Review Essay: Going Round in Circles[1]

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The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis. By Michel Cuypers. Translated by Jerry Ryan. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. xii + 202. ISBN 978-1-4742-2748-3 (hardback).

Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text. By Raymond Farrin. Ashland (Oregon): White Cloud Press, 2014. Pp. xvii + 163. ISBN 978-1-935952-98-5 (paperback).

Introduction

Since the 1980s, scholars publishing in Western languages have increasingly learnt to appreciate the literary qualities of the Qur'anic proclamations, thereby parting ways with the dismissive comments made by some earlier Western readers of the Islamic scripture. At the forefront of this development stands the question of whether Qur'anic surahs can be considered to display a significant degree of thematic and literary coherence. Do the surahs, or at least some of them, constitute compositional unities or are they merely collocations of self-contained verses or, at most, verse clusters? The fact that much pre-modern Islamic exegesis exhibits little interest in the surahs' structural organisation above the verse level and often attributes individual verses to distinct historical situations in the life of Muhammad creates a certain drift towards the latter alternative. Nonetheless, it seems that the current consensus among scholars based at European and North American universities has largely been swung in favour of at least some degree of surah holism. This is undoubtedly a welcome and justified development.

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The two publications under consideration here are impelled by this holistic turn while endeavouring to push it much further. Michel Cuypers' *The Composition of the Qur'an* seeks to demonstrate, at a stimulating level of detail, that Qur'anic surahs are structured in accordance with a small number of general compositional principles that govern Semitic literary production more widely. Cuypers' objective is to establish that the method of rhetorical analysis codified by the Biblical scholar Roland Meynet, which is also claimed to be valid for other ancient Near Eastern literature as well as for material from the *ḥadīth* corpus (pp. 6–7), is likewise applicable to the Qur'an. Following Meynet, Cuypers distinguishes three general "figures of composition": parallelism, mirror composition, and concentric composition (pp. 61–109). In order to qualify as exhibiting mirror composition, a passage or text must exhibit the structure ABCC'B'A', where, for example, A and A' – each of which might be a verse segment, a verse, a verse cluster, or an entire surah section – display sufficient commonalities and correspondences in order to merit being designated by the same letter. A concentric composition is a mirror composition built around a central element, thus displaying the form ABCDC'B'A'. Cuypers considers this type of structure to be "extremely frequent" throughout the Qur'an (p. 83).

The view that much of the Qur'an is structured concentrically is also endorsed in Raymond Farrin's *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation* (p. xv). Farrin builds on the work of Cuypers and on Mary Douglas' *Thinking in Circles*, both of whom demand that special interpretive weight be given to the midpoint of a concentric literary structure.[2] While the two monographs share a general conviction of the importance of ring composition in the Qur'an, their objectives are not identical but complementary. Cuypers' work is a detailed manual of Qur'anic rhetorical analysis that treats compositional figures from those occurring below the verse level up to the organisation of entire surahs, among them such extensive pieces as Q 5. Farrin's book, despite being much shorter and less technical, is even more ambitious, attempting to show that in fact the entire Qur'an exhibits a concentric structure that is pivoted on Q 50–56 (on which see pp. 59–69). Incidentally, it may be noted that a

[2] Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

similar claim was already defended in 2002 in an inaccessibly-published English booklet by Julian Baldick (of which Farrin seems to be unaware).[3]

A ring-compositional approach to the Qur'an has undeniably become in vogue, having also been prominently embraced in Carl Ernst's recent *How to Read the Qur'an*.[4] This may partly be due to the fact that it can be harnessed to a number of very different historical models and scholarly agendas. Apart from the general aim of rehabilitating the Qur'an's literary merits, a ring-compositional reading of the Islamic scripture may appear to be a promising ally for Islamic apologetics no less than for the sceptical rewriting of the standard narrative of formative Islam. For instance, Farrin's insistence that the Qur'an "possesses a magnificent design" throughout (p. xv) could easily be used as the crucial stepping stone in a latter-day *iʿjāz*-type argument for the Qur'an's divine origin, which Farrin himself comes close to intimating on p. 74 (where Muhammad's lack of appropriate literary training for producing such a magnificent document as the Qur'an is underlined).[5] Although the theological potential of the approach is not explicitly pursued, Farrin certainly takes his ring-compositional analyses to entail that "the Prophet himself arranged the whole Qur'an (whether or not by divine direction)": according to him, it is unlikely that the Qur'an had "multiple authors" since it consistently adheres to a ring-compositional structural logic (pp. 70–71). In contrast, Cuypers has gone on record claiming that the rhetorical analysis of the Qur'an makes it "highly probable" that the Qur'an emerged from "a Christian monastic milieu", where the Biblical Psalms would have very been well known and might therefore have functioned as a literary paradigm from which, presumably, the author or authors of the Qur'an picked up ring-compositional techniques.[6]

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[3] Julian Baldick, *The Qur'an: An Overview* (Taipei: International Exchange Committee, Tamkang University, 2002); see esp. p. 44.

[4] Carl W. Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

[5] Such a theological appropriation of the ring-compositional approach is also betrayed by the laudatory blurb of Cuypers' book-length study of Q 5, which praises its reading of the Qur'an as being "in absolute accordance with the Islamic faith" and its potential for Islamic-Christian dialogue. See Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an*, trans. Patricia Kelly (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009), back cover.

