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The Authority of Criticism and Its Limits in Critiquing Authority: Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The power of criticism is only realised in its fullest form when it springs from a writer who has lived through reality and tasted the bitterness of political tyranny; for then his criticism becomes a sincere expression of lived experience, not merely a theoretical stance. A writer who has experienced injustice and oppression under the authority of the state is better able to expose its flaws and reveal its hypocrisy. From this

perspective, criticism of authority becomes a form of uprising against inequality and a voice rejecting all forms of oppression.

However, this criticism often crosses familiar boundaries, becoming more intense and fiercer, and may slip into exposing individuals and undermining their prestige, revealing them in a light that was previously concealed behind a façade of honour and prestige. This is clearly evident in the work of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, particularly in his book *The Ethics of

the Two Ministers*, in which he directed scathing criticism at political authority, employing a sharp and satirical style characterised by both boldness and bitterness.

The impact of this criticism was such that it became the talk of the town, was held deep within people's hearts, and was revealed through their actions, despite all attempts to suppress or downplay it. Thus, al-Tawhidi demonstrates that the power of criticism, however much it is met with resistance, remains capable of exposing authority and shattering its aura.

Introduction

The fourth century AH is regarded as a century of contradictions. This is due to the flourishing of Arab culture as a result of its openness to other cultures—particularly Greek and Persian—and its infusion of these imported cultures with the Arab spirit, in addition to the flourishing of literature and prose in particular, during which other literary genres developed, including the art of letter-writing, yet the era was politically and socially turbulent; the fragmented Abbasid state was weakened, and corruption took hold, widening the gap between social classes. On the one hand, there were the wealthy (men of the ruling elite) who did not know how to spend their wealth; on the other, there was an educated class striving by every means to acquire wealth and riches.

However great a writer's stature, he is inevitably compelled to curry favour with those of high standing and authority; hence, those with penetrating insight and exceptional talent found themselves in a situation rife with contradiction. In order to assert his cultural and intellectual standing and his intellectual uniqueness, the writer finds himself obliged to prove himself to those of lesser standing, and is forced to stand at the gates of their palaces and knock upon them in rituals that can only be described as humiliating for this educated class, in which the gatekeeper plays the leading role as the intermediary between the writer and his desired goal of gaining the Sultan's favour.

Conceptual Framework:

The concept of authority is given full consideration in this study, alongside other central concepts such as criticism, the authority of criticism and the critique of authority, given the subtle connections between them that are evident in their interplay and mutual influence.

It should be noted that authority, as a concept, has been addressed by numerous studies and research projects, both recent and historical, each approaching it from the angle most suited to its analysis; this justifies our posing of the question:

of which authority and criticism are we speaking? What criticism do we mean, and what are the characteristics that render the relationship between them either possible or strained?

Power, as manifested in both ancient and modern thought, is not a static concept; rather, approaches to it vary according to epistemological backgrounds and intellectual concerns. It has been addressed by philosophy, politics, sociology and anthropology, each interpreting it from its own particular perspective.

This diversity explains the concept's fluidity and its resistance to being pinned down, as it is difficult to grasp a single essence of power or to establish a definitive definition for it. It is a shifting concept, which changes according to context and takes on varying forms in each historical period.

This relative ambiguity fuels the growing interest in power within modern intellectual literature, perhaps most notably in the writings of Michel Foucault, who marked a decisive turning point in the analysis of the concept of power through his archaeological and genealogical approaches. Foucault approached power not merely as an institution or apparatus, but as a network of relationships and everyday practices, extending from hospitals to prisons, and from schools to factories, within a framework of meticulous surveillance and strict social regulation.

In light of this, it is necessary to clarify the three fundamental concepts in this research:

1. Power: as a system of relationships that produces and reproduces itself within society; it is not necessarily embodied in the person of the ruler, but rather in a network of symbols, discourses and mechanisms

Definition of power:

The difficulty in establishing a precise definition of the concept of power can be attributed to the fact that it is a phenomenon characterised by constant evolution and change, taking on multiple forms and patterns depending on political, social and cultural contexts. If we take a brief look at history, we can observe some qualitative shifts in the representation and exercise of power:

It began as a phenomenon of violence stemming from a crude will seeking to dominate and assert its presence. It then evolved into a method of persuasion and guidance that encourages the individual to engage in collective action.

Its concept has become so intertwined with everything that authority is now regarded as interwoven with all aspects of human relations and the minutiae of all matters; indeed, it is linked to every institutional organisation. We derive authority through social integration and conflict; in other words, authority is considered ‘an elusive term, despite the clarity of its practices on the ground’.¹

Michel Foucault explored this ambiguity in depth; rather than seeking a definitive definition of power, he chose to construct a new analytical model through an archaeological and genealogical lens, in which he starts from the premise that power is not confined to the state and its apparatus, but rather permeates all social spheres and is exercised through discourses, institutions, techniques of control, and everyday relationships.

In the first chapter of his book, Abu Khash comments on this approach, stating: ‘2’ [Foucault constructs a novel model of power based on the assumption that power is highly ambiguous, both visible and invisible; our surroundings, or what we call power – such as the state and its apparatus – do not explain the sphere of its exercise or function.

If the concept of power is characterised by ambiguity and complexity, we shall attempt to approach it from a political and philosophical perspective, in a simplified and concise manner, whilst seeking – as far as possible – to identify its manifestations and expressions in relation to social, political, economic, cultural and religious life.

Given that authority is intrinsically linked to the very fabric of human relations, we observe its exercise clearly in social life; in this context, it tends more towards its political form, rather than in its patriarchal or religious forms, since its origins are linked to intervention to resolve human conflict and to overcome human brutality and tyranny; it seeks to prevent the arrogant and powerful from devouring the submissive and weak.

This perspective, adopted by the Moroccan thinker Kamal Abd al-Latif, holds that the emergence of authority was linked to a fundamental function: control and organisation. This is achieved through its intervention as a neutral force to resolve conflicts and restore balance within society, thereby ensuring

social peace, safeguarding lives and honour, protecting property, and warding off strife and wars.

