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“Bride of the Qur’ān”: An Aesthetic Reading of *Sūrat ar-Raḥmān*

Abstract This chapter consists of three main parts: first, a revisiting of the trend initiated by Amīn al-Khūlī (1895–1966)—that of the literary approach to the Qur’ānic text—as well as the religious and intellectual debates it sparked at the time around the issue of the divine inimitability (*i’jāz*) of the Qur’ān and the legitimacy of moving from the basic classical notion of rhetorical analysis (*balāgha*) to the modern concept of literary criticism and aesthetics. Three examples of that early modern school of interpretation will be mentioned: the controversial 1947 PhD thesis (Cairo University) by Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh entitled “Narrative Art in the Qur’ān;” ‘Ā’isha‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s (d. 1999) *At-Tafsīr al-bayānī li-l-Qur’ān* (The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur’ān, 1962); and Sayyid Quṭb’s *At-Taṣwīr al-fannī fi l-Qur’ān* (Artistic Illustration in the Qur’ān, 1945). Second, another brief revisiting of the critical school of New Criticism and its emphasis on form is presented. Third, there will be an attempt at an application of New Criticism’s mode of analysis to *Sūrat ar-Raḥmān* (Chapter 55: The Compassionate), a reading which can yield an appreciation of its aesthetic characteristics and metaphysical vision at the same time—an integration of textual, spiritual, and moral beauty.

1. Literary Criticism and the Sanctity of the Qur'an

Particularly in the modern Egyptian context, the literary approach to the Qur'an—meaning the application of modern tools of literary criticism to the Qur'an, hence treating it as a literary text—was first pioneered by Amīn al-Khūlī (1895–1966), as an approach that develops, not contradicts, the classical concept of the divine *ijāz*. The justification in his major critical work, *Manāhij at-tajdīd fī n-naḥw wa-l-balāgha wa-t-tafsīr wa-l-adab* (1961), was as follows: One of the main reasons that convinced early Arabs of the miracle of the Qur'an as a divine revelation and pronouncement was its supremacy and uniqueness, which surpassed all human literary or poetic productions known at the time. It was therefore natural to use literary criticism as a means of fathoming this textual beauty. In other words, early Arabs based their acceptance of the new religion on a form of literary evaluation of the Qur'anic text. However, when his graduate student Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh (1916–1998) submitted his PhD thesis *Al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī l-Qur'an al-karīm* (Narrative Art in the Qur'an), to Cairo University's Department of Arabic in 1947, it raised objections: to analyse the Qur'an as a literary art (*fann*) is to suggest that it is a human composition—which of course amounts to blasphemy. The crux of the slippery slope that has created and still creates deep-seated unease around this kind of analysis is this: the potential of de-sanctifying the Qur'an under the pretext of 'scientific' study. In Khalaf Allāh's work, for example, the controversy surrounding it was mainly due to his results or the conclusion that he reached as a consequence of applying this 'literary-critical' methodology: Quranic stories are primarily literary narratives employed to serve ethical, didactic, and allegorical purposes, and not necessarily, wholly or purely, historical facts or reliable historical sources.

Interestingly, the history of the classical linguists and rhetoricians who studied and elaborated the concept of *ijāz* and its features have progressively developed and increasingly emphasised the literary nature of the Qur'an. In his 2003 article, for instance, Naṣr Abū Zayd traces the roots of this tradition from the Mu'tazilites, al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869), al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1024), up to the famous philologist and literary critic 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) and his well-known book *Dalā'il al-ijāz* (Proofs of Inimitability).¹ They all discussed and analysed the Qur'an's eloquence and the features of this miracle of divine speech—what constitutes *ijāz*; but it was al-Jurjānī's significant emphasis on the laws of syntax (*naẓm*) in particular that introduced the dimension of the literary nature of the Qur'anic text. His theory was based on studying the science of rhetoric (*balāgha*), linguistics, and eloquence (*bayān*) and their laws through the study of poetry, as a means of examining the features of the Qur'an's perfection and supremacy.

