

## Authorial Guidance:

### Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's Closing Remarks

Lale Behzadi

Every text or, to be more precise, every reading of a text, has a beginning and an end. What seems like a self-evident truth opens a wide range of possible paths in the hermeneutic process. When we talk about books made from papyrus or paper, we begin the book by opening it or we look at the beginning of the scroll, and we end it by closing it or by getting to the last line of a parchment. But apart from this physical, rather haptic, experience there is far more to discover in terms of our perception, our definitions, our ways of interpretation, and, in particular, our authorial concepts. The end of a text is of imminent importance with regard to its authorship. If we assume a linear reading – or at least a linear use – of the text,<sup>1</sup> the ending is the author's last chance to guide the reader in the intended direction, to shape a possible outcome and to provide closure. It is the last chance to silence potential criticism and to give the finishing touch to the image the author has fashioned. There are several questions to be asked and points to be considered when we talk about closure, the first of which would be: Where does the end of a given text begin?

Depending on the narrative, the end could even start on the first page, the whole text being an endeavor to finally reach a certain outcome. Another question would be: is the end of a text its real end? And, more importantly in our context: who is leading the way towards the end? The present paper will show the complexity of ending as a literary procedure by using the example of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, a master of self-dramatization.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Which, of course, we cannot be certain of, especially with regard to the anthological and performative character of early Arabic prose.

2 I would like to thank Julia Rubanovich and Miriam Goldstein (Hebrew University) who invited me to Jerusalem in 2014 to discuss a preliminary version of this paper at a workshop on authorial composition in medieval Arabic and Persian literature.

## Preliminary Notes

Let me begin with some introductory remarks about author and text, albeit with certain reservations because most of the so-called historical facts are extracted from the book itself. For several reasons, nearly two hundred years had to pass before the first biographical account of the author's life came to be written down by Yāqūt (d. 1229) in his *Irshād*.<sup>3</sup>

Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī was probably born in Baghdad and died 1023 in Shiraz. He wrote his book *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn* after he had clashed twice with his employers in Rayy, the first time with Abū l-Faḍl b. al-'Amīd, the second time several years later with al-Şāḥib b. 'Abbād, both viziers under the reign of the Buyids. The work was originally commissioned by the Baghdadi vizier Ibn Sa'dān, who eventually hired al-Tawḥīdī not only as a copyist, but as an educated companion, and for whom al-Tawḥīdī also wrote his collection of their evening sessions *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* ("The Book of Delight and Entertainment").<sup>4</sup>

While the usually known title *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn* is often translated rather neutrally as "The Portrait/the Characters of the Two Viziers"<sup>5</sup>, Arabic variations of the title portray more clearly the book's tenor: *Dhamm al-wazīrayn* ("The Disapproval of the Two Viziers") or *Mathālib al-wazīrayn* ("The Shortcomings/Vices of the Two Viziers"). Furthermore, the book is a rare example of a work of prose that consists nearly entirely of denunciation and blame.<sup>6</sup> Of the 550 pages of the Tanjī edition, the first 78 are a theoretical introduction to the reasons that led al-Tawḥīdī to compose this work. The portrait of al-Şāḥib b. 'Abbād then takes up pages 79 to 320. The rest are, theoretically, dedicated to Ibn al-'Amīd, although the author frequently returns to al-Şāḥib b. 'Abbād, his principle object of resentment. Both characters are depicted as degenerate, vain, ridiculous, arrogant, untruthful, and cruel. Moreover, in

---

3 Yāqūt, *Irshād* V, 380-407.

4 Another aspect of al-Tawḥīdī's authorship is discussed in Behzadi, "The Art of Entertainment. Forty Nights with Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī."