Hence, it can be said that authority was – in its origins – nothing more than a tool for maintaining order and curbing chaos, before evolving into more complex forms in its practice, mechanisms and overall political project.

Criticism:

Linguistically, ‘naqd’ means: to distinguish and sort things, and to distinguish the good from the bad. From this root (naqd – naqda and tanqada) comes the practice of examining dirhams and other coins: to sort them and examine them in order to distinguish the good from the bad – in speech: to reveal its flaws or merits... ‘3

In the same sense, one says, ‘To critique poetry and the like is to examine it and distinguish the good from the bad.’

The poet Yahya ibn ‘Ali ibn Yahya al-Munjim says 4

‘There is poetry I have critiqued, just as the money-changer’s eye discerns the dinar’—’

In French, it is defined as: ‘spécialement Art de juger les ouvrages de l’esprit, les œuvres littéraires, artistiques. La critique dramatique 5 ...’ And ‘specifically, the art of evaluating intellectual, literary and artistic works. Dramatic criticism.’

It was originally used by the Arabs to distinguish between dirhams and dinars – that is, to tell the genuine from the counterfeit – but its meaning later expanded to include distinguishing between speech, ideas and works in terms of quality and mediocrity. So, what is meant by it when linked to authority?

Criticism of authority is: the examination and review of the performance of the ruling authority (be it political, administrative or symbolic), with the aim of exposing its mistakes, evaluating its decisions, and demanding reform or accountability.

1 Barry Hinds, *Discourses on Power (From Hobbes to Foucault)*, translated by Mervat Yaqout, reviewed and with an introduction by Yasser Qansouh, Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., 2005, p. 16.

2 Abu Khash, Joda Muhammad Ibrahim, The Philosophical Perspective on Power in Foucault’s Works – A Study in Political and Social Philosophy, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, Qatar, 1st ed., 2017.

3 Manajid al-Talib, Louis Maalouf, 1948, p. 905

4 The Student’s Guide to Critiquing the Words of Poets and Writers: Ibn al-Athir al-Kātib (d. 637 AH)*, edited by Nuri Hamoudi al-Qaisi et al., University of Mosul Publications, Mosul, (1982), p. 46.

5 Le Robert Micro, p. 312

In other words:

it is an intellectual or social practice based on analysing the policies and actions of those in power, and highlighting any flaws, injustices or mismanagement therein, based on criteria such as justice, freedom, generosity and benevolence.

Functions of criticism of authority:

Criticism of authority encompasses a number of fundamental functions that reveal its nature and role within society; firstly, it is based on holding the ruling authority's decisions and policies to account by subjecting them to scrutiny and analysis rather than simply accepting them. It also seeks to expose manifestations of corruption or despotism that may arise within the structure of government, making it a tool for oversight and accountability.

This critique is not limited to diagnosis, but extends to the defence of individual rights, including the right to attain one's rightful status or 'reward', in the face of all forms of exclusion or marginalisation. Finally, criticism of authority fulfils a reformist function, as it proposes alternative visions that seek to rectify imbalances and build a more just reality.

Consequently, the critique of authority should not be understood as passive opposition, but rather as an intellectual practice seeking reform and change, by combining analysis, accountability and the proposal of alternatives.

The Authority of Critique

First: Definition of the Authority of Criticism

The authority of criticism' can be defined as the moral and intellectual power that criticism possesses to influence opinions, guide judgements, and correct behaviours and ideas. It is not based on physical coercion, but relies on argument, analysis and persuasion. The authority of criticism stems from the critic's capacity for deep understanding, precise interpretation and objective judgement, which grants them a position that enables them to influence the audience and shape public opinion.

Secondly: Sources of the authority of criticism

The authority of criticism (the writer/critic) derives its strength from a range of elements that confer credibility and influence within society; knowledge and experience are considered to be the primary foundation, for the more proficient the critic is in their field, the greater the accuracy and validity of their criticism. Scientific methodology also contributes to strengthening this authority by adopting clear

principles and a rigorous approach that prevents criticism from becoming arbitrary or impressionistic.

Furthermore, language and argumentation play a pivotal role; the ability to express oneself persuasively and articulate ideas clearly makes criticism more impactful for the audience. The power of criticism is only complete through independence and objectivity; the critic gains greater respect when they distance themselves from personal whims and narrow interests, and judge according to standards of justice and fairness.

Consequently, the authority of criticism is not based on boldness alone, but on the synergy of these elements combined, thereby ensuring its effectiveness and its capacity to influence and bring about reform.

Thirdly: The Spheres of Critical Authority

Critical authority exerts its influence across multiple spheres, most notably literary criticism, which helps to shape public taste and evaluate creative works; social criticism, which exposes negative phenomena and seeks to rectify them; and political criticism, which monitors the performance of those in power and calls for reform and change.

When we consider the period of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, we observe that the majority of political and social criticism was not expressed directly and explicitly, but rather took indirect routes, making use of literature, storytelling and literary gatherings. Writers were compelled to employ symbolic and rhetorical techniques that concealed criticism under the guise of entertainment and socialising, in order to avoid the authorities' repression and domination.

Consequently, this style of writing not only reflects an intellectual stance but also reveals a deep awareness of the nature of the political and social context; literature becomes a means of accountability and criticism, albeit indirectly, thereby highlighting both the limits of freedom and the limits of the power of criticism at the same time.

Fourth: The Functions of the Monetary Authority

The Monetary Authority plays pivotal roles within society, as it helps to rectify distortions and correct errors, which in turn has a positive impact on improving performance across various sectors. It also fulfils a fundamental awareness-raising function by fostering individuals' awareness of the issues affecting them, enabling them to understand their circumstances and come to terms with the challenges they face. It does not stop there, but extends to holding officials to account for their decisions and actions, thereby reinforcing the values of transparency and accountability. Furthermore,

constructive criticism acts as a catalyst for creativity, spurring thinkers and writers to develop their output and elevate their work to greater levels of quality and depth.

