

Ehsan Yarshater

Dean and Doyen of Persian Literary Studies

A little over twelve years before completing his studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and receiving the Ph.D. degree in Old and Middle Iranian Languages, Ehsan Yarshater had received a Ph. D. in Persian literature from Tehran University in 1947 with a dissertation titled *She'r-e Farsi dar Ahd-e Shahrokh* (Persian Poetry in the Time of Shahrokh); the work was published by Tehran University Press in 1953. He first came to Columbia University in 1958, was appointed to the Kevorkian Chair in 1961, and founded the Center for Iranian Studies in 1968. In order to arrive as an assessment of his part in the academic study of Persian literature the world over, I thought it might be instructive to see what the status of Persian literary studies was at this university in the decades before his arrival – i.e., in the years following World War II.

In a word, there was no academic program in Persian Literature. By the late 1930s, a Columbia student in social sciences or humanities could study with the likes of historian Jacques Barzun, Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, Poet, Critic and English Professor Mark Van Doren, and perhaps best known of them all literary critic, author, and teacher Lionel Trilling, to name just a few of the great minds on the Morningside campus. Together with his wife Diana Trilling, this latter Columbia academician had in 1937 revived the famed *Partisan Review*, a left-leaning magazine that counted among its associates the likes of Saul Bellow, Alfred Kazin, and Susan Sontag. The University's graduates during this period were equally accomplished – for example, two alumni of Columbia University's School of Law, Charles Evans Hughes and Harlan Fiske Stone (who was also dean of the School of Law), served successively as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

It was a decade later that this University began to approach the study of the cultures and languages of the Middle East. The effort, and the environment driving it in post-World War II, first took place in the School of International Affairs, founded in 1946, where this University began to emphasize practical training to foster understanding of regions of vital interest and to prepare diplomats, information officials and other professionals to meet the complexities of the postwar world. Under the leadership of the dynamic Schuyler Crawford Wallace (1898-1969) the School expanded in scope and depth, initiating, as an example, an increasingly interdisciplinary approach that drew on Columbia's renowned faculties in history, political science, linguistics, and other traditional fields.

It took another decade for Columbia to begin the study of the cultures and literatures of the Middle East with the founding of The Middle East Institute in 1954. The event helped to align Columbia with the national pace in developing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the Middle East, and it was to this University's credit that its offerings were concentrated primarily on the period from the rise of Islam to the present, with a primary focus on the 19th and 20th centuries. Fostering an inter-regional and multi-disciplinary approach to the region, the Institute focused on the Arab countries, Armenia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Central Asia, and Muslim Diaspora communities. As part of that effort, an Arabic Program was also established and the language

began to be taught as part of Columbia University's curriculum. It rose to a new level of prominence on this campus when Edward Said, a leading literary critic, public intellectual and passionate advocate for the Palestinian cause, joined Columbia University in 1963 as a member of the University's the Departments of English and Comparative Literature and worked until his passing in 2003. In the same year Columbia University celebrated its bicentennial during a period of steady expansion. This growth mandated a major campus building program in the 1960s, and, by the end of the decade, five of the University's schools were housed in new buildings.

Persian was first taught here in 1951 by Bernhard Geiger (1881–1964), an Austrian philologist and originally a scholar of Hebrew at the University of Vienna who had been forced out of that position by the Nazis, and immigrated to New York. From 1938 to 1951 he had taught Indo-Iranian philology at the Tibetan-Iranian Institute, later to be expanded into the Asia Institute, New York. In 1951, two years after the shah of Iran conferred upon him the Order of Humayoun, he began to teach Indo-Iranian languages at Columbia University as well. Geiger's publications included *Die Religion der Iranier* (1929); and *Middle Iranian Texts*, among other, less well-known works. He was also the principal researcher of the detailed philological study of Talmudic words of Iranian origin. So, by the time Dr. Yarshater appeared on Columbia University's Morningside campus he fit very well in both the Persian literature of the Islamic period as well as pre-Islamic Iranian languages and dialects. In that sense, Columbia got a bargain with a faculty member who could traverse pre-Islamic and Islamic Iranian languages and literatures.

