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SOUND AND MEANING IN *SŪRAT AL-QĀRIʿA*

BY

MICHAEL SELLS

The short suras from the last section of the Qurʿan, especially those concerned with the *yawm al-dīn* (day of judgement, moment of truth), have been widely admired for their artistic and literary qualities. For Theodor Nöldeke, for example, «There are no more sublime suras in the Qurʿan, none in which the passionate excitement of the prophet shows forth more powerfully. It is as if one saw with his own eyes how the earth opened up, the mountains were strewn about, and the stars were thrown into confusion»¹. Yet there has also been a very different reaction to the *yawm al-dīn* suras. Hartwig Hirschfeld categorized them as «declamatory address,» and then went on to make the following characterization: «Descriptions of the Day of Judgment, scarcely differing from each other in the endless variety of torments for the wicked they depict, form a prominent feature of the declamatory address»². In neither case is the aesthetic judgement justified through detailed analysis of the text.

Presented here is a reading of the first sura discussed by Nöldeke under his grouping of «most sublime» suras, *sūrat al-qāriʿa*. The reading explores the relationship of sound and meaning within the sura, with special emphasis upon phonological effects acknowledged in the classical *tafsīr*³ and in modern studies⁴, but

¹ Theodor Nöldeke and Friedrich Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (1909-38, reprint, Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1970), I: 98-99: Es gibt keine großartigere Suren im ganzen Qorān, keine in denen die leidenschaftliche Erregung des Propheten mächtiger hervortritt. Es ist, als ob man mit Augen sehe, wie die Erde sich auftut, die Berge zerstieben, und die Sterne durcheinander geworfen werden.» Other suras listed in this group are suras 99, 82, 81, and the vision episodes of sura 53. On stylistic grounds, I make a similar grouping, but include as well *sūrat al-qadr* (97), and sections from other suras that are stylistically and thematically parallel.

² Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), p. 56.

³ Discussion of aural aspects of *naẓm*, often translated as «composition,» but perhaps more accurately rendered as «voice,» and discussion of *tawāzun* or textual

rarely placed at the center of literary analysis. Those effects center around the **sound-figure**, a sound-complex that picks up semantic, emotive, and gender associations or «charges» through its deployment within the sura. The analysis below will trace the development of sound-figures through the sura and identify the points at which particular sound-units become charged. Of special interest will be the role of semantic indeterminacy; in a discourse with a

harmonics, remain at the general or anecdotal level. See, for example, Ibn Kaṭīr, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, appended to his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 1, 499-509. Bāqillānī ignores suras such as *al-zalzala* and *al-qārī'a* and *al-qadr*. Cf. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *l'ġāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. by As-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1981). Zamaḥsharī discusses them briefly from a largely rhetorical perspective: Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamaḥsharī, *Al-Kaššāf 'an Haqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wuḡūh al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1947). In his *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, Ibn Kaṭīr relates traditions concerning the importance of proper recitation and the power of sound quality, but does not integrate such issues into his tafsīr proper: Isma'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1966). Cf. Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3 (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1953), 162-69, and Muḥammad Abul Quasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazālī's Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 18-33. The *taḡwīd* literature also avoids practical criticism of the relationship between sound and meaning in particular texts, though some reciters have discussed the question informally. Lamyā' al-Farūqī, «Tartīl al-Qur'ān al-Karīm,» in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Mawlānā Sayyid Abul A'ālā Mawdūdī*, ed. Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ansari (London: Islamic Foundation U.K., and Jedda, 1979), 105-121; Labīb al-Sa'īd, *Al-Ġam' al-Sawtiyy li l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī), 324-30; Khalil Semaan, «*Tajwīd* as a Source in Phonetic Research,» *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 58 (1962): 112-20; Ahmed Gouda, «Qur'anic Recitation: Phonological Analysis,» (Georgetown Univ. Ph.D. Dis., 1988).

⁴ William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 79-115; Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Régis Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 2nd edition (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977), pp. 169-181. Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'ān: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 7-8; Frederick Denny, «The *Adab* of Qur'an Recitation: Text and Context,» in Anthony Johns, International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an, Australian National University, Canberra, 8-13 May 1980. Ser. 1, 2nd ed. (Canberra: Australian National University, 1981), and *idem*, «Exegesis and Recitation: Their Development as Classical Forms of Qur'anic Piety,» in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions: Essays in Honor of Joseph Kitagawa* ed. Frank E. Reynolds and T.M. Ludwig (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), pp. 91-123; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin and New York, 1981), who presents a quantified analysis of various sound groupings; Pierre Crapon de Caprona, *Le Coran: aux sources de la parole oraculaire; Structures rythmiques des sourates mecquoises* (Paris, 1981), who emphasizes prosodic, metrical features; and Issa J. Boullata, «The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: *I'jāz* and Related Topics» in A. Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 139-157.

high degree of phonological patterning, sound-figures become particularly acute when semantic closure is lacking.

To follow the generation of these sound-figures will entail a discussion of four modes of Qurʿanic discourse⁵. (1) **The semantic mode** is defined narrowly to include the realm of discursive meaning, the lexical, syntactical, and thematic areas. (2) **The acoustic mode** is made up in part of features often referred to by terms such as assonance, consonance, euphony, paranomasia, alliteration, onomatopoesis. However, the sound-figures discussed here are often resistant to the vocabulary of tropes and figures of Arabic and Western literary criticism. They form textures of phonological parallelism that are heard across and beyond the boundaries such rhetorical terms entail. Without regular poetic meter, the lyrical intensity of some Qurʿanic passages is even more implicated in such non-metrical phonological features than is lyric poetry. Although some classical scholars, such as Ibn al-ʿAṭīr, have analysed Qurʿanic discourse according to the conventions of *sağʿ*, such analysis touches only incidentally upon the sound-figures discussed here⁶. The conventions of *tağwīd* are viewed here as part of the oral text of the Qurʿan and as an index of certain key phonological features⁷. (3) **The emotive mode** is made up of sounds and sound-units, that through their particular deployment within the sura,

⁵ This essay is the second in a series of studies on the relation of sound and meaning in the final short suras of the Qurʿan. The first appears as «Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*,» *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 111.2 (1991): 239-59.

⁶ For a good exposition of this issue, see Devin Stewart, «*Sajʿ* in the Qurʿān: Prosody and Structure,» *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 21.2 (September, 1990): 101-139. The basic prosodic convention is the use of the word as the unit of counting, with suitable exceptions made for certain words (such as *fi* when followed by a *hamzat al-waṣl*), with an emphasis upon accentual rather than quantitative meter. The sound-figures and quantitative rhythms discussed in this essay might be heard to play against the formal aspects of *sajʿ* in a manner similar to their play against syntax. See ʿAlāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʿān*, 4 vols. (Manṣūrāt Rāḍī, 1984) 3:332-360 and Ibn al-ʿAṭīr, *Al-Maṭāl al-Sāʿir fī Adab al-Kātib wa al-Ṣāʿir* 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Nahḍat Miṣr, 1959-62) 1:270-342.

⁷ Qurʿanic recitation will be treated here on the ideal level, as formulated in the rules of *tağwīd* and applied in the basic style preserved in the *murattal* form. No position is taken on the question of whether contemporary recitation represents an unbroken tradition from the time of Muhammad to the present. Like the question of the sources and manner of composition of the Qurʿan, the question of possible historical evolution in recitation is of secondary interest to the question posed here, i.e., how the Qurʿan as we know it—however it came to be—generates meaning.

gradually become charged with emotive values. No claim is made here concerning any innate relationship of a particular sound to a particular set of emotive values. Instead, the analysis is concerned with showing how certain sound units are highlighted by their placement in the text and then charged through their relationship to the semantic and acoustic interplay of which they are a part. As with the acoustical mode, the effects are often too supple to be confined to a lexical unit and often resist standard rhetorical labels, such as that of the interjection. (4) In **the gender mode**, the polarity, tension, and harmonization of gender, especially through gendered pronouns and inflections, takes on an importance beyond what is expected. There is a heightened tension between natural gender and grammatical gender, and between animate and inanimate. In many cases, a pronoun will carry both the animate and inanimate sense, as if a complete personification were just on the verge of breaking through. In some cases an implied personification hovers over certain pronouns and gender inflections that on the explicit level refer to inanimate beings.