Fifth: The Limits of the Authority of Criticism

Despite the importance of the authority of criticism, it is not absolute; rather, it is subject to a set of constraints that ensure it is directed along the right path. Among the most prominent of these constraints are adherence to ethics and respect for others, avoiding slander and defamation, as well as relying on evidence and arguments rather than preconceived judgements. On this basis, we shall attempt to examine the manifestations of these constraints in the writings of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, focusing on his book **The Ethics of the Two Ministers**, as a case study that reveals the limits and dimensions of criticism in the context of the relationship between the intellectual and the authorities. To what extent did Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi respect these constraints in this book?

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi:

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi is a unique figure by any measure; even his life was marked by turmoil and obscurity. We shall therefore confine ourselves to the accounts that we consider to be complementary, in order to arrive at a true picture of his life and biography. According to Yaqt al-Hamawi, one of his contemporaries: ‘Ali ibn Muhammad ibn al-‘Abbas, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, originally from Shiraz, though some say from Nishapur; and I have found some learned men to call him al-Wasiti, a Sufi in demeanour and appearance⁶.’ We find Hasan al-Sindubi among those who share this view; he says: “He is Muhammad ibn al-‘Abbas Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi. Historians have differed as to his origin, with some saying he was from Shiraz, others from Nishapur, and others from Wasit.⁷ Whatever the disagreement, there is no doubt that he was of Persian origin; yet what is strange is that most historians of this period made no mention of his place of birth, nor of his date of birth.

- What is the reason for this?
- Could this be attributed to the actions of the authorities or their influence on the literary scene?

- Or was the authorities’ censorship at work, silencing every dissenting voice?

It is no surprise that we find a slight discrepancy in the book **Bughyat al-Waa’ah** (2/190), mentioned by Dr al-Hasan Butbia, in which there is a reference to his nickname in the context of a linguistic explanation; from this, one can infer his affiliation with the Mu’tazilite school of thought, which is new information regarding a figure about whom most sources and books agree was a Sufi in appearance and demeanour. Among those who held this view was Yaqt al-Hamawi, who said: “Translators agree that his name was ‘Ali ibn Muhammad ibn al-‘Abbas, that his kunya was Abu Hayyan, and that his surname, al-Tawhidī, derives from a variety of date called al-Tawhid. Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Hajar said: ‘It is possible that it refers to al-Tawhid, which is the religion, for the Mu’tazilites call themselves the People of Justice and Tawhid.’⁸

Ibrahim al-Kailani attributes the reason for this inconsistency in the biography of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidī and the numerous gaps therein to his extensive travels between countries; ‘in the Hijaz, Iraq, the mountains and the Hijaz, and he spent most of his life moving from one country to another, standing at doorways, and mixing with Sufis and strangers.’⁹

This is something on which there is no disagreement: that is, the man travelled and moved about frequently, his excuse for this being that he was poor, and that he laid bare the writer’s true nature whilst wiping the sweat from his brow. In his book **Society and the Era in the Literature of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, Nur al-Din Belkacem refers to the state of the rulers during that period of the Islamic nation’s history, who were characterised by “by their neglect of the affairs of their subjects and of protecting them from the dangers threatening them, owing to their immersion in frivolity and debauchery; and because they had not come to power in accordance with divine law, they were not the most suitable for the nation, chosen from among its people through consultation, but rather were among those who seized power by force, as they were

⁶ Al-Ghitani, Jamal, **Khulasa al-Tawhidi: Selections from the Prose of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., October 1995, p. 5.

⁷ Abu Hayyan, Ali ibn Muhammad al-Tawhidi, **Al-Maqabasat**, edited by Hassan al-Sindubi, Dar Su’ad al-Sabah, Kuwait, 2nd ed., 1992, p. 8.

⁸ Boutbia, Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad, **The Ethics of the Two Ministers by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi: Between Reality and Art**, National Printing and Publishing House, Marrakesh, 1st ed., 2007, p. 59.

⁹ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, op. cit., Introduction (f).

adventurers and the ambitious; they thereby subjugated the nation to their own interests and exploited it.” 10

History bears out the point made by this text, which pinpoints the flaw in this equation, one characterised by exploitation, revenge, contempt and scorn... In other words, a picture of the corruption that pervaded political, social and economic life, though cultural life was not immune to it; indeed, it spread to that sphere and influenced it. We shall subsequently attempt to examine some manifestations of this reflection of the characteristics of society and the era upon literature, particularly through the writings of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, as he is regarded as a symbol of dissident writing that sought to criticise political authority and engage in the act of criticising the authorities.

- To what extent was Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi objective in his writings and criticisms of both ministers?
- Was this a ploy on his part to publicise and highlight their prominence in a distinctive and unconventional manner, demonstrating his shrewdness and cunning?

The aim of the study we are undertaking is to examine the nature of the relationship between literary writing (criticism of authority) and political authority (and the authority of criticism), as represented by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi and the two ministers—Ibn Abbad and Ibn al-Amid—through his famous works **The Faults of the Two Ministers** and **The Ethics of the Two Ministers**.¹¹

In **The Ethics of the Two Ministers**, he examines the lives of the two great ministers of the Buyid state; he explores their biographies, their conduct, and what he considers to be their faults and shortcomings—namely, Fadl Ahmad ibn Husayn ibn al-Amid and Ibn al-Abbas, nicknamed al-Sahib; for they had a profound influence on political and cultural life in their time, and this was not confined to their own region, but extended to most of the eastern regions of the Islamic state that were under Buyid rule. This book also chronicles an important period in the life of Abu Hayyan during the fourth century AH, which had a profound effect on the renewal of his thought and his transformation from a pacifist into a pessimist harbouring resentment towards his era and his contemporaries; a development that led the researcher ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi

to identify points of similarity between Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi and Kafaq in their nihilistic and pessimistic tendencies.