[6] Michel Cuypers, "L'analyse rhetorique face à la critique historique de J. Wansbrough et de G. Lüling: L'éxemple de la sourate 96", in Carlos A. Segovia and Basil Lourié (eds), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom? Studies on the Rise of Islam and Various Other Topics in Memory of John Wansbrough* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012), pp. 343–369, at p. 364.

Both historical inferences seem questionable to me. At least prima facie, a text composed in accordance with the principles of ring composition is equally conceivable as the product of a multigenerational human editorial process leading to an ever more symmetrical honing of transmitted material, as the product of a single human author with appropriate exposure to similar texts, and as the product of divine revelation. Any attempt to privilege one of these three options would require a much more elaborate argument than is currently on offer.[7] At least for the time being, it therefore seems safest to refrain from placing any historical, and much less any theological, load on a ring-compositional analysis of the Qur'an, even if the latter should turn out to be a tenable method of literary analysis. But is it a tenable method of Qur'anic literary analysis? It must be acknowledged that both Cuypers and Farrin present a number of compelling observations, some of which are indebted to earlier Islamic exegetes such as the Mamluk commentator al-Biqāʿī or the 20th-century Indo-Pakistani exegete Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī. For example, Farrin convincingly highlights that Q 1 and Q 113–114 function as a frame around the entire Qur'anic corpus (pp. 7–8) and that Q 2–5 form a thematically interconnected surah group (pp. 48–9). Cuypers' book in particular includes highly insightful treatments of the rhetorical structure of certain Qur'anic passages, such as Q 5:15–19 (p. 52), Q 81:19–25 (p. 85), and Q 92 (p. 87). Ultimately, however, I would suggest that both Farrin and Cuypers substantially overplay their hand in maintaining that ring structures are ubiquitous throughout the entire Qur'an.

"Semitic rhetoric"?

Before illustrating my reservations by means of a number of examples, some attention must be given to Cuypers' theoretical framework, anchored in the notion of a distinctly "Semitic rhetoric" that allegedly informs a wide range of texts from ancient Near Eastern writings to the Qur'an. Cuypers posits that "Semitic culture" is characterised by distinctive "manners of thinking and expressing itself" (p. vii), as a result of which its literary production conforms to a system of structural laws (e.g., p. 9) that can be described with absolute certainty (p. 5). The binary distinction

[7] For instance, Farrin's observation that Muhammad "through forty years of life, had shown no special inclination to literature (he was a merchant)" (p. 74) uncritically presupposes that the Islamic *sīrah* sources – whose theological or salvation-historical agenda should by now be duly recognised not only by dyed-in-the-wool Wansbroughians – provide us with accurate information about the Prophet's early life and the literary stimuli that he would have encountered.

between Semitic and non-Semitic thought and literature that is upheld by Cuypers sits in a great deal of tension with the intellectual sensibility of 21st-century Western literary and cultural scholars, many of whom – myself included – are almost instinctively inclined to celebrate the shifting and hybrid nature of texts and cultural identities. Cuypers' breezy pronouncement that "the Greek demonstrates, the Semite shows" (p. 21), in particular, modelled on Meynet's original "The Greek demonstrates, the Jew shows" (cited on p. 185, n. 12), seems to come straight out of the scrap book of 19th-century racial and cultural theorising.

There is, of course, a lot to be said in favour of challenging cosy and complacent scholarly habits. Nonetheless, the cultural essentialism resonating from Cuypers' tidy distinction between Semitic and non-Semitic "manners of thinking" and expression does not adequately capture the current scholarly understanding of the cultural milieus from which both Biblical literature and the Qur'an emerged. In the case of the New Testament, which constitutes the primary specialisation of Meynet, the bare fact that it is written in *koinê* Greek (even if some of its authors may have been native speakers of Aramaic) already casts doubt on the idea that the mere employment of a Semitic or non-Semitic language is likely to be accompanied, or not to be accompanied, by recourse to a specific set of compositional conventions. As regards the Qur'an, the intellectual and religious world of late antiquity that forms is context of origin is certainly one in which Greek and Semitic cultural influences had long intermingled. There is also the fact that ring structures have been detected in the Homeric epics,[8] while much post-Qur'anic Arabic writing does not seem to be ring-compositional. It is true that Cuypers might neutralise this latter point by underscoring the profound impact that he considers Greek rhetoric to have had on Islamic thought (p. 11). Nonetheless, the preceding considerations do combine to make the notion of a characteristically "Semitic" way of exposition appear problematic, to say the least.

Cuypers himself recognises that some use of the compositional figures he discusses is also found outside Semitic literature. According to him, what distinguishes Semitic rhetoric is not "the occasional usage of parallelisms or chiasm

[8] See e.g. Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, pp. 101–124; Seth L. Schein, "The *Iliad*: Structure and Interpretation", in Ian Morris and Barry Powell (eds.), *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 345–359; Stephen V. Tracy, "The Structures of the *Odyssey*", ibid., pp. 360–379.

or even a ring composition", but rather "the absolutely systematic usage of these figures of composition at all levels of the text" (p. 9). Cuypers' cultural essentialism is thus coupled with the self-assurance of a modern scientist: a certain body of data is comprehensively subsumed under an unfailingly valid system of laws, yielding "absolutely certain conclusions" (p. 5). In keeping with this implicit scientism, *The Composition of the Qur'an* exudes a keen desire to convey an impression of methodological rigour, most visible in the lengthy set of technical definitions that makes up chapter 3 (pp. 23–60). At the same time, it is implied that a failure to be persuaded by Cuypers' claims might simply betray a lack of appropriate expertise, or perhaps of the requisite literary talent: "Let the debutant or the amateur be prudent! One has to know the trade, have experience and perhaps a certain predisposition of the spirit to sense the links between the elements of the text." (p. 10) It hardly deserves pointing out that the upshot of such a stance may well be a worrying degree of self-immunisation against collegial criticism.