Three points should be emphasized from the start. **First**, these four categories⁸ are not all parallel. The emotive and gender categories are elusive and the literary effects that occur through them are not easily identifiable. They are implicated in translexical, transmorphic sound-figures that weave themselves in and out of the discourse. **Second**, each of the four modes is intertwined with and dependent upon the other three, and exists only insofar as it interacts with them. Neither sound nor meaning can exist by itself or be understood without the other. In this sense, I would distinguish between semantics narrowly defined as one of the four modes, and semantics more broadly defined as inclusive of the four modes. The approach here is not meant to sacrifice meaning to sound, but rather to bring out a multidimensional sense of meaning⁹. **Third**, no sound-unit automatically engenders a com-

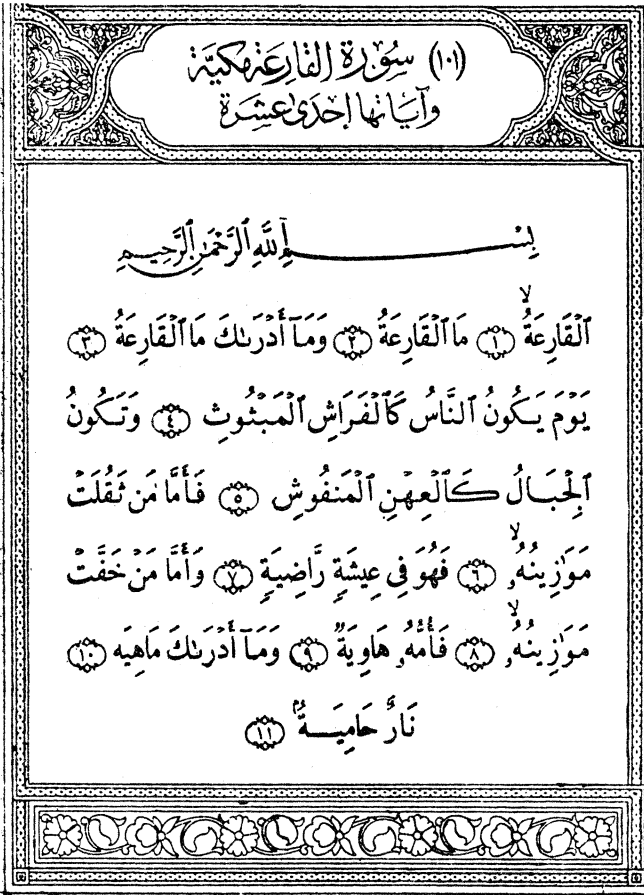
⁸ In longer passages, we would have to take into consideration a fifth mode as well: that of number and person, with emphasis upon the change in number and person (apostrophe) in reference to the divine voice and to the human hearer. This aspect is well discussed in Neuwirth (*Studien*, cited above, n. 4).

⁹ In his linguistic analysis of the phoneme, Roman Jakobson criticized the cataloguing of speech sounds without reference to their role in language: «Speech sounds cannot be understood, delimited, classified and explained except in the light of the tasks which they perform in language.» See R. Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, trans. by John Mephram (Cambridge, Ma., 1978), p. 109.

elling literary effect. The semantic, acoustic, emotive, and gender effects of a given phrase remain only potential until they are picked up and amplified by succeeding passages. While many of these effects might inhere naturally within the grammar and phonology of the Arabic language, they are only actualized insofar as the Qurʿanic voice has moulded and shaped the innate potentialities in a particular and distinctive fashion. While implicit personifications may be found in other languages that, like Arabic, are based upon grammatical rather than natural gender, the Qurʿanic sense of implicit personification is due to a heightening and stretching of such potentialities beyond their normal range, and to their amplification through the other three modes. Similarly, while Arabic may share with other languages certain interior sound-sense values, these possibilities are actualized only in concert with the semantics of a given Qurʿanic passage¹⁰.

In regard to sound and meaning in the Qurʿan we might say, similarly: «Sound figures or sound symbols cannot be understood, delimited, classified and explained except in the light of their relation to the semantic aspects of the text.» Jakobson's analysis of poetic language outside of formal verse may be more helpful in this regard than his literary analysis of specific poems, which, ironically, can be accused of tending toward a catalogue of sound effects. See R. Jakobson and L. Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Bloomington, Ind., 1979), pp. 197-214 and R. Jakobson, «Linguistics and Poetics,» *ibid.*, pp. 85-122.

¹⁰ For similar issues in expressive semantics, see Lubomír Doležel, *Occidental Poetics: Tradition and Progress* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 100-108. See Jakobson and Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (cited above, n. 8), pp. 177-231, for a review of the issue of sound symbolism, synaesthesia, and the possibility of universal, interlinguistic correspondences between certain sounds and certain shapes, colors, and emotions. The conclusions of my study of aural effects in the Qurʿan is in provisional agreement with the data cited by Jakobson and Waugh from a wide range of languages and genres. That agreement takes on two aspects. First, the sound symbol is only implicit until it is brought out in a particular context and tied to a particular semantic content. As stated by Jakobson and Waugh (p. 289), paraphrasing Grammont, the significance of vowel evocations «manifests itself only when it is prompted by the meaning of the text or when it does not stand in contradiction to the latter.» Cf. M. Grammont, «Onomatopées et mots expressifs,» *Trentenaire de la Société pour l'Étude des Langues Romanes (1901)*, pp. 261-322, and Dell Hymes, «Phonological Aspects of Style: Some English Sonnets,» reprinted in S. Chatman and S.R. Levin, eds., *Essays on the Language of Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 1967), pp. 33-53. Hymes defends the usefulness (but not the sufficiency) of norm and deviation analysis, but he also points out its restriction to effects of cumulation rather than contrast and its ineffectiveness in the analysis of single poems. The second aspect of agreement concerns implicit sound-symbol coordinates, most importantly, the association of emotive intensity with the «a,» as indicated by the synaesthetic connection between «a» and the color scarlet or the sound of the trumpet (Jakobson and Waugh, pp. 193-4). See also



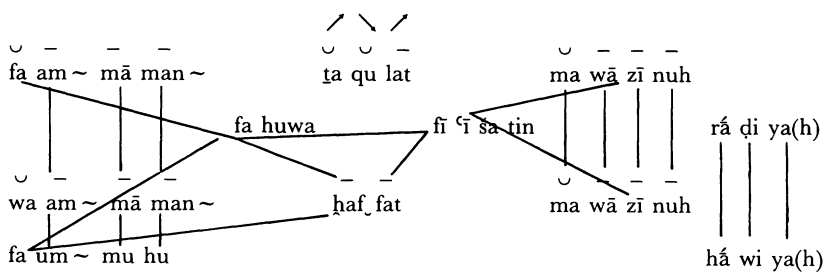
M.M. MacDermott, *Vowel Sounds in Poetry: Their Music and Tone-Colour* (London: Kegan Paul, 1940) and David I. Masson «Vowel and Consonant Patterns in Poetry,» reprinted in Chatman and Levin, pp. 3-18. For Masson, «There are three principal sources [acoustic, kinaesthetic, and lexical] for the evocative power of the sounds of words, words either as they are used for the nonce in a given passage of poetry or prose, or as they reside in the general stock of a language.» Of special interest here is Masson's discussion, p. 18, of lexical associations «that arise from the occurrence of a syllable or part-syllable which recalls that of other words in the language *without possessing the objective status of a morpheme* [emphases mine].» Purely quantitative analysis would not be adequate for the purposes of this study. A given sound or series of sounds may be highly significant in one passage, less so in another. It may be completely unexceptional by the standards of 7th century Arabic, yet in a given Qur'anic passage it may be molded into a striking effect by its repetition and strategic placement within a particular semantic, lexical, and phonological matrix.

Sūrat al-Qārī‘a

- 1 al-qārī‘a
- 2 mā l-qārī‘a
- 3 wa mā adrāka ma l-qārī‘a
- 4 yawma yakūnu l-nāsu ka-l-farāš al-mabṭūṭ
- 5 wa takūnu l-ġibālu ka l-‘ihni l-manfūš
- 6 fa ammā man ṭaqlat mawāzīnuh
- 7 fa huwa fī ‘īšatin rāḍiya
- 8 wa ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnuh
- 9 fa ummuhu hāwiya
- 10 wa mā adrāka mā hiyah
- 11 nārun ḥāmiya

- 1 The qārī‘a
- 2 What is the qārī‘a
- 3 What can let you know what the qārī‘a is
- 4 A day humankind are like scattered moths
- 5 And mountains are like wool dyed and carded
- 6 Whoever’s scales weigh heavy
- 7 His is a life that is pleasing
- 8 Whoever’s scales weigh light
- 9 His mother is hāwiya
- 10 What can let you know what she is
- 11 Raging fire¹¹

Fig 1: Acoustical Resonances, Vertical and Horizontal
Sūrat al-Qārī‘a, Verses 6-9
 (~ = ġunna)



¹¹ Translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the author.