As for Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s treatise **The Faults of the Two Ministers**, it too is replete with numerous explanations, details and stories; between the lines, it reveals to us the character of the author, his traits and his moral principles, citing a number of figures from diverse literary backgrounds, most of whom were his contemporaries. This was an attempt on his part ‘to imbue his criticisms of these two gentlemen with a spirit of proof and the weight of evidence drawn from witnesses and eyewitness accounts, thereby exonerating himself from the accusation of exaggerating in his criticism of them and falling short in his praise of them’¹², so that the question becomes legitimate:

- What is the motive behind his hostility towards the authorities?
- And why all this animosity, expressed through an inappropriate approach to dealing with authority?

It is no secret that Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s motive for seeking power was to acquire wealth; for “he confirms that he devoted himself to study and learning in his youth with great zeal, which aroused the envy of some of his relatives, and to this end he drew upon his intellectual gifts and his particular abilities of comprehension and retention; and this fuelled his hope of drawing close to those in power and influence in his time, of establishing contact with them and of travelling to meet them.”¹³

The first minister he approached was the Minister of Ma’iz al-Dawla: Abu al-Hasan Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Mahalbi; however, he was not welcomed by him, given his hostile stance towards the enemies of the Shi’a.... He then set out for Abu al-Fadl ibn al-Amid, a distinguished figure in the fields of scholarship, literature and politics; yet his hopes were dashed, for he did not achieve what he had hoped for, because ibn al-Amid “was troubled by al-Tawhidi’s self-importance and his arrogance towards him, whilst al-Tawhidi himself was

10 Belkacem Nour al-Din, ‘Echoes of Society and the Age in the Literature of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’, op. cit., p. 155

11 Al-Yasin, Muhammad Hasan, Al-Sahib ibn Abbad: His Life and Literature, Dar al-Ma’arif for Authorship, Translation and Publishing, Baghdad, Iraq, 1st ed., 1957 CE/1376 AH, p. 9.

12 Muhammad Fawzi Mustafa, Three Epistles on Satire, Dar al-Qalam, Library of Administrative Sciences, Kuwait, 1st ed., 1401 AH/1981 AD, p. 33.

13 Al-Hasan Butbia, The Book of the Ministers’ Ethics by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, p. 62.

a Sufi in demeanour and appearance.”¹⁴ He had no standing amongst the great and the elite, whereas Ibn al-Amid combined “the splendour of the Persians with the majesty of the Sultan”¹⁵; thus, he looked down upon him and despised him, so Abu Hayyan had no choice but to return the favour in kind, exposing his faults and shortcomings. He then contacted Ibn Abi al-Fath, son of al-Amid, but received no better treatment than his father had given him; he then turned to al-Sahib Ibn Abbad “in the waning days of his youth and some of its splendour.”¹⁶

This first encounter was widely recounted in the historical sources¹⁷ and in the books that have studied Abu Hayyan; to say the least, it was a test for this intellectual, who was seeking to win the prize after having attracted the attention of the authorities in order to secure their favour. It took place in the year 369 AH, when he travelled from Baghdad to Al-Ray to present himself at the gate of Al-Sahib ibn ‘Abbad. Al-Tawhidi had sought him out, as he says, “with high hopes and an open heart.”¹⁸ He wished to rid himself of the ill-omened reputation associated with scholarship; thus, Abu Hayyan tells us of this first meeting with Al-Sahib, saying: “As for my conversation with him – the pronoun referring to Ibn ‘Abbad – when I reached him, he said to me: ‘Abu whom?’ I said, ‘Abu Hayyan.’ He said, ‘I have heard that you observe the rules of etiquette.’ I replied, ‘I observe the etiquette of the people of this age.’ He asked, ‘Does Abu Hayyan decline the verb or not?’ I said, ‘In the presence of our master, he does not decline it.’”¹⁹

The aim is not to list examples or recount stories, but rather to examine the reasons behind the book’s emergence as a result of the relationship between the authority of criticism and the criticism of authority, and to explore the nature of the criticisms and the aspects they touched upon. Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi left both Ibn al-Amid and his father, as well as al-Sahib ibn Abbad, disappointed and empty-handed; for he says: “‘I left his door in the year 370, returning to the City of Peace with neither provisions nor a mount, and for three years he did not give me a single dirham, nor anything worth a single

dirham...’”²⁰ He therefore had no choice but to resort to the power of the word (criticism of authority) in the face of the ‘authority of criticism’ exercised by the two ministers, and thus produced this work, **The Ethics of the Two Ministers**, which contains the most scathing satire one can find in Arabic literature.”²¹ It thus gains value by highlighting the complex relationship between literary writing and authority—namely, that the two are in conflict. However, it is worth noting in this regard that the direct and true reason for writing this book was revenge against Al-Sahib ibn Abbad, despite conflicting views on the matter. This argument is supported by his own words: “‘But I was afflicted by him, just as he was afflicted by me; he cast me from his bow, sweating, so I poured out what I had upon his head in anger; he deprived me, so I despised him; he belittled me, so I humiliated him; and he singled me out for disappointment, which overcame me, so I singled him out with backbiting that consumed him; the overt is the most unjust, and the middle ground is the most forgivable.”²² In the same vein, Professor Al-Hasan Boutbia states that “everything he wrote about the two ministers was only after his setback with Al-Sahib.”²³

Section Two: The Causes of the Enmity

As for the motives behind the emergence of enmity between Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi and al-Sahib, these can be traced back to three causes: cognitive, creative and skill-related, and relational and communicative.

