The Art of Entertainment:
Forty Nights with Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī

Lale Behzadi (University of Göttingen)

Al-Tawhīdī’s Kitāb al-imtā’ wal-mu‘ānasa (The Book of pleasure and enjoyment/companionship) is a remarkable example for an artistically nested text with so many layers and ramifications that we can hardly see where the composition begins and where the textual movements end. It displays the skills of the author and the high quality of literature of that time. Above that, it shows the richness literary texts can possess and the turns they take, quite often – we must assume – without being intended by the author.

If we look at al-Tawhīdī’s life we can use his work first as a source of information about the conditions he lived in, the political situation of that period and especially the circumstances of those who wanted to make a living out of writing. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī (c.315/927-c.411/1023) travelled around to find the right place and mentor for his literary ambitions. He was an admirer of al-Jāhiz (d. c.255/868), making an endeavour to reach his unique method of prose writing, a combination of huge knowledge and easiness of style. The tragedy of al-Tawhīdī’s life is that he failed to reconcile the fact that he, as a court writer, had to be at service and was captivated in the usual hive of intrigue with the way he saw himself, an artist of words, and a servant of literature. As readers, we gain a lot from this inconsistency since he permanently had to close the gap, to satisfy his sponsors without betraying his principles. Frustration and restriction, as destructive as they may be for the person, sometimes cause creativity and resourcefulness. This is what one can witness in al-Tawhīdī’s texts, especially those like the one at issue, who give hints about their genesis.

Second, his work provides us (as well as his contemporary readers) with information about several fields of knowledge, especially philosophy, theology, rhetoric and behaviour in general. It shows, above that, how the author tried to present his knowledge in a readable form and artful language, using passages of poetry and rhyming prose, parallels and other forms of rhetoric to shape his writing and amuse the audience. The abundance of knowledge is stunning, leaving the reader as well as the listener in the book (the vizier) somewhat exhausted at the end of each chapter, which induces the vizier regularly to ask for an amusing anecdote before his companion leaves him at the end of the night.

This article focuses on the third facet (which is connected to the first), the narrative strategies the text presents in view of the circumstances under which the au-

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1 Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī, Kitāb al-imtā’ wal-mu‘ānasa, eds. Ahmad Amin/Ahmad al-Zayn, vol. 1-3, Dār maktabat al-ḥayāt lil-ṭibā‘a wal-nashr wal-tawzi‘ (Further referred to as IM).
The author has written the book. The aim is not simply to explain the text with its historical background. Instead, al-Tawhidi himself gives a complicated introduction in which the reader gets a hint on how to find his way through the labyrinth of frames. This concept of presentation shall be our main focus, for it provides indications and instructions on how to understand the sequence of the chapters. We are told stories within stories, we are lead to paths which end suddenly or go back to an irritating crossroad. Al-Tawhidi is so eager to take us by the hand that it should be illuminating to stop, turn around and examine the motifs, dodes and wrappings that are arranged around what is called the “essence” of his book, the philosophical reflections. Step by step analysis of the frame construction will be made to try and find out which paths we are meant to take and which side roads suddenly open up and what connection this has with a narrative structure.

Since the mere sequence of events does not make a story we should ask what al-Tawhidi does to make his work attractive. One could argue that the philosophical thoughts in themselves bear enough attraction; that the arrangement and the introductory remarks are merely details without much importance. In the course of this article I will show the immense impact these arrangements have and how they can shape our perception of the whole book. Although this is only one reading version amongst others, this is the nature of reading in general: there is no isolated validity.

1. The Genre

The book Kitāb al-imtā' waal-mu'ānasa belongs to a genre which, in a broader sense, can be called court literature. Along with the need of the still young Islamic society to collect traditions and knowledge in all conceivable fields, there grew the demand of the higher classes to acquire education, style and awareness. The vehicle of all this was adab, a product as well as an attitude, an active process as well as a condition.