5 See for example M. Bergé, "Abu Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī" in CHAL, 114.

6 Cf. Lagrange, "L'obscénité du vizir," and the French translation *La Satire des deux vizirs*.

al-Tawḥīdī's eyes, they claim to be more than they are while in truth, they know nothing. Both viziers, by the way, had a reputation – and promoted it actively – of being very educated and refined writers and poets themselves. Al-Tawḥīdī writes about Ibn ‘Abbād in the following, using a third person to express his contempt:

I asked al-Musayyabī: What do you say about Ibn ‘Abbād? He said: When it comes to degeneracy he possesses an inimitable Qur’an, and in the field of stupid insolence a revealed Āya [i.e. a Qur’an verse], for envy he has a real disposition, and in matters of lying he has got an adhering disgrace [...] his appearance is a delusion, and his inside is ignorance [...] Praise be upon Him who has created him as a nuisance for those who are good and educated, and gave him wealth and possession in abundance.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Ibn al-‘Amīd is depicted:

About Ibn al-‘Amīd Abū l-Faḍl, he was a totally different chapter and a different disaster [...] He used to pretend patience behind which was just idiocy, he claimed knowledge that he was ignorant about, and he fancied himself as brave while he “is more a coward than someone who fears death when he farts” [he quotes a proverb]. He has claimed to excel in logic but knows nothing about it, he has not read a single book by someone important, he has suggested to be aware of geometry while he is indeed far away from it; in the field of chancellery he did not even know the basic rules of calculation; he really was the stupidest man with regard to incomes and expenses.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Tawḥīdī himself has often been portrayed as a rather gloomy person. Kraemer in his study calls him a “difficult person” who found “fault with everyone he met” and displayed a “chronic pessimism”, and as someone who suffered throughout his lifetime from a lack of appreciation as a writer.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he had to beg for appointments and often ended as a scribe and copyist. The text, therefore, is mostly regarded as a form of ex-

7 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 107.

8 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 321.

9 Kraemer, *Humanism*, 213.

aggerated revenge for the unjust treatment which he endured at the hands of both Ibn ‘Abbād and Ibn al-‘Amīd.

While this may have been the case, the value of this book goes far beyond its historical significance. If we consider its performative character and its rhetorical aspirations, it may even serve to teach us something about our own established theoretical concepts, so that we may vary them, enrich them, and look at them from a new angle, especially with regard to authorship, for example, and more specifically with regard to closure.

### Author and Closure

Before turning to the end of this book, we have to ask about our definition of the author. In literary theory it has been long since established that we distinguish carefully between author and narrator, between narrator and character, and between the different roles and perspectives a narrator may assume (or shifts of perspective between the aforementioned, referred to as types of focalization in the field of narratology). Research in Western medieval studies, in the course of time, has distanced itself from this strict separation. It seems appropriate nowadays to consider historical circumstances without being interpreted as having made a positivistic reading.<sup>10</sup> These approaches, as well as the very inspiring research on closure that has been done in the Classics so far, usually take fictional literature as a starting point which, in pre-modern times, means mostly drama, epic, and poetry.<sup>11</sup>

In historiography, the “literary turn” has been widely accepted in recent years. Nevertheless, it remains difficult sometimes to examine so-called historical texts by applying methods deriving from literary theory without raising suspicions. There seems to be no middle ground between either viewing a non-fictional text as an authentic historical source on the one hand, or as a historical source that has been manipulated for some

---

10 See Unzeitig, *Autorname*, 17, 347, 350.

11 Roberts et al., *Classical Closure*. First attempts to acknowledge closure-related structures can be found in Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography*, esp. 72-77.

reason, either by the author himself or by later readers on the other. We could go so far as to state that the categories “fictional” and “non-fictional” in our context fail to be useful.<sup>12</sup>

In our case, the book has been labeled from its beginnings as a report, an eyewitness account, albeit a biased one. The author, therefore, has been identified as the historical figure, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī. Indeed, nowhere in his work does al-Tawḥīdī explicitly suggest that his text might be something other than the actual truth. As a *littérateur*, on the other hand, he is a master of the word, and it is worth looking at the different roles he plays, the different voices with which he speaks. In shaping the end, he is, as well as any writer of any text – and even more so as a writer of a piece of entertaining literature – interested in predetermining the hermeneutic path and protecting his side of the story.

After the rediscovery of the author and his comeback in literary theory,<sup>13</sup> authorial functions can be found especially at the end of a text. Don P. Fowler has done the groundwork in the Classics by distinguishing five different senses of closure, borrowed in part from philosophical discourse. Closure, for him, can be understood as:

1. The concluding section of a literary work;
2. The process by which the reader of a work comes to see the end as satisfyingly final;
3. The degree to which an ending is satisfyingly final;
4. The degree to which the questions posed in the work are answered, tensions released, conflicts resolved;
5. The degree to which the work allows new critical readings.<sup>14</sup>

While we can use this classification without reservation with our text, too, we will see that some points are of lesser significance and others should be added to broaden the scope of the classification.