Administratively, too, Yarshater's arrival here proved auspicious indeed as Columbia University began to further expand its Middle East Department in general and its Iranian Studies Program with financial help from Hagop Kevorkian, including a chair in Iranian Studies, which in 1961 Ehsan Yarshater was invited to occupy. After much hesitation and prolonged discussions with his wife, Yarshater accepted the University's invitation and embarked on a rather arduous but richly productive phase in his life. During it, he worked very hard in New York for three-quarters of the year, and returned every long vacation to Iran to work even harder there.

In time, Yarshater authored and served as the editor of numerous scholarly works. Among others he has authored *Persian Poetry in the Second Half of the 15th Century* (1953), *Southern Tati Dialects* (1970), has edited the third volume of Cambridge History of Iran, in two parts, covering the Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian periods (1983, 1986), and *Highlights of Persian Literature* (1988). He launched *The Encyclopaedia Iranica* Project in 1974, and continues to edit it to this day, 25 years after his retirement. He is the General Editor of the 40-volume Tabari Translation Project, and the Founding Editor of the Persian Text Series, the Persian Heritage Series, the Columbia Lectures in Iranian Studies, and the Persian Studies Series.

In a real sense Yarshater is living proof, if proof were needed, that indeed the harder you work, the luckier you get. Over the years, several lecture series in his name have been instituted at Harvard University, The University of London, The University of California at Los Angeles, The Centre National de Recherche Scientifique in Paris, and The University of Maryland. In addition to receiving the Georgio Levi Della Vida Medal for Achievement in Islamic Studies from UCLA in 1991, he has been elected honorary member of the International Society for Iranian Studies,

the Societas Europaeas Iranologica, and the Institute of Central and West Asian Studies in Pakistan.

As a faculty member at the University, Yarshater's contribution to Columbia's expansion of its Middle Eastern literatures was enormous: in the 1960s, he was planning volumes for a projected series of translations of Persian classical works called Persian Heritage Series, and since UNESCO had a similar project in hand, under the title of Persian Representative Works, it proposed that their undertaking should be merged with Ehsan Yarshater's. The two projects more or less shared a single objective: to make "the best of Persian literary, historical and scientific texts available in the major world languages not only to satisfy the needs of the students of Persian history and culture, but also to respond to the demands of the intelligent English language readership who seek to broaden their intellectual and artistic horizons. Under Ehsan Yarshater's direction the publication of volumes in this important new series proceeded apace.

Based on the belief that, in spite of recent efforts, Persian literature had never received the attention it truly deserves, Dr. Yarshater launched another publication project, *The History of Persian Literature*, envisioned, again, a series of books, now numbering in 18 volumes, to answer the need for greater attention to this millennium-old tradition, one that would offer a new, comprehensive and detailed history of its subject. Conceptualized as an authoritative survey that would reflect the stature and significance of Persian literature as the single most important accomplishment of all Persian speakers, the series is in progress as we celebrate the 95th Birthday of the brain behind it. To carry the series forward, prominent scholars in the field have been invited to bring fresh critical approaches to bear on this important topic and the series will include representative samples of the literature as well. Four volumes have already been published by I.B. Tauris: ***Volume I: A General Introduction to Persian Literature***, edited by Professor J.T.P. de Bruijn; ***Companion Volume I: The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran***, edited by Professors Ronald E. Emmerick and Maria Macuch; ***Companion Volume II: Oral Literature of Iranian Languages***, edited by Professors Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph; and ***Persian Historiography***, edited by Professor Charles Melville.

Yarshater has written about every stage in the long history of Persian literature, every genre and variety of Persian poetry, almost all generations of poets writing in the Persian language, and almost every author conceivably named in the Persian canon. Even leaving aside ***The Encyclopaedia Iranica***, which in itself has many thousands of entries on Persian literature, there's probably no scholar writing today anywhere in the world about Persian literature who would not need to access, examine, analyze or otherwise address at least one of the sixteen monographs and over one hundred articles by Ehsan Yarshater.