1 Naṣr Abu-Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Alif* 23 (2003): 8–47.

What was then al-Khūlī's new contribution? He took this tradition to the next level, and he developed it further as an approach that is appropriate to the critical knowledge of the age and its modern tools. He moved the focus of study from the classical domain of language and rhetoric to a wider domain—that of literary criticism—by making a new connection to the fields of psychology and aesthetics. Further, he proposed a method of studying the Qur'ānic text that analyses literary style and its emotional impact on the recipient/reader as a way of evoking the aesthetic awareness or response of both commentator and reader.² He used the term *fann al-qawl* (the art of discourse)³ to explain that the literary approach to the Qur'ān through modern theories of literature could further uncover its *ijāz*. To underscore this he added a new dimension to its definition: *ijāz nafsi*, meaning highly expressive and emotionally impactful.⁴ Although Abū Zayd only mentions in this regard what he perceives as the influence of the movement of Romanticism and its critical ideas, he does not see a more specifically relevant connection: how this view reflects the strong influence of the contemporaneous (1930s and 1940s) Anglo-American critical schools of Practical Criticism and the New Criticism trend.

In addition to Khalaf Allāh, 'Ā'isha 'Abd ar-Raḥmān or Bint ash-Shāṭi' (d. 1999) was another major disciple of this modern literary method in Qur'ānic studies. Her selective commentary *At-Tafsīr al-bayānī li-l-Qur'ān* (Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'ān) (1962) introduced the method of a literary/textual approach that looks at all the verses dealing with one single subject or topic and examines the usages of words, terms, tropes, and expressions as they occur in different rhetorical and semantic fields. She differentiated this method from the classical linear method of chapter-by-chapter and verse-by-verse commentary, as she was focused on outlining divergences, convergences, and stylistic analysis across verses and *sūras*, highlighting eloquence and effectiveness.

Whereas al-Khūlī, Khalaf Allāh, and Bint ash-Shāṭi' were mostly critics and scholars of Arabic who were interested in applying new literary theories that would modernise Qur'ānic studies, Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996) intended to produce works of theology contributing to the traditional field of Qur'ānic *tafsīr* (interpretation), albeit by using different methodologies. Both attempted a thematic approach that emphasises structures of meanings and issues as they are generally presented in *sūras*. In his comprehensive exegesis of the Qur'ān, *Fi ḡilāl al-Qur'ān* (In the Shade of the Qur'ān) (1952), Quṭb begins by introducing the general thrust or main argument of a *sūra*, paraphrasing whole units or passages within and not verse by verse. He was more interested in themes and issues, not minute individual verses or a linguistic analysis

2 Amīn al-Khūlī, *Manāhij at-tajdīd fī n-naḥw wa-l-balāgha wa-t-tafsīr wa-l-adab* [Innovative Methodologies in Grammar, Rhetoric, Interpretation, and Literature] (Cairo: GEBO, 1995), 144, 175, 182, 185.

3 This is the title of his 1947 book published in Cairo.

4 Al-Khūlī, *Manāhij*, 203.

of terms and expressions, and he focused on analysing the discourse of a *sūra* by dividing it into sections and sub-topics. In al-Ghazālī's work, which was aptly and significantly titled *Naḥwa tafsīr mawḍūʿī li-suwar al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, 1995, (Towards a Thematic Interpretation of the Qurʾān's Chapters), the introduction treats the "*sūra*, all of it, taking an overall picture from beginning to end, considering the subtle links that tie it together, making its beginning a preparation for its ending, and its ending a fulfilment of its beginning."⁵ He also mentions that he was careful to demonstrate the "unity of subject" in every chapter.

These twentieth-century attempts at methodological innovation and the new interest in literary/thematic perspectives have been analysed by present-day Qurʾānic scholars as both a revival and a further development of relevant classical treatments. The terms used are "coherence-related" or "holistic" Qurʾānic approaches, and are traced and explained by Nevin Reda:

In general, "holistic" is related to holism and is often used synonymously with "as a whole." It conveys the idea that the properties of a given system cannot be fully determined or explained by the sum of its component parts alone, and is predicated on the assumption that there is an added value gained when looking at how all the component parts work together, as a totality. In the case of the Qurʾān, it typically implies looking at its *sūras* as whole compositional units, as opposed to the individual verses alone. It can also refer to the Qurʾān as a whole, the added value usually taking the form of central themes or qualities.⁶

In her article, Reda provides a very useful review of the medieval roots and modern scholarship of this attention to the compositional qualities and stylistic features of whole *sūras*. She refers to the contributions of Theodor Nöldeke, Angelika Neuwirth, Jacques Jomier, Navid Kermani, and Devin Stewart among others, but particularly highlights the works of Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī and Mustansir Mir, who dedicated his studies to the identification of structural and thematic unity in the Qurʾānic text. Reda further explains this '*sūra*-centric' analytical approach: "Ideally, a holistic approach would begin with analysing the relationships between the various components of each *sūra*, identifying its central idea, and then move on to study the relationships of the various *sūras* to each other, and how they too form a whole." Furthermore, "there are two prevalent types of holistic approaches today: *sūra*-centric and generic. In the *sūra*-centric approaches, *sūras* are divided into parts and the relationship between the various parts is

5 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Naḥwa tafsīr mawḍūʿī li-suwar al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 1995), 5.