---

12 Glauch, “Ich-Erzähler ohne Stimme,” 161/162, 184.

13 See Burke, *The death and return of the author*.

14 Fowler, “First Thoughts,” 78.

The Arabic text consists of a rather loose succession of anecdotes, reports, and verses, either by the author himself or by his many sources. Its main target is the Buyid vizier al-Şāhib b. ‘Abbād. The creator of the text, possibly an individual named Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, indicates that he is aware of the controversial nature of his statements.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it could be especially revealing to see how he intends to end this text.

### Markers of Closure

Although any decision about the beginning of an end can seem arbitrary, certain markers of closure make themselves apparent, especially in a text with such a seemingly obvious agenda like this one. I will follow Yāqūt here who apparently had the same idea, presenting an extract of the last 58 pages (492-550), starting with page 492 where the succession of anecdotes stops.<sup>16</sup>

It is quite evident that the author cannot release the reader with this accumulation of accusations against two of the highest ranking officials of the time without giving a final statement. Let us go through the last pages and try to identify markers of closure as well as measures of rhetoric which the author takes to bring the text to the intended end.

### Language and Style

The first marker is a change in language and tone. After the elaborate style of presenting anecdotes and quoting informants, other sources, verses etc. we suddenly hear an accusatory voice, a first-person narrator, who through repetition creates a solemn atmosphere. The concluding

15 And he tries to put himself in line with well-known predecessors to justify his scheme; for example al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 42f.

16 Yāqūt, *Irshād*, vol. V. The entry on al-Tawḥīdī covers pages 380 to 407. On page 396 Yāqūt introduces his quotation: “Abū Ḥayyān said near the end of his book ...” (‘inda qurbīhi min farāghī kitābihi). He then quotes several pages (Yāqūt, *Irshād*, vol. 5., 396-404; al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 492-509), omits a lengthy part and then quotes the last page again by writing: “Abū Ḥayyān ends his book about the character of the two viziers after apologizing for what he did ...” (wa-khatama Abū Ḥayyān kitābahu fī akhlāq al-wazīrayn ba‘da an i’tadhara ‘an fī‘lihi ...) (Yāqūt, *Irshād*, vol. 5., 404-405; al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 550).

section (Fowler, point 1) begins with a series of exclamations each starting the same way: Five times the voice calls out: *Fa-mā dhanbī* (how am I to blame/what is my fault/how can it be my fault, ...), thus nearly composing a hymn, an incantation, and creating the atmosphere of a tribunal where there seems to exist no equal firing power: it's the single voice against the rest of the world.

A well-known measure of rhetoric is the direct appeal to the reader. Al-Tawḥīdī calls him the Listener (*al-sāmi*) and addresses him several times. The last page of the book is quite conventional where the author quotes some appropriate verses and nearly disappears behind a prayer, leaving the very last word, in a sense, to God himself. While there is a first person existent throughout the book, in this last passage (except the last page) the individual voice is even more plainly audible, the text transforming into a dialogue where one person takes over both voices, the accuser and the accused.

### **Argumentation**

While the criteria in Fowler's list relate to fictional texts, they point to the existence of specific literary strategies which allow a given story to come to an end. The reader of our book (even the contemporary one) probably knows the outcome as he knows the two famous protagonists. There seems to be no need for suspense with regard to a complicated story, nor is there a need to solve conflicts or problems between characters that have been introduced in the book (see Fowler point 4). On the other hand, when we consider how daring al-Tawḥīdī has positioned himself outside the accepted hierarchy of the time, it is fascinating to watch how he tries to save his neck. It is not the result that is of interest here, not the end itself, but rather the way the author navigates through the stormy weather he himself helped to create. For that purpose, several modes, features, markers, and strategies can be identified:

## 1 Rejecting Authority

The first measure is to reject the sole responsibility; one could also say that the author here disaffirms his authority. He does so by handing over authority to others (as a transmitter as well as a victim):