First: The epistemological cause

As for this epistemological aspect, it can be understood from the following passage: “One day, al-Sahib spoke on the subject of grammar, saying: ‘The forms fa’l and af’āl are rare in the language.’ Al-Tawhidi then countered him, saying: ‘I have memorised thirty letters, all of which are in the forms fa’l

¹⁴ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Ministers**, n.p., p. (g).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Faults of the Ministers**, n.p., p. (h)

¹⁷ Al-Hamawi, Yaqut al-Rumi, **Ma’jam al-Adiba: Irshad al-Arib ila Ma’rifat al-Adib** (Dictionary of Writers: A Guide for the Discerning Reader to the Knowledge of the Writer), edited by Ihsan Abbas, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1st ed., 1993 AD, 34/15. See: **Khulasat al-Tawhidi**, p. 55, and **Al-Sahib ibn Abbad: His Life and Literature**, pp. 43–44–45.

¹⁸ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, n.d., Introduction (h).

¹⁹ Al-Yasin, **Al-Sahib ibn Abbad: His Life and Literature**, p. 43.

²⁰ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, n.p., Introduction (T).

²¹ Al-Ghitani, **Khulasa al-Tawhidi: Selections from the Prose of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, n.p., p. 10

²² Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, n.p., Introduction (h)

²³ Al-Hasan Butbia, **The Book of the Ministers’ Morals: Between Reality and Art**, p. 76.

and af'āl.'²⁴ So far, so good; but Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's extensive explanation and thorough analysis served as a lesson for his companion, carrying more than one implication—amounting to an overstepping of authority and of the red lines that ought not to be crossed. He said to him: “ ‘Your deviation from your claim regarding ‘fa’l’ indicates that you are acting in the manner of ‘fa’il’, but we do not permit you to take the law into your own hands, nor do we lend an ear to your words; what you have brought forth does not justify your audacity in our assembly nor your presumption in our presence.’²⁵ What we deduce from this text is that there is an intersection between the epistemological cause and the relational cause.

Secondly: the creative cause

I have termed this the creative or technical cause, which is hardly surprising in the case of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, of whom Yaqut al-Hamawi says: “He is unrivalled in intelligence, insight, eloquence and mastery, having acquired extensive knowledge of every art.”²⁶ This became evident when he was asked to copy a collection of the Caliph's books; he proposed producing summaries²⁷ that would captivate the listener and the reader as if by magic. This was interpreted as him belittling his employer's work, whereupon his employer became furious; “for whilst he admired his poetry, prose, politics, administration, scholarship, literature and all his other deeds and works, he simultaneously looked down upon the output of others, belittling their worth and refusing to acknowledge their superiority over him.”²⁸

Add to this the story of the man from Damascus who asked him about the writings they read in their region.²⁹

Thirdly: The relational and communicative reason

This is evident in the reaction of his companion when Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi demonstrated his competence before the assembly at their first meeting, and in other sessions in which Abu Hayyan was put to the test by the other party, who met

him with indifference, distraction and contempt; and this is indeed what happened to him.

When we speak of the relational reason, we mean his lack of tact in dealing with the elite and high-ranking figures, Muhammad al-Yasin points to this as the main reason for the end of this relationship, namely ‘Abu Hayyan's ignorance of how he ought to conduct himself in the presence of ministers and dignitaries, and his lack of knowledge of the means by which to win over his patron's heart and mind through the gracious methods by which he might be spared the labour of copying, writing and transcribing as required of him.’³⁰

I believe that this statement reflects a bias in favour of Ibn Abbad, who attempts to excuse his actions by claiming that Abu Hayyan was not adept at dealing with the elite – or, in today's terms, was not diplomatic in his conduct. It is therefore legitimate for us to raise certain questions, including:

- How could he have said such a thing, when the man is attested to possess intelligence, insight and encyclopaedic knowledge?
- And how can such a judgement be justified when he had previously dealt with influential figures in government such as Ibn al-Amid and Ibn Sa'dan?

The aim is not to dwell on this primary cause and prolong the debate, but rather to draw attention to these factors, which, taken together, we believe have caused the cup to run over, leading Abu Hayyan to take the difficult decision to restore his reputation. Yet, with his characteristic shrewdness, he chose the path of criticising the authorities through his writing rather than facing the sword; he pitted criticism against the tyranny of power, for he was unable to voice his opinion openly in the face of authority. This is the view taken by Dr Al-Hasan Boutbia, who states: “He lacked the courage and fortitude to challenge the two formidable ministers, and so his book was titled *Zahir al-Nil* as a veiled reference to them;

²⁴ Belkacem Nour al-Din, **Echoes of Society and the Age in the Literature of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, p. 69.

²⁵ Al-Yasin, Al-Sahib ibn Abbad: His Life and Literature, p. 44.

²⁶ Muhammad Kurd Ali, **Amir al-Bayān**, n.d., p. 494.

²⁷ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi suggested to Ibn Abbad's librarian that he select a collection from these numerous letters, saying: ‘This is lengthy, but if you (my lord) would permit me, I could extract from it passages as precious as pearls, which would circulate in gatherings like the ‘Shamat’ and ‘Dastabwayhat’; were a madman to be recited them, he would come to his senses, or were they to be breathed upon one with an ailment, he would be cured—never tiring, never crying out for help, and never to be reproached.’

(Belkacem, Nour al-Din, *Echoes of Society and the Age in the Literature of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi*, p. 68

²⁸ Al-Yasin, Al-Sahib ibn Abbad: His Life and Literature, p. 48.

²⁹ A man from the Levant came to al-Sahib, and amongst the questions he asked him was: ‘Which epistles do you read in your region?’ He replied, ‘The Epistles of Ibn ‘Abd.’ ‘And who?’ he asked. ‘The Epistles of al-Sahib,’ he said. One of his companions gave him a sly glance, as if to say, ‘The Epistles of al-Sahib,’ but he did not realise it. Al-Sahib saw this and said: ‘Are you winking at a donkey that cannot feel?’ (Al-Yasin, Al-Sahib ibn ‘Abbad: His Life and Literature, p. 52; and in *Mu'jam al-Adabā'*: 257/6)

³⁰ Al-Yasin, Al-Sahib ibn ‘Abbad: His Life and Literature, p. 46.

see that he hit the mark when he criticised, aided in this by both his choice of words and his meaning.

