Some Tangential Thoughts on *Adab* and Civility[*]

I begin with a quotation in translation.

> —Nowadays true spiritualism is as rare as the Philosopher's Stone; for it is natural to seek the medicine that fits the disease, and nobody wants to mix pearls and corals with common remedies…. In times past the works of eminent Sufis, falling into the hands of those who could not appreciate them, have been used to make linings for caps or binding for the poems of Abu Nuwās and the pleasantries of Jāhiz…. Our contemporaries give the name of "law" to their lusts, pride and ambition they call "honour and learning", hypocrisy towards men "fear of God", concealment of anger "clemency", disputation "discussion", wrangling and foolishness "dignity", insincerity "renunciation", cupidity "devotion to God", their own senseless fancies "Divine knowledge", the motions of the heart and affections of the animal soul "divine love", heresy "poverty", scepticism "purity", disbelief in positive religion "self-annihilation" neglect of the Law of the Prophet [PBUH] "the mystic Path", evil communication with time-servers "exercise of piety". As Abu Bakr al-Wāsiti said: "We are afflicted with a time in which there are neither the religious duties of Islam nor the morals of Paganism nor the virtues of Chivalry."— [1]

Don't let the sad litany deceive you into thinking that I was quoting from some sermon I heard last night on Pakistani TV. As some of you may have recognized, the passage comes from the beginning pages of that magnificent book, *Kashf-al-Mahjūb*, whose author Syed Ali bin Usman al-Hujwiri is now renowned and revered by the name Dātā Sahib. He wrote it ten centuries ago, and probably not terribly far from these borders. And I did not quote that passage to give you some cold solace by suggesting that if things looked bad presently they looked much the same a millennium ago too. My interest lies in what al-Hujwiri quoted from Abu Bakr al-Wāsiti—who in fact lived a century earlier—to add a powerful final flourish to the denunciation of his own times. I repeat: "As Abu Bakr al-Wāsiti said: 'We are afflicted with a time in which there are neither the religious duties of Islam nor the morals of Paganism nor the virtues of Chivalry.'"

al-Wāsiti bemoans his days, and claims that his society had lost its moorings totally. Nothing exists that could give his society direction or vitality, and thus make its life full of meaning and purpose. He lists the three things that to his mind could have served the purpose but were no longer found in the land: the *ādāb* of Islam, the *akhlāq* of the Jahiliyya, and the *ahlām* of the Men of Muruwwa, the men who lived by a code of Chivalry.

I'm not as well informed as I should be when talking of these things, but to my knowledge *Muruwwa* was a code of chivalry, kindness and forbearance that many in the upper classes of the Muslim society identified themselves with around the time of the first Crusades—like the codes of chivalry among the Knights of Europe. If one influenced the other, it is of no concern to me. What I would note, however, is that the *Muruwwa* of the non-Sufi elite was not very different from what came to be called *Futuwwa* among many Sufi circles.

In any case, what matters here is the naming of the three by al-Wāsiti, and the order in which he placed them. First and foremost are the *ādāb* of Islam, which are not to be confused with the laws of Islam. This is no time to discuss what falls under the rubric of *ādāb* or Adab in the Islamicate world. The literature is vast, the topic enormous. Muslim societies have produced countless treatises on Adab, and Muslim authors have tried to lay down the Adab or an ideal code of praxis for all sorts of trades, disciplines, and professions. From the Adab of a Qazi to the Adab of a Sufi Disciple to the Adab of a Poet-Lover. In

essence, the concept of Adab served a key role in that binary of *Zāhir* and *Bātin*—the External and the Internal; the Shell and the Kernel—that governed much of the life and thought in the pre-modern Islamic societies, Adab claiming to define the "inner reality" of anything and everything, usually in the guise of protocols and codes.

Going back to al-Wāsiti, he seems to declare that the people of his Muslim society had lost what gave meaning to their lives, the *ādāb* of Islam. "Externally" or on the surface his society was Islamic, but not so "internally." Next, he seems to suggest that his people could have possibly given some significance to their lives by cultivating the *akhlāq*—the natural virtues—that existed in pre-Islamic societies and enriched the lives of those bygone people. But that too was no longer possible. The final nail in his society's coffin, according to al-Wāsiti, was the fact that even the qualities of Chivalry, the virtues belonging to a very small group, were no longer to be found. My understanding of al-Wāsiti's ordering of the three is that the first refers to a unified vast community defined by a religion, the second to a smaller society defined by tribes, and the third to a much smaller group that consisted of self-driven individuals. The decline, therefore, was total, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

