 12 (1969), p. 230.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230-231.

⁵² On Beirut in these times, see Samir Khalaf, *Persistence and change in 19th century Lebanon. A sociological essay* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1979); Fawaz L., *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983); May Davie, 'Au prisme de l'altérité, les orthodoxes de Beyrouth au début du XIX siècle', *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 107-110 (2005), 161-182, [Online facsimile] <<http://remmm.revues.org/2805>>.

As we have already mentioned, Nāṣīf's biographers say that he did not speak any foreign languages, but this condition did not seem to have prevented Nāṣīf from sustaining excellent scientific and cultural exchanges with the Protestant missionary milieu which would lead to the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College in 1866, what would later become the American University in Beirut. As is well known, one of the most illustrious people to have worked with this cultural institution was Eli Smith, the pioneer of the Arabic translation of the Bible.⁵³ Eli Smith (1801-1857) was ordained on May 26th, 1826 in Springfield. He travelled extensively in the East and made a map of Mount Sinai and *Arabia Petraea*. He also went on a mission in Armenia of which there is an interesting account.⁵⁴

According to what Nāṣīf said himself in a letter to Eli Smith, his collaboration with the American mission began as early as 1830. The relationship was, at least at the beginning, of a professional nature: Nāṣīf was chosen because of his reputation as an excellent copyist and for his competence in Arabic. He was entrusted by Smith to make handwritten copies of various works in Arabic. He was paid in cash for this work by American missionaries. From the correspondence between the two, we can glean that Nāṣīf's skill was requested for works on historical subjects, such as a book on Lebanese history in which Girgis Baz, the Minister of Emir Bashīr II Shihāb assassinated in 1807, is mentioned.⁵⁵ In another letter dated 1847 Nāṣīf informed his interlocutor that he had obtained the authorisation from a certain person (whose name he did not mention, but who is assumed to be a well-known man) to write his story, but the same person set the price of the work at 1000 piastres. In Nāṣīf's opinion, the price is reasonable when compared to the person's fame.⁵⁶ It may be deduced from this correspondence that Nāṣīf also worked on the creation of copies of Arabic grammar texts for the students of the Protestant mission to use.⁵⁷ The contact with the American missionaries did not end with Eli Smith's departure, though we must say that the relationship of collaboration did encounter some difficulties; Nāṣīf was forced to seek the intervention of Smith to urge the missionaries in the Beirut office to give him some work. He had proposed the making a copy of the famous dictionary by Fayruz Abadi, from a manuscript which he considered to be excellent, but the missionaries had answered that they could not pay for works of a 'wordly' (*dunyawī*) and not 'religious' nature with the money from the mission, also giving an interesting use of the adjective itself.⁵⁸ In the same letter Nāṣīf asked Smith if he knew someone in the US or in the UK who would pay for the making of copies of manuscripts of 'wordly' topics, such as history, language or literature. He insisted on this point, stating that the creation of works of this kind would 'educate and enlighten the people'.⁵⁹ In the same letter, Nāṣīf delicately suggested to his interlocutor that he might earn much more making copies for other clients, but the friendship and intimacy that bound him to his American partner were worth much more. As proof of this intimate and fraternal bond, despite the rhetorical formulas of politeness used in his letters, Nāṣīf attached a poem written in honour of his American friend in which he expresses with

⁵³ The Presbyterian Church sent missionaries to the Orient through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. For historical review about the Syrian Protestant college see A.L. Tibawi, 'The Genesis and the Early History of the Syrian Protestant College', part I, *The Middle East Journal* 21 (1967), 1-15; part II 21 (1967), 199-212. For the American missions in the Middle East see Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East. Missionary Influence on American policy 1810-1927* (Minneapolis: Lund, 1971).

⁵⁴ Eli Smith, H. G. O. Dwight, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H. G. O. Dwight in Armenia; including a journey through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia, with a visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1833). See also Margaret R. Leavy, *Looking for the Armenians. Eli Smith's missionary adventures, 1830-1831* (New Haven, Conn.: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992), Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, vol. 50, 189-275.

