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SOUND AND MEANING IN
SŪRAT AL-QĀRĪ'A

BY

MICHAEL SELLS

The short suras from the last section of the Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān, 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-qārī'a. 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 studies ⁴, but


² Hartwig Hirschfeld, New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Quran (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 tawāzūn or textual Arabica, Tome XL, 1993, © E.J. Brill, Leiden

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 Qur'anic discourse. (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, onomatopoeia. 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 Qur'anic passages is even more implicated in such non-metrical phonological features than is lyric poetry. Although some classical scholars, such as Ibn al-Aṭīr, have analysed Qur'anic discourse according to the conventions of *ṣāj*, such analysis touches only incidentally upon the sound-figures discussed here. The conventions of *ṭağwīd* are viewed here as part of the oral text of the Qur'an and as an index of certain key phonological features. (3) **The emotive mode** is made up of sounds and sound-units, that through their particular deployment within the sura,

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6 For a good exposition of this issue, see Devin Stewart, "*Ṣāj* in the Qur'ān: 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-waṣīl*), 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 *ṣāj* in a manner similar to their play against syntax. See Ġalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān al-CUlu-m al-Qur'dn*, 4 vols. (Manṣūrat Rādī, 1984) 3:332-360 and Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Al-Matal al-Sā'dir fi Adab al-Kātib wa al-Sā'dir*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktatabat Nahdat Miṣr, 1959-62) 1:270-342.

7 Qur'anic recitation will be treated here on the ideal level, as formulated in the rules of *ṭağwīd* and applied in the basic style preserved in the *muqattal* 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 Qur'an, the question of possible historical evolution in recitation is of secondary interest to the question posed here, i.e., how the Qur'an 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 categories 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, transmorphemic 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 meaning. Third, no sound-unit automatically engenders a com-

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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 Mepham (Cambridge, Ma., 1978), p. 109.
pelling 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 Qur'anic 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 Qur'anic 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 Qur'anic passage.  

In regard to sound and meaning in the Qur'anic 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 Dolezel, 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 Qur'anic 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 Qurˈanic 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-mabṭūt
5 wa takūnu l-ḡibālu ka l-‘ihni l-manfūṣ
6 fa ammā man ṭaḥqulat mawāzīnuh
7 fa huwa fī ẓiṣatin rādiya
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
(~ = ǧunnā)

¹¹ Translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the author.
The sura begins and ends with words (qārī‘a 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, ḥaf-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 (/lāl/ līl/ ya) falls at the end of verses 7 and 9 (rādiya, 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 accessional and metric rhythm. The original rhyme is set in the CāCiCa pattern, with a feminine noun (qārī‘a) with a marked feminine ending. After the end-assonance of ūl-ūš in verses 4-5, the original rhyme of verses 1-3 returns in verses 7, 9, 10, 11: qārī‘a, qārī‘a, qārī‘a, rādiya, hāwiya, mā hīya, and hāmiya, the last four rhyme-units being based upon the CāCiyā pattern.

Verses 1-3

al-qārī‘a
mā l-qārī‘a
wa mā adrāka mā l-qārī‘a

The qārī‘a
What is the qārī‘a
What can let you know what the qārī‘a 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. \textit{Lisān al-\textsuperscript{\`A}rab} gives the radical \textit{q-r-c} a wide range of meanings having to do with striking, hitting, shocking, and breaking, but the particular form \textit{qārī\`a} is not widely attested\textsuperscript{12}. The radical \textit{q-r-c} appears in only two other Qur\textsuperscript{n}anic passages, and in those two passages no more information is supplied as to its meaning\textsuperscript{13}. To this lexical indeterminacy is added syntactical indeterminacy: in verse 1, the phrase \textit{al-qārī\`a} appears without any apparent function in a sentence. In verse 2, the lexical indeterminacy is acknowledged through the question «what is the \textit{qārī\`a}?» The locution \textit{mā adrākā mā} (what can tell) of verse 3 is used in the Qur\textsuperscript{n}an 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 \textit{mā adrākā 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 pharyngealized\textsuperscript{14} and non-pharyngealized /\textipa{\textashape{a}}/: \textit{ma}, \textit{qa}, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibn Man\textsuperscript{\`u}r, \textit{Lisān al-\textsuperscript{\`A}rab} (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir) 8: 262-270.
\textsuperscript{13} The two passages are 13:31 and 69:4. The latter begins with the statement, \textit{kag\textashape{d}abat tamī\textashape{d}u wa\textashape{d}’ād bi l-qārī\`a} (Thamud and ʾAd denied the \textit{qārī\`a}). The passage goes on to elaborate on the subsequent destruction of Thamud and ʾAd without giving any more information concerning what it was exactly that those ancient civilizations denied. It is clearly something related to the \textit{ḥāqa}, but then that term is given the exact same \textit{mā adrākā mā} mark of semantic openness, in the exact same semantic and acoustical configuration: \textit{al-ḥāqa}, \textit{ma l-ḥāqa}, \textit{wa mā adrākā mā l-ḥāqa}, as we find in \textit{sūrat al-qārī\`a}.
\textsuperscript{14} Other examples of the charged long-\textit{a} within the Qur\textsuperscript{n}an could be cited. Perhaps the most famous is the \textit{tahlīl}, the Qur\textsuperscript{n}anic phrase «lā ilāh illā ilāh.»
Verses 4-5:

