PART 5:

A Portrait Gallery

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This is the fifth of the author's six collections of eclectic, occasionally irreverent, excerpts from the vast treasure-house of Arabic literature. In each, he samples and comments thematically, seeking that which is insightful, prescient or poignant, as well as the curious, mischievous or wisely satirical. Like the original authors, his goal, and ours, is to entertain, educate and enlighten.

—*The Editors*

BELONGING AS THEY DO TO A CULTURE IN which drawing, painting and the other figurative arts have usually played a minor role, Arabic speakers and writers have long been masters of the word-portrait. From strange and striking pictures of the beloved and the dead in pre-Islamic poetry, through formal portraits in heavyweight biographical dictionaries, to the more impressionistic sketches that "illustrate" the pages of almost every Arabic book, a lot of the literature of the Arabs has to do with people.

Most of the passages translated below are at the impressionistic end of the scale. The first, though, gives a short but detailed physical likeness—and shows why, until quite recently, such descriptions were necessary as records of a subject's appearance. Seventy-five years ago, but only half a mile from where I'm writing this, Nazih al-Mu'ayyad al-'Azm, a Syrian traveler from a distinguished Damascus family, has just entered a room in the palace of the Imam of Yemen:

> There sat a man with a countenance grave yet luminous, of medium build and brown complexion. His round face was somewhat marked by smallpox, and he had a high forehead, a small mouth, a large head and dark eyes that sparkled with magnetism and light. His nose was short and broad, his beard black and round, and his hands and feet small.

Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din, born in 1869, led the resistance against the Ottoman Turkish rulers of Yemen, eventually shared power with them and was sole ruler of Yemen from 1918 until his assassination in 1948.

Nazih assumed the man was a court functionary. He took a seat and waited while the official dealt with some papers.

> He was stamping them with a personal seal. Out of the corner of my eye, I managed to get a glimpse of the wording on one of the impressions—and saw that it was made by the seal of His Majesty the Imam. I realized immediately that I was in the royal presence, and sat up straight.

After a short conversation, the imam asked if the traveler had any requests. Knowing that the mountain realm was highly conservative, Nazih asked the ruler for permission to take photographs.

> "You may photograph whatever and whomever you wish," he said, "except me...." Never in his entire life has the imam permitted anyone to make an image of him. The pictures of him that have appeared in various magazines and newspapers are purely imaginary.

This may be a dig at the famous Lebanese-American writer Ameen Rihani, who in 1924 published a pen drawing of the imam, subsequently much reproduced. The French film-maker René Clément tried to get a shot of the imam riding in a covered carriage for his 1937 film of Yemen. Only the potentate's beard is visible, by now a ghostly white....

Of course, there's more to most word-portraits than physical features. The next, a miniature of Salah al-Din's (Saladin) multitasking chief minister al-Qadi al-Fadil, manages to combine a brief physical likeness with a few deft touches of character—and, somehow, to catch the spirit of a whole cultural setting.

I saw a thin old man, all head and heart, simultaneously writing and dictating to two secretaries. The force of concentration needed to produce the words caused every possible shade of movement to play across his face and lips. Indeed, it was as if he was writing with every part of his body.

The piece comes from an autobiographical sketch by the Iraqi physician cAbd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (died 1231). It was said that al-Qadi al-Fadil's short treatises alone, if bound together, would have filled a hundred volumes. (And we complain about information overload!)

The minister questioned his visitor on some abstruse points of Qur'anic syntax,

and not once during this did he interrupt his writing and dictation.

Sometimes, the briefest anecdote throws a memorable spotlight on some aspect of character. Here is the 13th-century biographer Ibn Khallikan on another bookish man, the early Muslim scholar al-Zuhri, and—just as importantly—his long-suffering wife:

When he sat at home, he would surround himself with books, and would become so absorbed in them that he would forget all other worldly concerns. One day his wife said to him, "I swear by God that these books are more trouble to me than three co-wives!"

Although very few have more than one, Muslim men are permitted to have up to four wives at a time.

Writer and reader might not always agree on what a certain characteristic is. In the next extract, the biographer wants to illustrate his subject's naïveté.

One day, Ibn 'Abd al-Nur stuck his hand in the outlet of a cistern and happened to find an enormous toad sitting in it—at which he called out to his friends, "Come over here! I've found a squashy stone!"

Naïveté? Or is it what you might call a surreal take on things? No one, however, could disagree ~~that the following~~ sketch of a scholar of Khurasan province in eastern Iran, Hatim al-Asamm ("the Deaf"'), portrays anything less than the perfect gentleman:

By the 13th-century cosmographer al-Qazwini.

He was not in reality deaf, but got his name from having once pretended to be so. The reason was that a woman who had come to ask his opinion on some matter or other happened involuntarily to break wind. In order that she would not feel embarrassed (and much to her relief), he said to her, "I'm hard of hearing and I can't catch what you're saying, so please speak up."