⁵⁵ Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī to Eli Smith, s.d., St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre Archives, Tibawi Papers GB165-0284, Box II/ file 3.

⁵⁶ Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī to Eli Smith, 30 July 1847, St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre Archives, Tibawi Papers GB165-0284, Box II/ file 3. One can presume it could be a member of Emir Shihāb's family or someone close to them.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī to Eli Smith, 12 or 16 August 1845, St. Antony's College, Middle East Centre Archives, Tibawi Papers GB165-0284, Box II/ file 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

vivid images and almost heart-rendering verses, the love that was near to passion that bound them together, and the nostalgia and longing that he had to see him again soon.⁶⁰

Although our poet was tied by a particular friendship with Eli Smith, he had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with other American missionaries, whom he mentioned in his correspondence with his friend, including Thomas Laurie, William Thomson, and Isaac Bird amongst others. In 1847 Smith launched the Syrian Association, one of the first cultural organisations in the region, with the participation of prominent Syrian intellectuals, including Nāṣīf.⁶¹ At the same time, Nāṣīf was chosen by Eli Smith as a collaborator for the challenging project of an Arabic translation of the Bible for his excellent reputation as a linguist and scholar. The translation of the New Testament was begun in 1847 by a team led by Eli Smith and, after his death, continued by Cornelius Van Dyck (1818-1895) with a new group in which he chose to include a Muslim Arabist, so that there would be no influence by prior knowledge from the Christian group.

The intense bond and the sincere friendship between Nāṣīf and Eli Smith are shown by the elegy the first composed for the death of the American missionary, a copy of which is conserved in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies.⁶² Nāṣīf was then replaced by Yusuf al-Asir, a scholar who had been trained at the al-Azhar school. The work was completed by Van Dyck in 1865. In those years the Catholic community felt the danger represented by the intense missionary activities carried on by the Protestants, especially after the publication of the Arabic version of the Bible. This Protestant influence was felt more dangerous in the poor rural areas where they had some schools. The Jesuit Superior of Deir al-Qamar, Henri de Prunières, told to Mgr. Valegra, the Apostolic Delegate in Syria, that Catholic could not oppose their schools to those of the Protestants due to lack of financial resources.⁶³

This is the description of the working methods used by the translation team led by Eli Smith:

'It is plain from the above that Dr. Smith began to work on the translation in 1848, assisted by Sheikh Nāṣīf el Yazigy, and Mr. Butrus el Bistany [*sic*]. First, Mr. Bistany made a translation into Arabic from the Hebrew or Greek with the aid of the Syriac. Then Sheikh Nāṣīf, who knew no language but Arabic, rewrote what had been translated, carefully sifting out all foreign idioms. Then Dr. Smith revised Sheikh Nāṣīf's manuscript by himself, and made his own corrections and emendations. Then he and Sheikh Nāṣīf went over the work in company, and Dr. Smith was careful not to let the meaning be sacrificed for a question of Arabic grammar or rhetoric.'⁶⁴

His work as a reviewer of texts of Scripture was not limited to the impressive work of translating the Bible into Arabic, we also find him involved in checking the Arabic text of a publication that appeared in 1870, dedicated to some of the apocryphal books of Tobit and the Maccabees carried out in a Greek Orthodox milieu.⁶⁵

We have an account of Nāṣīf's death and some details about his funeral thanks to another American missionary, Henry Harris Jessup. 'On Wednesday, February 8, 1871, one of the notable dignitaries of Syria died in Beirut. Sheikh Nāṣīf el Yazigy was the greatest living Arabic poet, author of fourteen different works in Arabic, and formerly for years the companion and assistant of Dr. Eli Smith in the translation of the Bible into Arabic. He died aged seventy-one years. He had been partially paralyzed for two years past but never forgot Dr. Eli Smith. He often said to me, «When Dr. Smith was on his death-bed he preached to me a sermon which I have not forgotten and never can forget. No, sir, I

⁶⁰ The poem starts with the following words *Qif bayna al-rīhān*.