Is it my fault (*fā-mā dhanbī*), if the great and learned men of our time, when I asked them about him [Ibn ‘Abbād], described him all in the manner I have collected in this book? I have even abstained from mentioning many of his turpitudes, because I did not want to be redundant, and I wanted to keep the pen from writing down [too many] atrocities, from spreading repulsive deeds or tribulations one does not want to hear or talk about. Not to mention those words of him that have escaped me because I have left him in 370 [980/81].<sup>17</sup>

Is it my fault (*fā-mā dhanbī*), if I recount the bitterness of failure he has made me swallow after giving me hope, and if I recount the ill success he has caused after feeding my aspirations, considering the [my] long time of service, [his] never ending promises, and [my] good faith [in him]. As if I alone have been exposed to his meanness, or as if I alone have been treated by him like this.<sup>18</sup>

The author is not alone in having suffered. Having constructed a case against his accused, he falls back into an imaginary line of victimized, like-minded individuals.

## 2 Isolating the Adversary and Setting the Norm

Al-Tawḥīdī had been asked by Najāḥ, the librarian, to copy thirty volumes of Ibn ‘Abbād’s correspondence to be sent to Khurasān. His suggestion to extract the best parts and to arrange them properly in order to be passed around in sessions was met with Ibn ‘Abbād’s disconcertment; apparently he felt lectured. According to al-Tawḥīdī, this happened not least because there had been a miscommunication:

---

17 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 492.

18 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 492.



This was made known to him in an unflattering way, which I did not know, and he said:

“He belittled my epistles, he refused to copy them, and he abused them. O God, I will acknowledge nothing that he knows, and he will realize his luck when it has left him.”<sup>19</sup>

In al-Tawḥīdī’s eyes, Ibn ‘Abbād is clearly overreacting which he has to counter with equal exaggeration, giving a sample of his rhetorical skills and his knowledge, and ridiculing the object of his criticism:

As if I had abused the Qur’an, or thrown menstrual pads on the Kaaba, or wounded the she-camel of Ṣāliḥ, or defecated in the well of Zamzam. Or as if I had suggested that al-Nazzām had been Manichaeen, or al-‘Allāf a supporter of the Dayṣāniyya, or al-Jubbā’ī a follower of the Butriyya, or as if I had said that Abū Hāshim had died in the house of a wine merchant, or ‘Abbād [the father] had been just a teacher for little school boys.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 Solidarity with the Reader

The author seeks solidarity with the reader by recounting this outrageous request and virtually telling the reader: “See what he did to me! Can you imagine this?”:

Is it my fault (*fa-mā dhanbī*), you people, if I could not copy thirty volumes? Who would like to approve this effort, so that I should excuse him, if he condemns my refusal? What kind of person would copy this amount and would then pray to God to get back his eyesight or the use of his hand?<sup>21</sup>

Al-Tawḥīdī replaces subjective emotions with allegedly objective standards (reason, common sense etc.), and at the same time fraternizes with his readers.

---

19 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 493.

20 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 493-494.

21 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 493.

#### 4 Rhetoric Battles (Degradation)

Al-Tawḥīdī's main battlefield was *adab*, the writing of elegant prose. Ibn 'Abbād had a reputation for his eloquent and graceful style, the very skill upon which al-Tawḥīdī set all his ambition and for which he sought acknowledgment. His strongest adversary could not attest al-Tawḥīdī's proficiency in writing, and vice versa. Instead they seek to talk down their respective literary merits. The battle goes as follows:

Is it then my fault (*fā-mā dhanbī*) when he said to me: "Wherever did you get that gaudy tawdry style you keep writing to me in?" I replied: "How could my style be otherwise than as His Excellency describes it, seeing that I pluck the fruit of his 'Epistles', drink at the fount of his learning, make his *adab* my guiding light, and do my humble best to draw a few drops from his ocean and strain a trickle of his outpourings?"