Arabic lends itself to painting "group portraits" in big, broad strokes. Here is the 11th-century author Ibn Hazm on the Muslim inhabitants of his native Spain (and, indirectly, on quite a lot of the rest of humanity):

The 14th-century Spanish scholar and politician Ibn al-Khatib. Here, in one of those heavyweight biographical dictionaries (nearly 2000 printed pages, listing anyone of any interest who ever had anything to do with Granada), he is writing about a 13th-century scholar of Málaga called Ibn 'Abd al-Nur. "There are morals to be drawn from the universe of God Almighty," Ibn al-Khatib says after this anecdote, "and the strangest part of that universe is the world of man."

They are Arabs in their ancestry, nobility, haughtiness, eloquence of speech, blitheness of spirit, opposition to injustice, refusal to submit to humiliation and freedom from subservience; Indians in their extraordinary attention to and love of the sciences; Baghdadis in their fondness for novelty, the care they take over their cleanliness, the delicacy of their character, the sharpness and subtlety of their intelligence and the copiousness of their ideas; Nabataeans in their ability to locate sources of water and in the diligence with which they apply themselves to the planting of seedlings and trees and to agriculture in general; Chinese in the perfection of their various crafts of manufacture and the excellence of their pictorial arts; and Turks in their waging of wars, in their development of the weapons of war and their close attention to all the duties incumbent on warriors.

The fame of the ancient Nabataeans as agriculturalists went back to an early 10th-century book on the subject, "translated from the Chaldaean"—but later unmasked as a forgery.

Here by their compatriot al-Qazwini.

Sometimes a portrait, and particularly a group portrait, can home in on a single feature, exaggerate it and end up as caricature. The unfortunate townspeople of Isfahan in Iran, for example, have always had a particular characteristic enlarged:

The allegation stuck. Six centuries later, the English Persianist E. G. Browne said that misers in Persia were said proverbially to be "as mean as the merchants of Isfahan, who put their cheese in a bottle and rub their bread on the outside to give it a flavor."

It has been said that the people of Isfahan are characterized by stinginess.... The story is told of a visitor to the city who gave a loaf of bread as alms to a blind man. On receiving it, the blind man exclaimed, "May God make your stay in Isfahan a happy one!" Hearing this, the visitor said, "How do you know I'm not a local?" And the blind man said, "Because I've been sitting here for 30 years and not a single Isfahani has ever given me a whole loaf of bread!'

But when the caricature is by a native of the place, we might be more inclined to take it at face value. Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani wasn't afraid to be blunt about his fellow-townsmen:

Badi' al-Zaman, "the Wonder of the Age," earned his nickname from his brilliant Maqamat–tales in rhyming prose about a fictional vagabond and master of disguise, Abu 'l-Fath of Alexandria.

Hamadhan's my hometown and of all towns it's the best;
In some ways though, I have to say, it's worse than all the rest:
In looks, its youngsters seem like wizened oldsters and, in truth,
Its older generation is as brainless as its youth.

Al-Khansa flourished in the last decades before the Islamic era.

Returning from mass observation to individuals, some of the earliest Arabic literature focuses on people. In the following verses, the woman poet al-Khansa mourns her brother Sakhr, killed in inter-tribal fighting. Such an elegy was for public recitation—but, powered by the intensity of love and loss, no less personal for that:

Another more recent echo—this time from Laurence Binyon's 1914 poem "For the Fallen": "At the going down of the sun and in the morning/We will remember them." Grief crosses centuries; so does poetry.

Sakhr it was who led when they rode out,
Sakhr it was who when they hungered was their remedy,
Sakhr it was from whom the other leaders took their lead,
As if he were a beacon-fire upon a mountain-top.
Patient under pressure, handsome, self-controlled, a perfect man—
And when the day of battle dawned, a brand ablaze with war!

Sakhr embodies here all the components of muru'ah– the manly virtue of the ancient Arabs. Such dirges by women poets have a long history in many cultures. The late Patrick Leigh Fermor quoted a Greek example, "unspeakably sad and beautiful," extemporized at the burial of an English airman shot down in the 1940's: "He shone among thousands," it begins, "like the sun...."

Several of al-Khansa's elegies to Sakhr have survived, at least in part. Here, from another, are probably her most famous lines, beautiful in their spareness:

The rising of the sun brings Sakhr to mind,
And I remember him with every setting sun.

Al-Mujahid had fallen out with the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and was, effectively, kidnapped by them while in Makkah and taken to Cairo for this period.

Indirectly, al-Khansa reveals much of herself in her elegies. But Arabic literature is also rich in "full-face" images of women. The more formal ones tend to be of the great and good, like this portrait of Jihat Salah, mother of a 14th-century sultan:

From al-Khazraji's Pearl-Strings, a history of the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen. "Jihat Salah," literally "the direction of Salah"–Salah being the high-ranking eunuch in charge of the lady's household–is a polite way of referring to her without mentioning her name.

The finest odes by seven celebrated pre-Islamic poets were given this title, supposedly because they were inscribed and hung up in the sacred enclosure at Makkah. (Sad to say, this may be a later legend.) Imru' al-Qays's ode is the oldest of the seven. A son of the king of the Arabian confederation of Kindah, he led a mobile and eventful life, and died of poison at Ankara in about 540.