⁶¹ Louis Cheikho, 'Mulhiq', *al-Machriq* 12 (1909), p. 40.

⁶² Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī, *An elegy on the death of Eli Smith, beginning: Qāla al-Shaykh Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī yarṯhi*, n.p., n.d.

⁶³ See the letter of Mgr. Valegra to Card. Barnabò, 26-7-1867, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 1 (1860-1873), f. 630 r - f. 631 v.

⁶⁴ Henry Harris Jessup, D.D., *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, v. I, Introduction by James S. Dennis, D. D. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), [online facsimile] <<http://www.arabicbible.com/for-christians/the-bible/148-fifty-three-years-in-syria/1449-the-arabic-bible-its-translation-and-the-translators-1848-1865.html>>.

⁶⁵ Macarius al-Ramlī, Joannes Papadopoulos, Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī (Eds.), *Kitāb Takmilat al-kutub al-muqaddasah al-qānūniyah al-maqbūlah min al-kanisatayn al-sharqiyah wa-al-gharbīyah* [The ten Apocrypha from the Book of Tobit to the Maccabees, collated with the text of the Septuagint by I. Papadopoulos, and the Arabic text revised by Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī. Edited with a preface by Macarius al-Ramlī, Superior of the convent of Nātūr.] (Beirut, 1870).

cannot forget it. Dr. Smith was a man of God». An immense crowd followed the sheikh to his grave, among them nearly 800 pupils from the schools and seminaries of Beirut, a noble tribute to his great learning. Such a sight had not been seen in Beirut since the days of Justinian.⁶⁶

Nāṣīf's collaboration with the American missionaries made an important contribution to the formation of an Arab national consciousness through the growth of a generation of young people aware of the richness of their cultural and linguistic heritage.⁶⁷

In particular, the Arabic translation of the Bible also became a new element in the rivalry between the Catholic Church and the Protestant missions. The new Arabic edition of the Bible immediately received widespread popularity even amongst Catholics. The Jesuits informed the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome, complaining that copies of Protestant Bibles were also being used by Catholic priests and bishops. They indicated the need for the Catholic Church to undertake a work of translation of biblical texts into Arabic too in order to make sure Catholics no longer continued to use the Protestant translations which, in their opinion, also contained errors. The Jesuit Father de Prunières expressed his concerns to the apostolic delegate in Syria, Mgr Valerga, with these words:

'In autre moyen, qu'ont les Protestants d'augmenter leur influence c'est la diffusion de leurs livres et surtout de leur Bible, qui se trouvent en grand nombre entre les mains des catholiques, et même celles de leurs éditions de Beyrouth, c'est à dire de leur propre traduction: les prêtres mêmes s'en servent fréquemment, aucune autre édition catholique de la Bible ne se trouvant entre leurs mains: c'est un moindre mal, quand on peut trouver un exemplaire de l'édition de Londres, qu'a été imprimée sur celle de Rome. Outre l'inconvénient des fautes volontaires qu'ils ont faites dans la traduction, il y a celui de voir les Protestants seuls en possession de donner l'Écriture Sainte, et cela même aux Catholiques. Le mal [demanderait] un prompt remède, par la divulgation d'une édition Catholique.'⁶⁸

As a response to the Protestant Bible, Father Monnot, the Superior of the Jesuit Mission in Syria, elaborated a project to print a Catholic edition of the Holy Scriptures, according to the precepts of the Council of Trent. The Jesuits were very careful and made sure they obtained the prior consent of the Propaganda Fide for the translation.⁶⁹ From Rome, the Congregation agreed, but did not want to appear as the responsible for the work and asked the Apostolic Delegate in the Holy Land to give his *imprimatur*.⁷⁰ Monnot referred to Cardinal Barnabò that this was the request of the Maronite Patriarch and of several Catholic bishops. Barnabò agreed with the project that, as we know, was carried out some years later with the contribution of Nāṣīf's son, Ibrahim.⁷¹ In the draft attached to the letter we find some information about the Catholic appreciation of the Protestant edition of the Bible and also to the style of the translation: 'la quale è bella con nitidità di caratteri, con elegante traduzione, con comodo formato, con prezzo discretissimo per non dire gratuito, e diffusissima, e appare nelle mani anche dei religiosi e preti, i quali dicono di non averne una cattolica' [which is very good with clear characters, with an elegant translation, in a convenient format, with a very low price, if not free, and a

⁶⁶ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*.