To return to the beginning, Abu Hayyan addressed a range of characteristics in **Al-Sahib** and **Ibn al-Amid** that can be identified through passages in his book, which we shall cite as examples for the sake of clarification and understanding, not for the purpose of scrutiny or analysis; these meanings, for the most part, pertain to the moral sphere. Among these meanings is ‘arrogance’ (al-ghuroor), which in Arabic is the passive participle of the verb ‘to be arrogant’ (maghroor), and one of its meanings is ‘one who is self-admiring and proud of oneself’.³⁵ An example of this is his statement: ‘There was no one like him in either the Umayyad or Abbasid dynasties’³⁶; this statement appears in some of his books.

It may be noted that the meaning of ‘al-ghuroor’ encompasses self-admiration and implies strength; the ego is intertwined within it, presenting an image of boasting. An example of this is his statement in a gathering: “‘I am the defender of those who praise me, the scourge of those who disobey me, and the avenger of those who wrong me or provoke me; my heel is raised high above the head of time.’”³⁷

This arrogance gave rise to something else in al-Sahib, namely belittling people’s possessions; and this leads us to another meaning: contempt. Contempt derives from the triliteral verb ‘haqara’; we say that to hold something in contempt is to belittle it and look down upon it, and among the meanings encompassed by the term are humiliation and scorn. Building on what has been explained above regarding the lexical meaning of the term, the companion’s actual usage and conduct in word and deed never deviated from this meaning; rather, they confirmed it with full merit and justification. An example of this is what Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi recounted about himself, stating: “‘One day he came upon me in his house whilst I was sitting in a corner of the portico writing something he had asked of me. When I saw him, I rose to greet him, but he shouted in a shrill voice: ‘Sit down! For scribes are too lowly to rise in our presence.’”³⁸

Al-Tawhidi criticises Ibn al-Amid for his contempt for his subjects, particularly those without influence or standing,

³⁵ Muqatil ibn Sulayman, Abu al-Hasan Muqatil ibn Sulayman ibn Bashir al-Azdi, *Tafsir Muqatil ibn Sulayman*, edited by Abdullah Mahmoud Shehata, Arab History Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1423 AH/2002 AD, pp. 1–459–460.

³⁶ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, n.d., p. 133

³⁷ Ibid., p. 114

saying: “And if he saw someone among them who lacked distinction in stature, or prominence in appearance, or fame in name and position, he would despise him, turn his gaze away from him, look down upon him, and pay no heed to his mention or presence.”³⁹

The contempt that Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi experienced at the hands of Ibn al-Amid, and which was repeated with al-Sahib, made him feel so deprived that he even considered his reaction to be natural and a duty: “It is incumbent upon the deprived person to remind him of what is most characteristic of him and most widely known about him.”⁴⁰

Another of the meanings by which Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi branded al-Sahib ibn Abbad was ‘tyranny’ (taghyan), and among its lexical meanings is that it denotes overstepping the mark; thus, we say that a person’s tyranny consists in his overstepping the mark in oppression and the like. Abu Hayyan considered himself among those who had suffered injustice at the hands of al-Sahib, namely when the latter failed to honour him or extend hospitality to him; for he followed this with a commentary on Ibn al-‘Abbas’s interpretation of a Qur’anic verse in which Allah, the Exalted, says: “‘Allah does not love the open proclamation of evil in speech, except by one who has been wronged; and Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing’ [An-Nisa’: 148]. Abu Hayyan says, ‘I am that wronged one,’ and elsewhere in the book he discusses the reasons that led Ibn ‘Abbad to become tyrannical, arguing that there was no one left to criticise him or challenge his authority: ‘So the field was left to him alone; he turns white and yellow, struts about and boasts, and says ‘seven out of eight’; he has not been humbled by anyone, yet everyone has been humbled before him, and he commands every human being, and no man has forbidden him; every needy person has prostrated themselves before him, and he needs no one else’⁴¹

From the foregoing, we see that these meanings are interrelated and overlapping; for the tyrant is inevitably conceited, arrogant about himself and his deeds, and views everything through the lens of his own self-interest, seeing nothing but himself; this inevitably leads him to despise others and belittle people’s possessions.

³⁸ Jamal al-Ghitani, **Khulasa al-Tawhidi: Selections from the Poetry of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, p. 54

³⁹ Abu Hayyan, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 63.

⁴⁰ Abu Hayyan, **Mithalib al-Wazirayn**, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 63.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 100.

Among the characteristics listed by Abu Hayyan in his book **The Ethics of the Two Ministers** regarding both the Companion and the Son of the Dean—through which he sought to diminish their worth and lower their standing in the eyes of the general public—we find ‘stinginess’. The meaning of miserliness is well known to all; it is the opposite of generosity and giving. Among the remarks Abu Hayyan made regarding the dean’s miserliness is the following: “And Jareej al-Maqal recited in reference to Abu al-Fadl:

‘We have a philosopher, a scholar of the natural world, who tells us who has been shaped by the wonders of nature

He saw miserliness as shrewdness; thus, he protects and defends himself So you see no one in his house but the hungry and he claims that poverty lies in generosity and kindness, and that there is no fortune to be gained from acquiring crafts⁴²

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi points to an aspect of miserliness shared by both Ibn al-‘Amid and al-Sahib, namely that generosity, magnanimity, and giving lead to poverty; yet he forgot that through them one’s honour is preserved ⁴³, and they serve as the best testimony to their owner after his death. This is the meaning of the poet’s words:

The reward for a favour is gratitude, and the hand of benevolence is a source of praise and the praise of the living for the departed is a life that endures⁴⁴

In the same vein, al-Tawhidi reminds the reader of generosity and its manifestations, noting that generosity is not always related to money, but takes other forms, including: ‘In greeting, cheerfulness; in companionship, warmth; in character, forbearance; in deeds, sincerity; and in wealth, sharing.’⁴⁵

To conclude our discussion of miserliness, we note that Abu Hayyan was convinced that miserliness warrants the defamation of its practitioner; he therefore cited a hadith to establish the argument and proof for his defamatory action, in which he says: “Burhan al-Sufi told us: ‘Bishr al-Hafi

⁴² Abu Hayyan, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 250

⁴³ Among these is the poet’s saying: ‘And whoever seeks praise through his wealth protects his honour from every abominable and ruinous act’ (ibid., p. 58).