Structuring Qur'anic passages

The fact that Cuypers' commitment to the existence of a distinct Semitic rhetorical system is mercifully absent from Farrin's book affords an important reminder that either's assertions about the literary organisation of the Qur'an should primarily be judged in terms of the literary data, which is what the remainder of this review will attempt to do. Although Cuypers expressly denies that he is engaged in peddling "a priori prejudgements imposed on the text like a prefabricated theory" (p. 10), a reader who is not already invested in the validity of the ring-compositional approach will, upon suitably careful scrutiny, have reason to doubt many of the structural analyses put forward by both Cuypers and Farrin. This results from two principal flaws: first, from a tendency to subdivide Qur'anic texts in a manner that is often counterintuitive and even arbitrary; and second, from the fact that the intra-textual links that Cuypers and Farrin adduce in arguing that two passages mirror each other are frequently weak or self-servingly selective. Both faults would appear to be rooted in a desire to maximise the occurrence of symmetrical and especially concentric structures in the Qur'an.

The first difficulty, that of questionable structural subdivision, becomes visible already in Cuypers' treatment of the basic rhetorical unit that he calls a "member".

Following Meynet, a member is defined as "the elementary unit of rhetorical organization" (p. 26); in Cuypers' citations from the Qur'an, members are accordingly set off by line breaks. Cuypers plausibly subdivides many of the Qur'an's longer verses of the Qur'an into several such lines or members, similar to Angelika Neuwirth's proposal to partition them into "cola".[9] Both Cuypers and Neuwirth are thus agreed, reasonably enough, that longer verses are internally complex or, as it were, molecular units that contain smaller literary building blocks: one cannot, after all, read a verse like Q 2:282 without catching one's breath somewhere. Neuwirth and Cuypers furthermore agree that many short verses are one-liners composed of just one such member or colon. Unlike Neuwirth, however, Cuypers is also prepared to recognise the possibility that two verses should be regarded as a single member, which he deems to be the case for Q 88:13–14, 88:15–16, and 74:40–41 (p. 28). This is a more serious step than it might at first seem, for it amounts to declaring a Qur'anic verse border – that is, a caesura that is clearly underpinned by rhyme – to be to all intents and purposes structurally immaterial. Elsewhere, Cuypers explicitly states his view that Qur'anic rhyme has at best a subsidiary relevance for discerning the structural division of a given passage (p. 43–44).[10] Thus, an extremely prominent and basic literary feature that pervades the entire Qur'an – the fact that the latter naturally subdivides into discrete verse units defined by a concluding assonance – is pronounced to be of potentially only marginal compositional significance. This stands in puzzling tension with Cuypers' self-declared aim of "following the compositional indicators that are found in the text itself" (p. 24).

Against Cuypers, I would submit that a verse border should always be assumed to constitute a weightier structural caesura than any border that is posited between adjoining members or cola within a verse. This principle would immediately undermine a number of divisions proposed by Cuypers. For instance, consider Q 5:7–8, discussed on p. 41, which Cuypers divides into the following members:

[9] Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*, 2nd edition (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 119–122. See also Lutz Edzard, "Perspektiven einer computergestützten Analyse der qur'ānischen Morpho-Syntax und Satz-Syntax in kolometrischer Darstellung', *Arabica* 50 (2003), pp. 350–381.

[10] Cuypers' brief remarks about Qur'anic rhyme unfortunately display no acquaintance with the relevant spadework done by Neuwirth, found in *Studien*, pp. 65–115. For example, using a system of variables introduced by Anton Spitaler, Neuwirth would describe the rhyme scheme of Q 84:16–19, as conforming to the pattern 3C3q (= short vowel + any consonant + short vowel + *q*), whereas Cuypers merely speaks of "a rhyme in *aq*".

[7a] And remember God's grace upon you
[7b] and His covenant by which He bound you,
[7c] when you said: "We hear and obey!"
[7d] And fear God!
[7e] God knows what is contained in men's breasts.