The sura begins and ends with words (*qāriʿa* and *hāwiya*) that have rich etymological associations, but whose precise meanings are unclear. The syntax of the sura is equally complex, with several areas of ambiguity and multiple possibilities for interpretation. The first three verses are in what we might call the hymnic mode, with strong use of rhythm as well as phonological and lexical repetition. Verses 4-5 offer a more explicitly literary language with the two similes (people like scattered moths, mountains like carded wool) placed in rhythmic, grammatical, and phonological parallelism with one another. Verses 6-9 are made up of a complex sentence of two double-clauses, centered upon the metaphor of the scales. It is in this section that the only two verbal actions occur (*taqulat*, *haf-fat*; weigh heavy, weigh light). The second and fourth of these verses (verses 7 and 9) end with a rhyme that ties into the rhyme of vv. 1-3 and brings back their hymnic structure. Because the primary verse-ending assonance of the sura (*/ā/ /i/ ya*) falls at the end of verses 7 and 9 (*rāḍiya*, *hāwiya*), verses 6-7 and 8-9 can be counted as single rhythmic units. The final two verses return to the hymnic mode, again using phonological repetition and strongly rhythmic cadence.

In terms of verse length, the sura takes the form of a diamond, beginning with short verses, moving toward longer verses and rhythmic units, and returning to very short verses. As is the case with many of the short suras, the verses end with a strong sense of accentual and metric rhythm. The original rhyme is set in the CāCiCa pattern, with a feminine noun (*qāriʿa*) with a marked feminine ending. After the end-asonance of *ūṭ-ūṣ* in verses 4-5, the original rhyme of verses 1-3 returns in verses 7, 9, 10, 11: *qāriʿa*, *qāriʿa*, *qāriʿa*, *rāḍiya*, *hāwiya*, *mā hiya*, and *hāmiya*, the last four rhyme-units being based upon the CāCiya pattern.

Verses 1-3

al-qāriʿa

mā l-qāriʿa

wa mā adrāka mā l-qāriʿa

The qāriʿa

What is the qāriʿa

What can let you know what the qāriʿa is

These three verses are characterized by what I will be calling «semantic openness.» By calling a particular locution semantically open I mean simply that it is indeterminate, lexically, syntactically,

or in some other way, and to such a degree that its indeterminacy plays an important literary role. While some forms of interpretation attempt to fill in the semantic indeterminacy by providing a clear-cut meaning, the goal of the analysis here is to examine how the indeterminacy functions with the text.

The sura begins with a double indeterminacy. *Lisān al-ʿArab* gives the radical *q-r-ʿ* a wide range of meanings having to do with striking, hitting, shocking, and breaking, but the particular form *qāriʿa* is not widely attested¹². The radical *q-r-ʿ* appears in only two other Qurʾanic passages, and in those two passages no more information is supplied as to its meaning¹³. To this lexical indeterminacy is added syntactical indeterminacy: in verse 1, the phrase *al-qāriʿa* appears without any apparent function in a sentence. In verse 2, the lexical indeterminacy is acknowledged through the question «what is the *qāriʿa*?» The locution *mā adrāka mā* (what can tell) of verse 3 is used in the Qurʾan when a word or phrase is introduced whose meaning is expected to be unclear. But even as the expression acknowledges the difficulty, it introduces a new syntactical ambiguity. The *mā adrāka mā* formula and its standard response break down into the following pattern: 1) «what can tell you what X is» and 2) «Y». The expression can mean either: Y can tell you what X is, or X is Y.

The semantic indeterminacy of the first three verses arouses expectations for more closure regarding the meaning of the term or locution at issue. When these expectations are not satisfied on the narrowly semantic level, phonological features become more prominent, particularly the sound-units based upon the pharyngealized¹⁴ and non-pharyngealized /ā/: *mā, qā, drā*. Though underscored, the emotive and gender charges these sound complexes will pick up by the end of the sura remain latent at this point.

¹² Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Šādir) 8: 262-270.

¹³ The two passages are 13:31 and 69:4. The latter begins with the statement, *kaḏḏabat ṭamūdu wa ʿādu bi l-qāriʿa* (Thamud and ʿAd denied the *qāriʿa*). The passage goes on to elaborate on the subsequent destruction of Thamud and ʿAd without giving any more information concerning what it was exactly that those ancient civilizations denied. It is clearly something related to the *hāqa*, but then that term is given the exact same *mā adrāka mā* mark of semantic openness, in the exact same semantic and acoustical configuration: *al-hāqa, ma l-hāqa, wa mā adrāka mā l-hāqa*, as we find in *sūrat al-qāriʿa*.

¹⁴ Other examples of the charged long-*a* within the Qurʾan could be cited. Perhaps the most famous is the *tahlīl*, the Qurʾanic phrase «*lā ilāha illā llāh.*»

Verses 4-5:

**yawma yakūnu n-nāsu ka-l-farāši l-mabtūt
wa takūnu l-ğibālu ka-l-^ᶜihni l-manfūš**

A day the people are like scattered moths
And the mountains are like colored, carded wool

In verses 4-5, two similes are presented: human beings like scattered moths and mountains like colored, carded wool. The two verses are balanced against one another, syntactically, phonetically, and semantically. They are longer than the previous three verses, as if the Qurʾanic voice were stretching out after the intense beginning of verses 1-3. They are of a more complex and varied phonetic timbre than verses 1-3. They each contain a /ū/ at the beginning and end, with the u-sounds and n-sounds dominant throughout (*yakūnu n-nās*, *ᶜihni l-manfūš*). The /ā/ also appears (*nāsu*, *farāši*, *ğibālu*). The phonological parallelism between the two verses is built upon the intricate interaction between «a» and «u».

The phrases *al-farāši l-mabtūt* and *al-ᶜihni l-manfūš* bring into the sura an array of phonetic color: open syllables, closed syllables, stops, fricatives, nasals, liquids, and aspirations. This coloration contrasts with the repeated use of only a few sound qualities that made up verses 1-3, and gives these phrases an acoustical texture harmonious with their more explicitly poetic quality. These two verses also contain an echo based on the *maf^ᶜūl* form in *mabtūt* and *manfūš* and oblique assonance (*ūt-ūs*). The combination of the stop /b/ and the fricative /th/ in *mabtūt* is underscored by the *tağwīd* convention of *qalqala*, a slight tripping achieved through the insertion of an anaptyctic vowel. Similarly, the nasalizing that occurs in the /n/ and /f/ combination of *manfūš* is underscored by the *tağwīd* convention of *ihfā*?. These effects are enhanced by the runs of long syllables (*rāš al-mabtūt*, *ka l-ᶜihni l-manfūš*) at the end of the two verses, bringing a quantitative weightiness to them and compelling the reciter and listener to linger over them syllable by syllable.

Verses 4 and 5 come as a response to the question, «What can let you know what the *qāriʿa* is?» The semantic openness that one would expect to be resolved by the response to the *mā adrāka mā* is immediately heightened instead by syntactical and grammatical ambiguity. Two explanations are generally given for the accusative case of *yawma*. Some suggest that it is the direct object of an implied

verb: to know what *al-qāriʿa* is, «look at or think of a day...» Others suggest that it is a temporal accusative: «on a day in which...»¹⁵ In the first case, there would occur the same syntactical ambiguity in the response to the *mā adrāka mā* expression that occurs when the response is a noun in the nominative case¹⁶: 1) Y can tell you what the X (the *qāriʿa*) is or 2) the *qāriʿa* is Y. The classical tafsir tends to reduce this ambiguity to «the *qāriʿa* is Y.» However, that is to reduce the *mā adrāka mā* to a mere synonym for the interrogative *mā*, a reduction that I will argue is unwarranted¹⁷. The reading of *yawma* as «on a day» seems to be the most natural reading, requiring less by way of interpolation. This sense of *yawma* would serve to defer until the end of the sura any answer to the *mā adrāka mā*, even a syntactically equivocal answer.

What is the literary effect of these multiple possibilities? As the sura progresses, I will suggest that they place the day (*yawm*) within a temporally multivalent context. It can be read, and has often been read, as a day in the future. But the ambiguities noted here, when combined with the temporal multivalence at the end of the sura, allow the conception of this day in a kind of non-linear time, a time not confined to a particular moment in the future.

¹⁵ Ṭabarsī, p. 532.

¹⁶ The expression *mā adrāka mā* is used with suppleness in the Qurʿan. Here I list the terms it accompanies and what kind of response it generates: 69:3 (*al-hāqa*, verbal sentence beginning a narration); 74:27 (*saqar* verbal sentence directly related to *saqar*); 77:14 (*yawmu l-faṣl*, a warning, *waylun!*, to those who disbelieve); 82:17 (*yawmu d-dīn*, *yawma*, in the same accusative case we find in *sūrat al-qāriʿa*); 83:8 (*siġġīn*, a nominative, *kitābūn marqūm*, which could indicate what can tell what *siġġīn* is, though it is usually interpreted as «*siġġīn* is a written record» in line with the standard *mā adrāka mā* interpretation); 86:2 (*aṭ-ṭāriq*, a noun in the nominative); 90:12 (*al-ʿaqaba*, a noun in the nominative); 97:2 (*laylatu l-qadr*, a nominal sentence); 104:5 (*al-ḥuṭama*, a noun in the nominative).

