The Concept of *adab* in Early Sufism with Particular Reference to the Teachings of Sahl b. ʿAbdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896)

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Defining *adab* in Sufism

In the commentary to his English translation of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, R.A. Nicholson has defined *adab* as: “the character, feelings and manners that are the fruit of spiritual culture”.1 This explanation goes some way towards conveying the subtlety and complexity of the term, suggesting that it comprises inner and outer aspects (as in “feelings” and “manners”), that it has a connection to *akhlāq* (character), and, perhaps most importantly in the context of sufism, that it is the product of spiritual cultivation. Nicholson further compares *adab* to St Paul’s understanding of that aspect of love (*agape*) “that doth not behave itself unseemly”.2 Notwithstanding the nuanced explanation of *adab* presented in his commentary, Nicholson was inevitably constrained in his translation to find more specific equivalents for the word according to context. Thus, for example, we find *adab* rendered most often as “respect/reverence”,3 but also as “self control/discipline”,4 “correction”,5 “manners/good manners”,6 “culture”,7 “erudition”8 and even “service”.9

Looking at other English translations of Sufi works, we find the term rendered in various ways, as for example: “spiritual comportment”,10 “propriety”,11

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2 1 Corinthians XIII.
3 Nicholson, e.g. 1, lines 84, 1490, 1493, 2175 and 3061.
4 Nicholson, e.g. 1, lines 91, 2825.
5 Nicholson, 4, line 2805; 5, line 3005 and 6, lines 1514, and 2583.
6 Nicholson, 4, lines 121, 156 and 7; 2, lines 1418, 3219 and 20, 3305; 3, lines 3245, 3680; 4, lines 1141, 2155, 2975; 5, line 3035; 6, line 4612.
7 Nicholson, 2, line 3644; 6, line 2398.
8 Nicholson, 2, line 2418.
9 Nicholson, 3, lines 3606, 3610.
10 Honerkamp, “The Qur’ānic Roots and Ethical Foundations of *Sulūk.*”
11 *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*. The use of the word propriety here is intended to convey the idea of behaving or having an attitude that is fitting for a certain thing, an aspect of *adab* that is also indicated in Nicholson’s allusion to St Paul’s “not behaving itself unseemly”.

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“correct behaviour”\textsuperscript{12} or “culture”,\textsuperscript{13} for the singular (\textit{adab}); and “manners”,\textsuperscript{14} “rules of ethical conduct”,\textsuperscript{15} “rules of behaviour”,\textsuperscript{16} “customs, attitudes and rules of conduct”,\textsuperscript{17} or “[codes of] fair conduct”,\textsuperscript{18} for the plural (\textit{ādāb}).\textsuperscript{19}

Most translators would doubtless acknowledge the difficulty of representing the subtlety and cultural richness of the term with one or two words, or even with a phrase. Moreover, account needs to be taken not only of possible semantic differences between the term as used in its singular (\textit{adāb}) and plural (\textit{ādāb}), but also of the significance of various verbal forms of the root ʾ-d-b. For example, the second (causative) form, \textit{addaba} (inf. \textit{ta ʾdīb}), can have the sense of educating, training and refining, but to complicate matters further, we sometimes find the word \textit{adab} itself employed as a verbal noun equivalent to \textit{ta ʾdīb}. Thus the hadīth of the Prophet, \textit{addabanī rabbī fa-ahsana adabī} might be translated as “My Lord educated\textsuperscript{20} me, and [gave me] the most beautiful education”,\textsuperscript{21} or “My Lord educated me and made my \textit{adab} (demeanour, comportment, conduct etc.) beautiful”.\textsuperscript{22} The range of meanings suggested by the reflexive fifth form of the verb, \textit{taʾaddaba}, will be discussed below.

The aim of this study is to discuss ways in which \textit{adab} is defined in some of the earliest mystical texts devoted to the subject, and to use these as a backdrop against which to examine Sahl al-Tustarī’s own definitions and explanations of \textit{adab}. I have been careful to distinguish between tracts and treatises

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Von Schlegel, \textit{Principles of Sufism}, 308ff.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Hujwīrī, \textit{Kashf al-mahjūb}, 341, though elsewhere in his translation of this text he has “good manners”.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Sarrāj, \textit{Kitāb al-Lumaʾ}, editor’s synopsis, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Böwering, “Adab Literature.”
\item \textsuperscript{16} Böwering, “Adab Literature.”
\item \textsuperscript{17} Kohlberg, Introduction to his edition of al-Sulamī’s \textit{Jawāmiʿ}; Biagi, Introduction to her translation of Sulamī’s \textit{Jawāmiʿ}.
\item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{Tafsīr al-Tustarī}, translation, 220.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Examples of French translations are “règles de conduite” for \textit{adab} (singular), Deladrière, \textit{Enseignement spirituel}; “sociabilité, civilité, règles de vie,” Massignon, Al-Hallāj, 2773; and of German translations are, “Gute Sitte, Höflichkeit, (gute) Erziehung, Bildung”, Gramlich, \textit{Schlaglichter}, index, also the first two of these in \textit{Sendschrieben}, 39ff.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Or ‘trained’, ‘refined’ etc.
\item \textsuperscript{21} In support of this interpretation is the fact that some variants of this hadīth have \textit{ahsana taʾdībi} instead of \textit{ahsana adabī}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Of course, the root ḥ-s-n has the meaning of being “good” as well as “beautiful”. Denis Gril has the following pleasing translation of this hadīth: “My Lord has instilled \textit{adab} in me, and perfected it in me”. See Gril, “Adab and Revelation,” 229. On the sources for this and other versions of the hadīth see ibid., n. 4, and Kohlberg’s translation of Sulamī’s \textit{Jawāmiʿ}, p. 3, n. 7.
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