yawma yakūnu n-nāsu ka-l-farāšī l-mabṭūt
wa takūnu l-ḡibālu ka-l-ʿihni 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 Qur'anic 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-nāṣ, ᵬⁱⁿḤⁱ ᵱʰ⁻ᵐᵃⁿᶠūˢ). The /ā/ also appears (nāṣ, farāšī, ḡibālu). The phonological parallelism between the two verses is built upon the intricate interaction between «a» and «u».

The phrases al-farāšī l-mabṭūt and al-ʿihni 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 mafūl form in mabṭūt and manfūš and oblique assonance (ʿuf-ūš). The combination of the stop /b/ and the fricative /th/ in mabṭūt is underscored by the taḡwīd convention of qalqala, a slight tripping achieved through the insertion of an anaptyctic vowel. Similarly, the nasalizing that occurs in the /n/ and /l/ combination of manfūš is underscored by the taḡwīd convention of ḯḫʕāʔ. These effects are enhanced by the runs of long syllables (rāš al-mabṭūt, ᵱᵃʳⁱᵉ ʰⁱⁿḤⁱ ʰⁱⁿḤⁱ 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 má ṣadrāka má 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-qāri‘a 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 case ¹⁶: 1) Y can tell you what the X (the qāri‘a) is or 2) the qāri‘a is Y. The classical tafsir tends to reduce this ambiguity to «the qāri‘a 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 unwarranted ¹⁷. 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 Qur‘an. 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-fāṣl, a warning, wayylun!, to those who disbelieve); 82:17 (yawmu d-dān, yawma, in the same accusative case we find in sūrat al-qāri‘a); 83:8 (ṣiqqīn, a nominative, kitabuin marqūm, which could indicate what can tell what ṣiqqīn is, though it is usually interpreted as «ṣiqqīn is a written record» in line with the standard mā adrāka mā interpretation); 86:2 (at-tāriq, a noun in the nominative); 90:12 (al-‘aqaba, a noun in the nominative); 97:2 (laylatu l-qadr, a nominal sentence); 104:5 (al-ḥuṣama, a noun in the nominative).
¹⁷ Mahmūd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Alūsī, Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-ʿAzīm, vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1978), 85; is most explicit, interpreting the final verse as meaning «she/it is a fire» (hiya nārun). Muhammad ibn Ḥarīr al-Ṭabarī, Gāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Tāwīl al-Qur’ān, vol. 30 (Cairo, 1953), 280-83, takes special pains in his paraphrase to remove all syntactical ambiguity: «Then he [the divine author of the Qur‘ān] made clear what she/it was, and said, she/it is a raging fire»: Tumma bayyana mā hiya fa qāla hiya nārun hāmiya. For a tafsīr discussion that does preserve the ambiguity of the passage, see Ismā’il Ḥaqqī Bursevi, Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Bayān, vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), p. 499.
Verses 6-7, and 8-9

fa-amma man taqulat mawâzînuhu
fa-huwa fî ‘îsatin râdiyya
wa amma man haffat mawâzînuhu
fa-ummuhu hâwiyya

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

Classical tafsîr focuses upon mawâzîn. It is explained either as a plural of mizân (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 mawzûn (the outcome or judgment of the weighing)\(^\text{18}\).