[8a] O you who believe,
[8b] be steadfast to God,
[8c] witnesses of equity!
[8d] Let not hatred for a people incite you
[8e] not to be just!
[8f] Be just!
[8g] This is closest to fear of God.
[8h] And fear God!
[8i] God is informed of what you do.[11]

Cuypers arranges these 14 members into three textual "pieces", two outer ones consisting of members 7a–7e and 8d–8i, respectively, and one "central piece" consisting of members 8a–8c. Furthermore, the first and third piece are said to be complementary and to "correspond to one another". Incidentally, I harbour strong reservations about Cuypers' claim that a meaningful antithetical link can be discerned between the reference to "God's grace" (*niʿmata llāhi*) in member 7a and the reference to "hatred for a people" (*shanʾānu qawmin*) in member 8d; but the question of what constitutes a valid intra-textual correspondence – an issue that I have singled out above as constituting the second principal flaw of Cuypers' and Farrin's work – is best postponed until later. What matters at this juncture is that the border between the first and second piece that is postulated by Cuypers coincides with a verse border (that between vv. 7 and 8), while the boundary between the second and third piece sits squarely within v. 8. If one takes Qur'anic rhyme seriously, as I think we must, it will be necessary to attach more structural weight to the caesura between members 7e and 8a, which is reinforced by a verse-final rhyme, than to the border between members 8c and 8d. As a result, the passage would much more naturally divide into two parallel units of text, each ending with an

[11] Note that I modify Cuypers' translation in several regards.

injunction to “fear God” (members 7d and 8h) followed by what one might call a theological predication (members 7e and 8i). Furthermore, the first half of this parallelism is most plausibly taken to consist not only in v. 7, but also to encompass v. 6, which is opened by the same vocative as v. 8, “O you who believe”, followed by a command.

A more adequate account of the compositional structure of Q 5:6–8 would therefore be to say that vv. 6–7 and v. 8 form two parallel stretches of text whose beginning and ending display palpable overlap in diction (“O you who believe ...”, “fear God!”), and which are furthermore insulated from each other by means of a clear topic shift between v. 7 and v. 8. Thus construed, however, vv. 7–8 will not emerge as having a concentric shape built around a central piece made up by members 8a–8c. My proposal that vv. 6–7 be regarded as belonging together furthermore flies in the face of the structure for Q 5:5–11 that is proposed in Cuypers’ monograph on surah 5, where v. 6 is identified as the centre of the entire sequence (or, as he says, “sub-sequence”), while v. 7 is allocated to the latter’s concluding passage.[12] It is interesting to observe how this construal of Q 5:5–11 handles the vocatives at the beginning of v. 6 and v. 8: while the address opening v. 6 is considered to open the central passage of the sub-sequence vv. 5–11, the address opening in v. 8 is not considered to function as a structural divider and is squirrelled away in the middle of a passage. Thus, very similarly to the way in which we above saw Cuypers dismiss the verse border between v. 7 and 8 as structurally insignificant, we here find him refusing any compositional function to a verse-initial vocative. Regrettably, Cuypers makes no attempt to engage with an important article by Zahniser that explores the Qur’an’s use of formulas of address as structural dividers.[13]

Cuypers’ treatment of Q 5:7–8 illustrates how his scant regard for the importance of verse borders decisively facilitates the discovery of concentric patterns. A similar case in which he secures a concentric compositional structure by denying a verse border greater structural significance than the border between two verse-internal members consists in Q 5:72–73 (p. 86). It is however important to appreciate

[12] Cuypers, *The Banquet*, p. 113.

[13] On the structural significance of vocatives see A. H. Mathias Zahniser, “Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: al-Baqara and al-Nisāʾ”, in Issa J. Boullata (ed.), *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qurʾān* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), pp. 26–55, at pp. 30–32.

that these are not inadvertent slips but rather conscious methodological choices. For Cuypers is upfront about his conviction that the way in which we structure a Qur'anic passage should not be determined by thematic or semantic considerations (p. 23) and may if needs be freely override rhyme (p. 44). Instead, the correct division of a Qur'anic text "depends, above all, on the formal symmetric and semantic correspondences" that can be identified among the text's component units. Similarly, it is explicitly urged that the delineation of individual members be based on a member's "aptitude to form a symmetry with another member" (p. 28). The net value of such advice is very much to give the Qur'anic interpreter license to disregard virtually any literary signals that would commonsensically be viewed as indicative of compositional structure (such as rhyme, vocatives, or topic shifts) if doing so permits him to identify a greater degree of structural, and especially concentric, symmetry. Thus, Cuypers advocates a subdivision of Q 86 into three sections that ignores a formally obvious caesura after v. 4, following the oath statement that concludes the surah's oath introduction (vv. 1–3), and instead imposes a cut after v. 7, in the midst of a continuous argument that reasons from God's creation of man (vv. 5–7) to His ability to "bring him back" for an eschatological judgement (vv. 8–10) (pp. 119–120). The underlying motive here is clearly to ensure the applicability of one of the "laws" about concentric composition that were laid down by the New Testament scholar Nils Wilhelm Lund, namely, "the law of shift from centre to the extremes" (see pp. 115–120), in accordance with which the centre of surah 88 is said to exhibit a correspondence with the outer parts of surah 86 while the centre of surah 86 is linked with the first part of surah 88. It would not be unfair, therefore, to summarise Cuypers' methodology as follows: the validity of Meynet's rhetorical system, which incorporates most of the "laws of Lund", is taken for granted; the Qur'an is reconciled with this system, if necessary at the price of ignoring important literary markers that are immanent to the Qur'an; and at the end it is claimed that the applicability of Meynet's system to a further textual corpus has been successfully shown. This is not, as Cuypers maintains, an inductive approach (p. viii) but rather a deductive one. Indeed, one might be excused for finding the entire procedure perfectly circular and reductionist, insofar as Cuypers has no interest in exploring the possibility that the

Qur'an might display compositional traits that are not simply manifestations of an overarching "Semitic rhetorical logic" (p. 117).[14]

