

Thomas Hoffmann

# The Poetic Qur'ān

Studies on Qur'ānic Poeticity

2007

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0949-6807  
ISBN 978-3-447-05515-4

## Contents

Preface .....	XI
Acknowledgements .....	XIII
Translation, Transliteration, and Grammar .....	XIV
Rules of Transliteration .....	XIV
Table of Transliterations .....	XV
Abbreviations .....	XVI
Miscellaneous .....	XVI
Situating the Qurʾān .....	1
I. The Qurʾān and the Poetic Heap .....	3
II. From Emerging Communications to Canonical Qurʾānication .....	7
III. Rethinking the Canonical Qurʾān .....	9
IV. Interdisciplinarity and the Comparative Predicament .....	12
V. Reasons for a Literary Approach .....	13
VI. Revisiting Qurʾānic Poeticity .....	17
VII. Summary .....	19
Part One: Towards a Poetics of Qurʾānic Poeticity .....	21
I. Towards a Poetics of Qurʾānic Poeticity .....	23
Fuzzy Universals and Family Resemblances .....	24
II. Religious Language and the Qurʾān .....	31
Textworlds and Poietic Realities .....	33
Relative Transcendence and God-reference .....	36
Theophanic Aurality and the Poetics of Veiling .....	39
III. Canonicity and Entextualization .....	45
IV. Deviation, Tradition, and the Genesis of Liminality .....	47
V. Uneasy Aesthetics .....	52
VI. Literature and Religion and Pied Poeticities .....	56
VII. Summary .....	59
Part Two: Qurʾānic Ritual Poeticity .....	61
I. Qurʾānic Ritual Poeticity .....	63
II. Between Deviation and Tradition: Predicaments of Authority .....	65
III. Between Heightened and Common Language: Qurʾānic ‘Arabīya .....	69
Special Lexicon and Discourse Integration .....	70
Syntax and Word Order .....	73
Parallelism: Terseness and Excess .....	75

Circumlocution, Figurative Language, and Opacity .....	76
Hyperbolic Condensation .....	78
Prophecy as Dissipation of Volition .....	81
Tags, Quotation, and the Invocation of Presence .....	83
Self-reference, Metapragmatics, and Vocality .....	85
Chantability .....	86
IV. The Function of Ritual Poeticity .....	88
Appraising Ritual Poeticity: Realising Family Strife .....	89
V. Summary .....	91
Part Three: On Lively Matters .....	93
I. Reciting the Recitation: Qur'ānic Mīmēsis .....	95
II. Voicing Surrender .....	98
III. Articulate Glossolalia: On the Mysterious Letters .....	101
IV. Writing the Voice, Voicing Writ .....	107
V. Cantillating Liminality: Between Song and Speech .....	109
VI. Real-time Poetics and Poetic Deceleration .....	115
VII. Risk in Recitation: Paratexts of Liminality .....	117
A Brief Analysis .....	120
VIII. Summary .....	122
Part Four: Cognitive Poetics, Enunciation, and Self-Reference .....	123
I. The Moving Qur'ān – A Cognitive Approach .....	125
Revisiting Movement .....	125
'Moving' Words and Grammar .....	126
Introducing Cognitive Linguistics and Poetics .....	128
Movement in Cognitive Poetics and in the Qur'ān .....	129
From Nautical to Prophetic Scenarios: Q 42:32–33 .....	130
II. The Poetics of Qur'ānic Force Dynamics .....	134
Introducing Force Dynamics .....	136
Forceful Samples .....	138
Towards a Force Dynamic Poetics of the Qur'ān .....	140
III. The Rhetoric of Qur'ānic Subjectivity .....	141
Monologue, Liminality, and Protean Pronouns .....	141
Research Positions on Qur'ānic Enunciation .....	143
Linguistic Subjectivity .....	145
The Poetic and Protean 'I' .....	147
'Thick' Pronominality and Poeticity .....	149
Forthright and Hesitant Rhetoric .....	151
Liminality and Flights of Enunciation .....	153
IV. Self-Referentiality and Agonistic Poetics in the Qur'ān .....	157
Rethinking Qur'ānic Self-Referentiality .....	159
Forms of Qur'ānic Self-Referentiality .....	160

The Prophet’s Strong Misreadings .....	163
Self-referentiality and Poeticity .....	164
The Unpoetic Poetic Refutations.....	166
Revisionary Ratios of the Qur’ān .....	169
Qur’ānic Self as Social Structure and Process.....	172
Self-Referentiality and Self-Criticism.....	173
V. Conclusion .....	175
Bibliography .....	179

## Preface

This work is the outcome of fortuitous circumstances and sheer deliberation. Ever since my late teenage years, when I visited an Arab country, I have been captivated by the ‘melodies of the minarets.’ A latent association between the Islamic Arab world and aesthetic experience was formed during this trip, and has lived on in the back of my mind. Years later, when studying comparative religion and Islamic studies at the University of Copenhagen, this latency, emerged into the idea that the Qurʾān – much like the Bible – could be read *as* literature. Taken as text, the Qurʾān can be approached with many of the same tools used in contemporary literary studies. Insights derived from a literary approach can also be fruitfully combined with those of traditional Qurʾānic studies. Seen this way, the Qurʾān is a text of a great literary-imaginative value.

When I began the present work as Ph.D. student, I did so by addressing some of the same issues that Andrew Welsh approached in his early monograph *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics* (1978). Instead of focusing on diachronic reverberations alone, Welsh endeavoured to sketch out some persistent patterns of poetic language and poetic effect. Welsh’s endeavour soon turned out to be more intricate than he expected, and his – as well as my – study changed into a ‘far more tentative speculation about the ways in which poetic language catches, reflects, and directs fundamental powers of vision and action.’ Thus, the present study attempts to merge the ‘cool’ of philology with the ‘heat’ of criticism, hoping more for a climate of respectful fray than of lukewarm conformity.

The present work, being a slightly revised version of my Ph.D. thesis, presents philological details that may be burdensome for those unfamiliar with Arabic as well as issues of poeticity and the often sprawling and somewhat ‘intoxicated’ terminology of literary criticism. I feel positioned between the devil and the deep blue sea with regards to terminology, academic traditions, and aspirations. Thus, I pray that the reader will bear with these difficulties and be willing to cross into that explorative arena of exchange called interdisciplinarity.

The thesis is divided into four parts, preceded by an introductory chapter and rounded off with a summary and conclusion. In *Part One – Towards a Poetics of Qurʾānic Poeticity*, the designs and principals, both textual and religious, of which the Qurʾān partakes, will be outlined. In *Part Two, Three, and Four*, specific literary and poetic features of the Qurʾān will be pursued along with more ‘Olympic’ and tentative attempts to entangle various poetic principles at work.

As its subtitle indicates, this book merely engages in Qurʾānic *studies*. In the best of all worlds an all-inclusive, coherent, and fully systematic *explication de texte* would be my ambition; however, such aspirations, are at odds with the format of

theses like this, but, alas, also with my abilities. It goes without saying that the Qur'ān contains infinitely more than this handful of studies comprises. Nevertheless it is my hope that the key poetic contours and principles of the Qur'ān will not only appear more powerful and rich through these studies, but also more puzzling and in need of further investigations.

Besides these commonplace scholarly hopes and anxieties, a much more acute matter presses us – namely that of freedom of speech. During the past three years I have read about people from a distant past who sadly fell pray to injustice, bigotry, and sanction due to their transactions with the Qur'ān. I have also read of and met contemporaries who have been forced into geographic or professional exile, been physically assaulted, or even murdered due to their Qur'ānic undertakings. This work is also dedicated to these people.