At a first glance, Abū Hayyān al-Tawhidi’s work is part of the majālis genre, compilations that were written as materials for the entertainer and guests at the courts. The increasing number of governors and wealthy notables opened a market for stories, texts and pieces of news that had to come along educating, exciting and amusing, but not without a certain intellectual standard – to be presented at the soirées and salons. The audience had had certain expectations that

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2 It should not be denied that we of course can read the whole book as “a mine of information about contemporary intellectual life” and that it “should prove invaluable for a reconstruction of the doctrines of the Baghdad philosophers”, as S. M. Stern put it in his Article on al-Tawhidi (Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, 1960). Though acknowledging this statement and many others which claim al-Tawhidi above all as a transmitter of philosophical ideas, the objective of this article is to show that it is quite difficult to extract “pure” information without being influenced by the modes of presentation.
had to be fulfilled or at least stimulated by the professional entertainer (nadim),
who thankfully used these works to feed the ever hungry minds.³

Compilations of adab works in this way could be used as manuals for intel-
llectual court life. They showed also the horizon and education of the author and
compiler. Above that, they were the currency in which the writers, authors and
scholars paid back the protection and livelihood they enjoyed under the reign of
the respective caliph, governor or emir. Al-Tawhîdi himself classifies his book by
stating the exact genesis of the writing, the original idea, the patron, the difficul-
ties of translating the idea into action, and the relations between the participating
persons. He has been hired to entertain the vizier Ibn Saʿdān (i.e. Abū ʿAbdallāh
al-Husayn b. Ahmad b. Saʿdān, called al-ʿArid being a former army inspector)⁴,
and he documents these conversations in a book. This book has several func-
tions: it provides evidence for his nights at the court; it is the favour in return for
having been chosen as the companion of the vizier; it shows the educated and
cultivated state of the author; it can be used by other readers either to amuse and
educate themselves or to entertain others and organize a social evening.

The genre of court literature includes different kinds of books: textbooks that
教 the bureaucrats how to write (letters, calculations, lists, epistles, for exam-
ple Qudama b. Jaʿfar (d. 337/948): Kitāb sināʿat al-kitāba); books that collect
news about different topics in order to insert them into the conversation (Ibn
Qutayba (d. 276/889): ʿUyūn al-ḥabbūr); books with instructions for different
groups of professions (al-Jāḥiz: Kitāb al-muʿallimīn); books that elaborate on cer-
ten concepts and principles (by al-Tawhīdi himself, for example, al-Sulṭa wa-
alsadīq), stressing the positive and negative sides of each phenomenon (the sub-
genre of mahāsin wa-masāʾil, thus showing the eloquence of the author)⁵. Al-
though introductory remarks were quite common, mainly because of thankful
remarks to the patron, the main focus laid on the presented material. The author
could show his brilliance and advocate himself this way for further orders.

Nevertheless introductions were important to give a foretaste to the coming
treasures and explain the motifs of the author.⁷ They therefore were composed
very carefully by giving examples of the writer’s literary skills. What is remark-

³ cf. Roger Allen, The Arabic Literary Heritage. The development of its genres and criticism, Cam-
bridge University Press 1998, 238.
⁴ Vizier 373-375, under the reign of Ṣamṣām al-Dawla, executed 375. For historical deduc-
tions see Ahmad Amin in his introduction, IM 1, Z. Kraemer, in his detailed introduction
into Buyid court life, gives 374/984 as the year of Ibn Saʿdān’s execution (Joel L. Kraemer,
Humanism in the renaissance of Islam: the cultural revival during the Buyid age, Leiden: Brill
1992, 191) while Bergé dates his death to 382-3/992-3 (M. Bergé, “Abū Ḥayyān al-
et al., Cambridge University Press 1990, 112-124, here 122.
⁵ There are other dates as well, d. 938.
⁶ An example for this can be found in the ninth night, providing a list of opposites but
without further elaborations such as certainty-doubt, knowledge-ignorance etc.
⁷ See the article by Bilal Orfali in this book on the “Art of the Muqaddima.”
able here is that al-Tawḥīdī mixes genres: he serves the need to be entertained and to provide intellectual food – which is what is generally expected from majālis literature - but at the same time he presents a report on his conversations with the vizier. He goes even further and reveals the details that led to the book in the first place.

2. The Framework

One of the features that shape this book is its framework or, to be more precise, the encapsulation of frames. These are connected with the announced addressees of the book and the relationships of the persons who play certain (official and unofficial) roles in the setting.

The author, through the choice of his title, already declares that he wishes to entertain and to give pleasure – to whom? There are at least three targets/addressees:

A. The author claims to be in personae one of the two dialogue partners and the narrator, respectively. As the evening entertainer of the vizier it is his main goal to provide amusement and make conversation. We can assume that he also had the vizier in mind, at least theoretically.