Although Farrin's theoretical presuppositions are more modest than those of Cuypers, arbitrary structural breaks also beset *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation*. For example, one of the sections making up surah 2 is said to be located at Q 2:113 (p. 13). This is an extremely improbable point at which to position a structural border: v. 113 continues and concludes a polemical verse cluster directed against the Jews and Christians that begins with v. 111, and there is a clear thematic shift between vv. 113 and 114. Interestingly, an earlier article by Farrin on the structure of surah 2 places no section border here and respects the thematic coherence of Q 2:111–113.[15] A particularly eccentric subdivision is proposed for Q 53. Farrin discerns major breaks at v. 29 and v. 33, yielding a tripartite structure (vv. 1–28, vv. 29–32, vv. 33–62) that is, yet again, found to be concentric (p. 97). The break at v. 33 is plausible, but v. 29 comes in the midst of a polemical section spanning at least vv. 23–32. In addition, other evident caesurae in the text – especially at v. 19 and v. 57 – are ignored.[16] A further case in which Farrin implausibly imposes a section break between two verses that are closely interconnected consists in Q 50:15–16: v. 15 highlights that God has not been "worn out by the first creation" and castigates the audience for their doubts about God's ability to perform a "new creation", which presumably refers to the resurrection; v. 16 then expands on the theme of God's first creation by invoking specifically the creation of man and threateningly asserts that

[14] Another instance of questionable subdivision consists in Cuypers' treatment of Q 81:19–29, presented as a ring around v. 26 (pp. 125–126). The latter verse is a brief polemical question ("So where are you going?"). Rather than singling it out as the centre of Q 81's concluding part, v. 26 might just as well, or perhaps even more plausibly, be seen as a parenthetical (or metatextual) aside that amplifies, and thus belongs together with, the assertion that "this is not the speech of a devil worthy of being stoned" in v. 25. By contrast, the obvious shift in the reference of the third-person pronoun *mā* between vv. 24 and 25 suggests at least a minor section break there. In general, I would therefore recommend structuring the passage into three verse clusters, vv. 19–21, 22–24, and 25–29. Note that both the first and the third cluster commence with third-person statements whose subject is a pronoun without antecedent that would appear to designate the Qur'anic revelations ("it"), while their predicate is a genitive construction with *qawl* as the first term. It therefore seems appropriate to describe this tripartite run of verse clusters as being concentric, with the defense of the Qur'anic messenger ("your companion") in vv. 22–24 functioning as the sequence's centrepiece.

[15] Raymond K. Farrin, "Surat al-Baqara: A Structural Analysis", *The Muslim World* 100 (2010), pp. 17–32, at p. 23.

[16] On the structure of Q 53 see the following publications (which Farrin does not engage with): Neuwirth, *Studien*, pp. 207–208; Nicolai Sinai, "An Interpretation of Sūrat al-Najm (Q. 53)", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13 (2011), pp. 1–28, esp. pp. 11–13 (partly based on Neuwirth); Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran: Handkommentar und Übersetzung*, vol. 1: *Poetische Prophetie: Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), pp. 642–685.

man's divine creator is aware "of what his soul whispers to him; and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein". The couplet patently forms a thematically cohesive verse cluster, and Farrin's suggestion that one of surah 50's two major section breaks should run right through it (p. 95) strikes me as a literary equivalent of the Berlin wall, ripping apart a unified textual landscape.[17] Farrin's sectioning here is transparently geared towards supporting his claim that Q 50, too, has a concentric structure: by cutting after v. 15, he ensures that the surah's Section A contains a statement to the effect that God was not wearied by the "first creation", which corresponds to a similar assertion in v. 38, shortly after the beginning of Farrin's Section A' ("We have created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, and no weariness touched Us"). It is hardly open to doubt that there is thematic and lexical overlap between Q 50:15 and 50:38; but this correspondence will only fit a concentric shape if v. 15 is allotted to the surah's opening part rather than, as Neuwirth would have it, to its middle section.[18] Farrin thus imposes on the texts a structural division that will significantly augment the amount of concentric intra-textual correspondences that can be detected in it. The puzzlement generated by his and also Cuypers' predilection for improbable section breaks is not mitigated by the fact that neither makes any effort to relate his claims to, and defend them against, the work of other scholars who have worked on some of the same surahs.

Interestingly, the worry that ring-compositional structures are being propped up by means of dodgy section breaks has also been raised against Farrin's previous work on Arabic poetry.[19] In studying the Qur'an, too, he seems to take for granted that the text, if properly analysed, will display a concentric organisation, as a result of which the task of the literary analyst simply consists in working out the most persuasive route towards reaching a preset destination. As with Cuypers, the price of this manner of proceeding consists in doing a fair bit of violence to the literary fabric of the Qur'an, by riding roughshod over what I have described as "literary signals

[17] See the alternative division proposed in Neuwirth, *Studien*, p. 285, which posits a subsection break before, rather than after, v. 15.
[18] See previous note.
[19] Geert Jan van Gelder, review of Raymond Farrin, *Abundance from the Desert: Classical Arabic Poetry*, *Speculum* 87 (2012), pp. 1190–1191, at p. 1190: "Judicious division into unequal parts will often help in suggesting symmetries. A crass example is the invective poem by Jarīr, where section A comprises wholly different passages of *nasīb* (love reminiscence, vv. 1–4) and *hijā'* (invective, vv. 5–14), a most odd way of dividing a poem, and Farrin's justification is extremely tenuous. But it had to be thus, for otherwise the ring (my precious!) is lost. The scope of this review does not allow me to point to similar cases."