He retorted: "You are lying and sinning, you bastard! Where are my words intrusive and begging, where do you find in them servility and the plea for mercy? My words belong to heaven, yours are dung."<sup>22</sup>

#### 5 The Process of Selection

If the reader has the temporary impression that there is a stalemate, this changes immediately with the fifth exclamation. Now, the author mounts his strongest weapon: he alone chooses what to include in the text. He uses his authority to present evidence of his excellence in prose. But in order not to appear as someone who one-sidedly misuses his power, we learn that he did so against his will:

Is it my fault (*fā-mā dhanbī*), if when he asked me: "Have you been with Ibn al-'Amīd Abū l-Faḥḥ?" I replied: "Yes, I have visited him and joined his session, and I have seen what happened to him there, how he has been praised with verses, how he is outstanding in this, how he excels in that, how he takes this and that on to promote scholars

---

22 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 493.

and littérateurs, how he has sent Abū Saʿīd al-Sirāfi this and has given Abū Sulaymān al-Mantiqī that ...”

At that he furrowed his face, and his words became dismissing [...] Then he said: “I know that you have sought refuge with him in Iraq; read your letter for me in which you have asked him for his favor, and in which you have praised him.” I refused, but he ordered and insisted, so I read it to him, whereupon he in a fury lost his self-control.<sup>23</sup>

Although he tries to refuse, eventually he has to share his lengthy letter with Abū l-Faṭḥ.<sup>24</sup> This letter does not only praise Ibn al-ʿAmīd’s rival, it is first of all proof of al-Tawḥīdī’s skills as a writer and shows that he can do more than deliver blame if the person is worth it.

## 6 The Author in Danger or The Author as Hero

What happens now is a vivid illustration of authority within communication. For al-Tawḥīdī, there is no doubt that he has crossed a line. Again, this is not his own assessment alone; others, too, have noticed it, including his target:

Afterwards, I was informed: “You have harmed yourself by describing his enemy in such good words, and by singling him out so clearly and making him the master of humankind.” [...]

They also said to me: “You have harmed yourself, and you have thrown all caution to the winds. He hates you and despises you and finds that you have crossed the line with your words, that you don’t know your class, and that you have forgotten your rank.”<sup>25</sup>

In his answer, al-Tawḥīdī reveals his code of honor which prevents him from insulting a person without cause. By this *argumentum e contrario*, he indicates that Ibn ʿAbbād deserves what he got, and he, al-Tawḥīdī, had exposed himself to danger by adhering to his code of honor.

---

23 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 495-496.

24 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 496-504.

25 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 504.

I replied: “I did not want him to watch me attacking the honor of such an important man, bashing him without consideration, or turning my back on him.”<sup>26</sup>

## 7 Résumé

A very prominent feature in textual endings is to sum up the text in one catching phrase, an important step to meet the expectation of the reader (see Fowler’s points 2 and 3). Al-Tawḥīdī’s résumé of these exclamations takes the form of a rhetorical question:

If these matters are unclear, and if these consequences are unknown, is not the point of all the goodwill that is the reason for devotion, and does not devotion lead to praise? And the same goes for insult that is the reason for hatred/aversion, and does not hatred lead to disapproval? Well, that’s exactly the case.<sup>27</sup>

For those who, after having read this rhetorical exclamation mark, still have doubts about the real outcome of the presented material, he declares the bottom line as follows:

Ibn ‘Abbād was extremely jealous of everyone who had rhetorical skills and could express himself in an elegant way.<sup>28</sup>

The book could have stopped here. However, by all appearances, it should end with a *finale furioso*. To illustrate his verdict, al-Tawḥīdī adds that Ibn ‘Abbād one day got carried away and laughed heartily about an anecdote he, al-Tawḥīdī, had told him. He even requested that al-Tawḥīdī should repeat it. Afterwards, someone informed al-Tawḥīdī how angry Ibn ‘Abbād had been about the situation. The reason for this anger, al-Tawḥīdī affirms, could be nothing other than fury about his, al-Tawḥīdī’s, excellence and pure envy. After several pages of sayings and further anecdotes on the subject of tyranny in general, the author (i.e. the audible voice) wraps things up by saying:

---

26 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 504.

27 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 505.

28 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 505.

I have added report to report, and word to word, to increase the benefit, and to display the knowledge, in order to support what I have said with clear arguments, and in order to provide appealing pleasure.<sup>29</sup>

Here, al-Tawḥīdī applies the conventional ending of an *adab* work which specifies the well-known and rather non-specific purpose of *adab* itself: to be useful, learned, clear, and entertaining.

