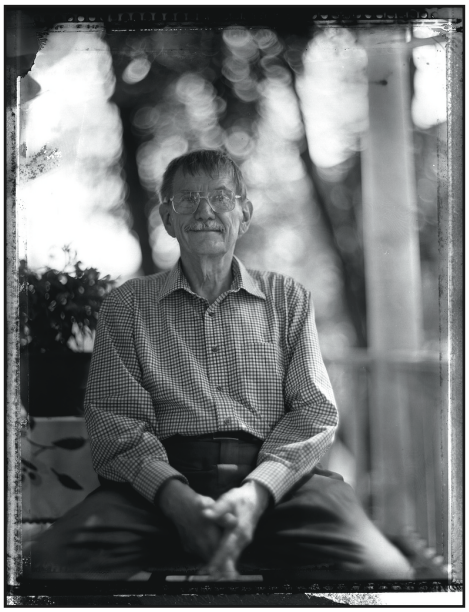
In Memoriam



Wolfhart P. Heinrichs (1941-2014)*

On January 23, 2014, we lost a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. Wolfhart P. Heinrichs was born on October 3, 1941, into a family of philologists. His father H. Matthias was a Germanist, and his mother Anne a scholar of Old Norse who attained a full professorship at the Freie Universität in Berlin at the age of 80.

Wolfhart began his studies in his hometown of Cologne. His university years included much traveling and many languages. After semesters spent at Bonn and Tübingen, he joined the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He then studied at Frankfurt and finally at Giessen, where he received his doctorate in 1967. Along the way, he learned Latin, Greek, French, English, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Old South Arabian, Ethiopic, Ottoman, and Uigur. He also studied certain other African languages—which ones, specifically, I do not recall, though he is fondly remembered for reciting a text in one of them, complete with clicks, at parties.

After stints in Beirut and Istanbul, and a first foray into Neo-Aramaic, Wolfhart returned to teach at Giessen. In 1977, he was offered a professorship in Arabic at Harvard University. Three years later, he

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(Photo by Satoru Murata)

married Alma Giese, a fellow scholar of Arabic and Islam, and an accomplished translator into German. In 1996, he was appointed James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic at Harvard, a position he held until his death.

Most of Wolfhart's work concerned Arabic literary theory and criticism. With enormous breadth and precision, he investigated questions such as the possible influence of Greek thought on Arabic poetics, the meaning of *istiʿārah* (metaphor), and the relationship between literary theory and legal hermeneutics. He was one of the few internationally recognized authorities on neo-Aramaic. And as co-editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, he not only reviewed countless entries written by others but contributed some fifty articles himself, beginning with "*mubālaghah*" and ending with "Zanjānī." "He never promoted himself," one of his former students recently wrote. "He just quietly and steadily produced, each item of scholarly output a gem contributing to a glittering tapestry of refreshingly oblique perspectives on things otherwise taken for granted or previously not considered."

As a teacher and *Doktorvater*, Wolfhart was reluctant to suggest topics for his students, much less impose a particular method or approach. He was, however, uncompromising in his insistence that students think clearly, write carefully, and translate precisely. To ensure that these standards were met, he would comment copiously on whatever was submitted to him, often poking gentle fun at flights of fancy or (worse yet) errors in transliteration. I once amused him no end by mis-transliterating the name of the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaḍīʾ, "the one who seeks light," as *al-mustaḍīʿ*, "the one who seeks ruination." "Now that's really funny," I remember him scribbling in the margin. He may even have permitted himself an exclamation mark.

In retrospect, Wolfhart's insistence on getting the details right seems to have arisen from a principle: that of respecting the complexity of the material we deal with. Since Edward Said, it has become customary to dismiss philologists as "Orientalists," that is, as not-so-harmless drudges intent on dominating the natives they study. It is hard to imagine Wolfhart aspiring to anything so grandiose. His method, if I might venture to distill it, consisted of the following premises. First, we must understand what problem it is that our text is trying to solve. Second, we must assume that the response makes sense. If it doesn't make sense to us, then we must have misunderstood it. Wolfhart extended this so-called principle of charity to everything he read, including our comically wrongheaded translations. I don't recall hearing him say that our translations were wrong. Instead, he would ask: "If you wanted to say *that* in Arabic, how would you say it?" This is a question I still ask my own students.

At his memorial service, held in Cambridge, MA, on January 27, 2014, those of us who knew him primarily as a scholar and teacher were touched to hear neighbors and friends outside the university speak of his kindness, his good humor, and his love of life. "He never made anyone feel a lesser person for not knowing all the things he knew," was a refrain we heard again and again. In retrospect it seems that he thought of his work not only as a calling but also as a job, in the good healthy sense of the word. I remember him telling me, with a hint of pride perhaps,

that the briefcase he carried was actually a satchel of the kind carried by German working men.

A longer biography, a bibliography of his works and Alma's, and a list of his students all appear in his Festschrift, *Classical Arabic Humanities In Their Own Terms,* edited by Beatrice Gruendler (Brill, 2008). Meanwhile, tributes to him continue to appear. A particularly apt one was posted on Facebook some weeks ago by one of his former students. It consists of a poem by Abū al-Ḥusayn ibn Fāris that, according to Wolfhart, "encapsulated the life of a scholar":

"How are you?" they asked.
"All is well," I replied:
"One need met, others unfulfilled."
When the heart's sorrows accumulate, we say:
"Perhaps one day there shall be release."
My cat is my companion, my heart's delight
My papers; and my beloved, the lamp.

— Michael Cooperson