¹⁷ Mahmūd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qurʿān al-ʿAẓīm*, vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1978), 85; is most explicit, interpreting the final verse as meaning «she/it is a fire» (*hiya nārun*). Muḥammad ibn Ġarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ġāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl al-Qurʿān*, vol. 30 (Cairo, 1953), 280-83, takes special pains in his paraphrase to remove all syntactical ambiguity: «Then he [the divine author of the Qurʿan] made clear what she/it was, and said, she/it is a raging fire»: *Tumma bayyana mā hiya fa qāla hiya nārun ḥāmiya*. For a *tafsīr* discussion that *does* preserve the ambiguity of the passage, see Ismaʿīl Ḥaqqī Bursevī, *Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Bayān*, vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), p. 499.

Verses 6-7, and 8-9

**fa-ammā man ṭaqlat mawāzīnuh
fa-huwa fi ʿišātin rāḍiya
wa ammā man ḥaffat mawāzīnuh
fa-ummuhu hāwiya**

As for one whose scales weigh heavy
He is in a pleasing life
And as for one whose scales are light
His mother is hāwiya

Classical *tafsīr* focuses upon *mawāzīn*. It is explained either as a plural of *mīzān* (a balance), in which case it would be interpreted as in the plural out of emphasis rather than indicating more than one balance, or of *mawzūn* (the outcome or judgment of the weighing)¹⁸.

The four verses fall into two pairs, each of which constitute a single statement. Each pair begins with an *ammā man* (as for one who...). In each of the pairs, the *ammā man* verse elicits an implied question and a semantic tension which the *fa* verse answers and releases. The protasis verses, *fa-ammā man* and *wa ammā man*, bring into high relief a phonetic pattern based upon a-sounds and nasalization. In an earlier study of *sūrat al-qadr*¹⁹, I suggested that the nasal/a-sound in the verse-opening expression *innā* was amplified through the phrase that followed (*anzalnā*) in a manner which created a sound-figure out of the /a/ and nasal combination, a sound-figure that carried the sound-sense relation of the onomatopoeic interjection, but without limiting that relation to a single word. The effect would carry across several words. Here we see a similar amplification of a simple conjunction (*ammā*) into a sound-figure through the repetition of its phonological elements. The first *fa-ammā* is preceded by *manfūš* and followed by *man*, giving us: *manfūš / fa-ammā man*. This congealing of a particular nasal + /ā/

¹⁸ The Muʿtazilites and others (Muḡāhid Ḍaḥḥāk, al-Aʿmaš) denied that deeds could be weighed. See Ṭabarī, p. 272, Alūsī, pp. 282-84, and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 32 (Cairo: Itizām ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad, n.d.), p. 73. In ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Quṣayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārat* (Cairo: Al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀma li al-Kitāb, 1983), p. 761, it is suggested that it is the paper on which the deeds are written that is weighed.

¹⁹ «Sound, Spirit, and Gender,» (cited above, n. 5).

sound combination provides a sonic matrix that resonates back toward the beginning of the sura and forward toward the end, echoing with the *mā l*, *mā adrāka mā*, *un-nās*, and with *mā adraka mā hiya*, *nār*.

The *am/mā* combination that begins both question verses, and the *wa* of the *wa ammā man* find an inverse echo in the *mawā* of *mawāzīnuh*. These repeated sound units at the beginning and end of verses 6 and 8 provide a frame for the two key words, *taqulat* and *haffat*. The two verbs are highlighted or marked in several ways:

1) With the exception of the copulative (*yakūn*), they are the only two verbs within the sura. The accumulation of clauses, complexly linked together without a finite verb, has resulted in a sense of tension and expectation, for which these verbs provide a release.

2) As was mentioned above, they occur within a phonological «frame» surrounded by the nasal and long-*a* combinations.

3) They occur in the exact rhythmic and quantitative center of the verse. In each case the crucial verb occurs between identical, *mafāʿilun* feet: $\overset{\wedge}{-} - - - \underline{taqulat} \overset{\wedge}{-} - - - // \overset{\wedge}{-} - - - \underline{haffat} \overset{\wedge}{-} - - -$

4) The phonological and rhythmic character of *taqulat* is further marked:

A) It is the only syntactically correlated anapest within the sura²⁰. B) The central grammatical and rhythmic placement of the term puts special emphasis on its interior phonological make-up: the movement in *taqulat* from high in the throat (*ta*) to low (*qu*) to high (*lat*). The result is a subtle but very effective sense of onomatopoeisis, as if the sounds were congealing and being weighed down as they were spoken. I emphasize here that I am not claiming the word *taqulat* carries such an onomatopoeitic quality in itself, but rather that it takes on such quality through its use and placement in the sura.

5) The term *haffat* also takes on special markings.

A) As a syntactically reinforced spondee at the center of the verse, occurring between two metrically identical phrases, it occupies a rhythmically emphatic position. B) The marking is increased further by the occurrence of *haffat* as the fourth and fifth in a run of five long syllables: *am/mā/man haffat*. As with the similar

²⁰ The only other short, short, long combination occurs at the beginning of verse 4, (*ma ya kūn*), but the sequence is tied lexically and syntactically to the previous and following sound-units and thus the anapestic rhythm is not as strongly marked.

run in verse 5 (*ka-l-‘ihni l-manfūš*) the long syllables allow or compel the reciter to linger over the sound-unit. C) The interior phonological character of *ḥaffat* also becomes underscored by its placement within the sura. The double «ff» in *ḥaffat*, reinforced by its central position in the verse is part of a chain of resonance and echoes of the /f/ within verses 6-9: fa, fa, fi, fa.

6) A special consonance occurs between *taqulat* and *ḥaffat* on the one hand, the expressions *farāš al-mabtūt* and *‘ihni l-manfūš* on the other. The sequence of /f/ /š/ /t/ /t/ /f/ and /š/ in these phrases finds a phonological echo in the fricatives /t/ in *thaqulat* and /f/f/ in *ḥaffat*. In the case of *ḥaffat*, this consonance becomes especially pronounced because of the series of long syllables in which *ḥaffat* occurs (a sequence of long syllables also found in the expressions *farāš al-mabtūt* and *‘ihni l-manfūš* (above, p. 412). These parallels of quantity and consonance reinforce what might otherwise seem to be an accidental semantic parallel. In verses 4-5, the similes hinge around the notions of lightness (as in the scattered moths) and heaviness (as in the mountains). The contrast of lightness and heaviness in verses 6-8 is used to a different purpose. Even so, part of the distinctive effect of the recitation of *ḥaffat* might be due to the phonic and rhythmic resonances just indicated between *ḥaffat* and *farāš al-mabtūt*. The *ḥaffat* picks up through its various markings (phonological, rhythmic, syntactic, and semantic) the sense of vulnerability, fear, or panic that was expressed by the image of the scattered moths. These contextual factors might help explain the association of heaviness with approval and lightness with disapproval, an association the classical commentators found counter-intuitive²¹.

7) Finally, *taqulat* and *ḥaffat*, form an interior closed assonance (*at-at*). The assonance between *taqulat* and *ḥaffat* echoes a similar effect in other *yawm al-dīn* suras: *zulzilāt, aḥrajāt, wa qālāt* (99:1-3), and *infatarāt, intatarāt, suḡḡirat, bu‘īrat* (82:1-4).

Fig. 1 charts some of the resonances that are confined to verses 6-9 proper. {FIG 1}

The ending of the protasis verses, *mawāzīnuh*, carries a vowel sequence: /ā/, /ī/ and the /u/-/h/ combination that emphasizes the /u/ in a way that gives it an analogous (though not identical) sonic

²¹ See the attempts to justify this apparently counter-intuitive association in Alūsī, p. 283.

flavour to the /ū/. Thus we get a movement through the three vowels in Arabic. The protasis verses end with the aspiration, /h/, filling in for the more complete form of the masculine pronoun *hu*. The apodosis verses end (*rāḍiya*, *hāwiya*) with the CāCiCa assonance with which the sura began (*qāriʿa*), but they shift the final consonant of the sequence from /ʿ/ to /y/: *rāḍiya*, *hāwiya*, *mā hiya*, *ḥāmiya*. In each case, the words within the final rhyme are marked as feminine, either as marked feminine participles (*rāḍiya*, *ḥāmiya*), a feminine pronoun (*hiya*), or in the case of *hāwiya*, a feminine participle or substantive depending upon one's interpretation. Because these words are in the final position, the feminine ending (/a/ plus *tāʾ marbūʿa*) is pronounced with an aspiration as *ah*. The words *mā hiyah* are given a final /h/ within the written text, evidently to allow this aspirate reading there as well²². The aspirate pronunciation of the feminine terms in verses 7, 9, 10, 11 sets up an incomplete assonance with the aspirate pronunciation of the masculine pronoun *hu* in verses 6 and 8. In effect, masculine and feminine endings are combined into a special aspirate ending. Gender is further underscored by the unusual use of *rāḍiya*. The tafsir discussions take it in the sense of *marḍiya*, «pleasing to another,» or *dātu riḍā* (having approval) rather than the sense of «one [fem] pleased» that it would take as a participle of *raḍiya*, «to be pleased»²³. The plain sense meaning of the text seems to demand such an interpretation. However, the attempts to justify this grammatically unusual interpretation of *rāḍiya* have resulted in the most tortured explanations²⁴. When viewed from the context of the gender interplay within the sura, the more customary meaning of *rāḍiya*, a participial form for one (fem.) who is pleased—a meaning which is semantically displaced in a very unusual fashion—will echo within the texts as an undertone, and will echo most strongly with that other feminine participial adjective with which it is phonically,

²² As has been pointed out, the aspirate pronunciation of the final *tāʾ marbūʿa*, which is used by contemporary reciters, can be verified by checking the qafiyas of classical poetry, where such endings are often used in rhyme sequence with masculine pronouns (e.g. *amāmahu* rhyming with *al-salāmatu* would be pronounced as *amāmah* and *al-salāmah*). See W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 2:369-70.

