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

Lale Behzadi (University of Göttingen)

Al-Tawḥīdī's *Kitāb al-imtāʿ wal-muʾānasa* (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.[1] 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-Tawḥīdī'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-Tawḥīdī (*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-Jāḥiẓ (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-Tawḥīdī'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-Tawḥīdī'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-

---

[1] Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-imtāʿ wal-muʾānasa*, eds. Aḥmad Amīn/Aḥmad al-Zayn, vol. 1-3, Dār maktabat al-ḥayāt lil-ṭibāʿa wal-nashr wal-tawzīʿ (further referred to as IM).

thor has written the book. The aim is not simply to explain the text with its historical background. Instead, al-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī is so eager to take us by the hand that it should be illuminating to stop, turn around and examine the motifs, dodges and wrappings that are arranged around what is called the "essence" of his book, the philosophical reflections.[2] 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-Tawḥīdī 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-imtāʿ wal-muʾānasa 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 Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī'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

---

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-Tawḥīdī (Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, 1960). Though acknowledging this statement and many others which claim al-Tawḥīdī 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 (*nadīm*), 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 intellectual 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-Tawḥīdī himself classifies his book by stating the exact genesis of the writing, the original idea, the patron, the difficulties 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-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad b. Saʿdān, called al-ʿĀriḍ being a former army inspector)[4], and he documents these conversations in a book. This book has several functions: 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 teach the bureaucrats how to write (letters, calculations, lists, epistles, for example Qudāma b. Jaʿfar (d. 337/948)[5]: *Kitāb ṣināʿat al-kitāba*); books that collect news about different topics in order to insert them into the conversation (Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889): *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*); books with instructions for different groups of professions (al-Jāḥiẓ: *Kitāb al-muʿallimīn*); books that elaborate on certain concepts and principles (by al-Tawḥīdī himself, for example, *al-Sadāqa wal-sadīq*), stressing the positive and negative sides of each phenomenon (the subgenre of *maḥāsin wa-masāwī*, thus showing the eloquence of the author)[6]. Although 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*, Cambridge University Press 1998, 238.

4   Vizier 373-375, under the reign of Ṣamṣām al-Dawla, executed 375. For historical deductions see Aḥmad Amīn in his introduction, IM I, 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 1992², 191) while Bergé dates his death to 382-3/992-3 (M. Bergé, "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī", in *The Cambridge history of Arabic literature, ʿAbbasid belles-lettres*, ed. Julia Ashtiany 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 all 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-Wafāʾ 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 politer 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.[8] 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Jāḥiẓ whose subject-hopping and unorganized writing became nearly proverbial)[9].

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-Tawḥīdī, 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-Tawḥīdī'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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī).[10]

---

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

9   For further reading with respect to the audience see Lale Behzadi, *Sprache und Verstehen. al-Jāḥiẓ über die Vollkommenheit des Ausdrucks*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2008.

10 See the aforementioned execution of Ibn Saʿdān after his brief intermezzo as vizier; fn. 4.

B

Another addressee is al-Tawḥīdī's mentor and friend Abū l-Wafāʾ al-Muhandis (d. 997).[11] 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-Tawḥīdī's preface, Abū l-Wafāʾ 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-Tawḥīdī addresses his benefactor directly: "*Ayyuhā l-shaykh.*" 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 (*fahimtu jamīʿa mā qultahu lī bil-ams* ...), thus evoking a presence and nearness to the action, i.e. the reader can nearly follow in real time. Abū l-Wafāʾ had apparently given him some advice regarding the expected encounter with the vizier.

Al-Tawḥīdī quotes Abū l-Wafāʾ who reminds him of the circumstances that brought him from Rayy to Baghdād and from Ibn al-ʿAmīd to Ṣāḥib b. ʿAbbād in the first place at the end of the year 370 after hijra. He also reminds him of the encounters they have had and how they have profited from each other. Abū l-Wafāʾ connected his friend to Ibn Saʿdān, vizier of Ṣamṣām al-Dawla b. ʿAḍud al-Dawla in the years 373 to 374/375 after hijra:

> "Yes", Abū l-Wafāʾ 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 owed 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."[12]

What starts as an explanation on how al-Tawḥīdī got the honour to become the vizier's company turns into a severe reproach. Abū l-Wafāʾ continues to dwell on al-Tawḥīdī'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-Wafāʾs) help, guidance and conveyance. Al-Tawḥīdī presents all this in direct speech, quoting Abū l-Wafāʾ, who gets really annoyed about al-Tawḥīdī's ingratitude, along several pages. Abū l-Wafāʾs rage culminates in the warning that he will rip the friendship with al-Tawḥīdī off his heart unless "you inform me completely about what you two talked about and shared in good and bad."[13] His condition for maintaining the friendship and forgetting the betrayal

---

[11]   Famous especially as a mathematician, see the article *Abu l-Wafāʾ al-Būzadjānī* by H. Suter in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition, and the chapter on Ibn Saʿdāns court and on al-Tawḥīdī in Kraemer, *Humanism*, 191ff, 212-222.

[12]   IM I, 5.

