

# laetus in praesens

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## Poetic Engagement with Afghanistan, Caucasus and Iran

### an unexplored strategic opportunity?

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## Introduction

This exploration is in response to strategic challenges in the region named. It is a development of earlier studies of the interface between strategy and poetry (*Poetry-making and Policy-making: arranging a marriage between Beauty and the Beast*, 1993; *Ensuring Strategic Resilience through Haiku Patterns: reframing the scope of the "martial arts" in response to strategic threats*, 2006) as well as in relation to the role of music and song (*A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* 2006; *Reframing the EU Reform Process -- through Song responding to the Irish challenge to the Lisbon Treaty*, 2008).

The original version of this document arose as a response to an invitation to make a presentation in a session on *Caucasus Future Challenges* at the Wilton Park Conference on *Caucasus 2020: the Future of European Security* (January 2009). [Wilton Park](#) (Sussex, UK) arranges conferences on international affairs for politicians, officials, academics and others from around the world. In their initial form the notes were communicated to the organizers. Being unable to attend, the focus in that response was on how the challenge of the Caucasus might nevertheless be more fruitfully reframed.

## Preamble

**Aesthetics:** It is not widely recognized in the cultures beyond the direct influence of Islam the extent to which aesthetics is valued there, whether in the form of poetry or song. The "[clash of civilizations](#)" is readily framed by the West as implying a direct physical threat between cultures. Aside from conventional diplomatic dialogue, no other vehicle is

considered appropriate to the engagement between worldviews so framed. It is of course the case that there is a long history of such physical conflict between such cultures.

[Michael Bibby](#) (*Hearts and Minds: poetry and resistance in the Vietnam Era*, 1996) introduces his compilation of poetry of resistance to the Vietnam war within the USA with the comment:

On May 4, 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson told a meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc.: "We must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live there." Coming on the heels of the first mass deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam, this speech marks one of the earliest uses of the phrase "hearts and minds" in relation to the Vietnam War.... The U.S. policy of "pacification" was often referred to as "winning hearts and minds," which meant that it sought to win the emotional and political support of the rural South Vietnamese...

In his extensive discussion of the phrase and its subsequent significance, Bibby notes that more poetry was published in the USA after 1960 than in any previous historical period. However, he notes much of this anti-war, activist poetry vanished without trace in the following twenty years. The topic is also discussed by Lorrie Goldensohn (*Dismantling Glory: twentieth-century soldier poetry*, 2003).

Eleanor Wilner (*Poetry and the Pentagon: Unholy Alliance?* *Poetry Magazine*, October 2004) describes an initiative of the US National Endowment for the Arts, in collaboration with the US Department of Defense, named [Operation Homecoming: Writing the War Experience](#). Launched in April 2004, it was designed as a project to help soldiers write about their experiences in war, notably by bringing writers to military bases to conduct workshops for soldiers returning from combat. It would seem to have been both an effort to pre-empt the problematic soldier poetry of the Vietnam era as well as to provide a form of therapy for potentially traumatized combatants. The first product contained a mix of writings, including some poetry (Andrew Carroll, *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*, 2006).

With respect to the Vietnam war, there is also little trace of any strategic importance attached to understanding the poetry that sustained the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese. Its importance is indicated by the remarks of Fred Marchant (*War Poets From Viet Nam. Humanities*, 1998):

There is a Vietnamese legend that in times of distress the nation will be blessed with the arrival of a child poet. During the years of the American war, in what Americans then called North Viet Nam, there was such a young poet. His name was [Tran Dang Khoa](#).... When Khoa brought me... to [Nguyen Trai's](#) mountain hermitage, I think he was ... tacitly claiming his poetic lineage, and teaching us how poetry had always been inherently important to the Vietnamese people. Any schoolchild might know a score of poems by heart, and ordinary adults who had nothing to do with writing or publishing poems, would at least remember a few and could recite them.

Literacy had been an essential virtue of the centuries' long anticolonial struggle. ... As with Nguyen Trai, it was not at all uncommon for leaders of the anticolonial struggle to be themselves accomplished literary people. Reading, writing, recitation, and performance had for centuries been one of the ways to forge a national identity.... As I said good-bye to Khoa and other writers I realized that I had just spent a week in a society where poetry and poets were considered national treasures. In the twentieth century, certainly the poet who drew directly on the model provided by Nguyen Trai was Nguyen Ai Quoc, more commonly known as [Ho Chi Minh](#).