²³ See E. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980), part 3, p. 1100.

²⁴ Alūsī, p. 284, gives a clear example of the lengths to which the commentators were forced to go to justify this use of *rāḍiya*.

metrically, and grammatically parallel, *hāwiya*. In order to explore the gender interplay, we will need to move on to the controversial word *hāwiya*, the key word in the sura. Because the interpretation of *hāwiya* is linked to interpretation of verses 10-11, I will discuss it in connection with those final two verses.

5) *Verses 9-11*

**fa-ummuhu hāwiya
wa mā adrāka mā hiyah
nārun ḥāmiya**

His mother is/will be *hāwiya* (or, may his mother be *hāwiya*)

And what can let you know what it/she is

Raging fire

The final three verses return to the hymnic rhythm and phonology of verses 1-3. The verses are short, with the movement from 10 to 11 reversing the movement from 2 to 3. The *mā adrāka mā hiyah* of verse 10 is directly parallel to the *mā adrāka mā l-qāriʿa* of verse 3.

While recalling the first three verses, verses 9-11 also complete the development of verses 6-9. The final question and response contain a syntactical ambivalence similar to that we saw surrounding verses 3-6. The final verse, *nārun ḥāmiya*, can be interpreted to mean either that:

- 1) *Hāwiya* is raging fire
- 2) Raging fire can inform you or has informed you what *hāwiya* is.

At this point we come to the critical word in the sura: *hāwiya*. *Hāwiya* echoes *qāriʿa* in its syntactical placement, its lexical ambiguity, and its rhythmic and phonological patterning. Classical tafsir has offered two basic interpretations of this term. The first interpretation is eschatological, and follows the common pattern of reading as much as possible according to a paradigm of reward and punishment, heaven and hell. The reading adopted in most Western translations takes *umm* as a metaphor for abode or refuge (*maskan*, *maʿwan*, *mustaqarr*), or origin (*aṣl*) and takes *hāwiya* as a synonym for hell (*an-nār*, *ḡahannam*). The passage would mean: «his final abode or refuge is hell.» However, attestations for the term *hāwiya* meaning abyss in early Arabic are tenuous. More strained

is the version of eschatological interpretation that reads the expression as short for *umm raʿsihi hāwiya*. It would mean that the sinner will fall (from *hawā*, to fall headlong) over on the top of his head (*umm raʿsihi*) into the abyss. Justification for the dropping of *raʿsihi* is not given and the assertion that the term *umm* here means *umm raʿsihi* rather than a variety of other possible *umm* expressions is not demonstrated.

Without denying the eschatological resonances of the passage, the second tafsir reading is clearly more grounded in the classical usage of the term and more compelling on literary grounds²⁵. Here *hāwiya* is taken as the active participle of *hawā*, with the meaning: a mother who is bereft of her children. The expression would then mean: «His mother will be bereaved,» or «May his mother be bereaved,» or finally, «His mother is bereaved»²⁶. The meaning of *hāwiya* would undergo a turn in the following expression: *wa mā adrāka mā hiya*²⁷. The expression suggests that it may have an

²⁵ August Fischer, «Eine Qoran-Interpolation,» in Carl Bezold, ed., *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldeke zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag*, vol. 1, pp. 33-55 offers a three-fold division, dividing the eschatological reading into two parts. The first is the *umm raʿsihi* reading. In addition to the editions cited by Fischer, pp. 35-40, this reading can also be found in al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān Fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 9 (Beirut, 1379H), p. 532 and Ibn Kaṭīr, pp. 306-308, who states: *qāla maʿnāhu fahuwa sāqitun hāwin bi ummi raʿsihi fī nāri ḡahannam waʿabbara ʿanhu bi ummihi yaʿani dimāḡihi*, and then traces the tradition to Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿIkrima, Abū Šālih and Qatāda (p. 307). Fischer's second reading takes *umm* as a metaphor for abode or refuge. Fischer and A. Sprenger, *Das Leben die Lehre des Moḡammad* (Berlin, 1861-5) 2:503 favor the third reading in Fischer's division, the one that reads *hāwiya* as the active participle designating a woman bereft of her child.

²⁶ Fischer concludes by suggesting that the meaning of the *hāwiya* verse was not well understood by Muhammad's followers. The reference to *nār*, which Fischer assumes is an unambiguous reference to *ḡahannam*, would have been interpolated into the sura later, either by Muhammad or by one of the early companions, in an effort to make the previous reference to *hāwiya* comprehensible.

²⁷ C.C. Torrey suggests a similar turn in meaning, but he attributes it to Muhammad's alleged fondness for mystifying and borrowed words. The hearer of the recitation would first think of *hāwiya* as the name for a woman bereft of her child. However, «The hearer would see that the threat was far more terrible. *Hāwiya*, instead of being the participial adjective, was a mysterious name of a blazing fire, while *ummuhu* contained the grimly ironical assurance that his acquaintance with *Hāwiya* would not be merely temporary; she would be his permanent keeper and guardian.» C.C. Torrey, «Three Difficult Passages in the Koran,» in T.W. Arnold and R.A. Nicholson, eds. *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1922, reprinted by Philo Press: Amsterdam, 1973), p. 469. Torrey concludes (pp. 469-71) with the suggestion that the term *hāwiya* was taken from Isaiah where *hawwāh*, the fem. participle of the *qāl* stem of *hawah*, «to fall,» appears with the meaning of «disaster.»

extended meaning and intimates that it may be a proper name. The antecedent of *hiya* is marked out as both specific and mysterious.

Hāwiya is framed by semantic openness. It remains multivalent and indeterminate²⁸. While it grounds a number of possible meanings, no single, stable meaning can be attributed to it, even as a «plain sense.» It can be an «abyss» or «a woman who has perished» or «a woman bereft of her child»²⁹, or, after the turn in meaning with the *wa mā adrāka mā hiyah*, the name for a mysterious, feminine-gendered being. The expression *ummuhu hāwiya* can be read as a future (his mother will be *hāwiya*), or as a curse (may his mother be *hāwiya*), or as a simple statement of present fact (his mother is *hāwiya*)³⁰. As was noted above, the syntactical relationship between *fa-ummuhu hāwiya* to the final *nārun ḥamiya* is ambivalent: raging fire

The Torrey-Fischer debate raised the issue of whether *hāwiya* would have to be a diptote if it were a proper name. Torrey, p. 471, states that the word «should of course be written as a diptote,» and that «as originally used, by Mohammed and his followers, it had the ending neither of diptote nor triptote, but merely the rhyming termination *ah*.» The later written text, with nunation, is then attributed to the misunderstanding of later commentators. If we take Torrey's insight concerning the «turn in meaning» more strongly than he intended it, we can explain the change in another way. The word would initially not have been the name of a fire, but rather that participle designating a bereaved mother. The following verses force the hearer to reinterpret the identity of that «mother» and the meaning of the term *hāwiya*, at which points it could take on connotations of a proper name. See also Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥafāḡī, *Hāšiyat al-Šihāb; 'Ināyat al-Qāḡī wa Kifāyat al-Rāḡī 'alā Tafsiṛ al-Bayḡāwī*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dār Šādir, n.d.), 392-93; For a criticism of Torrey's theory of the Isaiah borrowing, see Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1977), p. 286.

²⁸ Philip Wheelwright speaks of the «plurisign» as opposed to the «monosign» as the basic unit of poetic language. He contrasts this plurality of meaning with Empson's «ambiguity» by distinguishing between «both-and» and «either-or.» I use the term «ambiguity» with the assumption that while the two possibilities can seem to offer an «either-or» to the hearer seeking a single meaning, they carry a «both-and» force, a plurisignification or multivalence essential to the literary effect of the passage in which they occur. See P. Wheelwright, «Literary Form and Meaning,» (in Chatman and Levin, cited above, n. 13), pp. 250-263.

