



INFINITE CONVERSATION,  
OR HOME ABROAD  
BEATRICE GRUENDLER

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Beatrice Gruendler (D.E.U.G. Strasbourg, 1985; B.A. Tübingen, 1987; M.A. 1989, Ph.D. Harvard, 1995), Professor at Yale University, is active in four areas of research: the development of Arabic script, classical Arabic poetry and its social context, the integration of modern literary theory into the study of Near Eastern literatures, and early Arabic book culture viewed within the history of media. Her publications include *The Development of the Arabic Scripts: From the Nabatean Era to the First Islamic Century* (1993); *Medieval Arabic Praise Poetry: Ibn al-Rūmī and the Patron's Redemption* (2003); and, as contributing editor, *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms* (2007). Her current work comprises a study of the communicative choices of literati in the ninth century A.D. and a media history of early Arabic book culture. – Address: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Yale University, P.O. Box 208236, New Haven, CT 06520-8236, USA. E-mail: [beatrice.gruendler@yale.edu](mailto:beatrice.gruendler@yale.edu)

One poet, for lack of better resort, invoked the “sacred bond of culture” to throw himself upon the mercy of a patron. He met with success and went home with a bag of silver coins. Another poet, reading a book outside his house, met with the scathing comment of a neighbor, “Of what use is scholarship and culture for one of poor means?” The neighbor was proven wrong: a vizier, listening to the poet’s conversation advised his sons, “Take down his utterances in addition to his poetry and letters.” The poet even talked his way to the caliph: he intercepted the chief judge who had entrée at court and persuaded him that it was the judge’s duty to use his status by introducing the poet, just as it was his

duty to pay the tithes on his material possessions to the poor. The place was Baghdad, the time the early ninth century A.D.

Ten months in Grunewald let me travel to the Iraq of the Abbasid age thirteen centuries ago and delve into these and other snapshots of literary life with an intensity I had not experienced for many years, so much so that I wondered what had kept me from doing so. There simply had not been the time. It also reacquainted me with old penciled notebooks and long dormant electronic files of past readings. The reception of my first survey on “Communicative Choices in Early Islamic Book Culture” by colleagues from history, anthropology, and sociology and the enthusiasm it generated helped confirm that my chosen approach of writing a literary anthropology would work. A particular treat was to be introduced by the novelist Elias Khoury, whose classical Arabic recitations enlivened not only my colloquium but also many subsequent conversations.

We live in a time of changing media in which our research tools alter rapidly, in contrast to the ancient sources we are investigating, and matter and method unfailingly affect each other. This paradox brought home to me how pressing it is to look closely at how people grappled with new formats in earlier periods of incisive change and how those formats gradually impacted the way people spoke, wrote, and thought. Much of this happened in the Near East: the invention of script in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the invention of alphabets on the eastern rim of the Mediterranean, and the first cosmopolitan book culture in Iraqi cities, my own focus. It is essential therefore to integrate the Near East into the “grand narrative” of world media, and my research and writing at the Wissenschaftskolleg should be a beginning.

The “what” was clear but not the “how”. To paint a panorama out of a myriad of puzzle pieces, the fruits of five years of intermittent reading, proved a challenge. How could I compose a mosaic out of the tesserae? Accident and reading held the solution. While I was closing gaps in my survey of the written records of literary life of the ninth century, notably the administrative historiography, bio-bibliographical sources, and vitae of grammarians (the critics of poetry by default before it became a proper discipline), I stumbled upon two key personae around which the facets could be clustered: the smooth scholar-performer al-Asma‘ī (d. 828) and the erudite but unsavory book scholar Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 825). Their encounter helped contextualize the diverse attitudes toward the emerging manuscript book. Their usage, or non-usage, of this new data carrier in varying situations also served as a mold into which to cast the larger background information. Once the logic of telling was established, further figures would add themselves to continue the

development and its concomitant tensions, such as the grammarian al-Farrā' (d. 822), who outmaneuvered greedy stationers to keep his most popular book affordable, or Abū 'Ubayd (d. 838), who experimented with diverse book types from compilation to composition from scratch and was so successful at catering to different markets that he received a stipend as a book author.

The Abbasid vizier al-Hasan b. Sahl (d. 850), enumerating the canon of nine Greek, Persian, and Arab arts, states, "The one [art] that surpasses them are snippets of speech, nocturnal conversation, and what people in sessions take from each other." The spoken word, whether a conversation, recitation, or the commented reading in a teaching circle, or *ḥalqa*, formed not only the model for many books, but much prose writes its oral transmission into the text. Written and spoken word cohabit in Arabic culture. But the same could be said about Wallotstraße 19. A particular genre of such "oral literature" was the introduction of colleagues at the colloquia. The presentations grew during the year and some presenters practiced it three or even four times, outdoing themselves at each instance in engaging with the speaker's oeuvre and playing off it using different styles and media.

The discussions of the narrative group composed of Barbara Piatti, Thomas Pavel, Karl Schlögel, and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus and the writers Ilma Rakusa and Claire Messud likewise integrated the written and the spoken. Their feedback to my first chapter drove home that how a story is told matters as much as the story itself. This was instrumental in steadying the narrative path I had taken. More so, they would remain as a readership in my mind that now I always think of while writing. The new approach required a more person-based account, which meant a rereading of the biographical sources on grammarians and their works that formed the core of the first chapter. Though I had brought a substantial library with me, such titles had not been anticipated; but the library team sleuthed out Arabic books from the Staatsbibliothek and across the country at record speed.

Berlin showed itself to be a hub of Arabic studies of all shades and the numerous venues engendered fruitful encounters. One of them was the lecture series, entitled "Zukunftphilologie," of the Forum Transregionale Studien, under the aegis of Angelika Neuwirth and Islam Dayeh, which tracks the potential of philology in changing systems of knowledge in regions beyond Europe. This was the most specialized audience to whom I presented my work in process, and these mostly young Berlin colleagues engaged with the material in great detail.