However, it would appear that the strategists of current conflicts have learnt nothing from poet-strategists such as Nguyen Trai and Ho Chi Minh. In addition to Operation Homecoming, the Pentagon has tended to frame its use of aesthetics in the tradition of direct support to military engagement, whether in providing supportive music to its soldiers, enabling them to listen to music whilst operating combat vehicles on search and destroy missions, or as an adjunct to interrogation (notably through sleep deprivation). It is far less clear to what extent such aesthetics have been used to engage opponents -- on terms meaningful to them -- in any effort to win "hearts and minds". This is very curious given the deliberate effort by Elizabeth Samet to teach poetry to military cadets, as described by Marjorie Kehe (*'Soldier's Heart': why we ask West Point cadets to wrestle with poetry*, 2007) and through an [interview](#).

By contrast, the [Communication Initiative Network](#) reproduces a report for the UK government on a region of Afghanistan by Gordon Adam (*Winning Hearts and Minds in Helmand*, 2008). This notes the critical need for an emphasis on participation -- not propaganda. In that respect it notes how little Pashto language media was reaching rural Afghans in the conflict areas. It recommended a professional news service closely attuned to local events, and entertainment in the form of music, local poetry, and literature and drama. By contrast, as reported by the International

Crisis Group in 2008, the Islamist militia was making making a violent comeback, particularly in that area -- making sophisticated use of media with many messages coming as songs, religious chants and poetry (Herbert A. Friedman, [Psychological Operations in Afghanistan](#), 2008).

There would appear to be no trace of any attempt at strategic engagement through poetry with cultures that value that medium -- even, notably, as a function of PSYOPS ([Psychological Operations](#)). Ironically the US Defense Secretary responsible for the initiation of intervention in the Middle East was a known source of "poetry" in that period (Slate, [Rummy's Ruminations: the collected poetry of Donald Rumsfeld](#), 2006) of which one such poem has continued to be of strategic significance ([Unknown Undoing: challenge of incomprehensibility of systemic neglect](#), 2008).

The danger of such aesthetic negligence in any "hearts and minds" exercise can perhaps be succinctly stated in the form of a well-known question relating to World War II, namely why it was that the Germans "had the best tunes", and why that conclusion was associated with their demonization.

The challenge would appear to be to understand why poetry is valued in cultures with which effective engagement has been frustrated over many years and to determine what are the fruitful rules of engagement within that framework. No attention would seem to have been given to this possibility. However the possibility should not be treated simplistically, as helpfully concluded by [Ramsey Nasr](#) ([Poetry and Engagement](#), 2004):

To avert a misunderstanding: I'm not saying that poets should get on the first flight to Iraq or Afghanistan. Let them stay indoors. Pamphlets are not what we need, not for "the cause", or anything.... What to do with living people in a nonsensical world? Is it possible to allow engagement in poetry without corroding that very poetry? I'm convinced it is as long as you're talented enough and steer clear of ready solutions.... Engagement is not about choosing for or against a party, engagement is simply about life, taking part in it. If need be, only through words; through language.

However missing from this comment is the strategic challenge of how one engages with another through poetry -- where the aesthetic values may be radically different. What then are the rules of engagement? The challenge may be highlighted by the following juxtaposed images

#### Images indicative of the paradoxes of contrasting aesthetic worldviews

the image on the left might be understood as how "Islamic terrorists" are perceived by those holding the "civilized worldview" on the right; however the image on the left could also be understood as how the "hedonistic West" is understood from within the aesthetic purity of Islam, suggested by the image on the right

[Eurovision Song Contest](#) Winner (Athens, 2006)



[EU anthem](#) (Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*)



If aesthetic harmony (notably musical lyrics) offers a way forward, possibilities might include:

[A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?](#)

[All Blacks of Davos vs All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?](#)

[Reframing the EU Reform Process -- through Song: responding to the Irish challenge to the Lisbon Treaty](#)

[Poetic Engagement with Afghanistan, Caucasus and Iran: an unexplored strategic opportunity?](#)

**Poetry and Islam:** Most striking, in contrast with the West, is perhaps the role of poetry in Islamic cultures. A notable feature is the use of *saj'* -- a form of rhymed, rhythmic prose characteristic of Arabic literature and diction to which the Arabic language lends itself because of its structure, the mathematical precision of its manifold formations and the essential assonance of numerous derivatives from the same root supplying the connexion between the sound and signification of words. As such it has been valued for its mnemonic qualities. It was notably used in pre-Islamic times as a mode of dignified discourse. Because of its association with these pagan practices its use in the early days of Islam is said to have been forbidden by Muhammad with the phrase: "Avoid ye the rhyming prose of the soothsayers or diviners."