²⁹ These meanings are discussed in Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* 15:373. Cf. the fine exposition in Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī: *al-Ġāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 28 (Cairo, 1962), p. 167.

³⁰ The participle can indicate the future in the Qur'an. The key factor is context, and it is often a narrative context that makes the time sequence clear. In a lyrical passage such as that under discussion here, the lack of narrative context allows a plurisignification in the area of time. See also, H. Reckendorf, «Zum Gebrauch des Partizips im Altarabischen» in Carl Bezold, ed., *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldeke zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag* (Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1906), vol. 1, pp. 253-264.

being either that which can tell us what «she is» or that which she, in fact, is.

The turn in meaning from one of the syntactical permutations involving a mother bereaved to the possible personification of the *hāwiya* (what can tell you what *she* is) is rough. It jars the hearer and we might say figuratively that it jars the text, particularly the etymology of the word *hāwiya*. The radical h/w/y is opened up into a variety of connotative possibilities: from *hawā* (desire), *hawā*² (air), *hawā* (to plunge headlong). Certainly the notion of plunging into an abyss is present here, but I would suggest that the reading of that abyss as «the pit» or any spatially and temporally defined place of punishment is a taming of the text. What gives this moment in the text its literary effect is the fact that nowhere is any end to such a falling suggested. It is the act of falling, not some topographically defined place of punishment, that is most prominent.

I have used here the expression «she is» for *mā hiyah*, rather than «it is.» The only references to animate beings have been to collectivities; moths, human beings (*an-nās*). Whether or not *umm* is interpreted as metaphorical, we have here for the first time a lexical sign for an animate, gendered individual. *Ummuhu* is acoustically marked by phonological parallelism; with its double /m/ it carries forward the nasal quality noted in verses 6 and 8 (*ammā man*), but the /a/ has been replaced by the /u/. The seeming personification of *hāwiya*, the turn in its meaning that occurs within the phrase *mā hiyah*, adds to the sense of drama and intimates that the gender structure of the sura may be more than grammatical. Otherwise unremarkable and purely grammatical gender features in the previous verses now resonate in a new key. The indefinite pronoun *man* of verses 6 and 8 is in itself gender non-specific, but it governs a pronoun, *huwa* or *hu*, which is masculine/neuter. The gender is then balanced by the feminine gender of the main terms in the responding verses 7 and 9: *fa-huwa fī ʿiṣātin rāḍiya*, and *fa ummuhu hāwiya*. We have then a formal opposition masculine/feminine //masculine/feminine. While the plain sense of *rāḍiya* in verse 7 demands interpreting the words as *marḍiyya* or *ḍātu riḍā*, the grammatical difficulties (above, n. 26) combine with the overall gender interplay and with the parallelism *rāḍiya/hāwiya* to allow the more natural meaning of *rāḍiya* to sound as an undertone. We have two active participles, which in their most immediate

appearance would refer to one [fem] who is content and one [fem] who is bereft of her child. In the first case, the meaning of a contented woman is displaced by the context, a displacement explained only by elaborate grammatical manoeuvres. In the second case, the meaning of a woman bereft of her child is allowed a temporary semantic validation, only to be intensified to the point of personification.

These possibilities can be heard in the acoustic resonances generated by the term *hāwiya*. The converging semantic and acoustic stress not only jars loose the word's etymological associations, it can also be said to *break the word apart*. The elements of the word are thus able to form translexical and transmorphic patterns that function as sound-figures within the sura. The first sound-figure operates as a gender undertone. The syllable that follows *ummuhu*, the *hā* of *hāwiya*, repeats the /h/ of *hu* but follows it with an /ā/ rather than a /u/. The result is the sequence *hu hā*: i.e. the masculine pronoun suffix followed by a sound unit that, were it taken independently, would be the feminine pronoun suffix. Although the *hā* is not to be taken independently at the level of surface semantics, its position in the sura and the phonological and gender resonances of which it is the matrix allow it to be heard as an undertone in a way that *frees it temporarily from its lexical base*. The second sound-figure is emotive. The *hā* of *hāwiya* can take on the emotive connotations of phonologically parallel and homonymic interjections: *hā*, *hāh*, *ayyuhā*. In order to illustrate how the *hāwiya* can generate such transmorphic sound-figures, it will be helpful to make a list of the various forces converging upon it.

1) The final rhyme in a pronounced aspiration, /h/, is distinctive in that it can allow the masculine pronominal suffix and the feminine participial marking to be pronounced in the same manner. Such a collapse of normally incompatible gender signs brings the issue of gender marking to a more prominent role. Just in case the gender issue might have been lost on the hearer, two examples of the masculine pronominal suffix, pronounced as /h/, are placed in an alternating sequence with the main rhyme. Further dramatizing the issue is the /h/ at the end of *hiyah*, which has no grammatical function and which the commentators are at a loss to explain beyond attributing it to a dialectical difference.

2) The complex verse-ending assonance that occurred in verses 1-3, 7, and 9 (open a /short i/ya), is tied into the final two verses

in a rhythmic culmination: *qāriʿa/qāriʿa/qāriʿa/rāḍiya/hāwīya/mā hiyah/hāmiya*. As the verses become shorter at the end, the assonance takes on an increased tempo and a more hymnic intensity.

3) The /ā/ in *hāwīya*, *mā hiyah*, *hāmiya* occurs in the most highly marked of all rhythmic positions: the accented syllable in a complex, multisyllabic, end-verse assonance.

4) The charge that the /ā/ picks up from its position and repetition in verses 9-11 is further amplified by the dominant role of /ā/ throughout the sura. The syllables in which /ā/ occurs, *rā*, *hā*, *mā*, and *hā*, take on a particularly high degree of rhythmic and phonological stress.

5) The combination of /ā/ with nasals and aspirates, (*mā*, *nā*) and (*hā* and *hā*), that occurs in the final verses *hāwīya*, *mā hiyah*, *nārūn hāmiya*) is charged not only by the phonological patterns of *sūrat al-qāriʿa* (see, for example, the discussion of verses 6, 8, above), but by similar patterns in other parallel passages in the Qurʿan. Similar gender and emotive sound-figures are to be found in other *yawm al-dīn* suras, such as *sūrat al-zalzala*, where an implicit personification of the feminine *al-ard* (earth) sounds through the sound-figures built around *hā* and *mā*, with semantic intimations of insemination and birth³¹. *Sūrat al-qadr*, which concerns Muhammad's reception of the prophetic revelation, is constructed around the play of the grammatically feminine field of *laylat al-qadr*, with the sound-figures centering around the expressions *rūhu fiḥā* (the spirit within it/her) and *salāmun hiya* (peace it/she is). Throughout the sura, a partial personification of the night, with undertones of insemination and con-

³¹ In balance with the cosmic metaphor of a final quaking of the earth, we can hear the intimation of a birth, with the connotation of one speaking about a woman in birth pangs: *wa qāl al-insānu mā lahā* (and someone says what is with it/her). The majority of verses in this sura end with the complex assonance *Cālahā* or the variant *Cārahā*. In each case, the final sound *hā* is the third person feminine pronominal suffix, which creates a strong gender marking at the verse ends, a gender marking that is balanced by the final, aspirate /h/ in the final verses (*jarah*), which stands for the masculine pronominal suffix *hu*. The *mā*, with its marked position as the accented syllable of the end-verse assonance, takes on a particularly strong charge, one quite similar to the *mā* in *mā hiya* in *sūrat al-qāriʿa*. Two verses later in the same sura, the acoustics of *sūrat al-qāriʿa* are recalled, along with intimations of the theme of insemination and birth: *bi ʿanna rabbaka awḥā lahā* (how your lord inspired in it/her). Here the *hā* and the *hā* in *awḥā lahā* form the same kind of aspirate/long-*a* that is heard in the *hāwīya/hāmiya* interplay.

ception, can be heard in sound-figures centering upon *hā* and *mā*³². The first three verses of *sūrat al-layl* contain a similar sound-figure based up on the sound unit *mā* and the assonance build around the /ā/, a sound-figure that occurs within a passage concerned with the creation of gender³³. Similar passages are to be found in accounts of the creation of the primordial human (*insān*, *baṣār*) and the creation of Jesus³⁴.