B. The author’s friend and mentor Abū l-Wafā’ al-Muhandis for whom this book has been written and who, as we learn, is eager to know what the vizier and al-Tawḥīdī were talking about.

C. The broader readership (the educated people, the salons), since the book has been officially published and distributed.

We should look closer at these addressees and relationships and ask some questions, for example why al-Tawḥīdī gives us this variety of the auditory, and what effect does it have on the readership? Moreover, what do the multiple embedding of stories and supposed attendant circumstances do with the “main” material?

A

If the book were written for the vizier only (for the record, so to speak), it would have been enough to report the conversation itself with some praise to the vizier at the beginning. It would also have been polite and smarter to give the vizier a more active part or to eliminate the dialogue structure and give the lectures only. Instead, we notice that al-Tawḥīdī speaks the most. With some exceptions the pattern is the same: the vizier poses a question or a demand and al-Tawḥīdī answers, often in a long monologue, sometimes interrupted by comments or further questions. This arrangement offers al-Tawḥīdī a stage to present everything he knows and to prove above all of his rhetoric skills and his sharp mind. It is
true that the vizier often initiates the conversation; and, of course, he has to have an educated horizon to ask the questions and to add his remarks. However, in comparison to his guest he makes a rather dull impression. He asks whatever comes to mind and seldom contributes original remarks. Instead, at the end of the evening, he often demands a funny story as though tired of all the intellectual conversation. While al-Tawhidi tries to give all he has, the vizier remains on the receiving end of the conversation. On the other hand his questions give the opportunity to explain some thoughts in more detail or to provide the background of theories and theses. It seems as if these questions function as the scaffolding of the conversation building. They justify turns and digressions the author cannot be blamed for (similar to al-Jāḥiz whose subject-hopping and unorganized writing became nearly proverbial). \(^8\)

The talks with the vizier are embedded into the most visible frame of the book: the division of the text into forty nights. The narrator, al-Tawhidi, has spent approximately forty evenings with the vizier each of which contains discussions about certain themes like philosophy, language, theology etc. (adab in the best sense of the word).

This reminiscence of 1001 Nights immediately brings up certain references of structure and storytelling (more so today, since this collection gained a lot of its popularity only after the first translations into French in the 18th century). The figure of the storyteller who night by night tries to entertain his audience has been a well-established institution in Arabic literature for a long time. The forty chapters – with few exceptions – can be read independently from each other. They mostly deal with a certain subject, started by the vizier’s question about something followed by al-Tawhidi’s reply and, sometimes, going on as a dialogue.

As in 1001 Nights the partners of this frame have got different positions in the hierarchy. Although al-Tawhidi unlike Shahrazād is not threatened by death, he is in a dependent position and has to please the vizier in order to earn a living and useful recommendation. Al-Tawhidi has to manage the difficult balancing act to appear as the educated and self-confident scholar who is worth sitting next to the vizier and impressing him with his knowledge and rhetoric. At the same time he must neither bore nor lecture his partner and he has to be aware of the vizier’s power and how fate can change within the court from one minute to the next (even the vizier himself will later become another victim of the court intrigues, although he is still unaware of his fate while talking to al-Tawhidi). \(^9\)

\(^8\) Kraemer describes Ibn Sa’dān as a rather decent man who established a cordial and cultured soirées, contrary to the scheming atmosphere at court and the difficult economical and political situation (Kraemer, *Humanism*, 191f.).


\(^10\) See the aforementioned execution of Ibn Sa’dān after his brief intermezzo as vizier; fn. 4.
Another addressee is al-Tawhidi’s mentor and friend Abū l-Wafā’ al-Muhandis (d. 997). This relationship is the primary narrative (and the first frame) into which the other mentioned narratives (and frames) are embedded. As we are told in al-Tawhidi’s preface, Abū l-Wafā’ had done him the favour of introducing him to the vizier and (in turn) demanded a detailed report on their conversation. A closer look at this preface will reveal how the introduction influenced the whole book.

After a few introductory remarks on the importance of a friend’s guidance, al-Tawhidi addresses his benefactor directly: “Ayuhā l-štaykh.” He praises him and wishes him well in a delicate manner using rhyme prose and parallelisms.

In his speech he refers to a talk they had the day before (sahimtu jamī’a ma qal-tabu tī bil-ans...), thus evoking a presence and nearness to the action, i.e. the reader can nearly follow in real time. Abū l-Wafā’ had apparently given him some advice regarding the expected encounter with the vizier.