And yet, in introducing his study of Arab culture, Vicente Cantarino ([Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age](#), 1975) notes:

There are few, if any, cultural achievements of mankind accompanied by such a clear and distinct feeling of their own value as the poetic literature of the Arabs. Arab writers often characterize civilizations and peoples by their special skills. Poetry and poetic accomplishments are always cited by them as their own most important characteristic and one that distinguishes them from all other peoples. This evaluation is corroborated by the extraordinary influence exerted by Arabic poetry in form and content on all the poetic literatures which came in contact with it: Persian, Turkish, Indostanic, and, indirectly, the Georgic, are deeply influenced by Arabic poetry; medieval Hebrew poetry shows its influence; and even in the West it left its traces in the beginnings of the poetry of the Romance languages.

The strength of the arguments of Mohammed was recognized in part because of his oral skills -- within a tribal context in which poetic expression was highly valued in the encounter between tribes. Cantarino indicates with respect to Arabic tribes:

It should suffice to point out that the terms *sayyid* and *amir*, commonly used to designate the tribe's chief and leader, seem to have been used also as appellatives of the orator able to defend successfully in a dispute the rights of his tribe. Often the leader received the names of *khatib* (orator) and *za'im* (spokesman) because his personal eloquence was one of his most needed and highly appreciated virtues, more important even than his personal bravery.... The elected *sayyid* lacked any coercive means to impose his authority and thus has to rely on his natural gift of eloquence to influence and convince people.... The eloquence referred to by historians and literary critics is mostly in poetic form.

The Arabic poets, especially those of pre-Islamic times, were too realistic to conceive of poetry in an abstract way. Their role in society forced them more often than not to center their compositions on concrete events and problems.... Moreover, the social aims the poet is expected to serve required him too cultivate the poetic genres more appropriate to those aims, namely the panegyric and diatribe.... Rhythmic meter and rhyme, which at this time had already attained a remarkable degree of sophistication, were considered as mnemonic means to achieve more durable remembrance and rapid dissemination.... scorn was often expressed for those who did not have a poetic voice in their midst. (p. 21-3)

The poetic qualities of the [Qur'an](#), for example, continue to be much admired by those persuaded of the merits of that culture. The repeated media presentations of the body language of students engaged in rote learning in [madrasahs](#) fail completely to indicate that to a significant degree they are learning "poetry" -- and doing so willingly. Should [madrasahs](#) be better understood as the schools of "poetry" of that culture?

However, even though the musical-poetic nature is a key to appreciating the [Qur'an](#), paradoxically Islam believes it totally inappropriate to consider it poetry -- because poetry is held by its teachings to be intrinsically human rather than divine. The sacred text of the [Qur'an](#) is therefore **not** poetry. Islamic theologians formally refuse to admit the existence of any poetic character to the Qur'anic text, although the precise significance of this refusal has been much debated (as helpfully summarized by Cantarino). This complex situation (discussed below) is partially clarified, with citations, by Abul Kasem ([Islam and Poetry](#), *Islam Watch*, 27 May 2002). Another comment is provided by Asad Seif ([Islam and poetry in Iran](#)). An authorized view is provided by Mufti Bilal Cassim ([Islam and Poetry](#), *Albalagh*, 15 September 2002). Arab historians in fact report that Mohammed made use of poets very much in the same way as other tribal leaders who were not poets themselves., even though he condemned pagan Arab poetry and its poets. This is confirmed by M. M. Badawi, ['Abbasid Poetry and its Antecedents](#) (1990) arguing: *The view once widely held that Muhammed and Islam discouraged poetry and poets is now generally discredited....* (p. 147).

Despite any such reservations, Cantarino cites a frequently quoted definition of poetry by [Ibn Qutaiba](#) (*'Uyun al-akhbar*, 1964, vol. 11, p. 185):

Poetry is the mine of knowledge of the Arabs and the book of their wisdom, the archives of their history, the reservoir of their epic days, the wall that defends their exploits, the impassable trench that preserves their glories, the impartial witness for the day of judgment. Whoever cannot offer even a single verse in defense of his honor and the noble virtues and praiseworthy actions that he claims for his ancestry will exert himself in vain, even if they were gigantic. But he who bound them together with the rhyme of a poem, reinforced them with its rhythm, and made them famous with a rare verse, a popular proverb, and a fine concept, delivered them from unbelief, and put them above the deceptions of enemies and made the envious lower his eyes in shame.