These references should at least illustrate the interaction between phonology and gender across a number of closely parallel Qurʾanic

³² When such interplay is heightened by the affective intensity of long-a's and various forms of parallelism, the feminine pronoun in phrases such as *rūḥu fihā* (spirit in it/her or upon it/her) and *salāmun hiya* (peace it/she is) becomes underscored. The constant sense that the passage is on the verge of breaking into personification of night as a woman infuses phrases like *rūḥu fihā* and *anzalnāhu fī* (we send it/him down on/down in) with the possibility of an implicit metaphor of prophecy as insemination or conception. In the interaction of *rūḥu fihā* and *hu fī*, an interaction I have charted as it resonates down the central axis of the sura, we have another combination of aspirates around a gender play with both grammatical and natural overtones. See «Sound, Spirit, and Gender,» pp. 246-52.

³³ *Wa l-layli idā yağšā*
Wa l-nahāri idā tağallā
Wa mā ḥalāqa l-dakarā wa l-unṭā

By the night when it shrouds
 And the day when it reveals
 And what created the male and the female.

Though most commentators and translators have read the *mā* in *mā ḥalāqa* as merely a substitute for *man* (by him who created), I have argued that the *mā*, which is intricately bound up with gender interplay across a number of suras, can be interpreted in a manner that preserves its distinctive textual integrity. To translate as masculine that which creates the masculine and the feminine not only does violence to the meaning of the text, but loses the tension between the relative and interrogative sense of *mā* and the tension between the male and the female, that are operative in these verses. Ibid, pp. 256-59. This tension is bound up, as both cause and effect, with the sense that the final, rhyming /ā/ in these verses takes on a gender charge as an undertone. In the first two cases (*yağšā* and *tağallā*) the /ā/ is part of the radical and forms the imperfect, unmarked masculine ending of the two verbs. In the third case, the /ā/ in *unṭā* is the natural feminine ending. Its placement in the rhyme and phonological sequence charges it to the point that it seems to become a kind of sound-figure for the feminine itself. For linguistic studies of gender in Arabic, see Muhammad Hasan Ibrahim, *Grammatical Gender* (Le Hague: Mouton, 1973); A. J. Wensinck, «Some Aspects of Gender in the Semitic Languages,» *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam*, Afdeling Letterkunde 26 (1927): 1-60; L. Drozdik, «Grammatical Gender in Arabic Nouns,» *Graeco-latina et Orientalia* 5 (1973): 217-246; M. Féghali and A. Cuny, *Du genre grammatical en sémitique* (Paris: 1924).

³⁴ 15:29, 32:9 for the primordial human, and 21:91, 66:12: and 19:7 for Jesus.

passages, with similar sound-complexes at the heart of each, and with similar semantic undertones. The implied insemination of the night of *qadr*, the implied birth metaphor behind the final quaking of the earth, the insemination of the primordial mud with the resultant birth of the human, the conception of Jesus by Maryam through the spirit...all resonate with the last verses of *sūrat al-qāri‘a*. «*Ummuhu hāwiya*,» especially in its multivalent temporal frame and its implication of an irrevocable state, suggests in this intertextual context an impossible existence, a being born out of air, desire, an ontological abyss, a curse, a birth gone wrong.

It is in this charged context that the key word *hāwiya* is broken into transmorphemic and translexical sound-figures and the sound unit *hā* becomes multivalent. To listen to a reciter at this point is to hear several possibilities in one enunciation: 1) *hā* as part of the word *hāwiya*; 2) *hā* as an emotive sound-figure that can be pronounced with the same sense of sorrow (*huzn*) as might be found in its partially homonymic interjections, such as *hāwin*; 3) *hā* as a sound-figure for the feminine, an implicit partial personification that haunts the text and is conjured into a more pronounced expression at this point. The tension built up through this play is then resolved through the phonologically, rhythmically, and syntactically emphatic final expression, *nārun ḥāmiya*, but this rhetorical closure never results in any semantic closure³⁵.

The word *nārun* brings to a culmination the interplay of long-*a* sounds between the non-pharyngeal and the pharyngeal that occurs throughout the sura. In *nārun*, the pharyngeal consonant follows rather than precedes the long-*a*. The /r/ exerts a strong pressure

³⁵ A fourth sense, that of the demonstrative *hā* of *hādā*, comes into play in other Qur’anic passages and may also be operative here. For some Western work on «orchestration,» the rough equivalent of the Arabic *tawāzun*, see Cf. J.J. Lynch, in «The Tonality of Lyric Poetry: An Experiment in Method,» *Word IX* (1953), 211-224, whose goal is «first to discover the total effect of the poem’s euphony or tonality or musicality, or what Professor Wellek, following the Russian Formalists, calls ‘orchestration,’ and second, to relate its findings to ‘meaning’ in such a way that it can be seen how the poem’s phonemic tonality supports and contributes to its prose and poetic statement.» Lynch focuses upon how a climactic word in a sonnet (for example, «Silent» in Keat’s «On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer,») sums up both the theme and the dominant sound structure of the poem. In *sūrat al-qāri‘a*, a case could be made for *hāwiya*, *mā hiya*, or *nārun ḥāmiya*, as culmination of the phonological movements within the sura, but it is *hāwiya* that brings both the acoustic and semantic movements of the poem to a simultaneous culmination.

upon the long-*a*, a pressure resisted by Qurʾanic reciters in a manner that heightens the sense of tension between the pharyngeal and non-pharyngeal. *Nār* and *hāwiya* form a pair of terms that both contrast with and complement one another. The connotations of wind and air contained within the word *hāwiya* are in contrast to fire, air and fire being two separate, primary elements. Yet wind and air fan fires: the combination of the two elements causes a fire to rage. Rather than being mere synonyms, *hāwiya* and *nār* can be heard in a complex syntactic, acoustic, emotive, and symbolic interaction with one another. The last verse takes on a particularly strong grammatical closure because of the way the two *mā adrāka mā* clauses function in the sura. We recall that in the first instance, the primary interpretive possibility for the accusative *yawma* («on a day that...») deferred any answer to the question. The second instance of the question clause reminds us that an answer to the initial question was deferred, and by doing so adds to the tension caused by that deferral. The final phrase is grammatically climactic. It answers the question, but leaves open the ambiguity as to what question it answers. Is raging fire what it/she (*hāwiya*) is or is it what can tell us what it/she is?

The classical tafsir assumes the reference to fire is a reference to *the* fire, hell³⁶, an unsurprising assumption in view of the many passages in the Qurʾan where *an-nār* is connected with *ḡahannam* as a place of future punishment. The point here is that the meaning of *sūrat al-qāriʿa*, although it may well contain such a possibility, need not be seen as *confined* to it³⁷. The sura contains not the

³⁶ Ahmed Ali, p. 548, translates it as definite and also eliminates the final syntactical ambiguity: «How will you comprehend what it is/It is the scorching fire.» Fischer makes the same assumption.

³⁷ While there is justification in the Qurʾan for understanding fire in terms of «the fire» and the fire in terms of *ḡahannam*, the literary-critical question would be: why the term *nārun hāmiya* at this particular point? Such a question invites an investigation of the expression on its own, *without* an a-priori theological lense. That the good shall be rewarded and the evil punished, and that this shall occur in some form of heaven and hell or the equivalent, is one of the major commonplaces within religious traditions, especially at the popular level. To explain the sura through such a commonplace is to tell us little about its distinctive literary texture. The interpretive focus of early tafsir upon heaven and hell is a fact of Islamic history. To acknowledge this strand of interpretation, however, is not the same as granting it exclusive privilege over a complex and multivalent primary text. In this regard, see the «working hypotheses» for Qurʾanic interpretation outlined by Mohammad Arkoun, «pour un remembrement de la conscience islamique,» *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran,

definite «the fire» (*an-nāru l-hāmiya*), but the indefinite, «fire» (*nārun hāmiya*). It is not necessary to assume that this phrase refers exclusively to hell as a specific abode of future, eternal punishment³⁸. Mentioned above was the tendency within the classical tafsir to interpret a complex lexical and semantic range through a schematized heaven and hell discourse. The commentators call terms like *hāwiya* «names for *ġahannam*» (*asmāʾ min asmāʾ ġahannam*, or «names for the fire» (*min asmāʾ an-nār*), and call terms like *qārīʿa* «names for the day of resurrection,» *min asmāʾ yawmi al-qiyāma*³⁹. If these *min asmāʾ* expressions are taken to refer to terms as mere synonyms—*hāwiya* as synonymous with fire, the fire as synonymous with *ġahannam*—the semantic reduction is complete. Key words (*qārīʿa*, *hāwiya*) become mere stand-ins for *an-nār*, and the reading of *an-nār* is reified into a temporally and spatially defined site of punishment. Other key lexical, morphological, syntactical,

1977), pp. 194-95. Of special interest are no. 3, «Le Coran est un texte ouvert qu'aucune interprétation ne peut clore [emphasis Arkoun's] de façon définitive...» and no. 4, «En droit, le texte coranique ne peut être réduit à une idéologie, car il traite, en particulier, des situations-limites de la condition humaine.»