<<http://www.arabicbible.com/for-christians/the-bible/148-fifty-three-years-in-syria/1464-notable-visitors-and-converts-.html>>.

⁶⁷ About the role of the American missionaries in Syria and Lebanon see Christine Beth Lindner, 'Negotiating the Field: American Protestant Missionaries in Ottoman Syria, 1823 to 1860', PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2009; Dominique Cadinot, 'De la barbarie au nationalisme : effets de la présence missionnaire américaine en Terre Sainte (1815-1914)', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* [online journal] 80 (2010), (15 December 2010) accessed 29 August 2013. <<http://cdlm.revues.org/5323>>.

⁶⁸ Valegra to Cardinal Barnabò, 26 July 1867, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 1 (1860-1873), f. 631 v. Here he refers to the edition of the Bible printed in London and based on a translation made in Damascus by a Maronite bishop in 1620, and then published in Rome in 1671.

⁶⁹ Lodovico da Ravenna to Cardinal. Franchi, Beirut, 4 February 1875, SCPF, S.C. Siria, v. 2, f. 116 r. - 117 v.

⁷⁰ In the draft of the answer Franchi wrote that all should be done under the responsibility of the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and added 'this version will neither be seen as directly nor indirectly approved by the Holy See', SCPF, S.C. Siria, v. 2, f. 118 r. Probably the Cardinal did not want the Holy See to be seen as being responsible, taking into consideration the Ottoman Firman of February 1824 prohibiting the distribution of Bibles. That Firman, according to the Evangelical missionaries, was inspired from the Catholic Church for 'her bitter hostility to the Word of God'. See Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, p. 37.

⁷¹ Monnot to Barnabò, Rome, 16 March 1871, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 1 (1860-1873), f. 1095 r - 1096 v. In 1876 the Old Testament was published, followed in 1878 by the New Testament, both with the imprimatur of Mgr. Bracco, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.

large circulation, and it can also be seen in the hands of the religious and priests, who say they do not have a Catholic one].⁷²

5 NĀṢĪF PROTO-NATIONALIST?

The political role *Nāṣīf* had as a promoter of Arab nationalism has long been debated amongst contemporary scholars. There is no doubt that the revival of the Arabic language and literature served as the basis for the subsequent rise of an Arab national conscience. The various theories that have been developed about Arab nationalism, its characteristics and origins, about which there is a still debate among scholars⁷³, will not be addressed in this paper. Instead we intend to refer to a well-established fact in the analysis of the development of Arab nationalism: the importance of the factor of the language, amongst others, as an element that unites the Arabs. In this sense, *Nāṣīf*'s work is an important building block in the construction of a consciousness of Arab identity. In saying this, however, we do not intend to hail *Nāṣīf* as champion and representative of an ideology which, in his time, had not even been fully elaborated. However, knowingly or unknowingly, with his relentless work to bring forth the Arabic language in its purity again, he gave to his generation and to the subsequent ones a tool that would lead to the national revival of the Arabs, as well as to the raising of their cultural level. Some scholars have focused on this in their research, such as Thomas Philipp who, when presenting Jurji Zaydan's work on Arab nationalism, and with this author we are a generation after *Nāṣīf*, stated that, 'the conscious attempt to revive Arabic as a medium of thought and expression must be considered a main aspect of the development of a national consciousness. Such attempts can be traced back to *Nāṣīf Yāzījī* (1800-71), and more importantly to Butrus Bustānī (1819-83)'.⁷⁴ In regard to the work of the two Christians, not as theorists, but as scholars working in the field, he speaks of Arab culturalism *in actu*.⁷⁵ Others have stressed the role *Yāzījī* had in opening the way for the formation of the Arab identity and the spread of the idea of secularism in the Middle East through the renewal of the instrument of the language.⁷⁶