The four verses fall into two pairs, each of which constitute a single statement. Each pair begins with an amma man (as for one who...). In each of the pairs, the amma man verse elicits an implied question and a semantic tension which the fa verse answers and releases. The protasis verses, fa-amma man and wa amma man, bring into high relief a phonetic pattern based upon a-sounds and nasalization. In an earlier study of sûrat al-qadr\(^\text{19}\), I suggested that the nasal/a-sound in the verse-opening expression inna was amplified through the phrase that followed (anzalnâ) 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 onomatopoetic 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 (amma) into a sound-figure through the repetition of its phonological elements. The first fa-amma is preceded by manfûš and followed by man, giving us: manfûš / fa-amma man. This congealing of a particular nasal + /ā/
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, mafā'tilun feet: A - - - taqulat ^ - - - / / A - - - haffat ^ - - -

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 (tā) to low (qu) to high (lāt). The result is a subtle but very effective sense of onomatopoeis, 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 onomatopoetic 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 anapastic rhythm is not as strongly marked.
run in verse 5 (ka-l-‘ihni l-manfūş) the long syllables allow or compel
the reciter to linger over the sound-unit. C) The interior
phonological character of *haffat* also becomes underscored by its
placement within the sura. The double «ff» in *haffat*, reinforced by
its central position in the verse is part of a chain of resonance and
echoes of the /ff/ within verses 6-9: fa, fa, fi, fa.

6) A special consonance occurs between *taqulat* and *haffat* on the
one hand, the expressions *farāš al-mabṭūt* and ‘*ihni l-manfūş* on the
other. The sequence of /f/ /s/ /t/ /t/ /f/ and /s/ in these phrases finds
a phonological echo in the fricatives /t/ in *thaqulat* and /f/ /f/ in *haffat*.
In the case of *haffat*, this consonance becomes especially pro-
nounced because of the series of long syllables in which *haffat* occurs
(a sequence of long syllables also found in the expressions *farāš al-
mabṭūt* and ‘*ihni l-manfūş* (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 *haffat* might be due to the phonic and
rhythmic resonances just indicated between *haffat* and *farāš al-
mabṭūt*. The *haffat* 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 disap-
proval, an association the classical commentators found counter-
intuitive.\(^{21}\)

7) Finally, *taqulat* and *haffat*, form an interior closed assonance
(at-at). The assonance between *taqulat* and *haffat* echoes a similar
effect in other *yawm al-dīn* suras: *zulzilat*, *ahrajat*, *wa qālat* (99:1-3),
and *infatrat*, *intatarat*, *suggirat*, *buctirat* (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, *mawāzinuh*, 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 Alūśī, 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 (radīya, hāwiya) with the CaCiCa assonance with which the sura began (qārī‘a), but they shift the final consonant of the sequence from /ī/ to /y/: radīya, hāwiya, mā hīya, hāmiya. In each case, the words within the final rhyme are marked as feminine, either as marked feminine participles (radīya, hāmiya,), 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 ta’ marbūta) is pronounced with an aspiration as ah. The words mā hīyā are given a final /h/ within the written text, evidently to allow this aspirate reading there as well. 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 radīya. The tafsir discussions take it in the sense of marūiya, «pleasing to another,» or dātu ridā (having approval) rather than the sense of «one [fem] pleased» that it would take as a participle of radīya, «to be pleased».

The plain sense meaning of the text seems to demand such an interpretation. However, the attempts to justify this grammatically unusual interpretation of radīya have resulted in the most tortured explanations. When viewed from the context of the gender interplay within the sura, the more customary meaning of radīya, 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,

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22 As has been pointed out, the aspirate pronunciation of the final tā’ marbūta, 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. amāmah 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.


24 Alūsī, p. 284, gives a clear example of the lengths to which the commentators were forced to go to justify this use of radīya.
metrically, and grammatically parallel, ḥāwiya. In order to explore the gender interplay, we will need to move on to the controversial word ḥāwiya, the key word in the sura. Because the interpretation of ḥāwiya is linked to interpretation of verses 10-11, I will discuss it in connection with those final two verses.