6 Nevin Reda, "Holistic Approaches to the Qur'an: A Historical Background," *Religion Compass* 4 (2010): 1. See also her recent study of the topic in Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2017).

examined, usually tying them together by identifying a common theme. In the generic approaches, the focus is on the distinctive characteristics that hold the Qur'ān together as a whole and set it apart from other texts, such as its rhythms and rhymes, central themes, and other literary features."⁷

2. New Criticism and Aesthetic Reading

From a literary and critical point of view, the above hermeneutical approaches that highlight inner links in *sūras* and textual integrity point, in fact, to the kind of textual criticism and 'close reading' advocated by the school of New Critics, as exemplified by its well-known representative figures and works: Ivor A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929), William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), and Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). Close textual reading treats a poem or a literary composition as a self-sufficient verbal artefact with aesthetic specificity and identifies patterns of formal and thematic coherence. Form and structure uniquely embody meaning, and analysing their operation ultimately aims at unpacking and resolving opposites or contraries, which in turn creates an effect of aesthetic experience due to the perception and contemplation of harmony in the text. Moreover, this kind of imaginative, aesthetic engagement with the literary text can provide insight into a form of truth.

A text's central aspect is its form, which carries the chief characteristic of 'organic unity,' meaning coherence or interrelatedness, when "all parts of a poem are necessarily interrelated, with each part reflecting and helping to support the poem's central idea," "allow[ing] for the harmonization of conflicting ideas, feelings, and attitudes and results in the poem's oneness."⁸ This is achieved through paradox, irony, and ambiguity—all of which speak to the basic human experience of tensions/incongruities in everyone's life. New Criticism sees a literary text as initially structured around the often confusing and sometimes contradictory experiences of life. The text is crafted in such a way that it stirs its readers' emotions and causes them to reflect on the content and its embedded truth. In the end, the text will have created an overall, unified effect—upon the recipient—that yields aesthetic pleasure.

Hence, aesthetic reading or aesthetic criticism is often used to refer to this school's critical perspective, as well as, to later critical views that developed the reading/interpretive process further as an "aesthetic transaction," between text and reader.⁹ In this regard, I want to consider the suitability of New Criticism's basic critical principles—textual orientation,

7 Reda, "Holistic Approaches," 9.

8 Charles Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 4th edition (New Jersey: Pearson, 2007), 61.

9 Louise Rosenblatt, "Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading," *Journal of Reading Behavior* 1 (1969): 31–47.

interest in form that embodies meaning, and the notion of uncovering coherence/symmetry in the text as a reflection of the search for harmony in life¹⁰—to apply to an aesthetic reading of *sūrat ar-Raḥmān*. I am borrowing here from New Criticism's focus on how a literary text/poem specifically works: Because of its internal organisation and structural features, a poetic text creates harmony out of opposites and tension. In creating coherent wholes out of the incongruent and contradictory complexity of life, poetry can transcend the chaotic flux of life and so can become itself—as a text—an aesthetic experience of harmony. As was previously mentioned, critics like Ivor A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks were pre-occupied with the tropes of paradox and irony (resolving contradictions) and with the effects of poetry on its reader on the psychological level. Close reading is directed at the techniques and strategies that poems use to deliver the effect of diversity in unity that we experience.