that would commonsensically be viewed as indicative of compositional structure". To this charge, a proponent of ring theory might conceivably respond that in studying the Qur'an we simply need to let go of all our default intuitions regarding plausible textual caesurae and work on the hypothesis that "the Semitic rhetorical logic at work in the Qur'an" is simply not commensurate with "our Western logic" (cf. Cuypers, p. 117). However, such a response would be tantamount to little more than demanding a leap of faith, a leap that scholars who cannot help but accord structural weight to verse borders, topic shifts, and vocatives have not yet managed to carry off. The result would be a theory that has comfortably ensconced itself in an unfalsifiable position.

What makes a correspondence?

As emphasised above, to designate two Qur'anic verse clusters by means of derived lettering – i.e., as A and A', or B and B', etc. – presupposes that the two passages can be shown to exhibit tangible correspondences with each other. These correspondences ought to be compelling, specific, and ideally also exclusive, meaning that they should not also apply to further sections of the surah, at least not unless these are also designated by the same letter (e.g., as A, A', A'' etc.). One example in which the condition of exclusivity (a condition, it must be said, that neither Cuypers nor Farrin explicitly recognise) is not fulfilled is Q 2:284–286. Farrin perceives a pertinent thematic link between Q 2:2–5 and 2:285–286: "both sequences of verses concern believers and the matter of faith" (p. 21). However, as Neal Robinson has demonstrated, the final three verses of Q 2 also echo a plethora of further verses from across the entire surah.[20] This raises the question of whether any of these numerous intra-textual links deserve to be privileged over others. The use of derived lettering, of course, unhelpfully forces one to make a choice: a given section will either be identified as A', B', or C' etc., and thus be classed as primarily corresponding to one particular passage rather than another. Yet as illustrated by

[20] Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 2003), pp. 221–223; see also the summary of Robinson's findings provided in Nevin Reda (El-Tahry), Nevin, *Textual Integrity and Coherence in the Qur'an: Repetition and Narrative Structure in Surat al-Baqara,* unpublished PhD thesis (University of Toronto: Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, 2010), p. 98.

Robinson's discussion of Q 2:284–286, this may simply not be appropriate to the way in which Qur'anic surahs actually function.

Farrin's treatment of Q 2 is also marred by an excessive reliance on overly generic thematic links. Consider, for example, his claim that Q 2:1–39 and 2:243–286 mirror each other, thereby meriting to be designated as Sections A and A'. Farrin justifies this by giving the following summaries of these two sections: "Believers vs. disbelievers; Prophet challenges disbelievers to produce a *sura*; God gives life and resurrects" (Section A); "Believers encouraged in struggle vs. disbelievers; Abraham challenges king to affect [*sic*] rising of sun; God gives life and resurrects" (Section A') (p. 20; see also the more detailed surah breakdown on pp. 75–85). The problem is that very similar bullet points may be produced for many other verses in surah 2. In order to appreciate just how many passages of the composition could be classed as commenting on the contrast between believers and unbelievers, it bears rehearsing how often the phrases "those who believe" (*alladhīna āmanū*) and "those who are unbelievers" (*alladhīna kafarū*) occur outside Sections A and A': the former is found in vv. 62, 76, 82, 104, 153, 165, 172, 178, 183, 208, 212, 213, 214, and 218, while the latter appears in vv. 89, 105, 161, 171, and 212. The themes of creation and resurrection are also far from absent from the surah's middle sections (e.g., vv. 73, 117, 164, 174), while vv. 111–113 or 135–141 might with some justification be seen as "challenging" the Jews and Christians. In sum, the conveniently broad thematic affinities that are adduced by Farrin are insufficient to ground the claim that his Sections A and A' are in any way more closely linked with one another than each is with other parts of the surah. Unfortunately, Farrin does not bother to chart any intra-textual links that do not have ring-compositional implications. Analogous complaints could be made against Farrin's attempts to establish correspondences between adjoining surahs, which can be equally generic and non-exclusive.

Cuypers likewise has a certain tendency to overemphasise correspondences that are convenient but tenuous while omitting others that are more compelling yet inconvenient. For example, he would construe Q 82:13–19 as a concentric succession of three textual "segments" consisting in vv. 13–16, vv. 17–18, and v. 19 (pp. 41–42). Here, the basic subdivision of the text is plausible, but in order to justify talk of vv. 17–18 as forming the passage's "central piece", it would need to be shown