5) Verses 9-11

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{fa-ummuhu hāwiya} \\
\text{wa mā adrāka mā hiyah} \\
\text{nārun ḥāmiya}
\end{align*}
\]

His mother is/will be ḥāwiya (or, may his mother be ḥāwiya)
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) Ḥāwiya is raging fire
2) Raging fire can inform you or has informed you what ḥāwiya is.

At this point we come to the critical word in the sura: ḥāwiya. Ḥāwiya 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 ʿumm as a metaphor for abode or refuge (maskan, maʿwān, mustaqarr), or origin (aṣl) and takes ḥāwiya as a synonym for hell (an-nār, ǧahannam). The passage would mean: «his final abode or refuge is hell.» However, attestations for the term ḥāwiya meaning abyss in early Arabic are tenuous. More strained
is the version of eschatological interpretation that reads the expression as short for *umm ra’sihi hawiya*. It would mean that the sinner will fall (from *hawā*, to fall headlong) over on the top of his head (*umm ra’sihi*) into the abyss. Justification for the dropping of *ra’sihi* is not given and the assertion that the term *umm* here means *umm ra’sihi* 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 grounds. Here *hawiya* 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.» The meaning of *hawiya* would undergo a turn in the following expression: *wa mā adrāka mā hiya*. The expression suggests that it may have an

25 August Fischer, «Eine Qoran-Interpolation,» in Carl Bezzold, ed., *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, vol. 1, pp. 33-55 offers a three-fold division, dividing the eschatological reading into two parts. The first is the *umm ra’sihi* reading. In addition to the editions cited by Fischer, pp. 35-40, this reading can also be found in al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan al-Tabarsi, *Majmū‘ al-Bayan Fī Tafsir al-Qur‘ān*, vol. 9 (Beirut, 1379H), p. 532 and Ibn Katir, pp. 306-308, who states: qāla ma‘nahu fahwuwa sāqtun hāwin bi ummi ra’sihi fī nāri ǧahannam wa‘abbara ʿanhu bi ummihi ya‘ani dimāqīhi, and then traces the tradition to Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿIkrima, Abū Sālih 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 Mohammad* (Berlin, 1861-5) 2:503 favor the third reading in Fischer’s division, the one that reads *hawiya* as the active participle designating a woman bereft of her child.

26 Fischer concludes by suggesting that the meaning of the *hawiya* verse was not well understood by Muhammad’s followers. The reference to *nār*, which Fischer assumes is an unambiguous reference to *ǧahannam*, 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 *hawiya* 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 *hawiya* as the name for a woman bereft of her child. However, «The hearer would see that the threat was far more terrible. *Hawiya*, instead of being the participial adjective, was a mysterious name of a blazing fire, while *ummahu* contained the grimly ironical assurance that his acquaintance with *Hawiya* 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: Amsterdarm, 1973), p. 469. Torrey concludes (pp. 469-71) with the suggestion that the term *hawiya* was taken from Isaiah where *hawwāh*, the fem. participle of the *qāl* stem of *hawā*, «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.

*Hāwiyā* is framed by semantic openness. It remains multivalent and indeterminate. 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," or, after the turn in meaning with the *wa mā adrāka mā hiyah*, the name for a mysterious, feminine-gendered being. The expression *ummuhu hāwiyā* can be read as a future (his mother will be *hāwiyā*), or as a curse (may his mother be *hāwiyā*), or as a simple statement of present fact (his mother is *hāwiyā*). As was noted above, the syntactical relationship between *fa-ummuhu hāwiyā* to the final *nārun hamiya* is ambivalent: raging fire

The Torrey-Fischer debate raised the issue of whether *hāwiyā* 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."

*Hāwiyā* is framed by semantic openness. It remains multivalent and indeterminate. 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," or, after the turn in meaning with the *wa mā adrāka mā hiyah*, the name for a mysterious, feminine-gendered being. The expression *ummuhu hāwiyā* can be read as a future (his mother will be *hāwiyā*), or as a curse (may his mother be *hāwiyā*), or as a simple statement of present fact (his mother is *hāwiyā*). As was noted above, the syntactical relationship between *fa-ummuhu hāwiyā* to the final *nārun hamiya* is ambivalent: raging fire

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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.