Ironically, in a war-torn country, the Somalis of today are famous for their skills as poets -- being almost as important to that culture as the Islamic faith. Poems may be put to political use by the government or in criticism of politicians and

warlords. This has even led Ali M. Ahad to explore the question [Could Poetry Define Nationhood? the case of Somali oral poetry and the nation](#) (*Journal of Historical and European Studies*, 2007).

With respect to Yemen, according to Steven C. Caton (Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University):

Every day in the Middle Eastern country of Yemen, battles are being waged that don't involve bombs, guns or even a raised fist. Rather in Yemen, where physical violence is considered an inferior form of honor-conflict, poetry is one of the preferred weapons of choice.[\[more\]](#)

A colleague, Jim Wilce, reports that:

The skills of poetic improvisation are intimately related to Islamic piety in Yemen. What would understanding such things do to our perceptions of the Middle East and various conflicts there?

A more extensive account, situating practices in Yemen within Arab culture, is provided by [Rachel Galvin](#) (*Of Poets, Prophets, and Politics*, *Humanities*, 2002). She records comments by Arab observers that poetry remains a central part of Arab culture.

**Poetry and warlords:** As reported by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, since 2005 the Taliban's web site, *Al Emarah*, or *The Emirate*, has featured poetry glorifying their resistance, in addition to religious commentary and battlefield updates.

Of relevance is the keynote speech given by [John Paul Lederach](#) (*Tajikistan: Talking Poetry With the Warlord*, 2005) at the Association for Conflict Resolution's Annual Conference (Sacramento, CA, 2004) -- reproduced in his [The Moral Imagination: the art and soul of building peace](#) (2005). This is a factor presumably considered irrelevant to the need to despatch a further 17,000 troops to bring order to a region perceived as highly dangerous.. It might be asked, as in the case of poetry, whether there are not a range of understandings of "order".

There are many web references to warlords and their poetry. A contemporary Iranian poet celebrates warlords (Mahmud Kianush, [To Victorious Warlords](#), 2001). A long-term Colombian warlord is recognized for his poetry (Toby Muse, [Requiem for a Warlord](#), *Slate*, 2004). In Europe, warrior-poets have played a central role in Icelandic culture (Diana Whaley, *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, 2002).

**Poetry and Afghanistan:** It is even less well-recognized that this poetic tradition has a role in Afghanistan where the warlords are indeed valued for their poetic competence. As noted by [Coleman Barks](#) ([Rumi's American Popularizer Tours Afghan Poet's Homeland](#), *America.gov*, 22 April 2005):

The most startling observation that comes to me, as a practicing American poet, involves the vital role that poetry plays in the lives of Afghan men... This discovery, of course, is part of a blindness I have, that we have in this country, and in the West in general, to things Islamic. It is a long-standing and pervasive condition.... Their Afghan poet has been the most-read poet in the United States during the last ten years!

Steve Coll ([Restoring Poetry to Afghanistan](#), *NPR*, 24 January 2005) reported on the publication of a set of poems of a former Afghan poet laureate Khalilullah Khalil, collected by his son, currently Afghan ambassador to Turkey (Masood Khalili and Whitney Azoy, *An Assembly of Moths: selected poems of Khalilullah Khalili*, 2004). The book's introduction includes remarks on the role of poetry in the midst of chaos:

Many Afghans internalize segments off the great Persian classical poets, philosopher-mystics whose verse rises above daily hustle and bustle.

The result is something no longer valued in the modern, literate West: a memorized reservoir of poetic wisdom. Inherited from the great poets and internalized from early childhood onwards, this material serves Afghans as psycho-spiritual ballast -- a buffer against misfortune, and a reminder, when times are good, the luck seldom lasts...

The importance of shared poetic legacy is evident in day-to-day conversations across Afghanistan. People use the prefix 'Sha'er mega' ("The poet says") to substantiate argument. An Afghan provided this example: "If you go to a strange village and say, 'Two plus two equals four,' the villagers will challenge your authority. But tell them that 'The poet says' that two plus two equals five, and they'll accept what you say immediately."

An alternative use of poetry is made through improvisation of Pashto landays by women (Sayd Bahodine Majrouh,

*Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 2003). A landay is an unrhymed couplet of nine syllables in the first hemistich and thirteen in the second.

To what extent do foreign coalition forces engage with the people of Afghanistan through poetry?