Within *Yāzījī*'s very family we may witness what happened at the level of the country where there was a passage from one generation, which had started to cultivate an interest in the study of Arabic language and literature, to the next, in which the consciousness of being part of the Arab nation was fully mature. *Yāzījī*, as a father, is an example of this first generation of intellectuals who, re-launching the study and love for their language and literature, would also contribute to the maturation of a political consciousness of Arabness. His son Ibrahim would become the expression of this mature consciousness, expressed in an explicit and conscious way.⁷⁷ George Samné recognised the provenance of the call that won over the youth of his generation: Arabs, arise and awake!⁷⁸ This is the famous motto which is also found at the beginning of the essay by George Antonious about the

⁷² Draft attached to the letter sent by Monnot to Barnabò, Rome, 16 March 1871, SCPF, SC Siria, v. 1 (1860-1873), f. 1097 r.

⁷³ See George Antonious, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938); Sylvia G. Haim, 'Islam and the Theory of Arab Nationalism', *Die Welt des Islams*, New Ser., 4 (1955), 124-149; Sylvia G. Haim (Ed.), *Arab Nationalism. An Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Zeine N. Zeine, *The emergence of Arab nationalism: with a background study of Arab-Turkish relations in the Near East* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1973); and more recently Rashid Khalidi, 'Arab Nationalism: Historical Problems in the Literature', *The American Historical Review*, 96 (1991), 1363-1373; Rashid Khalidi et al. (Eds.), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (4th revised edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁷⁴ Thomas Philipp, 'Language, History, and Arab National Consciousness in the Thought of Jurji Zaidan (1861-1914)', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4 (1973), p. 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ See Hadī Matar Ni'ma, 'al-ittijāhāt al-'ilmānī fī al-sharq al-'uthmānī al-nātiq bi-l-dād fī al-qarn al-tāsi' 'ashar', *al-Mashriq*, 66 (1992), 395-425.

say they do no awakening of the Arabs.⁷⁹ In 1936, the Syrian nationalist applauded the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian and Franco-Syrian agreements, considering them the realisation of the dream of the Arab nation, even though, in reality, as is well known, these agreements still left little room for the implementation of full autonomy and independence of those countries. Samné himself recognised the importance of the preparatory work carried out by Syrian intellectuals in education, and we may also include in the debated among group Nāṣīf for his work in the revival of the Arabic language. He stated: 'Une élite intellectuelle s'est littérature serve peu à peu formée à la lecture des livres, elle a pris d'elle-même, de son glorieux passé, une conscience that have been de plus en plus nette et tout naturellement a réclamé l'indépendance'.⁸⁰

is a still debat Some scholars argue that this political consciousness can also be found in Nāṣīf⁸¹, while others well-established claim that he was a conservative, basing their argument on the fact that he persisted with imitating e factor of the classical models in rhymed prose.⁸²

f's work is ar Apart from the critical judgement on his literary production, it is also necessary to consider the In saying this evaluation of the political and cultural impact his activity had on the formation of Arab national y which, in hi: consciousness in a broader sense. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the awakening of a sense h his relentless of personal responsibility in the rebirth of one's country went hand in hand with the literary and tion and to the cultural revival of the Arab peoples.