30 The participle can indicate the future in the Qurʾān. 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 siebzigsten 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' (air), hawd (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 ma-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 ma-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 fi 'isin rādiya, and fa ummuhu hāwiya. We have then a formal opposition masculine/feminine //masculine/feminine. While the plain sense of rādiya in verse 7 demands interpreting the words as mardiyya or dātu ridd, the grammatical difficulties (above, n. 26) combine with the overall gender interplay and with the parallelism rādiya/hāwiya to allow the more natural meaning of rādiya 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 hāwīya. 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 transmorphemic patterns that function as sound-figures within the sura. The first sound-figure operates as a gender undertone. The syllable that follows ummu hu, the ĥā of hāwīya, repeats the /h/ of hu but follows it with an /ā/ rather than a /u/. The result is the sequence hu ĥā: i.e. the masculine pronoun suffix followed by a sound unit that, were it taken independently, would be the feminine pronoun suffix. Although the ĥā 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 form its lexical base. The second sound-figure is emotive. The ĥā of hāwīya can take on the emotive connotations of phonologically parallel and homonymic interjections: ĥā, ĥāh, ayyuhā. In order to illustrate how the hāwīya can generate such transmorphemic 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: qārī‘/al-qārī‘/al-qārī‘/al-rādiyya/hāwiya/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 hāwiya, 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, ūū, ā, mā, and āā, 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 āā), that occurs in the final verses hāwiya, mā hiyah, nārun hāmiya) is charged not only by the phonological patterns of surat al-qārī‘a (see, for example, the discussion of verses 6, 8, above), but by similar patterns in other parallel passages in the Qur‘an. Similar gender and emotive sound-figures are to be found in other yāum al-dīn suras, such as surat al-zalzala, where an implicit personification of the feminine al-ārd (earth) sounds through the sound-figures built around āā and mā, with semantic intimations of insemination and birth.

31) Surat 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 rūḥu ṣīḥā (the spirit within it/her) and salāmūn ḥyiya (peace it/she is). Throughout the sura, a partial personification of the night, with undertones of insemination and con-
ception, can be heard in sound-figures centering upon ḥā and mā. The first three verses of surat 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 gender. Similar passages are to be found in accounts of the creation of the primordial human (ṣāḥān, baṣār) and the creation of Jesus.

These references should at least illustrate the interaction between phonology and gender across a number of closely parallel Qur'anic passages. 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 fiḥā (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 fiḥā and anznānā fi (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 fiḥā 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.

Though most commentators and translators have read the mā in mā ḥalaqa 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 (ṣāḥān and taṣāllā) 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 nātā 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. Feghali and A. Cuny, Du genre grammatical en sémitique (Paris: 1924).
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 surat al-qāriʿa. «Ummuhu hāwiyā,» 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 hāwiyā 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) ħā as part of the word hāwiyā; 2) ħā as an emotive sound-figure that can be pronounced with the same sense of sorrow (huзн) as might be found in its partially homonymic interjections, such as hāwīn; 3) ħā 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 hāmiya, 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 ħā of hāḏa, 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 tawāżun, 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 surat al-qāriʿa, a case could be made for hāwiyā, mā hīya, or nārun hāmiya, as culmination of the phonological movements within the sura, but it is hāwiyā that brings both the acoustic and semantic movements of the poem to a simultaneous culmination.
upon the long-a, a pressure resisted by Qur'anic reciters in a manner that heightens the sense of tension between the pharyngeal and non-pharyngeal. Nār and ḥāwiya form a pair of terms that both contrast with and complement one another. The connotations of wind and air contained within the word ḥāwiya 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, ḥāwiya 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 (ḥāwiya) 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, hell, an unsurprising assumption in view of the many passages in the Qur'an where an-nār is connected with ǧahannam as a place of future punishment. The point here is that the meaning of sūrat al-qārī'ā, although it may well contain such a possibility, need not be seen as confined to it. 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 Qur'an for understanding fire in terms of the fire and the fire in terms of ǧahannam, the literary-critical question would be: why the term nārūn ḥāmiya 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 Qur'anic 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-hāmiyya), but the indefinite, «fire» (nārun hāmiyya). It is not necessary to assume that this phrase refers exclusively to hell as a specific abode of future, eternal punishment. 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 hāwiyya «names for gahannam» (asma' min asma' gahannam, or «names for the fire» (min asma' an-nār), and call terms like qārī'ā «names for the day of resurrection,» min asma' yawmi al-qiyāma. If these min asma' expressions are taken to refer to terms as mere synonyms—hāwiyya as synonymous with fire, the fire as synonymous with gahannam—the semantic reduction is complete. Key words (qārī'ā, hāwiyya) 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, and grammatical features such as definite and indefinite article, hapax legomenon, or collocation are taken as constants, their meanings being flexible and variable. The classical tafsir is relentless in its effort to make everything in the sura fit a heaven and hell framework. Tabari ascribes to Qatada the interpretation that radiya «means [he is] in paradise» (yacanifiganna). Tabari, p. 282. And a tradition ascribed to Muqatil departs from any information provided in sūrat al-qārī'ā itself to explain al-qari'ā as a reference to the torture (caddb) of the damned: «the enemies of Allah will be struck with the torture.» See Niẓām al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad Niṣābūrī, Garāʾib al-Qur'ān wa Raghūṭ al-Furqān, vol. 30 (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1962—), p. 164. Rāžī (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.