Al-Tawhidi quotes Abū l-Wafā’ who reminds him of the circumstances that brought him from Rayy to Baghdad and from Ibn al-‘Amid to Sahib b. ‘Abbad in the first place at the end of the year 370 after hijra. He also reminds him of the encounters they had and how they have profited from each other. Abū l-Wafā’ connected his friend to Ibn Sa’dān, vizier of Samṣām al-Dawla b. ‘Adud al-Dawla in the years 373 to 374/375 after hijra:

“Yes”, Abū l-Wafā’ says, “I arranged all this and I will not stop doing so in my relationship to you [...] for all the reasons I gave, and you owe this to me that you spend successive nights alone with the vizier; you can talk to him whatever you like and choose and write to him message after message.”

What starts as an explanation on how al-Tawhidi got the honour to become the vizier’s company turns into a severe reproach. Abū l-Wafā’ continues to dwell on al-Tawhidi’s lack of experience with court matters and how lucky he can call himself to come into this position missing the manners and necessary skills to do well at court. He then insinuates that his friend claims all the honour and benefit for himself without acknowledging that he would never stand where he is now without his (Abū l-Wafā’s) help, guidance and conveyance. Al-Tawhidi presents all this in direct speech, quoting Abū l-Wafā’, who gets really annoyed about al-Tawhidi’s ingratitude, along several pages. Abū l-Wafā’s rage culminates in the warning that he will rip the friendship with al-Tawhidi off his heart unless “you inform me completely about what you two talked about and shared in good and bad.” His condition for maintaining the friendship and forgetting the betrayal

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12 IM 1, 5.
13 IM 1, 7.
is to take part in the experience of the soirées as if he himself had been present:
“... as if I were watching you or sitting between you and joining you.”

Abū l-Wafā’ threatens al-Tawhīdī to withdraw from their relationship in case he refuses to do what he asked him to do:

And if you don’t do this, wait for the consequence of my estrangement from you and expect to be disregarded by me, as if I am with you and you become thirsty and bewildered; O Abū Ḥayyān, you will eat you finger from regret, and you will swallow your saliva from grief ...

C

The general audience is manifold. There is the contemporary audience al-
Tawhīdī must have had in mind. Like any other author, al-Tawhīdī tried to pro-
duce a text that is worth reading. The pleasure he promises is to be found in the
amount of knowledge and anecdotes he provides. To gain attention he has to
bring more than a mere collection of material worth knowing. He decides to
raise the attention by a special presentation of this material. This way the audi-
ence gets the impression of being a part of a distinguished company and to wit-
ness the results of two interesting relationships (al-Tawhīdī and the vizier; al-
Tawhīdī and his friend). On the other hand, the contemporary audience was fa-
miliar with the situation at the court. To give details about the evolving of a text
may also aid in unfolding the practice of patronage and connection in the higher
society, a practice with which al-Tawhīdī was highly unsatisfied.

We should ask what happens with the modern reader who knows nothing
about the life at the court in the 10th century and is not familiar with the names
that are dropped by al-Tawhīdī and his conversation partners. Maybe some of
the allusions escape his notice, maybe he is not at all interested in sharing the
ideas on philosophy and literary theory going back to the 10th century. Still,
there is more about the book than compiling ideas and revealing some embarras-
sing facts of court life.

3. Perspective

A question which has been discussed with respect to historical texts is the way in
which the author has influenced his material and thus manipulates the reader.
While historians try to distinguish between facts and fictional elements or stating
the creative character of every form of writing, artful literature from the begin-

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14 Ibn I, 7.
15 Ibn I, 7.
16 See Stefan Leder (ed.), Story-telling in the framework of non-fictional Arabic literature, Wies-
ning tries to create something that is beyond the pure report, more than submitting details and events. One may object that every text in itself is a composition and always carries subjective characteristics of the author. Above that, every text changes in the course of its reception; this is common knowledge by now. We also read historical texts and political analyses, religious treatises and manuals from that point of view. What is interesting here are the styles used by the Arab authors who definitely intended to write literary works. They consider themselves professional writers; they claim to create a text which is entertaining, educating and stimulating. It is evident that classical Arabic literature has not been mainly written as fictional literature. Nevertheless it enters realms where readers have to use their imaginative power. Their expectations interact with the linguistic material and with other literary and non-literary discourses, and thus produce what we call literariness and lead to the result which we call literature.