to the raising of Perhaps one should think about whether considering the love for a classical style and the purity of as Philipp who language is sufficient to define the political orientation of an individual. Was it not perhaps premature are a generatio to expect Nāṣīf to have such consciousness at that moment in history? But there is no doubt that the and expressio national consciousness in that world was fuelled by the rediscovery of the 'classical' charm of the ch attempts car language. Once a certain mastery of the classical language has been regained, it was used to take on (1819-83)'.⁷⁴ In new literary forms. In this sense, I feel it is useful to differentiate a purely literary criticism of Nāṣīf's in the field, he work, in relation to his contemporaries, from a judgement of the political impact of his literary work ing the way fo from a nationalist point of view. In this sense, it seems appropriate to include Nāṣīf as one of the lle East through precursors of the Arab renaissance movement. His insistence on language, his efforts in regaining its purity and simplicity of expression may be considered an end in itself. On closer inspection, however, ntry where there this dedication, which completely absorbed Nāṣīf's life, can be seen in the light of what Herder study of Arabic already theorised and practiced for German.⁸³ Moreover, the work of purifying the language used by Arab nation was Nāṣīf seems to correspond to what Fichte theorised about language as a mirror of the soul of a nation⁸⁴ ctuals who, re- as well as what Sati' al-Husri theorised in regard to Arab nationalism, to whom the development of the to the maturation idea of an Arab *umma* united by linguistic and cultural factors.⁸⁵ But with him we would be looking n of this mature at the next generation.

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⁷⁹ Antonious, *The Arab Awakening*.

⁸⁰ See George Samné, *Le Traité*, p. 386.

⁸¹ Fiona McCallum, 'Christian political participation in the Arab world', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23 (2012), 3-18.

⁸² See for example Starkey, *Nāṣīf al-Yāziji*, p. 377 and 379.

⁸³ For the relationship between language and nation in Herder see, in the extensive bibliography, Colin H. Williams, *Called into Liberty. On Language and Nationalism* (Clarendon: Multilingual Matters, 1994); Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology* (Baltimore: Georgetown University Press, 2003).

⁸⁴ For a more detailed analysis of Fichte and Herder's opinions on this point see George Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (2nd edition, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 59 ff and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (3rd edition, London: Verso, 2003), p. 69 ff.

⁸⁵ For an analysis of Sati' al-Husri's theory see Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 49 ff.

⁸⁶ See Zachs, p. 96.

awakening of the Arabs.⁷⁹ In 1936, the Syrian nationalist applauded the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian and Franco-Syrian agreements, considering them the realisation of the dream of the Arab nation, even though, in reality, as is well known, these agreements still left little room for the implementation of full autonomy and independence of those countries. Samné himself recognised the importance of the preparatory work carried out by Syrian intellectuals in education, and we may also include in the group Nāṣīf for his work in the revival of the Arabic language. He stated: 'Une élite intellectuelle s'est peu à peu formée à la lecture des livres, elle a pris d'elle-même, de son glorieux passé, une conscience de plus en plus nette et tout naturellement a réclamé l'indépendance'.⁸⁰

Some scholars argue that this political consciousness can also be found in Nāṣīf⁸¹, while others claim that he was a conservative, basing their argument on the fact that he persisted with imitating classical models in rhymed prose.⁸²

Apart from the critical judgement on his literary production, it is also necessary to consider the evaluation of the political and cultural impact his activity had on the formation of Arab national consciousness in a broader sense. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the awakening of a sense of personal responsibility in the rebirth of one's country went hand in hand with the literary and cultural revival of the Arab peoples.

Perhaps one should think about whether considering the love for a classical style and the purity of language is sufficient to define the political orientation of an individual. Was it not perhaps premature to expect Nāṣīf to have such consciousness at that moment in history? But there is no doubt that the national consciousness in that world was fuelled by the rediscovery of the 'classical' charm of the language. Once a certain mastery of the classical language has been regained, it was used to take on new literary forms. In this sense, I feel it is useful to differentiate a purely literary criticism of Nāṣīf's work, in relation to his contemporaries, from a judgement of the political impact of his literary work from a nationalist point of view. In this sense, it seems appropriate to include Nāṣīf as one of the precursors of the Arab renaissance movement. His insistence on language, his efforts in regaining its purity and simplicity of expression may be considered an end in itself. On closer inspection, however, this dedication, which completely absorbed Nāṣīf's life, can be seen in the light of what Herder already theorised and practiced for German.⁸³ Moreover, the work of purifying the language used by Nāṣīf seems to correspond to what Fichte theorised about language as a mirror of the soul of a nation⁸⁴ as well as what Sati' al-Husri theorised in regard to Arab nationalism, to whom the development of the idea of an Arab *umma* united by linguistic and cultural factors.⁸⁵ But with him we would be looking at the next generation.