## 8 The Author and God

A direct appeal to the reader/listener follows immediately afterwards:

Oh listener! You have listened to true and doubtful stories, among them detestable and agreeable ones. If God has endowed you with fairness and lets you love justice, if He has provided you with kindness and has secured your share of graciousness, and if He has raised you in terms of goodness, then I will be content with your judgment; I will not fear your hostility, and I will have faith in what God will put on your tongue, and what He has designed for me from you.<sup>30</sup>

Instead of leaving it to the reader to pass his judgment independently, the author alone sets the conditions under which he will accept a verdict. What seems like a humble gesture (relying on God) can also be read differently: The only acceptable verdict comes from the other great author, God himself. And since God's intentions are unreadable, the author alone will decide if the reader's reaction is appropriate. Thus, the author puts himself in line with the Creator; at least in his realm he is God.

## 9 Anticipation of Critique

His fellow critics are fallible beings, therefore, once again he has to refer to possible objections and refute them at once:

Know that if you ask for an apology, I have given a clear one already, and if you demand motivation, it has been provided with utmost clar-

---

29 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 547.

30 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 547.

ity; and if you are angry on behalf of Ibn ‘Abbād or Ibn al-‘Amīd, I have filled this book with their merits [too], with accounts of their education, their honor, and their glory.<sup>31</sup>

While we can find this technique – the anticipation of critique – quite often in medieval Arabic literature, it rarely happens that an author deliberately puts himself outside the circles of establishment, and at the same time claims to have been fulfilling all the circles’ criteria for what is considered appropriate scholarly behavior.

#### 10 The Author as a Keeper (in Form of Self-Praise)

By writing down so many anecdotes and details from the vizier’s life, al-Tawḥīdī, or so he claims, has done him a favor, i.e. he has preserved his deeds for posterity:

... so let me know who nowadays has filled ten sheets of paper with their characteristics, qualities, and honorable deeds, and with everything that informs about their circle of influence and their power; who undertakes it to celebrate them, to meet their demands, and to make known their reputation and their goals; [...] Who, then, has written down all this among those who are mentioned only together with these two, who are known only in connection with these two, who, if not one of these two had turned to them, today would stand watch in the road, or pick up kernels from the streets, or linger in the last corner of the Hamam.<sup>32</sup>

#### 11 The Author as a Medium

He returns then to the argument brought up before: it is not a matter of his character nor is it a singular occurrence, an encounter that regrettably went wrong. What happens here is a dissociation of the author as an individual; instead the focus is being lead to a certain mechanism and structure. He as an author is merely the mouthpiece or medium. This could have happened to anyone:

---

31 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 548.

32 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 548.

Be certain that whoever rides the humps and swims in the waters of this story like I did, whoever would say what I have said, and whoever exposes like I did, would be judged and condemned like I have been.<sup>33</sup>

### Closure and Openness/Closeness

Fictional literature is perceived as inherently open.<sup>34</sup> The author via his narrator(s) enters a semantic negotiation process together with his potential reader that cannot be closed even if there is a suggestion for a possible ending. By taking on the role of the author, al-Tawḥīdī demonstrates a mechanism that is at work in every text: It is impossible to simply declare a work as “closed” or “open”, because these statements very much depend on the perspectives, the critical zeitgeist, and the questions asked.

The audible voice in *Akhlāq al-Wazīrayn* plays with the implications offered by authorial functions: sometimes the authority comes in handy, sometimes it is better to shrug the authorial voice and hide behind the voices of others. Al-Tawḥīdī stands prominently in the foreground of the narrative, but the real person al-Tawḥīdī vanishes behind the roles and functions he adopts. As the arranger of his material, he remains the creator. But as only one of many factors in the process of originating the text, the author is much less the master of the hermeneutic process than he claims to be. Interestingly, the relief about this minimized authority – be it desired or not – is palpable, too.

The final passage is a vivid example of a communication process in which the parties involved do not act under equal conditions. Officially, the vizier is in the key position. He possesses authority and influence; with his power he eventually makes al-Tawḥīdī leave the court. Al-Tawḥīdī strikes back and presents himself as a powerful author who in this arena possesses the prerogative of final explanation. However, this is neither possible nor advisable in the form of an uninterrupted invective.