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 244–245.

⁴⁵ Abu Hayyan, **The Flaws of the Ministers**, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 257.

denounced a miser, then said, “The miser has no backbiting.””⁴⁶

Among the characteristics mentioned by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi regarding the two ministers are ‘madness’ and ‘foolishness’; and his madness stems, as described by Abu Tahir al-Anmati, from ‘his stature, for the fear he inspires has clouded the desire for him, and the resentment towards him has prevented one from taking pleasure in him.’⁴⁷

Abu Hayyan mentioned these traits because he regarded them as sensitive matters and fundamental prerequisites for leadership and office; thus, we see him citing the testimonies of some of his contemporaries. Among the examples he gave to illustrate the madness of the companion is what the jurist Ibn Zar’ah said of him: ‘There is nothing in his mind more absurd than this; truly, he is a marvel. His enemy is doomed by his authority, and his ally fears his many moods. He has neither trustworthiness nor loyalty, neither truthfulness nor kindness; he is all farce and utter ignorance.’⁴⁸

Madness was not the only reprehensible personal trait that Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi addressed in his critique of the two ministers; he also added stupidity to the list. Indeed, the stupidity with which al-Tawhidi described al-Sahib and Ibn al-Amid was linked to other terms, such as folly, lack of reason and ignorance. We shall give examples by way of illustration, such as his statement: “One day al-Khudayri said: ‘O al-Sahib, what should I say to my opponent if he tells me: “The definition of injustice is placing something in the wrong place?”’ Al-Sahib replied: ‘Tell him: “If a man takes his rolled-up turban and places it on his knee, he must be considered unjust.”’”⁴⁹

His reply can be classified under what the jurist Ibn Zar’ah said earlier, namely that all his talk is mere jest. It was Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s habit to cite yet another example of his companion’s folly; indeed, even more so when we realise that he associated him with evil and portrayed him in a repulsive light in the eyes of both the elite and the general public, likening him to Iblis⁵⁰. Among the things Abu Hayyan

⁴⁶ Abu Hayyan, **Mithalib al-Wazirin**, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁰ I said to Abu Sa’id al-Ibri, ‘Explain this man’s character to me, for I am thinking of writing a book on his moral conduct.’ He replied, ‘You have undertaken a difficult task. Can you describe Iblis in all his aspects?’ I said, ‘No, by God, I merely seek refuge in God from him.’ He said, ‘Then seek

mentioned to illustrate his contempt for his companion's intellect was what he once said to him: "O Abu Hayyan, who is the one you call Abu Hayyan?" I replied: "The greatest of people in his time, and the most eminent of his era." He said: "Who is he, woe betide you?" I replied: "You." He said: "And when was that?" I replied: "When you said to me: 'O Abu Hayyan'."51

Among the remarks he made regarding Ibn al-Amid, which justify his ignorance and folly, is his statement: 'And (Ibn al-Amid) would display a forbearance that concealed folly, and claim knowledge whilst being ignorant of it.'52 And lest we miss the opportunity, whilst we are in the midst of discussing the subject of intellect, we would like to mention a comparison made by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi between the two ministers, based on the account of Abu al-Salam Najiya ibn Ali, the poet from al-Qahtani, which draws on what he witnessed and what he heard about them. He said: "Ibn al-Amid was the more rational of the two, and he claimed to be generous, whilst Ibn Abbad was the more generous, and he claimed to be rational; yet in their claims they were both liars, whilst their true natures remained unchanged."53 We conclude from the foregoing that reason and generosity were not part of their true nature or character, but rather were feigned in certain situations. . Among the reprehensible traits for which he criticised the two ministers, we note 'envy'. It is said: to envy someone for something is to wish that their blessing would be transferred to oneself, or to seek to take it away from them and bring about its loss. Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi considers this reprehensible trait to be predominant in al-Sahib's character, stating: 'He was intensely envious of people of merit and knowledge, and of those skilled in memorisation and narration; and the bulk of his envy was directed towards those who wrote with beautiful calligraphy, mastered the language, excelled in composition, and were adept at metaphor.'54 By this, Abu Hayyan seeks to establish that the neglect and dismissal he suffered at the hands of the Minister were due solely to envy, and that among the things he envied was the Minister's scholarly standing and his status as a man of merit and knowledge.

refuge in God from this man before you seek refuge in God from Iblis, for although Iblis is evil...' (Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *Mithalib al-Wazirayn*, p. 211).

51 Waseem, Ibrahim, *The Theory of Ethics and Sufism in the Works of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi*, Dar Damascus, Jawahir al-Sham, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1st ed., 1994, p. 19.

52 Jamal al-Ghitani, *Khulasa al-Tawhidi: Selections from the Prose of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi*, p. 58.

This raises the following question: why this envy? The man had been granted prestige and authority, and the world lay at his feet; what, then, was the minister lacking? We must not forget that the Companion and the son of the Dean were both producing literary works; therefore, perhaps there is truth in what al-Tawhidi said about them regarding envy of creative and talented individuals—perhaps because the requirements of power and sovereignty demand a monopoly over all matters and concerns, and that the man in power should be well-versed in the sciences, accomplished in literature, and a leader in politics.