Another event, initiated by Christian Junge and Kirill Dimitriev (FU, with the support of the Junge Akademie and the DAAD), was a workshop on the creation of a new bilingual Master's of Research in collaboration with Egyptian and Moroccan universities. This gave me the opportunity, in a panel of sample seminars, to revisit one of my past course subjects: a literary debate between two tenth-century luminaries, the poet Mutanabbī (d. 965) and the poetician al-Ḥātimī (d. 998). This time the presentation was also a dialogue, bilingual in Arabic and German with Naser A. Elmowafi (Faculty of Literature, Cairo University).

Still other things occurred without planning. The Wiko's own EUME program and the FU provided an interminable list of conversation partners whom the peaceful patio of the Wiko encouraged to stay much past the customary lunch hour and to speak about current research. Somehow the *genus loci* suspended their thoughts about the next committee meeting. This was also true of media historians at large, such as Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst, with whom coffee hours extended past midnight, and still all had not been said. Such out-of-the-box re-thinking of the media transformations beyond a particular culture proved vital. Further enriching was a visit, supported by the Wiko, of my colleague James Montgomery (University of Cambridge, UK) to exchange notes on nineteenth-century book authors.

A pleasant challenge was the return to my mother tongue, which I had hardly used in my profession heretofore, and which provided a register in which to reformulate familiar subjects afresh. It began in Gotha, where I gave a "pre-run" of my colloquium at the Forschungszentrum of the University of Erfurt, and it occurred to me on the train that my carefully worded English talk would have to be delivered in German. It metamorphosed ad hoc into a conversational presentation, which I (and I believe the public) enjoyed more than a straight lecture.

More forewarning was given for a public evening conversation at the Wiko in January, on the topic of "Papyrus – Parchment – Paper: On the changing media of Arabic Book Culture", a trial run of what was to become a popular new format. My conversation partner was Michael Marx from the Corpus Coranicum Project of the Prussian Academy of Science, and our comparison of the textual and oral histories of the Qur'ān vs. Arabic poetry generated a host of perspicacious questions from the audience.

A highlight towards the end of my stay was a workshop at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, at which Director Jürgen Renn asked me to convene a workshop on Arabic science in collaboration with Isabel Toral-Niehoff, Peter Pökel

(both Arabistik), and Lukas Muehlethaler (Islamwissenschaft; all FU). Though I was familiar with their work, it was still surprising to learn of the wealth of current projects on Qurʾān studies, early Arabic philology and historiography, and post-Avicennian philosophy going on at the same time in the city.

In Arabic Studies, face-to-face encounters are as vital today as those between the individuals we read about up to thirteen centuries ago. They placed particular weight (despite their reliance on books) on person-to-person contact to further knowledge. Nonetheless it was the written form that reverberated across centuries, as the classical Arabic language, or *ʿarabiyya*, is a code, like Medieval Latin or Modern English, unlimited by the writer's creed, ethnic belonging, or geographical provenance. The field of Arabic Studies, consisting of a thinly spread international community, itself enjoys an internal durability; not even a few half-a-century-old works still retain value, and one aims to be read for an equally long time, though probably no longer on paper but in some (yet unknown) digital format.

Finally it would be incorrect to ignore the looming figure of Berlin and its performing arts, museums, and architecture, which made up no small part of my deficit in German culture over that last quarter century.

It was by chance that, towards the end of my stay, I had to write on the concept of the home in Arabic literature for a Colloquium at Göttingen's Lichtenberg-Kolleg (Institute for Advanced Study, a fledgling sister of the Wiko). Revisiting in May the material I had surveyed over the Christmas holiday, I was struck by the degree to which the topic was celebrated by its opposite: the universal home of the traveling poet or scholar, who finds soul mates wherever he goes and scorns the homestayer as a disempowered weakling. The famous Mutanabbī (d. 956) declaimed in a mix of nihilist bravado: "In no need for homes, no return urges me towards a land from which I traveled / The beauty has a moment from me, then there lies between us a desert crossed, but not toward encounter / The dearest place in the worlds is the saddle of a flying [steed], and the best companion in time is a book." More silent and gentle, a field-working grammarian felt homesick after a long stay in the desert, but upon gathering his first results, eloquent verse from the lips of a Bedouin, he exclaimed, "The sorrow became joy and the stay a pleasure." Traveling scholars had to pay the price of relinquishing a permanent home, whose stability, however, was not guaranteed, and some scholars felt like strangers in their own homes. Much of this grew out of the great mobility of pilgrims, scholars, traders, entertainers, and soldiers typical of early Islam, the last group at times positively barred by law from returning

home to ensure settlement in the new garrison towns. Some poets, like al-Buhturī, faced the problem squarely and denied the existence of nations altogether: “Do not say ‘communities and groups’, for the earth is of one dust and mankind of one man.” Another traveler rejected any genealogical linkage between land and human beings, “All of land is a man’s land, and no kinship ties a man to a piece of earth.” We may not be as modern as we think we are.

The wonderful atmosphere in Grunewald helped to integrate it all – extensive readings, forays into new methods, a radically different way of writing, and a willing public on whom to test it. This proved difficult to leave behind, and, having packed my library to be shipped back (which I had put off to the last three days) and crossing the Atlantic westward, I could not but agree with the early Islamic poet al-Quṭāmī (d. 720; his *Collected Works*, dated 974 A.D., are the oldest Arabic manuscript of the Staatsbibliothek): “My neighbors traveled within my heart. Indeed my heart is burdened with the neighbors close to whom I live.”