---

33 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 549.

34 Grewing et al., *The Door Ajar*, 10.

In order to really gain the upper hand, at the end al-Tawhīdī has to step back as an author without undermining his authority. Once the book is out of his hand, it is available for interpretation. Therefore, all possible pros and cons have to be included in the text. This technique opens the text on one hand, because the reader is free to choose between the arguments while on the other, it is the author, in fact, who determines the weight of certain arguments and the weakness of others. We witness here a permanent vacillation between closing and opening. The author displays his last will without calling it a last will. He presents a summary, and he claims authority because this is his story. A little later he rejects authority because the story could have happened to anyone. He evaluates his own writing but does not accept the evaluation of others. He gives an apology and takes it back immediately. The author presents explanations and justifications; although he fraternizes with the reader he does not trust his judgement. He practices the art of balancing – a common feature in medieval Arabic writing – but the outcome of the balancing must match his authorial interpretation. Depending on our perspective, this could be a quite hermetic way of presenting a text, or, on the contrary, we could see it as a way of dynamicization, of getting away from fixed meanings and static characters.<sup>35</sup> Be that as it may, we can observe a discursive need<sup>36</sup> and an imaginative play with literary conventions here.

This way of writing culminates at the end of the text and thus refers to pivotal aspects of the authorial function. The author offers himself as a medium with which the potential reader *ex post facto* can gain access to certain historical events, in non-fictional texts in particular. The author, in order to prevent the termination of this mediation process, has to achieve a balance between maintaining his authority and not patronizing the reader. Ironic twists, relativizations, addressing the authorship itself: All this can be seen as commentary on the process of writing, reading, and the mutual understanding of writers and readers in general; a

---

35 Stock, "Figur," 203.

36 See the phrase "diskursives Bedürfnis" in Glauch, "Ich-Erzähler ohne Stimme," 161.



process that in every new generation and in changing circumstances begins all over again.<sup>37</sup>

If we translate the story of the vizier and his scribe into a story about communication, the result would be that perfect communication, if at all possible, can be achieved between equal protagonists only, and that communication is all about balancing. The ideal would be the following, expressed in verses by an unknown poet and quoted on the last page:

I have not enjoyed support by a stranger  
Nor a benefit by a someone close to me for fifty years;  
Praise be to God, thank you: I am content  
Because I don't have to accuse the miser  
Nor do I have to praise the benefactor.<sup>38</sup>

It is perhaps impossible to eliminate dependencies entirely, as al-Tawḥīdī knows too well; he adds:

I wish I could be like him, but incapacity dominates me; it is planted  
in my nature.<sup>39</sup>

However, one could try to make the interdependencies visible, and to reveal the accompanying distortions and inconsistencies therein. Al-Tawḥīdī presents himself as the creator of the text but delegates the authority of the verdicts and the responsibility for the consequences to others. Thus, he weaves a network that is supposed to avert or at least minimize the risk of appearing untrustworthy. Here, the author seems aware of the fact that any given text is shaped by the author's perspective, by his choices, by the collage of sections and sequences he arranges, and in the order presented by him. In essence, he dismantles his authorial authority in order to increase his credibility. Al-Tawḥīdī ultimately, through his actions, (consciously or otherwise) reveals the inimitable essence of authorship.

---

37 It still has to be discussed in what way Fowlers fifth point ("the degree to which the work allows new critical readings") relates to a universal quality of textual reception.

38 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 550.

39 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Wazīrayn*, 550.

## Conclusion

A popular way of ending a text is to come back to the beginning. In the beginning I have mentioned that assessments of al-Tawḥīdī to date, with all due respect, mostly focus on his difficult personal situation that somehow must have affected his writing and his own judgment. One example is the following statement: “Tawḥīdī, clearly, is not an objective source.”<sup>40</sup>

Well, of course he is not. But who is? Instead, this quite diverse and multifaceted text, though not fictional in the first place, is built upon, and shows in an exemplary manner, one of the basic narrative mechanisms, the “narrative principle of cooperation” between author and reader which can be manipulated and suspended, too.<sup>41</sup>

