

Salma Khadra Jayyusi

## The Achievements of the Past, the Responsibility of the Present



Poet, critic, literary historian, anthologist and Professor of Arabic Literature at several Arab and American universities. In 1980 she left teaching to found PROTA, Project for the Translation of Arabic Literature and Culture, to which she has devoted most of her energy. Before getting fully involved in the academic and literary field, she spent many years as a diplomat's wife, living in several Arab and European capitals including Baghdad, Bonn, London, Madrid and Rome. She has three children, a son who is an engineer and two daughters who work in the academic and cultural fields. Major Publications in English: *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols., Leiden 1977. "Umayyad Verse" and "Modernist Poetry in Arabic", published in the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Vols. I & IV respectively, 1983. *Modern Arabic Poetry, an Anthology*, New York, 1987, 1991; *The Literature of Modern Arabia*, London and Austin, 1988 & 1990, 1994; *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, 1992, 1994; *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed., Leiden, 1992, 1993, 1994; *Modern Arabic Drama*, Bloomington, 1995; and *Modern Arabic Fiction*, New York, 1996. — Address: PROTA, 47 Homer Avenue, No. 51, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

For many years now I have applied myself to the dissemination of Arabic literature, mainly modern, in the West, especially in the English-speaking world. Through the Project of Translation from Arabic Literature (PROTA) which I founded in America in 1980 with the cooperation of a number of distinguished Arab and Western scholars and creative writers, all the major literary genres available in modern Arabic have been represented in comprehensive anthologies and single-author works. Ongoing research on modern Arab literary genres has led to the specific interest in the most recent developments, and PROTA's latest anthology to date, still under preparation, is an anticipatory collection of *End of the Century Poets*, intended to embody both the fulfill-

ment of a great poetic achievement in the twentieth century, particularly since the early fifties, and to herald further potential achievement for the twenty-first.

From this involvement with the present and the future, I found myself veering, at the same time, to a different kind of inquiry. It became clear to me that this concentration on the contemporary, aimed at illuminating areas of refined human creativity still unknown to the world at large, was not enough; Arabic poetry, extending as it does over more than sixteen centuries, has remained only sporadically and sometimes superficially discovered. It was, I now saw, necessary to return to the very fount, to the times before the advent of Islam in the early seventh century AD, and provide a full account of the language, the poetry and the culture of this long period: the language, because by the seventh century it had become so perfected that it could easily accommodate the pieties, the wisdom, the poetry and the narratives of the *Quran*, regarded to this day as the greatest embodiment of the genius of the Arabic language; the poetry, because this had already known its first golden age a century before: a sophisticated verse created mainly by nomads in harsh desert surroundings yet revealing, to the competent literary historian, all the signs of an extended, robust development unmatched anywhere west of India in its time; and the culture, because many of its aspects were founded on humane standards, with much of its ethic still to be seen in the present-day Arab world. With the advent of an age of interculturalism, and the breakdown of old prejudices and stereotyped ways of thinking, I felt the time now ripe to offer members of other cultures what is rightfully part of their human inheritance: the fruits of what I regard as a unique history of human creativity taking place in the Arabian Peninsula before the seventh century AD.

It was with this kind of study in mind that I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg. Initial consultations with German and other scholars (I must particularly acknowledge here the help and support of my friend, Renate Jacobi), led to the conception of an extensive work by various contributors that would build on the original research carried out by both Arab and Western scholars over the past few decades. Two workshops were held at the Kolleg, one with mainly German Arabists and the other, hosted and subsidized by the Wissenschaftskolleg, with Arab scholars coming there for the purpose. We hope to have a book ready for publication some time in 1997.

I still, however, continued my work on other PROTA projects. Apart from *End of the Century Poets*, the most important of these is a book I am editing on *Modern North African Culture and Literature*, begun two years earlier. Much needed for Arabic studies abroad, this PROTA

project was supported by the American Institute of Maghribi Studies in Washington, which subsidized a conference, attended by North African, Western and other Arab contributors to the volume and held in Tangiers in May, 1995. The meeting was an eminently fruitful one, and the book is now almost ready for publication in Arabic, though it still awaits funding for translation into English.