Seeking beauty and the aesthetic dimension in religious practice and thought has been part of the human experience across religions and spiritual systems throughout the centuries, but—according to Frank Burch Brown—it has been many years since formal theologians and religious scholars have seriously considered them to be a fruitful field of inquiry.¹¹ It is only in recent years that scholars of religion have increasingly turned to theories of art, narrativity, and poetic metaphor to interpret religious modes of thought and expression. In his *Religious Aesthetics: a Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, Brown strongly argues for an area of study that can combine the realms of the aesthetic and the religious, basically “the idea that part of religious experience simply *is* a kind of artistic and aesthetic experience,” and so both aspects can be pondered and studied in conjunction as a form of “theological aesthetics.”¹² One can employ criteria that is distinct from those used by academic theologians, religious scholars, or philosophers in order to formulate certain aesthetic principles to be integrated into the mainstream study of religion. In fact, the essence of Brown's argument and discussion regarding the importance of aesthetic sensitivity to fathom “the kernels of truth carried by the husks of aesthetic form,” meaning “the truth disclosed aesthetically is not entirely separable from the aesthetic form itself,”¹³ recalls the discussion of form and meaning in New Criticism's approach.

In the present Islamic context, it is Khaled Abou El Fadl, a contemporary Islamic scholar and thinker, who adopts and articulates a unique perspective that identifies and conceptualises ‘beauty’ as integral to the Qur'ānic moral vision. It is an approach that begins and ends with aesthetic

10 Leroy Searle, “New Criticism,” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imra Szeman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 691–698.

11 Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

12 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 114, 185.

13 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 41.

appreciation of the totality of the Revelation and its framing ethical principles, transcending the merely 'literal' or 'atomistic literalism' of separatist readings. His 2006 spiritually insightful collection of reflective essays, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, was, he states "inspired by a single compulsion: the search for what is beautiful in Islam or about it . . . wrestling with understanding the beauty of the Divine as well as the divinity of beauty."¹⁴ Abou El Fadl also highly values the worth and beauty of both intellectual and spiritual endeavours to fathom God's ultimate Text whose moral outlook he equates with beauty, as much as he equates evil and injustice with ugliness.

His most recent comprehensive work, *Reasoning with God*, develops more specific formulations of his vision of a Qur'ān-based theology of aesthetics merged with religious ethics: "In engaging the text of the Qur'ān, one often feels as if reconnecting to something primordial, sensible, and beautiful within oneself."¹⁵ In a powerful passage, he compares the emotional effect of reading the Qur'ān to the ecstatic feeling of balance and beauty he experiences when listening to classical music: "The Qur'ān is like a message that aims to ignite in its audience an aching for greater fulfilment and a fuller achievement of emotional and intellectual beauty." The Qur'ān opens the door "to venues of moral achievements that in their essence are conditions of beauty." Like a perfect musical composition that takes its listeners to new thresholds of beauty every time, the Qur'ān "is powerful because it creates trajectories of beauty—each one reaching a different level and point—with infinite possibility for continuous growth."¹⁶

3. Beauty in *ar-Raḥmān*

The total effect of beauty here is the result of a number of interrelated levels: unifying compositional elements, symmetrical structure, tropes, and themes. Initially, the Prophetic *ḥadīth* that describes the *sūra* metaphorically as "*arūs al-Qur'ān*" (bride of the Qur'ān) characterises it in the tradition as a beautiful, aesthetically-pleasing text, perhaps similar to a bride in her ultimate feminine adornment and beauty (*ḥusn*). In fact, one could read the two references to maidens of paradise who are likened to rubies and coral—the "*khayrat ḥisān*"—within this framework of exquisiteness that permeates the *sūra*. The name of the *sūra* itself, of course, recalls the *ḥadīth qudsī*: "I am the *Raḥmān* [Compassionate], created the womb and derived its name from mine," which associates divine compassion with a feminine element of beatific nurturing.¹⁷ Yet the most obvious and unique stylistic

14 Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), vii.

15 Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 11.

16 Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 283–284.

17 The Arabic word for 'womb' is *rahm*.

feature of the *sūra*, which might have formed the traditional basis of its perception as textually beautiful, is the recurrent refrain-verse, rhyming with the rest of the verses, which enhances the melodic, rhythmic aspect from beginning to end in a way that makes its recitation a highly poetic and almost a hypnotic experience. Musicality is a general feature of the whole of the Qur'ān, of course, yet it is more intensified here and uniquely integral to the basic 'aesthetic-spiritual' experience of this particular *sūra*. The refrain, as a compositional element in itself, encapsulates the essence of both the meaning and structure of the whole *sūra*.