**Poetry and Kazakhstan:** As noted by Marat Yermukanov (*Kazakh Folk Poetry Slams Corrupt Establishment*, 21 February 2007) of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute), folk poets (*aqyns*) give vent at weekly festivals (*aitys*), engaging in contests that are a national focus of attention via television. They publicly lambaste social ills, such as deep-rooted corruption, mismanagement, disrespect for national interests and missteps in foreign policy. In a society with limited press freedom and rigid codes of social behavior imposed from above, the *aitys* is the most available and a safe way to give vent to public feelings. Satirical verses of poets often target the inefficient legislative system. The traditional folk poetry is a unique form in the poetic culture of Central Asia, is recognized as a manifestation of the reshaped ethnic consciousness of Kazakhs.

**Poetry and the Caucasus:** The Caucasus became a romantic region for Russian poetry owing to its natural contrasts, as well as the original and somewhat hostile culture of its tribes people. Nature and history have combined to make Georgia a land of poetry, so recognized by its peoples (Peter Nasmyth, *Georgia: in the mountains of poetry*, 2006). *Mugham* is a unique phenomenon of Azerbaijani folk music heritage that perfectly reflects the national way of thinking; the vocal form an organic harmony of music and poetry which may involve the alternation of changing and constant elements, of improvised and concentrated episodes.

**Poetry and the Middle East:** It is curious that this conflict takes place in the midst of an Arab world much influenced by poetry, notably that of [Al-Mutanabbi](#) (11th century, Baghdad), considered a master of Arab poetry. [Mahmoud Darwish](#), repeatedly named for a Nobel Prize, is considered the poetic voice of Palestine -- engaging himself in poetic dialogue with Israel. Is there no scope for negotiation with Israel through poetic forms that would give rise to an agreement of a new kind -- expressed in (epic) poetic form? Who would be opposed to such an exploration and why? One step in that direction has been a [recent film](#). There is an active literature on Palestine-Israel issues from a poetic perspective.

**Poetic leadership:** More striking perhaps, as a matter of history, is the fact that [Joseph Stalin](#), as a Georgian, was notably appreciated for his poetic and singing skills -- in a culture which values song in ways unsuspected elsewhere. This is true of other such leaders, including [Mao Tse-Tung](#) -- whether or not their leadership was commensurate with their aesthetic insights or skills. Potentially of relevance is that Barack Obama has been widely appreciated for his "poetic" rhetoric.

**Poetic protest:** It is also of relevance to note a corresponding role that music and song (but not poetry) have played in the recent articulation of Western popular cultural values -- especially amongst those alienated from conventional approaches to governance. Such cultural products have been widely appreciated around the world -- although not necessarily in those parts upholding Islamic values and opposed to their Western vehicles.

**Prosaic dialogue:** It is relevant to note the widespread recognition of the very limited number of Arab speakers available to the intelligence services in the lead up to intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst "interpreters" may have subsequently become available, questions could usefully be asked about their competence in the poetic traditions of those cultures. "Poets" have an unusually problematic status in the West, as does their poetry. The aesthetics of poetry are not as widely appreciated as in Islamic cultures -- by all classes. It is highly probable that the "interpreters" sought in support of any strategic conflict would not be selected or appreciated for their poetic insights. This imposes an unnecessary constraint on strategic opportunities. Western discourse with such cultures would then be appreciated as "prosaic" at best.

## Indicative possibilities of reframing strategic engagement

1. Negotiations are typically framed as a "war of words" -- "jaw jaw" instead of "war war". The question here is whether any such "war of words" might be "upgraded" from the binary logic by which it is currently informed. An indication is offered by Frederick Sommer: *Poetic logic is the sensuous apprehension of what we do not yet understand in the presence of reality* (1984). This is arguably worthy of further investigation given the apparent inadequacies of current negotiation logic.
2. A significant outcome of any poetic exploration might well be the highlighting of more fruitful metaphors within which future interactions could be articulated. These might rise about the limitations of binary logic and its framing of a "clash of civilizations" ([In Quest of Uncommon Ground: beyond impoverished metaphor and the impotence of words of power](#), 1997; [Innovative Global Management through Metaphor](#), 1989)