that there are specific and exclusive correspondences between vv. 13–16 and v. 19. Cuypers' presentation of the text suggests two: his translation of both v. 16 and v. 19 contains the words "be able to", and v. 19, like v. 15, refers to the eschatological "day" on which God will sit in judgement over the resurrected. Now, Cuypers himself admits that he has employed the English "to be able to" for "different words in Arabic", which do however "possess the same meaning" (p. 42). Yet inspection of the Arabic casts some doubt on this affirmation: v. 16 runs: *wa-mā hum ʿanhā bi-ghāʾibīn*, "and they [the damned] are not absent from it [scil. from the fire of hell that is mentioned before in v. 14]", while the relevant part of v. 19 reads: *yawma lā tamliku nafsun li-nafsin shayʾan*, "on the day when no soul will be capable of doing anything for another". Given that *mā* X *bi*-Y is simply a standard form of negation in Qur'anic Arabic,[21] there is no reason to follow Cuypers in rendering Q 82:16 as "and they will *not be able to* keep away from it" and thus to suggestively assimilate it to the first half of v. 19 (Cuypers: "The Day when no soul will be able [to do] for [another] soul anything"). As regards the second correspondence, Cuypers' himself notes that vv. 17–18, which make up the passage's alleged "central piece", also contain a reference to the "day of judgement". In sum, Q 82:13–19 confronts us with a succession of three verse clusters, each of which contains some reference to the eschatological "day", without there being any exclusive overlap between the first and the third cluster. In view of these circumstances, it is simply misleading to describe the passage as having a concentric structure; rather, it is merely a tripartite sequence of three verse groups that is punctuated by the keyword *yawm* / *yawm al-dīn*.

A champion of ring theory might protest that the demand for exclusive lexical parallels is inappropriately stringent. Yet in order to keep the risk of arbitrariness at bay, it really is indispensable to insist that any claim to have detected ring-structural mirroring be corroborated by reference to "the repetition of a conspicuous word or phrase, such as a proper name" and a "clear thematic connection", as promised in Farrin's introduction (p. xvi, paraphrasing Mary Douglas). However, over and over again both Cuypers and Farrin are happy to posit correspondences that are either unpersuasively broad or based on the art of subintellection. Particularly exasperating

[21] Arne A. Ambros with Stephan Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), p. 331.

is Cuypers' attempt to pass the phrase *a-lā yaẓunnu ulāʾika* at Q 83:4 ("Do these not think ...?") off as corresponding to the noun *al-nās* (Cuypers: "the people") at 83:6. Cuypers smoothes over the lack of verbal overlap in the Arabic wording of v. 4 and v. 6 by translating the relevant part of 83:4 as "Do they not think, these [people]" (p. 78), thus smuggling in the word "people" and thereby anticipating the noun *al-nās* in v. 6. In other instances, two verse clusters are simply declared to mirror each other without any actual correspondences being pointed out at all. This is the case for Cuypers' construal of Q 101:4–5 and 101:6–9, which are designated as Parts C and C' of a mirror composition (p. 80). True, the two verse groups are related to each other as antecedent clause and main clause, and both vv. 4–5 and vv. 6–9 have an internal parallelistic structure (the first one exhibiting synonymous parallelism, the second one antithetical parallelism). None of this, however, justifies employment of derived lettering: the fact that two textual units X and Y utilise similar or even the same stylistic device is insufficient to establish that they stand in a mirroring relationship with each other, which is certainly the claim that is conveyed by designating them as X and X', rather than as X and Y. It is ironic that, pace Cuypers, the correct construal of Q 101 is actually a concentric one, with vv. 4–9 making up an extended middle section that is surrounded by a double frame, consisting in vv. 1/11 and vv. 2/10.[22]

Finally, Cuypers can also fail to note intra-textual correspondences that are indubitably there. Consider his analysis of Q 98 as "made up of two parallel parts, each containing two pieces" (pp. 47–48). A fair summary of Cuypers' presentation of the surah would be to say that he considers it to have the form ABA'B' (where A = v. 1–3, B = vv. 4–5, A' = vv. 6, and B' = vv. 7–8). However, the correspondences that are typographically highlighted by him fail to take into account the antithetical contrast between the phrases "those who are unbelievers" and "they are the worst of creation" in v. 6 and "those who are believers" and "they are the best of creation" in v. 8, as well as the recurrence of the adverbial accusative *khālidīna fīhā* ("abiding therein", namely, in the fire of hell) in v. 6 and v. 8. It appears that Cuypers, having decided that Q 98 fits the formula ABA'B', simply dispenses himself from taking any further interest in lexical overlaps and antithetical contrasts occurring within the

[22] Another instance in which Cuypers' presentation of a Qur'anic passage implies that two verse clusters stand in a mirroring relationship without any specific correspondences being pointed to is Q 96:9–13 and 96:15–19 (p. 117).

second half of the surah, i.e., between verse clusters A' and B'. Recognising such additional correspondences does not as such discount those that *are* noted by Cuypers, but it significantly complicates any attempt to provide a handy and unequivocal structural analysis of the text.

The complexity of surah-internal lexical correspondences is worth belabouring here. Anyone who has ever attempted to comprehensively map out all terminological recurrences within one of the longer Qur'anic surahs will know that, partly due to the formulaic quality of much of the Qur'an,[23] the outcome can be a veritable tangle of interconnections that often does not conform to any one clear-cut symmetrical pattern, be it parallelistic or concentric. Rather, one will normally observe a complex superimposition of miscellaneous parallelisms, chiasms, inclusios, and keyword recurrences. This is illustrated by the opening verses of surah 2. Subdivided into cola or members, vv. 1–5 read as follows:

[1] *Alif, Lām, Mīm*

[2a] This is the Scripture
[2b] in which there is no doubt,
[2c] a guidance (*hudan*) for the God-fearing,

[3a] who believe in (*alladhīna yuʾminūna bi-*) the Hidden
[3b] and perform prayer
[3c] and spend from that which We have provided for them,

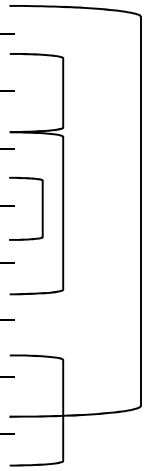
[4a] and who believe in (*alladhīna yuʾminūna bi-*) what was sent down to you (*mā unzila ilayka*)
[4b] and what was sent down before you (*mā unzila min qablika*)
[4c] and possess certainty (*yūqinūn*) about the world to come.