In terms of the direct meaning of the repeated question, "So which of your Lord's boons do you two deny?"¹⁸ the refrain addresses and challenges the two groups of created beings—humans and *jinn*—and so is the structural marker of the principle of duality or binary ordering that informs the *sūra's* composition. Grammatically, the terms for the noun and possessive pronoun "your Lord" and the verb "deny" use the dual form throughout, an obvious textual reflection of duality. The overall content of the *sūra* is divided between the created world—itself composed of the twin earth and skies (the first has rivers and seas, the second sun and moon)—and the hereafter, also divided between the blessings of Heaven and the punishment of Hellfire.

Yet the text begins with a verse consisting of a single word, "The Compassionate," the One from which all things generate. *Ar-Raḥmān*, the first among the ninety-nine Divine Names—described as "*asmā' ḥusnā*" (beautiful names) in the Qur'ān, Q 17:110—is differentiated from the second and closely-related Name of *ar-Raḥīm*, the Merciful, because 'compassion' here denotes an unqualified and boundless aspect of mercy in existence prior to the created realm and infinitely and unconditionally bestowed upon all beings. In this regard, it is commonly known that this particular Name applies only to God and cannot be used as an attribute or description for a human being who might be simply kind and merciful: "For it is one of the Names by which existence itself is made manifest, a universal blessing or mercy (*rahma*) that cannot be attributed to anyone other than God."¹⁹ In Sufi thought, all of creation is brought forth through "the Breath of the Compassionate," since the Qur'ān speaks of *nafas* (breath) that is infused into Adam and into Mary to create a new being, and so *ar-Raḥmān* relates more directly to the Divine Essence rather than the Divine Attributes or Qualities (the Names) through which God manifests Himself:

These Names are the Divine possibilities immanent in the Universe; they are the means by which God manifests Himself in the world just as He describes Himself in the Quran through them. The Names

18 All translations of Qur'ānic texts are taken from: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 1310–1318.

19 Nasr, *Study Quran*, 1310.

are thus the pathways leading toward God and the means by which one can ascend to the unitive knowledge of the Divine Reality. Since they are fundamental aspects of knowledge as well as of being, they manifest themselves in the Universe and in the spiritual life in which they become the object of contemplation.²⁰

According to Sufi metaphysics, the Essence or Reality is a unity, a oneness, encompassing yet resolving and transcending all oppositions, polarities, and contradictions evident in the world of multiplicity. Moreover, the ninety-nine Names are perceived as divided into two groups: Names of *jalāl* (that describe the attributes of majesty, might, and power, and inspire awe and fear) and Names of *ikrām* (that describe kindness, benevolence, and mercy). Indeed, two verses located at significant points of the *sūra* mention the twin name of *dhī l-jalāl wa-l-ikrām* (Possessed of Majesty and Bounty): Q 55:27 marks the turn from a section (Q 55:10–25) that speaks of the blessings or boons of this world to blessings of the Hereafter, and the last verse Q 55:78 ends the description of heavenly blessings. It is in God and through Him alone that all dualities and binaries merge in a single Oneness.

It is this implied synthesis or holism that eventually characterises the spirit of the *sūra* in its entirety, though—paradoxically—structured around pairings and binaries. Yet this structural and thematic duality is an illustration of the multiplicity and diversity of creation, which emanates from the Divine One and is a visible sign of His ‘creative Breath,’ but also eventually returns unto Him. In this regard, creation is compared by Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) to the articulation of sound from the human mouth when words use human breath to be uttered:

In the same manner that the human breath goes through the cycle of contraction and expansion, the Universe undergoes the two complementary phases of the same cycle. It is annihilated at every moment and re-created at the next, without there being a temporal separation between the two phases. It returns back to the Divine Essence at every moment while in the phase of contraction and is remanifested [*sīc*] and externalized in that of expansion. The Universe is thus a theophany of the Divine Essence, which is renewed at every moment [. . .].²¹

Hence, the whole *sūra* is framed by the *Raḥmān* at the very beginning and the God of Majesty and Bounty at the end, as a reminder—after having gone through this world and the other—that the Absolute Oneness of God is indivisible, the only Reality through which all polarities are ultimately undone.

20 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 109.

21 Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 112.