Without neglecting the historical circumstances, we can learn something about literary conventions and about the functioning of textual understanding, if we perceive the individuals in the text as characters. Characters have to function in the text only, not in real life. Both al-Tawḥīdī and his counterpart(s) are designed as characters; they adopt certain functions and can be seen as paradigms of certain narrative features.<sup>42</sup> The author’s guidance is an endeavor with an uncertain outcome; but it has been and still remains a very vivid activity, although created so many centuries ago. Al-Tawḥīdī’s authorship, then, is part of the ongoing process to form history via (hi)stories, and to show how revealing it can be to supposedly swerve from reality.<sup>43</sup> Research on authorship and on closure in medieval Arabic literature is still far from being exhausted. The end of this paper, therefore, is only a temporary one.<sup>44</sup>

---

40 Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian*, 42.

41 “Narratives Kooperationsprinzip zwischen Autor und Leser”, Jannidis, *Figur und Person*, 56.

42 Jannidis, *Figur und Person*, 161.

43 Frank Kermode, among many other subtle insights regarding the end, has commented on the illuminating effects and of the potentials of fiction, and on the writing of history in *The Sense of an Ending*, 42f., 50f., and *passim*.

44 Or, as Don P. Fowler put it: “Or has all ending, in the end, to be just stopping?” “Second Thoughts,” 22.

## Bibliography

### Sources:

- al-Tawḥīdī, Abū Ḥayyān. *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn*. Edited by Muḥammad b. Tāwīt al-Ṭanjī. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992.
- . *Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*. Edited by Khalīl al-Manṣūr. Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1997.
- al-Tawḥīdī, Abū Ḥayyān. *La Satire des deux vizirs*, présenté, traduit de l'arabe et annoté par Frédéric Lagrange. Actes Sud, 2004.
- Yāqūt b. 'Abdallāh al-Rūmī. *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb or Dictionary of learned men of Yāqūt*. Edited by D. S. Margoliouth. Vol. 5. Leiden: Brill, 1911.

### Studies:

- Behzadi, Lale. "The Art of Entertainment. Forty Nights with Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī." In *The Weaving of Words. Approaches to Classical Arabic Prose*, edited by Lale Behzadi and Vahid Behmardi. Vol. 112 of *Beiruter Texte und Studien*. Würzburg: Ergon 2009, 165-179.
- Bergé, Marc. "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī." In *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. 'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, edited by Julia Ashtiany et al. Cambridge University Press, 1990, 112-124.
- Burke, Sean. *The death and return of the author. Criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1992.
- Fowler, Don P. "First Thoughts on Closure: Problems and Prospects." *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 22 (1989): 75-122. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40235930>
- . "Second Thoughts on Closure." In *Classical Closure. Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. Edited by Deborah H. Roberts et al. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, 3-22.
- Glauch, Sonja. "Ich-Erzähler ohne Stimme. Zur Andersartigkeit mittelalterlichen Erzählens zwischen Narratologie und Mediengeschichte." In *Historische Narratologie – mediävistische Perspektiven*, edited by

- Harald Haferland and Matthias Meyer, 149-185. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.
- Grewing, Farouk F. et al. (eds.). *The Door Ajar. False Closure in Greek and Roman Literature and Art*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013.
- Haarkötter, Hektor. *Nicht-endende Enden. Dimensionen eines literarischen Phänomens*. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2007.
- Hirschler, Konrad. *Medieval Arabic Historiography. Authors as Actors*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Jannidis, Fotis. *Figur und Person. Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 32000.
- Kraemer, Joel L. *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam. The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age*. Leiden: Brill, 21992.
- Lagrange, Frédéric. "L'obscénité du vizir." *Arabica* 53/1 (2006): 54-107.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu. 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- Roberts, Deborah H. et al. (eds.). *Classical Closure. Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Roberts, Deborah H. "Afterword: Ending and Aftermath, Ancient and Modern." In *Classical Closure. Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*, edited by Roberts, Deborah H. et al. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1997, 251-273.
- Stock, Markus. "Figur: Zu einem Kernproblem historischer Narratologie." In *Historische Narratologie – mediävistische Perspektiven*, edited by Harald Haferland and Matthias Meyer, 187-203. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.
- Unzeitig, Monika. *Autorname und Autorschaft. Bezeichnung und Konstruktion in der deutschen und französischen Erzählliteratur des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.