During the year I also wrote seven essays (four in English and three in Arabic) for the conferences I attended and the lectures I was invited to give at various universities, European and Arab. I planned most of my essays to be part of a book on "contemporary" Arabic poetry intended to update my book on "modern" Arabic poetry published by Brill in 1977, who will also publish the new book. However, some of the essays were written on general cultural topics.

When I think of my year spent at the Wissenschaftskolleg, however, it is not just the planned projects or the writing of the essays (a rather lonely undertaking) that come to mind; this was, too, a year of great intellectual rapport and constant stimulation, and I loved every minute of it. The outstanding feature of the Kolleg, it seems to me, is the way it keeps abreast of the times: both multicultural and intercultural in its impetus, it looks firmly to the future, anticipating the possible fruition of a wide global intercultural movement unknown in the past. It was only after my arrival that I realized that the work on Euro-Arab cultural relations at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, done by Palestinian scholars I know, had been planned and made possible by the Wissenschaftskolleg. Stimulated by the Kolleg's refreshing emphasis on this subject, and having become, over the years, deeply unquiet about the lack of democracy and the slow implementation of human rights in the Arab world, I myself began to contemplate work on the issue, holding stimulating discussions on the subject with the eminently knowledgeable Fellow, Wiktor Osiatynski. The questions to be addressed here are the compatibility of human rights, in their Western, particularly their United Nations definition, with the indigenous cultures of the Islamic Middle East and the potential and general desirability for and the hindrances to their implementation.

Those who come from a background like mine — a Palestinian in the diaspora, a dedicated believer in interculturalism (and hence in the importance of disseminating the best of an Arab cultural contribution seriously underrepresented in the West) and a deep lover of freedom and democracy (whose denial to almost all my fellow Arabs is a constant source of grief and concern) — do not have the luxury of shirking the responsibility of contributing towards any of these areas: and so it was that my meeting with Hans Medick, another Fellow and a seasoned

historian working chiefly on micro-history, opened a wide door for potential service. While at the Kolleg, he decided to write a micro-history of the Palestinian people during the twentieth century, based on personal account literature — of which Palestinians have become fervent exponents since the mid-century, when their tragedy began. This, I felt, was a project both fascinating and urgently necessary; for the production of a historical account from the experiences of a people facing major upheaval humanizes history, explaining events in terms with which others can identify. I myself therefore began collecting, for this intended work, books and titles of personal account literature produced by Palestinians, and while at the Kolleg Dr. Medick and I agreed on the overall plan for the book and made a number of selections. Much more, however, must be done, with the help, I hope, of a third colleague living on site. Once the material for the book has been assembled and translated, each of us will write a commentary on these selections according to his or her specialization.

Yet the artistic life, which remains my first and most abiding passion, has not been neglected for one minute: and my meeting with the humanist and art historian, Hans Belting, another distinguished Fellow at the Kolleg, has been a source of great artistic joy. Again and again, I found my talks with him, on such questions as the similarity of art forms found in different cultures, bringing me back to the primordial sources of human art and confirming my sense of the unity of human creativity. This was an experience which will undoubtedly bear fruit.

In so short a space, it is not possible to name the many wonderful Fellows and Kolleg personnel whose acquaintance brought me such benefit, or to speak about the many friendships forged through the Kolleg's organization of lunches, dinners, the Tuesday colloquium, and the many cultural evenings. The computer staff and the library staff were extremely helpful and so was the secretarial staff and all the rest of the Kolleg's personnel. I should mention here, however, that, at the invitation of the Kolleg, and in conjunction with Kanine Chemla, the Fellows' elected representative, I organized a poetry evening in December at the Kolleg, at which eight world languages were represented.

I also cooperated with the House of World Cultures [Haus der Kulturen der Welt] in Berlin in organizing another poetry evening on July 9, at which poet Nizar Qabbani, famous for his erotic and fiery political verse, read a number of his most famous poems to a large audience in Arabic. These were in turn read in their German translation, which we had prepared for the purpose.

In a poetic piece I read at our farewell party at the end of the year, I described the Kolleg as:

*... an oasis, through which  
People of knowledge pass,  
Emerging wiser and more profound, and bearing a greater gift still:  
Something of love and friendship, and the capacity  
to be one with the world.*