That huge quantity is surpassed and enhanced by the superior quality of his scholarly writing. To me, the most outstanding feature of Yarshater's writing is the nuanced way in which he sees and presents all literary matters great and small. When he tackles one of the most polarizing issues in Persian literary scholarship, the transformation of Persian culture as a result of the coming of Islam to Iran, he speaks, on the one hand, of "such deep and enduring transformation in the life and culture of the country that some Iranians began to regard their pre-Islamic past as a pagan era which had ended with the fall of the Sassanid Empire". Let us pause here. In the sentence above, while an acknowledgement is made of what Yarshater refers to as the "deep and enduring

nature and extent of the transformation” he speaks of, at the same time he ascribes anything that goes beyond that to “some Iranians” and not all of them. He then resumes his own voice of moderation, calling that event “a unique turning point”; almost in the next breath of writing, however, he opines that “it would be an error to view the change as too drastic”. He then offers a catalogue of connections and continuities which he calls “powerful links” between pre-Islamic and Islamic culture of Iran.

He begins his discussion of the rise of neo-Persian literature in the Greater Khorasan in the 10th century CE with an acknowledgment that “Persia was now part of the Muslim world” and so the poets now found it fashionable to write poetry like the Arabs, in quantitative meters and applying the rules of Arabic prosody, which, according to him, is why the system soon evolved into “a pervasive literary force”. This is not just a nice scholarly concession; it is a manifestly true and deeply thought-out statement wonderfully articulated, not just about a historical trend, but also about the human nature. Coming to the next turn in the road that Persian literature has traversed over the past eleven centuries, Yarshater identifies a mid-13th century event, the sack of Baghdad by Mongol armies in 1258, as the terminating point of the first phase in the history of Persian poetry, soon to be followed by one marked by what he calls the “contributions of numerous non-Persian (ethnically speaking) luminaries of Persian literature, naming a dozen or so with the designation of the cities they are associated with: Amir Khosrow and Hali of Delhi, Fozuli of Baghdad and Iqbal of Lahore, among many others.

Many in my generation of literary scholars, who have been trying to communicate the vicissitudes of the generational perceptions about the relation between the shaping of Iranian identity in modern times and the historical perspectives we need to present on Persian literature, feel comforted in having consciously or unconsciously adopted the line that Yarshater has charted through these diverse, and at times divergent, entities, and are confirmed in recalling the voice of our master in such matters. For an immediate heir to the first generation of Iranian nationalists, men like Mohammad Qazvini, Mohammad-Ali Fought, Mohammad-Taqi Bahar, and for a man who has studied with the likes of Ebrahim Pourdavoud, Hassan Taqizadeh and Ali-Asghar Hekmat, Yarshater seems to me to have made a conscious choice to be a scholar rather than an ideologue.

In a word, at least in the matter of literary studies of the Persian language, through the works he has authored or edited, through the perspectives he has taken or modified, and through his example as a scholar-teacher, Yarshater has spanned the temporal space that connects pre-modern conceptions of Persian literature and literary Studies to these post-modern times, that is the entire space of modernity in the study of Persian literature; through his exemplary support for the promotion of the field of Iranian Studies all over the globe, he has set standards of scholarship in the field that two generations of scholars in his wake have tried to rise up to, and he has encouraged the teaching of Persian and Iranian Studies at the graduate and undergraduate levels in a way that no the scholar has even attempted. In all that, the man has been, is, and I think shall remain, the dean and Doyen of Iranian Studies, just as the Columbia University website says it.

Dr. Yarshater,

Tonight, I stand before you and this audience proud and humble. In expanding the idea of – and approaches to – the academic study of Persian literature you have shown us how much we don't know by telling us how vast our field really is. You have drawn the boundaries of a territory of imagination that stretches from Western Chinese lands through Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent over into the Caucasus, Abkhazia, Asia Minor and deep into Europe. You have charted the course of our field in such a way that we now know how much – what a vast amount – remains to be plowed, planted and cultivated. The global fraternity/ sorority you have trail-blazed and assayed, the two-thousand strong group you have nurtured of the scholars of Persian literature, are all a testimony and great tribute to your lifetime achievement. As one member of that fraternity/sorority, I stand in awe of you, salute you, and thank you, Sir!