We must excuse Al-Sahib if we realise that he was a man of prestige and authority, wishing to assert his control over matters, and quote from his words those passages which reveal his envy of poets, for he says: " 'He could not bear to hear anyone recite verse'55 To supplement the points made by Abu Hayyan regarding both the man in question and Ibn al-Amid—namely, their 'lack of piety'—and given the sensitivity of the subject of 'lack of piety', Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi relied on an eyewitness account to dispel any suspicion of fabrication, saying: ' I said to al-Ma'mun, "Tell me the truth about this man, for I have known him by night and by day, and the night reveals a man's secrets better than the day." He replied: "In short, the man is without piety due to his immorality in his conduct and his scepticism regarding knowledge."'56 Given the connection between religion and knowledge, it is inevitable that this man is renowned for his lack of knowledge. This is illustrated by the way he dealt with people of learning and scholars, which in essence did not differ from the way he dealt with people of virtue and talent, as mentioned earlier. It is worth examining the nature of his relationship with people of learning, where he says: " 'If they lied to him, deceived him, misled him, flattered him and fawned over him, he drew them near and favoured them, honoured them and gave them gifts; but if they spoke the truth to him, were steadfast and remained true to him, he distanced them and cast them aside, deprived them and humiliated them.'57 In the same vein, we cite a testimony that reinforces the view held by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi in his dealings with scholars in their early days, when he invited them to his councils to ascertain their knowledge; this demonstrates the

53 Abu Hayyan, *The Flaws of the Two Ministers*, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 316

54 Ibid., p. 82.

55 Abu Hayyan, *The Flaws of the Two Ministers*, edited by Ibrahim al-Kilani, n.d., p. 147

56 Ibid., p. 210.

57 Ibid., pp. 325–324

humility of political authority and its need for knowledge and scholars. He says: 'For the authority of knowledge surpasses that of government, and the honour of knowledge is greater than the honour of wealth; let your heart rejoice.'⁵⁸ These were some of the points Abu Hayyan raised to highlight the faults of the two ministers, for which they have become known throughout the ages. It was no easy matter for a man living during the reign of al-Sahib to possess such boldness in his speech; his fear and his concealment of the book's title are evidence of the tyranny of authority and the prestige of these two ministers, particularly al-Sahib ibn Abbad. So why this criticism? And what is the purpose of this critique?

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi answers that if 'matters were to be settled once and for all, and the branches were to return to their roots, I would find him cast aside alongside his peers—forgotten and of low standing... lacking in resemblance and stripped of his veil.'⁵⁹

This illustrates the power of the written word and the pen in the face of the power of authority and the sword. What Abu Hayyan achieved in the presence of those in power—within the inner circle—allows him to convey the true image of the man in authority from within his court and in his councils with his peers to the general public, with the aim of diminishing his worth, silencing his memory, exposing his secrets and lifting the veil from him. To bring this image to life, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi employed a mocking tone in his portrayal of the ruler, particularly in describing some of his reactions with vivid, dynamic detail, as if we were witnessing them with our own eyes. An example of this is his description of the ruler's state when his opponent became agitated: " 'Whenever Ibn Abbad spoke on a matter and then saw his opponent becoming agitated, he would ruffle his beard with his fingers and fiddle with it, shake his head, twist his neck, wrinkle his nose, and contort his mouth.'⁶⁰ Among these descriptions is his account of the reaction when Ibn 'Abbad felt unable to answer; one would see him "fly into a rage, his face swelling and flushing, his veins bulging, almost foaming at the mouth, before he launched into a torrent of words."⁶¹

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi presents these descriptions in a mocking manner to belittle the companion's standing in the eyes of both the general public and the elite; thus, he makes him a figure of ridicule, revealing that this is the true nature of

the man in charge. The vividness of his portrayal of the companion reveals al-Tawhidi's wit; the man deals with ideas and minds, and explains things to the general public, who understand vivid imagery and what they see with their own eyes. Thus, the dynamic depictions of his reactions became a source of ridicule and laughter for both the general public and the elite.

Conclusion

Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's aim in writing **The Ethics of the Two Ministers** was not to list their faults and shortcomings, but rather to restore his own reputation and redress the indifference and contempt he had suffered; indeed, some regard this literary work—**The Faults of the Two Ministers**—as Abu Hayyan's rebellion on behalf of the marginalised.

At times, he confined himself to the negative aspects, just as we have focused on the embarrassing questions that were put to the Minister in his councils; he left no avenue for attacking the Minister and undermining his reputation untried. He attacked his character, his manners, his knowledge, his honour and his intellect, portraying him as an ignorant, miserly, foolish, ridiculous and bloodthirsty man. To this end, he devoted all his creative energies, employing every possible method of vilification to attack his opponent as a means of dynamic portrayal; all to make him the object of ridicule and scorn. Thus, al-Tawhidi appeared to us to be bent on listing faults, for he channelled all his energy and abilities into disparaging his opponent; yet we see that he deliberately quoted and relied upon some of his contemporaries, a fact which lent this literary work an air of credibility. He writes in his book: " 'And the common saying goes: "He who makes himself a sheep has his neck snapped by the wolf; he who makes himself chaff is eaten by the chickens."⁶²

Through this statement, we see him bearing the concerns of both himself and others; he seeks to restore honour, for he has understood the game, which is that political authority imposes its power on everyone, including the writer and the written word; for this reason, as we have said, al-Tawhidi's revolution is the revolution of the common people. Through his work, he attempts to disparage the image of the two ministers in the eyes of the public, making them the subject of ridicule and

⁵⁸ Jamal al-Ghitani, **Khulasa al-Tawhidi: Selections from the Prose of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi**, p. 53.

⁵⁹ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, op. cit., p. 226

⁶⁰ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, op. cit., p. 165.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 170.

⁶² Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, **The Flaws of the Two Ministers**, n.d., pp. 8-9.

scorn, as well as holding them to account; in doing so, he seeks to raise the question from an unexpected angle: is this what leadership is like? And is this the ideal model for a minister and political authority?

For despite the book's literary merit—which lies in its containing some of the sharpest satire in Arabic literature—the two ministers lived on and their names were not forgotten, despite their association with this literary genre. The question remains: who triumphed? Was it authority or the pen? And does the pen possess a power to rival that of the sword?

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