The paradox in the case of al-Tawhidi is that he uses a conventional pattern for his book, court literature, varying it and breaking through it during the writing process. These acts of approaching a convention and leaving it in the next moment add to the appeal of the text. Another paradox can be found in the double figure author/narrator who claims to be both. It is not the problem of authenticity that is of interest here (for that, see below) but the question of whose point of view the whole story is told from. Only if we answer this question can we make a statement on the reliability of the narrator. Author and narrator carry the same name, al-Tawhidi. He has at least three tasks to fulfill: to entertain the vizier, to report on his friend and to prove himself as an author. Since these tasks sometimes contradict each other (for example, the report down to the last detail versus the loyalty to the vizier or the standard of literature) we cannot be sure what to believe. Which of these many conditions is responsible for the rhetoric style? Are we sure that we are told everything and if not, is that the result of confining court secrets or due to something that has to be hidden from Abū l-Wafā‘, or simply due to the fact that it is too trivial to find a place in a piece of work by someone who claims to be more than a secretary? In the tenth night, for example, al-Tawhidi switches his focus, turning from a participating actor to a commenting narrator. The narrator in one of the rare occasions enters the picture (whereas he usually is hidden behind the conversation partner and gives only direct speech), describing the vizier’s reactions, giving summaries of the conversation and even adding information that was not part of the evening talks. Here the writer wants to complete a chapter to be satisfied with the arrangement. We learn also that al-Tawhidi had read this (previously composed) chapter aloud to the vizier in the course of two nights.¹⁷

¹⁷ IM I, 195.
4. Authenticity

The narrator seems to be identical to the author, hence giving the book its authentic form of a report: a report about producing entertaining and artful literature.

Beginning with the preface, the reader is initiated into the art of creating an entertaining text.

The narrator/author gives the impression of retelling everything that happened in a certain period of time and suggests to the reader (the common reader, his friend, and the vizier) that he (the reader) witnessed the disclosure of the author's composition process. Here, the question of "real" authenticity is of secondary importance (i.e. the question of whether these soirées have taken place exactly under the reported circumstances or whether every word was spoken the way al-Tawhidi has documented).\(^{18}\)

The artistic point here is the trick of authenticity which – when properly used – never fails to have the desired effect: to draw the attention of the audience although they surely recognize the construction (this being one of the miracles of good literature: we see through the tricks and yet we are spellbound). We can even assume that al-Tawhidi took the job (to entertain the vizier) not only to get access to court, to earn money, and to gain at least some of the respect he was always looking for, but al-Tawhidi immediately must have seen the opportunity of processing this experience. This prospect in turn would have inspired him during the talks themselves. The result would be an artistically arranged reality, the boundaries between the so-called reality and our perception of it being blurred. Thus, literature becomes far more than a means to entertain; it creates reality because a certain activity has been undertaken with the prospect of writing about it.

As readers we can take the chance to be part of what has happened and of how the report has been created. We could apply performative speech act qualities to this sort of literature which comes into being only by being ordered and, vice versa, reports on a reality that has been created (only?) by writing about it.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{18}\) This has been doubted, with good reason, before, as for example in Kraemer, *Humanism*, 217-18.

\(^{19}\) This phenomenon has been discussed recently in modern literature, too, where books with assumed authenticity are presented; they are perceived as literature, not documentaries, see for example Thomas Glavinic, *Das bin doch ich*, München: Hanse 2007, and Christa Wolf, *Ein Tag im Jahr*, München: Luchterhand 2003. Beside the critical enthusiasm both have also been criticized in the feuilletons for taking it too easy (just writing about their daily life) instead of making an effort and creating a story. However, this “documentary approach” has a special impact on both the reception and the writing which is why one could question Iser’s statement of literature as something that mostly remains “without consequences” (Wolfgang Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1993, 512). On the contrary, not only do these texts leave traces in the reality; the concept itself evokes a certain perception, inside and outside the text.
Again, this arrangement creates a sort of diffusion or uncertainty. How should we perceive the assumption that al-Tawhidi was fully aware of the potential processing of the conversation while performing it? How did this influence his role at the soirée? Would his rhetorically refined style and his way of answering the vizier have been different had he been unaware that the whole project would end in a book? And how did the assumed charge to report shape his encounters with the vizier? Or, the other way round, how did the conversation (or the pieces on philosophy, literature etc.) influence the way of reporting?