3. Dialogue through poetry, lyrics and folk tales in many cultures makes extensive use of metaphor. A question as yet to be explored is whether dialogue between extreme positions can be conducted **through** metaphor -- in contrast to making occasional use of it. This notably applies to "interfaith dialogue" which is what is typically implicit in the dialogue between clashing worldviews ([Guidelines towards Dialogue through Metaphor](#), 1993; [Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews](#), 2006)
4. There is a case for the United Nations, perhaps through UNESCO, to give greater visibility to the strategic implications of dialogue with, and between, cultures through such an appreciation of aesthetics and the metaphors that it engenders. A little known publication perhaps justifies this argument (*Wit and Wisdom of the United Nations*, 1961). Is it the case that Islam is, to some degree, aesthetically offended by the aesthetics of the West? Is the "clash of civilizations" primarily a clash of aesthetics -- to be compared within the Western culture with that between the musical classics and pop?
5. There would seem to be a strong case for an historical review of the manner in which poetry (and song) had influenced policy-making, notably through its appreciation by negotiating leaders -- or in relation to their followers ([Poetry-making and Policy-making: arranging a marriage between Beauty and the Beast](#), 1993). A more specific case is made with respect to the widely appreciated Japanese poetic form ([Ensuring Strategic Resilience through Haiku Patterns: reframing the scope of the "martial arts" in response to strategic threats](#), 2006).
6. A case for the potential role of any aesthetic reframing in governance has been argued speculatively in [Aesthetics of Governance in the Year 2490](#) (1990).
7. The specific role of song in the articulation of agreements arising from any negotiation has been argued, with precedents, in [A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?](#) (2006). The case for the relevance of such reframing with respect to the Irish crisis over the Lisbon vote was made subsequently ([Reframing the EU Reform Process -- through Song responding to the Irish challenge to the Lisbon Treaty](#), 2008) -- calling upon the merits of [Carla Bruni](#)
8. With respect to the aesthetics of the religions reinforcing the clash of civilizations, one approach is to review the styles favoured for the collective celebration of individual religions -- and the manner in which these may pose problems for their appreciation by others ([Aesthetic Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue as Exemplified by Meditation](#), 1997).
9. Efforts are made to celebrate inaugural events, whether the opening sessions of a conference or the visit of a leader, through poetry (or song). This has been done with appreciation even in the USA. Potentially of equal, if not greater, interest is the possibility of celebrating the closure of any conference or negotiation with a poetic (or sung) adaptation of the conclusions -- if only to enhance media diffusion and popular comprehension.
10. In preparing these notes from the home of the [All Blacks](#), renowned for their much-publicized introductory *haka* -- one is readily reminded of the role of that dance of engagement in encounters between Maori tribes. Their approach points to another possibility of contemporary relevance, if only as a metaphor ([All Blacks of Davos vs. All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?](#) 2007)
11. From these perspectives, it is appropriate to recognize the huge importance attached to song in the Caucasus and its cultures -- and the impressive capacity for it there. The question is how to use that capacity between competing cultures. Competing choral "voices" engendering a larger polyphony?
12. In a world weary of conventional negotiations and the language of proposals, there are many provocative initiatives to reframe strategic approaches -- some of them with an aesthetic dimension ([Liberating Provocations use of negative and paradoxical strategies](#), 2005). For example, reports were recently circulated of a "breakaway republic" -- the [Ghetto Republic of Uganja](#) -- in one of the slums in Uganda's capital, complete with a full set of "cabinet ministers". It was formed around a politically influential dancehall.
13. Negotiations are typically about controversial issues on which opposing views are strongly held. This is ideal thematic material to be processed (even competitively) by poets (singers, musicians) to explore modes of integration of their harmonious integration -- perhaps using the discordant elements to enhance the "colour" of the work. Such contributions, occasional made for light relief at conferences, could be taken more seriously in offering complementary insights to negotiators and their constituencies.
14. Of related potential, in many Islamic cultures, is the appreciation for the tales of [Nasruddin](#). These raise the possibility of strategic dialogue through the wisdom of such folk tales. Recognized as "teaching stories", there is a tradition of their use in dialogue between opposing perspectives.