[13]   IM I, 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."[14]

Abū l-Wafāʾ threatens al-Tawḥīdī 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 …[15]

C

The general audience is manifold. There is the contemporary audience al-Tawḥīdī must have had in mind. Like any other author, al-Tawḥīdī tried to produce 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 audience gets the impression of being a part of a distinguished company and to witness the results of two interesting relationships (al-Tawḥīdī and the vizier; al-Tawḥīdī and his friend). On the other hand, the contemporary audience was familiar 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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 embarrassing 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,[16] artful literature from the begin-

---

[14] IM I, 7.
[15] IM I, 7.
[16] See Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the framework of non-fictional Arabic literature*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1998, and Eva Orthmann, *Stamm und Macht. Die arabischen Stämme im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert der Hiǧra*, Wiesbaden: Reichert 2002.

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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī. He has at least three tasks to fulfil: 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-Wafāʾ, 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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]

---

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 examples Thomas Glavinic, *Das bin doch ich*, München: Hanser 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-Tawḥīdī 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.[20] There are several ways to do this with al-Tawḥīdī's book, each giving away another purpose and another meaning to his work.

1. The book *Kitab al-imtāʿ wal-muʾānasa* is the written version of evening conversations between the narrator and Ibn Saʿdān 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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 literarily shaped (like the often mentioned title of al-Tawḥīdī as a literary philosopher or a philosophical literary writer)[21].

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

---

[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.

[21] See, for example, Ibrāhīm Zakariyya, *Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī: adīb al-falāsifa wa-faylasūf al-udabāʾ*, Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣriyya al-ʿāmma lil-kitāb 1974.

definition of a phenomenon[22]. He also presents a theoretical approach to the field of prose and poetry in Arabic literature.[23]

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-Tawḥīdī and Abū l-Wafāʾ).

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.[24]

Purposefully or not, al-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī comments on the transmitting process at the beginning of part two where he assures Abū l-Wafāʾ 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.[25]

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 *majlis*; 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.

[23] Which has been translated and commented upon by Klaus Hachmeier, "Rating *adab*: Al-Tawḥīdī on the Merits of Poetry and Prose. The 25th night of *Kitāb al-Imtāʿ wa-l-muʾānasa*, translation and commentary", *Al-Qanṭara* 25 (2004), 357-385.

[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, *Allegorien des Lesens [Allegories of Reading, 1979]*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1988, 25.

[25] IM II, 1f.

Al-Tawḥīdī, 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 l-Wafāʾ, is a reflection of what happened, al-Tawḥīdī 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* literature - 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-Tawḥīdī 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[26]. Al-Tawḥīdī explains this unusual digression ("there is no excuse to withhold them") and even elaborates on the difference between oral and written commentaries.[27]

Al-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī and Abū l-Wafāʾ).

It is possible to read this phenomenon historiographically with respect to al-Tawḥīdī's notorious dissatisfaction.[28] We can also take al-Tawḥīdīs explanation for granted: he apologizes for the scattered presentation but takes no responsibility for it, Abū l-Wafāʾ being the one who insisted on a reproduction of the court sessions.[29]

---

[26] al-Sijistānī al-Manṭiqī (d. *c.*375/985)

[27] IM I, 201f.

[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 semiotic or rhetoric terms; *Allegories*, 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-Tawḥīdī, the vizier, Abū l-Wafāʾ) generates suspense not only with respect to the question of how the conversation continues, but also whether al-Tawḥīdī sticks to his promise to re-tell 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 enter-taining 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 slander-ous way of writing and attribute it to al-Tawḥīdī'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-Tawḥīdī announces to Abū l-Wafāʾ 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 enter-tained, and in front of Abū l-Wafāʾ who wants the report on every detail. At the end of the book we learn how painfully al-Tawḥīdī was dependent on payment and patronage. He nearly begs Abū l-Wafāʾ for more money, lamenting that he does not get enough for each soirée with the vizier. The category of narrative de-sire, 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 listen-ing to this mixture of entertaining material is embedded in and interrupted by narrative remarks. In contrast to al-Jāḥiẓ, whom he adored so much and whose style he tried to develop further, al-Tawḥīdī obviously did not only present a rep-ertoire that teaches and informs the reader. His work tells a story and gives in-sights 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[32] 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-Tawḥīdī's style is elaborated in a way that often got him the label of al-Jāḥiẓ'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-Jāḥiẓ 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-Jāḥiẓ 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.[33]

As we have seen we can read al-Tawḥīdī'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 Abū l-Wafāʾ), a display of his genius in using the Arabic language or in showing his philosophical excellence etc.[34] 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-

---

[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.

[33] ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-bayān wal-tabyīn*, vol. I-IV, ed. ʿAbdassalām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānji bi-Miṣr 1968 vol I, 203.

[34] In one of the numerous Arabic studies on al-Tawḥīdī we still find the notion used in classical times that al-Tawḥīdī was "gifted" (*maṭbūʿ*, the opposite to *maṣnūʿ*, a quasi compensation for the lack of this somehow supernatural talent). See Fāʾiz Ṭāha ʿUmar, *al-Nathr al-fannī ʿinda Abī Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī*, Baghdad: Dār al-shuʾūn al-thaqāfiyya al-ʿāmma, 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 set 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī's writing, be it between the narrator and the unknown reader, or between the *nadīm* al-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī 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-Tawḥīdī. 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.