Immediately following the first verse with its single word that gives the *sūra* its title, pairings begin with the second verse, “taught the Qur’ān,” and the third, “created human being[s].” In other words, God is the source of the ultimate revelatory, primal Text and Creator of humans. This is the primary duality—divine text versus humankind—yet the fourth verse follows, “taught him speech/*bayān*,” which is the intermediary dynamic that brings God and human together. *Bayān* is not simply speech, but intelligent speech and expressiveness that reflect the capacity to understand clearly, a discriminating faculty that is a combined clarity both of understanding and articulating. It is human understanding that interprets God’s Text. Moreover, this is a signal of a ‘self-conscious’ *sūra* that calls attention to its own textuality and eloquence. This is the only instance in the Qur’ān that the word *al-bayān* as a separate grammatical noun with the definite article is used (with no attached pronouns or in other derived forms), thus indicating a generic term and highlighting it as a focal symbol of this particular *sūra*. It is also the noun given later to one branch of Arabic rhetoric, namely, the branch treating clearness in expression (*ilm al-bayān*). The *sūra*, therefore, invites textual interpretation of its own rhetorical and stylistic features, not just the expected religious and spiritual meanings to be culled from any sacred text.

The ‘creative’ and nurturing compassion of God in the first four verses merge, by association, with another divine attribute as a sub-text, since the Divine Name *al-‘adl* (the Just) is not explicitly mentioned but is implicit in the word *mīzān* (balance) of verses Q 55:7, 8, and 9, hence uniting compassion with justice. More dualities include references to the “sun” and the “moon,” ground stem-less “shrubs” and hard-stemmed “trees,” the “sky” held up and the “earth” laid out and spread, the cosmic “Balance” that holds up the sky and the worldly balance of fairness, merging the macrocosm with the microcosm world of human life.

This powerful beginning establishes the key dual structural element which also embodies the thematic essence of the *sūra*: a juxtaposition based on a perfect balance that is not characterised by conflict or strife, but by a certain ordered, complementary wholeness. At this point, the refrain-verse in Q 55:13 comes for the first time in the text, the double challenge to man and *jinn*, “So which of your Lord’s boons/blessings do you two deny?” The above unit, therefore, comprises the basic thematic U-turn movement of the whole *sūra*, from oneness to bifurcation and multiplicity and then back to the One Lord, the Creator. It is this particular stylistic and structural feature of the Qur’ān as a whole that Norman Brown notes and comments on when analysing *Sūrat al-Kahf* (*sūra* 18, The Cave), terming it “simultaneous totality,” when the whole appears in every part:

Hence, it does not matter in what order you read the Koran: it is all there all the time; and it is supposed to be all there all the time in your mind or at the back of your mind, memorized and available for appropriate quotation and collage into your conversation or your

writing, or your action. Hence the beautiful inconsequentiality of the arrangement of the suras: from the longest to the shortest. In this respect the Koran is more avant-garde than *Finnegans Wake*, in which the over-all organization is entangled in both linear and cyclical patterns which it is trying to transcend.²²

In this respect, Brown recalls Umberto Eco's analysis of the unique literary quality of *Finnegans Wake's* text as "an infinite contained within finiteness" and thinks that the description in fact applies to the genius of the Qur'ān, which was only appreciated by Western aesthetic sensibility the day it understood and appreciated *Finnegans Wake*. He also quotes Hodgson on the same feature of the Qur'ānic text in its entirety, "Almost every element which goes to make up its message is somehow present in any given passage,"²³ which is a reference to the holistic and coherence-related trend of Qur'ānic studies previously mentioned, as well as to the critical principle of 'organic unity' that embodies harmony according to the school of New Criticism.

The verse-refrain occurs thirty-one times in places that mark the end of a series of paired bounties, as Muhammad Abdel Haleem noted in his verse-by-verse paraphrase and explication of the *sūra*. He attempted its examination particularly in light of what he called the textual elements of "context and internal relationships," with roots in a few classical insights by medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and ash-Shāḥibī (d. 1388) and expressed by the prevalent view that "*al-Qur'ān yufassir ba'ḍahu ba'ḍan*" (different parts of the Qur'ān explain each other).²⁴ Significantly, Abdel Haleem claims that such medieval roots and the modern revival of interest in coherence in Qur'ānic studies are similar to the modern literary theories of intertextuality.²⁵

The binary images continue with verse Q 55:14: man was created from clay and *jinn* from fire; God is the Lord of the two 'east' and the two 'west' (of winter and summer), encompassing the farthest point of each rising and setting of the sun and encircling both limits of the earth's spectrum, which in itself implies the whole. Further, the "two seas," meaning the two bodies of salty and non-salty waters, "meet" yet are kept distinct without "transgression" of one over the other and are therefore in equal balance; the seas have depths that contain gems, and also spacious surfaces that carry sailing ships. Within the special context of this *sūra* and its

22 Norman Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text* 8 (Winter, 1983-1984): 167.

23 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islam and Christianity as Framework for Religious Life," *Diogenes* 32 (1960): 61, quoted in Brown, "The Apocalypse," 167.

