

Ehsan Yarshater as an Institution Builder

Ali Banuazizi
Boston College

I have been given the privilege and honor to say a few words as we celebrate Professor Ehsan Yarshater's 95th birthday. Over the past six decades, Professor Yarshater's name has been associated with nearly every area of Iranian studies and he is universally acknowledged as the doyen of our field. Later in the program, Professors Martin Schwartz and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak will talk about his contributions to the study of linguistics, pre-Islamic history and culture, and Persian literature. What I would like to focus on are Professor Yarshater's many signal achievements in creating and steering institutions that have informed and inspired scholars, students, and broad segments of the public, both in Iran and elsewhere, in relation to the Iranian culture and civilization over the past two generations.

It is said that the work of scholars and intellectuals begins and ends with ideas. This is certainly true as a broad characterization of the nature of scholarly work, which more often than not is carried out by individuals in relative isolation. But then, there are scholars whose pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment extends beyond the rarefied circles of their peers and fellow academics. They do this by creating venues, tools, and institutions that engage and educate much broader segments of the public in their society. Success in such pursuits requires dedicated work, patience, enterprise, pursuit of external resources, and above all active and persistent collaboration with others. Professor Yarshater's professional career, over and beyond his pioneering research and publications in several fields of Iranian studies, is illustrative of this latter, publicly-minded mode of scholarship.

Ehsan Yarshater's early professional life began in 1952, when he returned to Iran after a five-year course of study leading to an M.A. degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. (He had previously received a doctorate in Persian literature under the direction of Ali-Asghar Hekmat from Tehran University in 1947.) In the same year, he was appointed as a lecturer in Persian language and literature in the Faculty of Letters at Tehran University. In his new position, despite an unusually demanding teaching schedule, he managed to carry out extensive field research in villages of Northwest Iran on Southern Tati dialects, a topic on which he had worked as a student at SOAS under the guidance of the distinguished Iranologist, Walter B. Henning. And it was this pioneering linguistic research that served as the basis for his dissertation and doctorate from the the University of London in 1960. Meanwhile, when his earlier mentor, Ebrahim Pour-Davoud retired, Yarshater was appointed to his chair in "Ancient Persian Culture" at Tehran University.

In 1953, only a year after starting his teaching position at Tehran University, Dr. Yarshater embarked on his first major project beyond the walls of academia and founded *Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab* (Institute for Translation and Publication of Books). The Institute's initial objective was to translate and publish foreign classics into Persian—applying professional standards for editing, proper crediting, and printing that were unprecedented for Iran. Within a year after its establishment, the Institute published translations of the following five classic works simultaneously: Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* (trans. by M. A. Jamalzadeh), Joseph Bédier's version of *Tristan et Iseut* (trans. by P. Natel Khanlari), Plato's *Five Treatises* (tans. by M. Sana'i), Turgeniev's *Fathers and Sons* (trans. by M. Ahi), and Confucius's *Analects* (trans. by Kazemzadeh Iranshahr). The literary weight of these works, the prominence of their translators, the unusual care exercised in checking the accuracy of the translations against the

original, and the well-designed appearance of the books attracted the attention of discriminating readers and helped to raise editing and production standards for Iran's still nascent publishing industry. A total of 71 major works of world literature were published in this "Foreign Literature" (*Majmu'a-ye Adabiyat-e Khareji*) series by the Institute. Soon thereafter, the Institute sponsored three additional book series geared to younger age groups, including *Majmu'a-ye Kudakan*, ages 4-7; *Majmu'a-ye Nojavanan*, ages 8-11; and *Majmu'a-ye Javanan*, ages 12-15. Some 98 titles were published in these three series.

Encouraged by the success of the foreign literature series and, more importantly, following Dr. Yarshater's belief that a country's social development is vitally dependent on its citizens' level of general knowledge and understanding of the world, including their own country's cultural heritage, the Institute initiated several additional book series in the mid-1950s. These included a "General Knowledge" series (*Majmu'a-ye Ma'aref-e Omumi*), 138 titles; "Persian Texts" series (*Majmu'a-ye Motun-e Farsi*), 48 titles; "Iranian Studies" series (*Majmu'a-ye Iranshenasi*), 68 titles; and a number of general and specialized bibliographies, including the multi-volume "Bibliography of Persian Printed Persian Books" (*Fehrest-e Ketabha-ye Chapi-e Farsi*). With such remarkable output, in both quality and quantity, the Institute made an unparalleled contribution to the cultural literacy of many Iranians, young and old, over the course of its quarter-century existence from 1953 to 1979. It continued its activities under the same name for an additional two years after the 1979 revolution before being dissolved and incorporated within other cultural organizations under the Islamic Republic. [A detailed description of the Institute's history and publishing achievements may be found in an article on "Bongah-e Tarjoma wa Nashr-e Ketab" by Edward Joseph in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.]