I submit that the above tripartite delineation, despite its hierarchic undercurrent, could be useful in any discussion of what we are now calling "Civility", be it with reference to its commonplace meaning or its etymological connotation. "Civility" as perceived and practiced by a society, to follow al-Wāsiti, can arise *not only* from laid down rules—religious, professional, or tribal—and enforced through some institutional device; it can arise also from individual initiatives and acts of choice or preference. Today we live in nation states of the kind that did not exist in al-Wāsiti's time, and are surrounded by technologies that possess much greater totalizing force than any emperor in the past could have imagined. In our times, "civilities" of one kind or another can be imposed fairly successfully on large groups of people, not necessarily through the muzzle of a gun, but in various, much more innocuous ways. Meanwhile, it appears that the possibilities for individualized or individually inspired "civilities" are threatened everywhere. Particularly in many so-called Muslim countries. Muslim societies that were religiously multi-chromatic for centuries, and peacefully so, are now riven with extremist movements that would rather impose some one or other monotonous color.

That, to me, suggests that the tripartite thinking of al-Wāsiti—religious Adab, natural Adab, and individual Adab—should be borne in mind when considering, for example, school curricula. I believe that any institutional effort to cultivate or inculcate "civility" could become counterproductive if it *exclusively* used Islam or any other religion. More precisely, no institutional effort should use any religion in a manner that would belittle or uproot the true source of "civility" in praxis, i.e. the individual's own reasoning and conscience. The latter, in the past, could devise ways to express itself using the above-mentioned binary of the word and the spirit (or the external and the internal). That, now, has become more fraught in many Muslim societies. The threat comes not only from sectarian literalists, it also comes from many secular rationalists. Most Muslims have not quite given up on that binary, and readily draw upon it to make sense of some mundane joy and disappointment of life, but they might under all the forces ranged against them. And that would be a very sad day.

Two more observations, though they may appear even more tangential to the topic.

Recently, thinking about Adab in the Indo-Muslim culture of North India, I asked myself: isn't it possible that some perfectly civil people might see Adab as a kind of unacceptable conformity? Or, to put it differently, what could an individual do to be a nonconformist of some sort while remaining a worthy member of his Adab-bound society? I found that something called *waz'dārī*, which was essentially a matter of personal consistency, was one such acceptable individualism that was much practiced in the Adab-bound Islamicate elite society of North India in the 19th century, and is still cherished in some ways. I learned that minor breaches in the observance of the prevalent Adab were not only considered acceptable but were found admirable if they were committed with elaborate consistency, instead of randomly or at whim. In other words, consistency in non-conformity was also a kind of Adab. In the heydays of its popularity, such consistency was celebrated resoundingly, as in this couplet by Ghalib:

wafādārī ba-shart-i ustawārī asl-i īmāñ hai

mare butkhāne meñ to ka'be meñ gāṛo birahman ko

Fidelity is the core of True Faith, but only if it is consistent;

If a Brahmin breathes his last in a temple, make his grave in the Ka'ba.

What marginalized *waz'dārī*, though not made it completely meaningless, was the great surge for change and reform that came after 1857 and whose proponents felt that giving undue importance to "consistency" in praxis would be contrary to what they were proposing to their coreligionists in the newly emergent Colonial India: "Progress" through steady adaptation and change. I have discussed *waz'dārī* and related issues in fair detail elsewhere.[2] I mention them here to draw attention to the constrictive aspect inherent to any protocol or Adab. Some perfectly civil elements in the society will always find in any codified "Civility" a threat of conformity that they must somehow challenge.

My second observation relates to what I have been tinkering with for a long time, with no success. Many years back, when I read the 11th century savant Ibn Hazm's treatise on Love, translated by A. J. Arberry as *The Ring of the Dove*, and other Medieval books that delineated how a perfect *'āshiq* or Lover was to behave in Love, I wondered if anyone had also laid down a protocol that an ideal Beloved could or should follow. Was there, in other words, an Adab manual for the countless beloveds or *ma'shūq* in the Islamicate world? To my surprise, I found there was none. I then tried to write a brief essay on the subject, but so far it has been an impossible task. Why? To put the issue at heart most succinctly: while every manual of Love allows that a Lover could be in love with "Love" itself, and thus, theoretically, can be independent of any "Beloved," it is impossible to think of a "Beloved" without first implying a "Lover." It appears that "loving"—or being a "Lover"—is essentially the act of a subject person, while to be loved—or being a "Beloved"—is nothing more than to be the object of someone else's will. It made me wonder: is it the case that an Adab can be constructed only for those who either already possess the power to act as subjects, or are empowered by the proposed Adab to act in that manner? And if that is true, can we really separate Adab or "Civility" from Politics and Justice?

C. M. Naim (December 20, 2012)

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[1] Ali bin Uthman al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf Al-Mahjub*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (Delhi: Taj Company, 1989 reprint), pp. 7–8.

[2] See "Individualism within Conformity: A brief history of Waz'dari in Delhi and Lucknow," in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48:1 (March 2011), pp. 35–53.