As for Nāṣīf's proto-nationalism, Zachs writes that in the first half of the Nineteenth Century he was part of a group of intellectuals that was active in the cultural and social milieus in Beirut. They formed an association called '*al-jama'iyya al-sūriyya li-l-iktisāb al-'ulūm wa-l-funūn*'.⁸⁶ There was, other than Nāṣīf, his student Khalīl al-Khūrī, who had, in a novella, invited them to be modern

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⁸⁶ See Zachs, p. 96.

Orientalists, rather than incomplete Europeans.⁸⁷ In other studies dedicated to the birth of Syrian national consciousness Nāṣīf is cited as one of the precursors of this movement.⁸⁸

Nāṣīf shared with Butrus al-Bustānī the experience of *al-Madrasa al-waṭaniyyah*, which was established by the latter in 1863 in order to give a Syrian youth a high-level alternative to their local education; one that was different from the schools run by foreign Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Nāṣīf, recognised as a prominent Arabist, was involved in the teaching of Arabic. To this end, he also wrote some books for students. The establishment of a 'national' school was considered as the first step on the path to the necessary reforms.⁸⁹ Some scholars have identified Bustānī as having been the first to assert publicly in 1859 that there was the need for a revival of the Arabic language as a necessary condition for cultural regeneration⁹⁰, yet our author had already been devoted to this goal for many years. Perhaps he had not voiced it as explicitly and publicly as Bustānī had. Nevertheless, a trace of this concern in his spirit can be found in his poetic work *Majma' al-Bahrayn*, where he laments the fact that the Arabs had not mastered their own language.⁹¹ Nāṣīf dedicated his life to the study and teaching of Arabic as well as to the production of Arabic rhymed prose of high literary merit. He never learned a foreign language, we do not know the reason why, yet it is an interesting fact: he would have had many opportunities to do so working in close contact with Protestant missionary circles, as well as with French cultural and diplomatic circles, as we have already mentioned. All Nāṣīf's work, aimed at revitalising the Arabic language, in its classical literary forms, from poetry to rhymed prose, in the refinement and precision of terminology, formed the basis on which others built a national Arab consciousness which also became a political aspiration. His contribution in the field of linguistics cannot just be schematised as 'traditional', 'conservative', against the 'reformism' which appeared in other forms, using concepts that are perhaps premature for the time in which Nāṣīf lived and worked. Going 'back' to the Arabic of antiquity, of the golden age of classical literature, was then a novelty, a return to the origins in order to be able to move forward in the consciousness and pride of their own tradition. The literary judgement that has often been made by contemporary European critics concerning Nāṣīf's work identifies in him, with a certain amount of contempt, an 'imitator' of the old models, who is unable to infuse authentic and modern sentiments into his literary work.⁹² I believe, however, that we can be more lenient toward him when we consider that his work was pioneering in the revival of the Arabic language that served to pave the way for the development of Arab national thinking. Moreover, his work should be evaluated as a whole in terms of what he built along with other intellectuals of his time; various pieces that make up a more complex picture of a new ferment which animated the Syrian-Lebanese society throughout the Nineteenth Century.

⁸⁷ Zachs, p. 96.

⁸⁸ See, among others, Elisabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought. Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 32.

⁸⁹ See *al-Jinān* 7 (1876), p. 595, quoted in Butrus Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus al-Bustānī', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11 (May, 1980), 287-304, here p. 294.

⁹⁰ Abu-Manneh, *The Christians*, p. 291.

⁹¹ Again I owe this reference to Butrus Abu-Manneh, *The Christians*, p. 301.

⁹² See M.M. Badawi, p. 230.

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