In 1957, with the help of Iraj Afshar, Abdol-Hosayn Zarrinkoob, and several other scholars, Professor Yarshater founded Iran's first modern Book Society (*Anjoman-e Ketab*) and, as its main organ, the first Persian-language journal of book reviews, *Rahnema-ye Ketab*, with Iraj Afshar and M. Moqarrabi as its associate editors. For over two decades until its closure in 1979, *Rahnema-ye Ketab* served as the principal periodical for the review of new works on Persian literature, culture and history, as well as news about advances in various fields of Iranian studies in Iran and abroad.

Invited as a visiting professor of Iranian studies by Columbia University in 1958, Dr. Yarshater left Iran for New York and served in that position for two years. He returned to Iran for a final one-year stint at Tehran University in 1960, but returned to Columbia in 1961, this time as the holder of the newly established Hagop Kevorkian Chair in Iranian Studies. He held that position for nearly three decades until his retirement from teaching in 1990.

By any standard, Professor Yarshater's tenure at Columbia University over the past four-and-a-half decades has been an extraordinary example of scholarly achievement, successful institution-building, and transformative professional initiatives. Besides teaching and mentoring two generations of students about different aspects of Iran's cultural history, literature, and languages, he authored or edited several major books and over 100 scholarly articles and chapters; he served twice as the chair of the Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures; and he founded the Center for Iranian Studies (CIS) in 1967, and has served as its director since. As the first academic center in North America devoted exclusively to the study of Iran, CIS has played a key role in advancing the field by sponsoring lectures by leading scholars, seminars, art exhibits, concerts, and several major publishing projects. Among the latter, particularly noteworthy are the "Persian Heritage," "Persian Studies," "Persian Art," and

“Modern Persian Literature” series; an eight-volume critical edition of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, edited with extensive notes by J. Khaleqi-Motlaq; an authoritative translation of *Tarikh-e Tabari*, arguably the most important work in Islamic historiography, in 40 volumes; a two-volume translation of *Tarikh-e Bayhaqi*; and a projected twenty-volume *A History of Persian Literature*.

Professor Yarshater has played executive and leadership roles in a number of professional organizations worldwide. Starting in the mid-1950s, he served as the secretary of the UNESCO-affiliated Iranian Association for Philosophy and Human Sciences (*Anjoman-e Falsafeh va Olum-e Enسانی*) and vice president of Société de la dialectologie iranienne, a committee of distinguished linguists, including Georges Redard, Georg Morgenstierne, and Emile Benveniste, that had been formed to prepare a comprehensive atlas of spoken dialects in Iran and Afghanistan. He was made an honorary member of Societas Iranologica Europaea and the International Society for Iranian Studies, and served as the first elected president of the latter association in 1997.

The crowning achievement of Professor Yarshater’s long and illustrious career has been, of course, the massive *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, whose editing, management, and sustenance as an institution have become a lifelong mission. A precursor to the *Encyclopaedia* was the “*Daneshname-ye Iran va Islam*,” a Persian translation of articles from the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, plus new entries related to Iranian history and culture, which was published in Iran under Dr. Yarshater’s editorship by the Institute for Translation and Publication of Books in Tehran. A total of 10 fascicles of this work appeared between between 1975 and 1982. The current English version of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, entirely new and independent of the earlier Persian version of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, brought out its first fascicle in 1982 and will soon be completing its 16th printed volume (letter K). With the recent digital revolution

in publishing, the *Encyclopaedia* has been moving gradually to an online edition, for which it recently received high praise from the American Library Association as one of the best reference web sites. Today, the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is viewed by scholars, educators, librarians, and researchers as an indispensable and the most authoritative source of information on all aspects of Iranian civilization.

Reviewing the first volume of *Encyclopaedia Iranica* for the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* some twenty-five years ago (1990), I suggested that “*Encyclopaedia Iranica* will be judged as the most significant contribution of our century to the advancement of Iranian studies as a scholarly enterprise.” At that time, I could pass that judgment in relative confidence, as nine decades of that century had already passed. Now, with the expected completion of its digital edition in less than a decade, I venture to predict that *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is destined to become the most comprehensive, authoritative, and enduring work of scholarship on every facet of Iranian civilization in *two* centuries, the twentieth and the twenty-first.

A few years ago, reflecting on the earliest years of his professional career, Professor Yarshater admitted with disarming modesty:

No sooner had I settled in my job [at the University of Tehran in the early 1950s] than I was affected by a virus, of which the main symptom is that it kills all your leisure time and keeps you running after minutes and seconds.... I did not leave myself much time for attending to the more delectable aspects of life.

We all know that this terrible virus never left Professor Yarshater’s body and is probably what still keeps him at his desk every day of the week until the late evening hours. But as tenacious as the virus has been, it has never been able to subdue his indomitable zest for life and appreciation of the finer and “more delectable” things in it as the arts, Persian poetry, music,

ballroom dancing, travel, and long walks (with earphones) in Riverside Park, and above all the companionship of his many friends and admirers.