24 Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem, "Context and Internal Relationships: Keys to Qur'anic exegesis—A Study of *Sūrat al-Rahman*," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. Gerald R. Hawting and Abdel-Kader Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 73.

25 For a relevant and important read in this field of literary approaches to the Qur'anic text, see also Issa Boullata, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

thematic unfolding, the two seas can also be interpreted metaphorically as the two worlds of humans and *jinn*, or as a further allusion to earth and sky, land and sea, this world and the Hereafter, Heaven and Hell, or God and man—that is, as a figure of speech it encapsulates all the dualities mentioned so far.

Yet this encompassing and integrated wholeness of the macrocosm paradoxically carries within it the seeds of *fanā'* (disintegration and mortality) in the face of *baqā'* (immortality of the Divine). These are verses Q 55:26 and Q 55:27 which mark the shift from describing the blessings and beauties of this world's creation to speaking about the blessings/punishment of the Hereafter. The twin-concepts of *fanā'* (self-annihilation) and *baqā'* (subsistence in the Divine) figure prominently in Sufi thought as the two main states or stages sought and worked hard for by a Sufi in order to reach the supreme experience of union with the Divine Beloved—that is, to 'die' to one's worldly identity and feel immersed in the permanence of His Light and Beauty.

In the following section until just before the final verse, hell's boiling water and paradise's cool gardens and springs are juxtaposed: two Heavenly Gardens for the believers who have done good deeds each contain two flowing water springs, and in each are two kinds of every fruit, accompanied by beautiful maidens who are likened to rubies and corals. Once again, the same principle applies: the dual as a supposedly defined number in describing Heavenly bliss paradoxically implying a range of the limitless/infinite. In the middle of this section, verse Q 55:60 is also of significance: "Is the reward of goodness aught but goodness?" For goodness, the word *ihsān*, derived from the root *ḥusn* (to be beautiful, handsome), is used here: to convey the reality and truthfulness of Heaven, its bliss is indeed expressed in concrete and sensuous images of sheer beauty. It also links with *hisān* (beautiful maidens created in Heaven) in verse Q 55:70. The *ihsān* granted by God is in reciprocity to the *ihsān* of human beings on earth: goodness is met with goodness, and beauty is the reward of beautiful faith. Inversely, the verse can also refer to human beings' goodness and loving obedience to God as a response to God's preceding primal compassion and blessings. In this sense, the verse operates like the Sufi metaphorical mirror of contemplation between God and human:

God is the mirror in which you see yourself, as you are His mirror in which He contemplates His Names and their principles; Now His Names are not other than Himself, so that the reality [or the analogy of relations] is an inversion.²⁶

The tempo/rhythm of the final section (Q 55:62–77) increases as the intermittent verses between the verse-refrain become shorter to the extent

26 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū l-'Alā' 'Afīfī (Cairo: 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1946), 62 quoted in Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 116.

of one-word verses (e.g. Q 55:64: *mudhammātān*/deep green [gardens]), until it reaches the repose and ultimate tranquillity of God, of "Majesty and Bounty" (Q 55:78). Additionally, this last section repeats the components of the two Heavenly Gardens, with the description of dark green (Q 55:64) in parallel to the previous multiplicity of branches "*afnān*" (Q 55:48); the two springs pouring forth (Q 55:66) in parallel to the previously-mentioned flowing/running springs (Q 55:50); the date-palms and pomegranates (Q 55:68) in parallel to the preceding mention of two kinds of every fruit (Q 55:52); the good and beautiful companions "*hisān*" (Q 55:70) also echo the previous maidens likened in their fairness to rubies and coral (Q 55:58); their exquisite eyes "*hūr*" (Q 55:72) pairs with "*qāṣirātu ṭ-ṭarf*" (Q 55:56) (of chaste glances); and then finally the same description in Q 55:56 is repeated verbatim in Q 55:74 to conclude this parallelism or echoing: "*lam yaṭmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jānn*" (haven't been touched by man or *jinn*). In other words, this final segment creates inter-penetration or dovetailing as a textual embodiment of synthesis and resolving of oppositions. It is also of significance that Heavenly bliss in this particular *sūra* is deliberately tangible, visual, pictorial, and aesthetically sensual (different from other references in other *sūras* to the spiritual and psychological rewards of Heaven), as a reflection of the emphasis on 'beautiful' form, style, and textual organic unity.