5. The plot

For a long time, the plot of a story was used as an instrument for measuring literature. There are different definitions to the term; let us just start with a simple old-fashioned test: to summarize a book.  

There are several ways to do this with al-Tawhidi’s book, each giving away another purpose and another meaning to his work.

1. The book Kitab al-intâṣ wal-mu‘ānasâ is the written version of evening conversations between the narrator and Ibn Sa‘dân that lasted forty nights. We are presented with little stories woven around well-known scholars, ideas on certain subjects, anecdotes. Each chapter is dedicated to one night, as previously mentioned, that generally goes the same way: the vizier asks a question or makes a request and al-Tawhidi answers it. The vizier could add this book to the memorabilia of his term.

2. The book is a wonderful source of contemporary philosophical thought. In it we find not only al-Tawhidi giving his opinions on matters of life, society and literature, he also quotes a lot of other scholars and thus gives us evidence for statements that otherwise would have been forgotten. That is why this book is often considered as a work on philosophy and not as a literary text, albeit literally shaped (like the often mentioned title of al-Tawhidi as a literary philosopher or a philosophical literary writer).

3. The book is an example of carefully shaped language. Al-Tawhidi chose his style very purposefully, using all kinds of well-known rhetorical and poetical refinement, such as parallelisms, saj, tajnîs, or the art of brevity, giving the shortest

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20 For inspiration I have to refer to Peter Brooks, Reading for the plot: design and intention in narrative, Harvard University Press 1992. Although he gives a far more complex definition of plot he does not rule out the possibility to summarize and look at what we get by that, see for example p. 7.

definition of a phenomenon. He also presents a theoretical approach to the field of prose and poetry in Arabic literature.

4. The book is a story about dependence and pride, friendship and misuse of friendship, because it tells us about two men who are related to each other through the process of writing and submitting a book (al-Tawhidī and Abū l-Wafā).

5. The book is nothing of the above mentioned or all of it together; at the same time it is mostly and primarily a book about writing under certain historical circumstances as well as the aesthetic setting of the writing process.

As we have seen, we cannot really decide what sort of book we are dealing with when we try to make out its plot. This is one of the specialties of literary analysis, being itself part of the material that it is dealing with.

Purposefully or not, al-Tawhidī created a text that no longer (if ever at all) can be divided into the “main message” and the “literary measures” with which this message is transmitted. The transmitting tools themselves carry and create a chain of meanings which overlay and change the “official” meanings. Al-Tawhidī comments on the transmitting process at the beginning of part two where he assures Abū l-Wafā’ that no detail is missing, that he even explains the unclear, but declares at the same time that he also added remarks of important personalities to round off the subject.

6. Mode of presentation

Court literature is supposed to summarize what has been talked about in the evenings in order to give the potential reader the essence of the sessions and not to bother him with unnecessary details. By choosing the valuable pieces of the conversation the writer proves his ability to abbreviate. He forms a text corpus which no longer is a mere reflection of what happened at the mafštā; instead he takes the raw material and creates something entertaining for an audience that was not present at court or would reread the shared ideas and discussions in an entertaining way. It is clear that the writer was not supposed to take the minutes; rather he should and would refine what has been discussed and by doing this raise himself as well as the conversation partners.

22 As in the 26th night, IM II, 147-153.
24 This is the reason why we, according to Paul de Man and others, should be suspicious to all sorts of final statements when it comes to literature. See the introduction by Werner Hamacher to the German edition of Paul de Man, Allegories des Lesens [Allegories of Reading, 1979], Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1988, 25.
25 IM II, 1f.
Al-Tawhidi, instead of summarizing gives (or appears to give) the whole account of the evening conversation. What the reader is supposed to get, according to the promise to Abū I-Wafā’, is a reflection of what happened, al-Tawhidi being only the medium that transfers the information from one place to another.