³⁸ Fischer links the first two trends with the exegetical tendency to reify Qurʾanic vocabulary in the *yawm ad-dīn* suras into temporally and spatially defined regions of hell, a tendency that was already well established in some of the earlier tafsir traditions. For example, *hāwiya* was said to be one of the seven «doors of hell» of Sura 15:44. See the citations from Ṭabarī and Zamaḥṣārī in Fischer, p. 43. An even more striking example of this reification of Qurʾanic terms into a pre-set topography of heaven and hell is the interpretation of the common Qurʾanic word *wayl* (woe to, as in 2:73) as a particular wadi in *ġahannam*. A. Fischer, «Zu Sūra 101, 6,» *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 60 (1904): 371-74. The classical tafsir is relentless in its effort to make everything in the sura fit a heaven and hell framework. Ṭabarī ascribes to Qatāda the interpretation that *fī ʿiṣātin rāḍiya* «means [he is] in paradise» (*yaʿani fī ġanna*). Ṭabarī, p. 282. And a tradition ascribed to Muqātil departs from any information provided in *sūrat al-qārīʿa* itself to explain *al-qārīʿa* as a reference to the torture (*ʿaḍāb*) of the damned: «the enemies of Allah will be struck with the torture.» See Nizām al-Dīn al-Hasan ibn Muḥammad Nisābūrī, *Garāʾib al-Qurʾān wa Raġāʾib al-Furqān*, vol. 30 (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1962—), p. 164. Rāzī (p. 72) relates traditions that take this emphasis upon hell and torture even further. Thus, the scattered moths are only a partial likeness to the damned, since moths will not be tortured as the damned will be! For another discussion of how eschatological concerns overwhelm interpretation in the early tafsir, see Uri Rubin, «Abū Lahab and Sura CXI», *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 42 (1979): 13-28.

³⁹ These phrases occur continually through the *tafsīr*. The phrase *al-qārīʿa min asmāʾi yawmi l-qiyāma* occurs in Quṣayrī, p. 755, Ibn Kaṭīr, p. 356, Ṭabarī, p. 281, Ṭabarsī, p. 532. For the same phrase applied to *hāwiya*, see Rāzī, p. 74, Nisābūrī, p. 165, Ibn Kaṭīr, p. 358, Ḥāzin, *Lubāb al-Taʾwīl*, and al-Ḥātib al-Širbīnī, *Al-Sirāġ al-Munīr* (cited by Fischer, p. 38), and *Lisān al-ʿArab* (15:373).

rhythmic, phonological, and semantic features become no more than exterior devices, redundant or decorative, cut off from any vital relationship to the explicated meaning of the sura, or they are ascribed to exterior factors such as borrowing from the Biblical tradition or deformations caused by the compilation of the Qurʾanic texts⁴⁰. The way is paved for Hirschfeld's judgement that descriptions of the day of judgement scarcely differ from one another.

There is no evidence within *sūrat al-qāriʿa* to make reading *nār* as *an-nār* the only valid meaning. It is simple fire, an *indefinite* raging fire, which fits more closely the actual words of the text and which deserves more attention as an interpretive possibility. After all, it would seem a basic principle of *iʿgāz al-qurʾān* that what must be accounted for in the text is the words that are there, *as they are*, not as we might emend them through interpretation. The reading of the indefinite *nārūn* as indefinite becomes especially interesting when we return to the question of time. There are no explicit future markers in the sura. The present participle or other locutions without explicit future markers can be used for a future event, but in such cases there often is a contextual clue which points to the futurity⁴¹. In *sūrat al-qāriʿa* no such narrative context is present. Just as the reference to a fire in the last verse can be interpreted through other Qurʾanic references to the fire as denoting *ḡahannam*, so the references to «a day on which...» *can be* interpreted through other Qurʾanic passages as references to the future day of judgment. But such a reading may not exhaust the meaning of the sura.

At the heart of *sūrat al-qāriʿa* is an ontological reversal found in other early *yawm al-dīn* suras. What seems secure, the structure of the cosmos, the oceans, the heavens, the grave, the sphere of the earth itself, or here, the mountains and the social organization of human life (*an-nās*), is torn away. What might seem insignificant, a mote's weight of kindness or meanness (*sūrat al-zalzala*), what one

⁴⁰ Bell, for example, without any explanation, declares that *sūrat al-qāriʿa* is a fragment or series of fragments. Richard Bell, *The Qurʾan: Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1937, 1960), 674. Even so, Bell, of all the translators, is particularly careful to avoid semantic reduction in the translation proper, keeping the indefinite «fire,» refraining from translating *hāwiya*, and preserving the syntactical rhythms of the original.

⁴¹ Thus, when the divine voice announces to the angels that he is about to create a regent (*halīfa*), the narrative context of the episode allows us to impute a future sense to the present participle (2:30-33).

might have given or held back (*sūrat al-infiṭār*), becomes the ground of existence, an ontological absolute. This reversal can be placed in a future time and space. It can be placed in a hypothetical time⁴². It can be placed in an «eternal now,» within or behind the present moment, rather than in linear sequence after it⁴³.

The classical tafsir focused upon the quality of threat (*waʿd*) within *sūrat al-qārīʿa*. This analysis has emphasized other qualities. The text draws the hearer into a world of elemental transformations. Through performative mimesis, language reenacts the event in question. At the key point in the text, the language opens up around a semantic abyss. The event takes on immediacy. It is this immediacy that may account for the reactions of those as diverse as Nöldeke (above, p. 403), who describes the effect of the sura as making one feel «as if he saw with his own eyes,» and Faḥr al-Dīn Rāzī who speaks of the word *qārīʿa* as overpowering «our hearts with the sense of awe»⁴⁴.

Two other interrelated quantities are implicated in the above discussion of sound-figures: *ḥuzn* (sadness) and intimacy. The proclamatory aspects of the text, the strange vocabulary, the semantic gaps, the cosmic perspective, establish a distance between text and audience. However, within the elusive discourse of sound-figures, something very different occurs. As the proclamatory surface of the text «breaks apart» into the sound-figures clustered around simple, basic sound-units such as *hā* and *mā*, a new mode of discourse is heard: whisperings, intimations, inferences, highly personal intonations of emotion and gender; it is as if the speaker, the hearer, and the subject of discourse were intimately known to one another. At this point, the immediacy of the text translates itself into sadness rather than awe, the sadness that comes with a personal realization of unavoidable loss. In this more personal mode of immediacy, or *nowness*, fear is replaced by grief⁴⁵. This com-

⁴² For a similar view of Qurʿanic eschatology, one arrived at through a very different kind of analysis, see Norman O. Brown, «The Apocalypse of Islam,» *Social Text* 3:8 (1983-4): 155-171.

⁴³ This is the perspective that dominates Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, edited with commentary by A.A. Afifi, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1946).

⁴⁴ Rāzī, p. 71: *tahḡumu ʿalā l-qulūbi bi l-ʿamri l-hāʿil*.

⁴⁵ *Ḥuzn* is acknowledged by Qurʿanic reciters as a major element in the recitation, and the classical writers refer to it anecdotally. At times it is reduced to merely a subservient category to *waʿd*. See al-Suyūṭī (*al-Itqān*, cited above, n. 6)

bination of a sense of awe with interior whisperings of intimacy and sadness may help account for the broadness of the sura's literary appeal (admired by classical exegetes and non-Muslim orientalist alike) and well as its distinctiveness as a form of apocalyptic discourse⁴⁶.

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1:371-72 and Nelson (*The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*, cited above, n. 4), pp. 89-100. This essay suggests that sadness is not an aspect of threat, but is evoked at the moment that threat opens onto more complex emotive possibilities through the transformation of semantic and temporal categories.

A related issue is raised by the commonly remarked emotive effects of Qur'anic recitation upon those said to be unlearned in the meaning of the text. Two points are stressed here. First, even though in such cases sound seems to take on an independent quality, it is doubtful that such effects occur with *no* relation to meaning. It is quite possible to be formally unversed in the grammar and vocabulary of a text, but to grasp it semantically in other ways, through having heard it paraphrased, through its repeated, ritual connection to certain moments, activities, retellings, and events. Secondly, the emotive power of Qur'anic recitation on those without formal understanding of the text makes even more urgent a better understanding of Qur'anic sound, even and especially when it is tied to semantics in purely informal ways. Such issues lead beyond the scope of a purely literary study to a literary and anthropological investigation into the variety of ways in which the Qur'an is heard, learned, and taken to heart.

⁴⁶ The sura may well share apocalyptic elements, common themes, images, and even vocabulary with other literatures or traditions. But the literary effect achieved is due to the specific employment within the sura of a complex set of interpermeating discursive modes. In calling this style distinctive, I am not suggesting it is unique. Such a claim would demand detailed comparative analysis with all the relevant apocalyptic material that has survived and all that may have been lost.