15. Of particular interest are widespread assumptions about the structure, nature and communicability of the outcomes of negotiations between one or more opposing perspectives. In a world characterized by "innovation" in every domain, the structure of binding declarations and agreements has varied little over centuries. As indicated above with respect to "singable" declarations, there are other possibilities that merit consideration in order to invite respect and popular engagement ([Structure of Declarations: challenging traditional patterns](#), 1992, [Structuring Mnemonic Encoding of Development Plans and Ethical Charters using Musical Leitmotifs](#), 2001). The purpose of such initiatives is to embed mnemonic resonances between the elements of the structure -- reflective of feedback loops vital to their viability and sustainability.
16. Whilst potential agreement might be fruitfully scoped out -- perhaps as competing drafts -- of greater interest is the possibility of designing the outcome in "epic form". The proposed [EU Lisbon Reform Treaty](#) (of 300 pages of text) might be considered as an epic struggling to be born and to elicit appeal from the citizens of Europe. It has no aesthetic value at present and no consideration has been given to the possible merit of framing it to give a primary role to the aesthetics that would render it memorable. The challenge of the Western engagement with Islamic cultures might be fruitfully seen in the same light. It is the epic form that holds the resonances that sustain credibility, memorability and long-term viability. Briefly, if it cannot be "sung", does it hold sufficient significance to be worthy of communicating to the next generation?.
17. In term of epics on a grander scale, it was noted elsewhere ([Happiness and Unhappiness through Naysign and Nescience: comprehending the essence of sustainability?](#)) that in relation to the Caucasus that the [Nart Sagas](#) are a set of folk tales originating from regions of the North Caucasus -- currently of great political sensitivity, namely the Ossetians and the Circassian peoples, closely followed by the related Abkhaz and Abazin people. *Nart Sagas* are also present in Karachay-Balkar and Chechen-Ingush folklore. Some motifs in these sagas are shared by Greek mythology. It has also been speculated that many aspects of the much-valued Arthurian legends are derived from those sagas. Clearly there are common imaginative roots to be explored

## Clarification of Islamic views

Given the challenge of Islamic reservations regarding poetry, fundamental to the possibility of poetic debate, valuable clarification is provided by Patrick Colm Hogan ([Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Literature](#), 2000):

... the crucial concept for the Arabic Aristotelians is moral imitation toward moral ends. More exactly, in the view of these writers, the poet need not tell the literal truth. However, any poetic representation must present an image of possible moral or immoral action, and it must do so in such a way as to encourage people to emulate the former and avoid the latter. The problem with the poetry condemned in the *Qur'an* is not so much that it lies about facts as that it lies about morals -- or, rather, that it fails to foster (Islamic) virtue and to diminish vice. (29)

Hogan then continues:

...Arabic writers almost universally follow Aristotle in distinguishing moral levels of agents: those who are better than we are, those who are worse, and those who are the same. Incorporating this into their own framework, they conclude that the proper function of poetry is to praise the first and condemn the second, eulogize goodness and satirize evil....Later theorists adopted the same view. For example, al-Qartajanni (1211-85 ce) wrote that poetry "has the function of making [actions] attractive or repugnant to the human spirit".

The relation between poetry and rhetoric in this scheme should be clear. Indeed, the limitation of poetry to praise and blame makes it parallel certain forms of oratory. However, the Arabic writers emphasize differences as well. Specifically, rhetoric appeals to thought... Poetry, in contrast, operates on feeling.... it inspires feelings conducive toward virtue and away from vice, primarily the feelings of mercy and piety.... (30)

Of particular relevance are Hogan's comments on the Islamic understanding of the manner in which poetic discourse should cultivate an image:

... the writer inspires virtuous feelings through an imitative, but imaginative creation. This creation is structured around implicit or explicit approbation or derogation, sometimes called "embellishment" and "defacement"... this imitative and imaginative creation must engage the audience members, absorb them, immerse them, for it is in that engagement, absorption, immersion, that audience members begin to feel attraction to virtue or aversion to vice.... The crucial Arabic term here is "*takhyil*". *Takhyil* is a mimetic imaginative creation (a notion that is far more in keeping with the spirit of Aristotle's theories than are most European conceptions of mimesis...). *Takhyil* functions to capture the audience so that they forget



reality and accept the creation, granting it what is sometimes called "imaginative assent"... [Al-Jurjani](#) defines *takhyil* as "that process in which the poet presents as existing an object which actually does not exist, and makes a statement for which there is no possibility of a scientific presentation, and uses an expression which he himself makes up, and shows himself as seeing what he does not see".

*Takhyil* is the focus of a more recent commentary annotating classical texts (Geert Jan van Gelder, et al., *Takhyil: the imaginary in classical Arabic poetics*, 2008). This focus enables Hogan to clarify Islamic concern about poetry:

As [Ibn Sina](#) wrote: "The imaginative is the speech to which the soul yields, accepting and rejecting matters without pondering, reasoning or choice".... Indeed, "human beings are more amenable to imaginative representation than to [rational or reflective] conviction"... -- which is precisely what makes it so valuable, but also makes it so dangerous, and thus open to Qur'anic condemnation when immoral.