The authenticity of the *majālis* takes up the performative character of Arabic poetry which has to be presented to listeners in order to develop the full impact. The author of *majālis* - taking part at the session, witnessing it and writing the record - is situated in the conflict of maintaining the spontaneous character of the conversation and the ambition to shape his material and to slip off the role of the secretary. It is quite difficult to transform this character into a written genre. The writer wants to give an idea of the atmosphere at court; he shows the skills of the host and the guests and especially his own to answer and maintain a conversation while upholding a high standard of language and education. As an author, however, he wants to show his abilities in the written form which survives the moment. It has been mentioned before, that, albeit rarely, al-Tawhidi openly adds text that does not have any origin in the conversation; he feels, for example, that the subject of the 13th night (the human soul) would not be treated thoroughly without the ideas of Abū Sulaymān. Al-Tawhidi explains this unusual digression (“there is no excuse to withhold them”) and even elaborates on the difference between oral and written commentaries.

Al-Tawhidi does not restrict himself to reproduce stories, ideas and arguments; the text with at least the same force pronounces the manner in which the soirées have taken place. We learn about the fragile relationship between the author and his patron; we notice that the narrator feels compelled to mark abridgments of the texts and continuously addresses his patron.

This way, the reader is periodically interrupted and torn away from his reading the „philosophy“, „anecdote“ or else part of the information. Instead, every once in a while these passages point to the crucial constellation (al-Tawhidi and Abū I-Wafā’).

It is possible to read this phenomenon historiographically with respect to al-Tawhidi’s notorious dissatisfaction. We can also take al-Tawhidi’s explanation for granted: he apologizes for the scattered presentation but takes no responsibility for it, Abū I-Wafā’ being the one who insisted on a reproduction of the court sessions.

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26 al-Sijistāni al-Manṣūqi (d. c.375/985)
27 IM I, 2016f.
28 And to point out his need to take revenge, see Allen, 244. De Man expressed his astonishment that literary critics tend to describe structures of meanings mostly in historical terms rather than in semantic or rhetoric terms; *Alogories*, 118. This is especially the fact when it comes to historical “foreign”, in our case Arabic, literature.
29 IM I, 225f.
On the other hand the trialogical character of the text (al-Tawhidi, the vizier, Abū l-Wafā’i) generates suspense not only with respect to the question of how the conversation continues, but also whether al-Tawhidi sticks to his promise to retell everything, even the tiniest detail. The story behind the story is thoroughly composed, whether it has taken place exactly that way or not. The book is entertaining even on this completely different level which – we can assume – has been created quite purposefully to achieve a special effect. One can call this a slanderous way of writing and attribute it to al-Tawhidi’s wounded pride; however, it is a literary strategy which keeps awake the interest, and this is what counts.

Consistently at the beginning and end of a volume the reader gets an insight of the state of things between patron and writer. Again he seemingly takes part in the process of creating a book; again he can have the feeling of being present when literature comes into being. At the beginning of the second part al-Tawhidi announces to Abū l-Wafā’i that this volume will reach him within a week. He asks him to treat it, like the first part, strictly confidential as to protect it from the eyes of all the jealous rivals.30

The author presents himself as somebody who has to be careful in two ways – in front of the vizier who represents the political power and wants to be entertained, and in front of Abū l-Wafā’i who wants the report on every detail. At the end of the book we learn how painfully al-Tawhidi was dependent on payment and patronage. He nearly begs Abū l-Wafā’i for more money, lamenting that he does not get enough for each soirée with the vizier. The category of narrative desire, once introduced to analyse the motor of a text, gets a disturbingly practical meaning.31

7. The making of the text

The aesthetic experience this kind of literature provides takes place not only on the level of the collected thoughts and anecdotes. The joy of reading and listening to this mixture of entertaining material is embedded in and interrupted by narrative remarks. In contrast to al-Jāḥiz, whom he adored so much and whose style he tried to develop further, al-Tawhidi obviously did not only present a repertoire that teaches and informs the reader. His work tells a story and gives insights into human behaviour.

30 IM II, 1.
31 See Brooks, Reading, 37-38, 60-61, 143. The “desire to tell” interferes with other shades of desire, such as the desire to take part at and influence the cultural life at court, the desire to thank the patron, the desire to raise himself above his patron, the desire to fill the well-earned post of a leading intellectual figure etc. At the same time desire rises from other parts of the narrative construction: the desire to listen, the desire to communicate with the story etc.
We can look at this kind of composition in different ways: as a source of information about the situation at court; as a valuable collection of philosophical ideas of that time; as a game to produce literature.

However we might read the text, it is fascinating to see how many layers of reading it offers. Whenever a reader assumes that they have gotten the right perspective and understand the aim of the text, the next turn crosses their way and overlays the previous point of view.