[5a] Those (*ulāʾika*) are guided (ʿ*alā hudan*) by their Lord,
[5b] and those (*ulāʾika*) are the ones who prosper.

The lexical recurrences within this passage may be conveniently charted in the following format:

[23] On formulaic diction in the Qur'an see Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

positional reference (surah:verse,word)	recurrent lexical item
2:2,6	*hudan*
2:3,1–3	*alladhīna yuʾminūna bi-*...
2:4,1–3	*alladhīna yuʾminūna bi-*...
2:4,3–4	*bi-mā unzila*
2:4,6–7	*mā unzila*
2:4,12	*yūqinūn*
2:5,1	*ulāʾika*
2:5,2–3	*ʿalā hudan*
2:5,6	*ulāʾika*



To provide a brief commentary, the two occurrences of the word “guidance” (*hudan*) in colas 2c and 5a form an inclusio around the entire verse sequence. The second appearance of “guidance” is itself framed, and thus emphasised, by a repetition of the plural demonstrative “those” at the beginning of colas 5a and 5b. Within the bracket constituted by the passage’s two occurrences of “guidance”, we find a double occurrence of “who believe” in colas 3a and 4a, climactically capped by the largely synonymous expression “possess certainty” at the end of colon 4c. The second occurrence of “who believe” in 4a and the verse-final “possess certainty” could in turn be seen as forming a bracket around the parallelism “what was sent down to you” / “what was sent down before you” in cola 4a and 4b. It should also be observed that the final cola of v. 3 and v. 4 (3c and 4c) display a parallel grammatical structure consisting in an inverted word order that delays each sentence’s main verb to verse-final position (*wa-mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn*, *wa-bi-l-ākhirati hum yūqinūn*).

I would readily agree with Cuypers and Farrin that the lexical latticework produced by such recurrences betrays deliberate and highly artful literary crafting. However, it seems equally important to insist that such lexical correspondence networks may perfectly well create multiple layers of parallelistic, concentric, climactic, and other patterns rather than all pointing in the same direction; that they should not be allowed to blot out other literary markers; and that a proper

assessment of their compositional role requires us to map them out in their entirety, regardless of whether a given recurrence forms part of a concentric pattern or indeed any other pattern at all. Cuypers and Farrin, by contrast, often appear to be exclusively alert to those recurrences and thematic links that lend themselves to being seen as supporting one particular structural categorisation, usually a concentric one. This is unduly myopic and, frankly, makes the Qur'an a much less interesting text than it is.

Conclusion

Despite the preceding criticism of Cuypers and Farrin, I would consider it very probable that a considerable number of Qur'anic passages, perhaps even entire surahs, employ a certain measure of ring-compositional techniques: as pointed out at the beginning of this essay, Cuypers' structural analyses are by no means all unconvincing, and in critiquing some of his less persuasive construals we even had occasion to notice cases where he missed, rather than fabricated, concentric structures. However, Cuypers and Farrin cannot be trusted to give us a sober appraisal of where a ring-structural analysis of Qur'anic material works and where it doesn't; both are far too exuberant about having cracked the Qur'an's "rhetorical code" (Cuypers, p. viii).

What the field does not now need is a spate of studies animated by an a priori determination to press ever more surahs into a predetermined concentric mould, by hook or by crook. What the field would however be very well served by is a study seeking to carry out a truly impartial and critical assessment of the extent to which the Qur'anic corpus makes use of ring composition. Such a study's point of departure should be twofold. For any given surah, the first step would need to be a thorough argumentative weighing of the structural significance of various literary markers that can be identified in the text, such as topic shifts, vocatives, rhyme changes, or "wrap-up" formulae.[24] Such a structural survey, which would be able to profit from the work of Neuwirth and Zahniser, must not yet give any consideration to surah-internal lexical recurrences so as to avoid the problem, amply encountered above, that a surah's structure is surreptitiously trimmed and tweaked in a way that will maximise concentric results. By way of a second step, one would then need to

[24] The term "wrap-up" is taken from Zahniser, "Major Transitions", pp. 32–34.

catalogue all cases of intra-textual overlap within the surah at hand, such as is provided by Robinson for much of Q 2 and Q 5.[25] My subjective preference would be for the results of this exercise to be presented in something like the format used above, rather than by means of Cuypers' recourse to indentation, different font types, and miscellaneous special characters such as "=", "+", or "-", which can at times create a rather impenetrable typographical jumble. Only based on this preparatory work will it then be possible to objectively evaluate which Qur'anic passages show concentric structures. If Cuypers' and Farrin's monographs will at some point result in such a book being written, scholars of the Qur'an will have reason to be grateful to them for their pioneering, if exuberantly overstated, contribution.

[25] Robinson, *Discovering*, pp. 201–223; Neal Robinson, "Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida*", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3 (2001), pp. 1–19.