Fischer links the first two trends with the exegetical tendency to reify Qur'anic vocabulary in the yaum 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 Tabarî and Zamâḥšâri in Fischer, p. 43. An even more striking example of this reification of Qur'anic terms into a pre-set topography of heaven and hell is the interpretation of the common Qur'anic word waγl (woe to, as in 2:73) as a particular wadi in gahannam. A. Fischer, «Zu Sura 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. Tabârî ascribes to Qatâda the interpretation that fi 'istâtin râdiya «means [he is] in paradise» (ya'âni fi gâna). Tabârî, p. 282. And a tradition ascribed to Muqatîl departs from any information provided in sūrat al-qârî'â itself to explain al-qari'â as a reference to the torture (caddâb) of the damned: «the enemies of Allah will be struck with the torture.» See Niẓâm al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad Niṣābūrī, Garâʾîb al-Qurʾān wa Râğûṭ al-Furqān, vol. 30 (Cairo: Muṣṭafâ al-Bâbî, 1962—), p. 164. Râžî (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, «Abû Lahab and Sura CXI», Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 42 (1979): 13-28.
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 Qur'anic texts\textsuperscript{40}. 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-qārī'ā 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 iṣgāz al-qur'ān 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 nārun 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 futurity\textsuperscript{41}. In sūrat al-qārī'ā no such narrative context is present. Just as the reference to a fire in the last verse can be interpreted through other Qur'anic references to the fire as denoting gahannam, so the references to «a day on which...» can be interpreted through other Qur'anic 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-qārī'ā 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

\textsuperscript{40} Bell, for example, without any explanation, declares that surat al-qārī'ā is a fragment or series of fragments. Richard Bell, \textit{The Qur'an: 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 ḥāwiya, and preserving the syntactical rhythms of the original.

\textsuperscript{41} Thus, when the divine voice announces to the angels that he is about to create a regent (ḥālīfā), 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 time. It can be placed in an «eternal now,» within or behind the present moment, rather than in linear sequence after it.

The classical tafsir focused upon the quality of threat (*waʾd*) 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 Fahr al-Dīn Rāżī who speaks of the word *qārīʿa* as overpowering «our hearts with the sense of awe».

Two other interrelated quantities are implicated in the above discussion of sound-figures: *huzn* (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 *ḥā* 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 grief. This com-

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42 For a similar view of Qurʾānic 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 ʿArabi's *Fusūṣ al-Ḥikam*, edited with commentary by A.A. Afifi, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1946).

44 Ṭārīṣ, p. 71: *ṭahgūmu* ʿalā l-gulābi bi l-ʿamri l-hāʾil.

45 *Huzn* is acknowledged by Qurʾānic 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 *waʾd*. See al-Suyūṭī (*al-ْIqān*, 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 orientalists alike) and well as its distinctiveness as a form of apocalyptic discourse.*

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I’d like to thank my fellow panelists, along with Emil Homerin, Ruth Tonner, Mahmoud Ayoub, Rick Colby, Elizabeth Penland, and Rob Flynn for their suggestions and comments. I owe special thanks to Michael Zwettler for his careful and challenging reading of an earlier draft.

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1.371-72 and Nelson (The Art of Reciting the Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾānic recitation on those without formal understanding of the text makes even more urgent a better understanding of Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾān is heard, learned, and taken to heart.

* 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.