It is worth asking if this book can today be entertainment, if there is something other than the presentation of a historical constellation. I am convinced that early Arabic literature has more to offer than just answering our cultural curiosity. If we get involved in reading these texts without the attitude of an archaeologist we could let them have their direct impact on us and might get access to another angle of literature, thus becoming aware of the abyss, the labyrinthian qualities every text possesses.

As a conclusion I would like to go back to the starting point of the book. How was literature shaped and by which means did it get characteristic features? Al-Tawhidi’s style is elaborated in a way that often got him the label of al-Jâhiz’s worthy successor. He is a professional in using rhyme prose; he knows a lot of metaphors; he also knows where to stop using rhetorical figures as not to appear too playful (something al-Jâhiz condemned). But at his time all these talents, although still required from any author, were nothing rare, nothing to be distinguished from the growing number of people who wanted to write for a living. Already al-Jâhiz moaned about the many who thought to be experts in language and poetry and heavily criticized l’art pour l’art in rhetoric. Everybody who felt a talent in this field should examine himself scrupulously before he decided to publish his works.

As we have seen we can read al-Tawhidi’s book in a lot of different ways that even contradict each other: a documentary on Arabic Abbasid court life, a philosophical text-book, a double-faced revenge on all his “patrons” (among them the vizier and Abu l-Wafâ’), a display of his genius in using the Arabic language or in showing his philosophical excellence etc. It also goes without saying that the conventional expectations of the readers vary not only in time but also according to their respective background. For me, the most interesting aspect of this text - and the point where its artful shaping is most clearly visible - is its self-

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32 By which I do not mean to discredit archaeologists; literary archaeology as a way to reveal forgotten texts and to decipher and understand ancient cultures is, of course, necessary when studying literature.


34 In one of the numerous Arabic studies on al-Tawhidi we still find the notion used in classical times that al-Tawhidi was “gifted” (nâlîbî, the opposite to nawsî, a quasi compensation for the lack of this somehow supernatural talent). See Fâ’iz Tâha ‘Umar, al-Nâthîr al-fânî tinda Abî Hayyân al-Tawhîdî, Baghdad: Dâr al-shu’ûn al-thaqâfiyya al-‘amma, 130.
referential power that in one moment takes the reader as its accomplice and in the next disposes of this confidentiality. The setting as a report feigns to leave the reader outside, to leave him the part of the spectator. The narrator goes even further and claims neither to be responsible for the conversations (because it is not he who suggests the subject) nor for the presentation (because again it is not he who sets the form). But it is impossible to narrate or to read without being involved.35 The literariness, from this point of view, evolves when al-Tawḥidi or, to be more precise, the text juggles with the interaction of the narrator and his co-actors on one side, and with the permanent circumvention of expectations and genre characteristics on the other side. The motivation of the plotting is shattered and put together like a kaleidoscope, thus hinting to another meaning of “plot”, the scheming. As the reader cannot even be sure who initiated the book in the first place,36 he step by step is pulled down into the depths and whirls of the text.

The goal of this study is not to expose the author by proving that the text somehow works against his intentions. Rather it should be showed how contradictory and inconsistent textual movements can be, whether the author was aware of this phenomenon or not (it is not up to us to decide it); how the text claims circumstances which he denies on the next level; how very sophisticated Arabic literature in the 10th century meets and evades the expectations. It shows furthermore how even the literary analysis enters the same stage as the text itself and in the course of deciphering creates new meanings and uncertainties.37

35 The need for an interlocutor is especially visible in framed texts; see Brooks, Reading, 216. Roland Barthes stressed the fact that all storytelling is contractual (Roland Barthes, S/Z, engl.transl. R. Miller, New York: Hill and Wang 1974, 95-96). It is this indissoluble relationship that we find in al-Tawḥidi’s writing, be it between the narrator and the unknown reader, or between the nadim al-Tawḥidi and his patron; there are more of these relationships as mentioned above.

36 While in the introduction Abū l-Wafāʾ is quoted to have connected al-Tawḥidi to the vizier (thus doing him a favour), the reader in the first night gets to know that the vizier himself had asked for al-Tawḥidi. IM I, 19.

37 It might be useful to remember Paul de Mans remark on Proust where he states that deconstruction is nothing that we add to the text; instead deconstruction forms the text first of all. It is also there that de Man speaks about the double face of every literary text, claiming and at the same time denying the authority of its rhetoric form; see de Man, Allegories, 48.