In the end, all this richness and textured multiplicity, all this sensuous bliss and vividness, has, paradoxically, to be understood as a manifestation of the Oneness of God: the final verse, "Blessed is the Name of thy Lord, Possessed of Majesty and Bounty." In his study of the literary/apocalyptic nature of the Qur'ānic text as a whole, Todd Lawson has identified the elements of duality, opposition, and symmetry as characteristic of its overall conceptual and figurative structure. He notes that the Qur'ān is distinguished from other scriptures and holy books by the degree to which it is suffused with and informed by a preoccupation with duality: "The interplay of conceptual and substantive oppositions and dualities is a prominent feature of both the form and content of the Qur'ān," yet this does not always indicate antagonism: "rather its first meaning is 'two things facing each other, or being compared with each other.'"²⁷ As shown in the analysis above, it is this circulating principle that "enhances and emphasizes the message of oneness that is the focus and task of *tawḥīd*."²⁸ Lawson calls it the Qur'ān's special "text-grammar" that covers the spectrum from abstraction to the concrete, from divine attributes to elements of the natural world, hence structurally and semantically lending coherence to the whole text.²⁹ From this literary perspective, he perceives the highly aesthetic quality of the Qur'ānic text to the point that he deems it

27 Todd Lawson, "Duality, Opposition and Typology in the Qur'an: The Apocalyptic Substrate," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 27.

28 Lawson, "Duality," 29.

29 Lawson, "Duality," 28, 29, 31.

worthy to be studied and analysed in the manner of a classical epic like Homer's works.³⁰

Conclusion

Ultimately, a reading that analyses and interprets aspects of symmetry, proportion, pattern, and balance as the formal embodiment of an equally holistic worldview and doctrine (form and content as mirrors of each other) creates a unique aesthetic experience of harmony and wholeness. The literary/artistic pleasure that the text provides interacts simultaneously with the religious/spiritual message. Hence, the above has been an experimental venture that sees in textual literary analysis, not a lessening of the sanctity of the Qur'an or an implication that it is similar to literature in being a human product, but rather a confirmation of its divinity and miraculousness. Discovering its textual beauty/*husn* and responding to its aesthetic effect is part of an overall integralist religious and spiritual experience, of the belief in God's ultimate and perfect Beauty and of His combined compassion and justice. Although the humanistic basis or premise of New Criticism has long been transcended by 'political' readings and the socio-cultural critical schools of the end of the twentieth century (beginning with deconstruction/post-structuralism, new historicism, post-modernism, feminism, cultural studies . . . etc.), this approach may be the most suitable and inspiring one to apply to the Qur'anic text in the field of 'religious aesthetics' or a 'theology of beauty' as discussed by Frank Brown; both the aesthetic realm and theological concepts "exist in mutually transformative, dialogical relationship: aesthetic perceptions give rise to thought, and thought modifies aesthetic perceptions in such a way as to give rise to further aesthetic creation and insight."³¹

I would like to end with a quotation from Khaled Abou El Fadl that captures the unique, paradoxical experience of Muslims reading, reciting, understanding, responding to, and fathoming the depths, mysteries, and aesthetics of this central Text:

"The *Rahman* taught the Qur'an, created humans, and taught them discernment." (55: 1-4) The Qur'an is the embodiment of this divine ability—the ability to discern, comprehend, judge, and intelligently express that which is believed. Tonight I sit with you in my lap. In your presence I am ashamed to exist. But where can I go? I am not so luminous or so pure as to dissolve into you. So I try to integrate your divinity within my human soul. Do I succeed? Do I ever succeed? My Qur'an, my beloved Reading, The Reading that

30 Lawson, "Duality," 31.

31 Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 42.

started all readings, the Reading that preceded all readings and that inspires all readings. What a privilege it is to have you and what a burden! The actual word of the Divine Essence, the tangible presence of The Divine in our midst. What a privilege and what a burden! How can I, with all my weaknesses, anxieties, and fears, understand you? But I love you too much to stop trying to understand. Yet, I love you too much to dare think that I do, in fact, understand.³²

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32 Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty*, 14.

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