She was a happy woman, intelligent, right-guided, resolute, forbearing, bountiful, generous, blessed with political acumen and the qualities of leadership, noble of soul and lofty of mind. During the absence in Egypt for 14 months of her son, Sultan al-Malik al-Mujahid, when she acted as regent in the land, she kept the country in order and united the soldiery. And never in all that goodly age did the land enjoy greater fertility, security, equity and general beneficence than it did in that year. She left behind works that benefited religion, and was fond of religious scholars and pious people, conferring favors on them and showing them great honor. She would also do the rounds of the people's houses, inquiring into their conditions and liberally distributing gifts.

These included a number of schools and mosques, built and endowed at her expense.

Seldom does history produce a woman like her, or one more worthy of the lines of Abu 'l-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi:

The great 10th-century poet. The lines come from an elegy on the mother of his friend and patron Sayf al-Dawlah, ruler of Aleppo.

"Sun," shams, and "moon," here hilal, are in Arabic grammar respectively feminine and masculine—the opposites of their genders in many other languages.

If all the women in the world were like her, then
In excellence, for sure, they'd far surpass the men.
The fact that "sun" is feminine is not a slight,
Nor does the gender of the moon add to his light.

Of course, the most intimate portraits of women are to be found not in court panegyrics, but in the odes of love-struck poets. One of the oldest pieces of Arabic we have, Imru' al-Qays's "Suspended Ode," contains a description of the poet-prince's beloved from which the lines below are taken.

No translation, it has to be said, could ever catch the wild and thrilling strangeness of this poem; any attempt is like trying to tie down "the weaving of the winds," as a phrase near the beginning of the ode puts it. Many Arab poetry-lovers would say it has never been bettered. They may be right.

Slender, white of skin, her belly flat and taut,
her breastbone burnished like a looking-glass,
She looks askance, reveals a shapely profile; then a guarding
glance, as of a wild gazelle of Wajrah with her young;
Reveals a neck as graceful as an oryx's
when high she arches it, not unadorned,
And hair cascading black to grace her back, intensely black
and hanging dense and tangled as the bunches of the
palm-tree fruit,
The tresses at her crown piled high in plaits—
a maze of straight and twisted ways where hairpins stray;
Reveals a waist as slim and pliant as a plaited rein,
a leg as limber as a reed-stem bending to the breeze . . .

Wajrah is the name of a region two or three days' journey from Makkah on the route to al-Basrah. It was famous in early times for its rich supply of game.

My favorite female prose-portrait is of a very different woman—the aged Lu'lu'ah, nanny to three generations of the Ibn Munqidh family in 12th-century Syria. Below, the memoirist 'Usamah ibn Munqidh—one of her second-generation charges—looks back on her at the end of his own long life.

"Pearl"

For me, the portrait's candor, and the way it opens a glimpse into the sort of domestic space that is always closed to outsiders and thus eventually, inevitably, lost to time, makes it the literary equivalent of those intimate interiors by 17th-century Dutch painters like Vermeer.

Lu'lu'ah, God have mercy on her, was one of the best of women, much given to fasting, and upright in character. Time and again, however, she suffered from colic, and one day she had such a violent attack that she passed out. She remained unconscious for two days and two nights, during which we all gave up hope that she would ever recover. But she suddenly regained consciousness and exclaimed, "'There is no god but God! What a strange time I've had of it! I met all our loved ones who have died, and they told me such strange things. And one of the things they told me was that I'd never have the colic again!" She lived on long after this incident—to nearly a hundred, in fact—and, indeed, never again suffered from colic.

Lu'lu'ah, God have mercy on her, was always scrupulous in performing her prayers. One day I went into the apartment I had set aside for her in my house, and found her sitting in front of a basin, washing a mantle she used for her prayers. I said, "Mother, what are you doing?" and she replied, "My boy, people with cheesy hands must have got hold of this mantle, because whenever I wash it, it smells of cheese." I said, "Let me have a look at the soap you're using." She took the soap out—and I saw that what she thought was soap was in fact a lump of cheese! She'd been scrubbing the kerchief with it all this time, and it was this that had been giving off the smell. So I said, "Mother, this isn't soap—it is cheese." And she had a look at it and said, "You're right, my boy. And there was me thinking it was soap."

Muslim women often keep a special set of clothes for their devotions. "Mantle" and the Arabic word it translates, mandil, are etymological cousins; perhaps "kerchief" or "headscarf"—as in the Spanish mantilla—might be more accurate.

'Usamah calls his old nanny "Mother" out of endearment and respect, regardless of any social difference. In the next sentence, regardless of age, he is still bunayy to Lu'lu'ah—literally "my little boy."

Fearing that he's slipped too far into his own anecdotage, 'Usamah then quotes a rhyming proverb, "*Al-italah tajlib al-malalah*"—which means something like, "A drawn-out tale will soon go stale." Personally, I could never have enough of such tales, such portraits. In them the people of the past live on.

Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tarjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." Tarjuman is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).

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