R. Rubinacci. ([Political Poetry](#). In: 'Abbasid belles-lettres 1990, pp. 181-201 argues:

If poetry in which the beliefs or acts of the leaders of a particular socio-political system are supported or opposed can be defined as political poetry, there is no doubt that this type of verse flourished in Arabia well before Islam. Indeed, whatever the subject treated, the ultimate aim of the sizeable surviving body of pre-Islamic poetry was the glorification or criticism of the tribe, the nucleus of the system on which the contemporary social structure was based.... The advent of Islam impelled a change in these types of political poetry. The Prophet recognized the important political function of poetry, and employed poets to respond in kind to the attacks of the pagan poets... the weapons were still those of *fakhr* [glorification, self-praise] and *hija* [satire, lampoon], but the new way of life gave far greater prominence to the religious element... (p. 185).

## Improvisation in poetic debate

**Poetic discourse as a lost art:** The argument in what follows emphasizes **improvisation rather than recital of poetry previously prepared**. This does not preclude insertion into the discourse of prepared verses, possibly selected from classic poems. But if they have to be read -- not having been memorized -- this is already an indication of lack of the **spontaneity essential to interactive debate**, responsive to the other contributors and any **emergent aesthetic synthesis**. This mode may indeed call for **an unusual combination of skills**, although these have been a part of the poetic tradition -- especially in Islamic cultures. The argument assumes that, given the strategic potential, **people with poetic skills in a context of improvisation could be sought and encouraged in these abilities** -- as with so many other skills that require development, as with strategic negotiation itself.

It is unfortunate that **the extensive literature on terms like "poetic discourse" rarely if ever signifies any sense of actual dialogue** between parties using that mode -- even when the discourse is designed to enable social change. Such terms, implying such interaction, might be said to have been appropriated in order deliberately to disguise the fact that the discourse is unilateral from poet -- typically in written form, but occasional as a recitation -- to a listener, or more typically a reader. There is an assumption of asymmetry in that the poet's aesthetic skills are assumed to be greater than those of the essential passive listener. Curiously this echoes the manner in which authorities, such as national leaders, engage in "dialogue" with citizens through televised "fireside chats" (possibly themselves pre-recorded).

There would seem to be **no term that identifies unambiguously any form poetic discourse in the moment between equal parties**. Rather the poet is assumed to have prepared the poem for later recital or publication and that any "dialogue" is a virtual one in which the poet imagines a listener and the reader imagines that the poem engenders the presence of the poet. The situation is somewhat different in some tribal folk traditions where one poet indeed responds to another. However it is then unclear whether the responses -- typically in the modes of panegyric or diatribe -- are effectively "cut and paste" exercises using remembered verses as appropriate in an essentially defensive exercise of tribal self-aggrandisement. In effect one poet "blasts" another competitively in an exercise in [one-upmanship](#).

Use of a term like "poetic discourse" then tends to obscure recognition that **"poetic debate" is actually a lost art**, although "poetical rhetoric" naturally implies use of a degree of poetry in the phrases used in the prose form of the rhetoric of the debating parties. Insight into when the "rhetoric" is so impregnated with poetry as to be understood as constituting "poetic debate" is again not a focus of attention. A feature of the "lost art" is that this unfortunate misapplication of terminology disguises the fact that **whilst students may be taught to read and appreciate poetry, to recite it, and possibly to write it, there is no sense in which they are expected to acquire skills to engage with each other through poetry -- improvised in response to content formulated in the moment**.

Curiously this lost art is a reflection of discourse on vital strategic matters in formal international arenas. There, typically, a speech is prepared for "recital" -- and printed copies may even have been distributed to the audience. Any

speeches in response may have been similarly prepared and distributed (if only to facilitate the task of "simultaneous interpretation" between languages). The speeches may not even be designed to respond to each other but only to a predefined theme. Any passionate sense of suffering, or appeal to larger value frameworks, is then a rational construct (at best decorated with poetic flourishes).

The analogous condition in the case of "poetic discourse" tends to avoid response to a contrary perspective or -- if it is represented physically or by implication -- again takes the form of verses prepared in advance and not in response to those presented in the moment. Provocatively, at a time of financial crisis when the inter-institutional lending of "values" has frozen, it might be asked whether the failure of poets to lend and borrow aesthetic values in a fruitful pattern of interaction does not exemplify that challenge at an archetypal level.

**Poetic engagement:** In his analysis of the aesthetic theories of Hegel, Heidegger, Kant, and Habermas, John McCumber (*Poetic Interaction: language, freedom, reason*, 1989) comments that:

Poetic interaction is nothing more than interaction in which the hearer of an utterance, rather than its speaker, determines its meaning -- and does so because the utterance is... either irredeemably ambiguous or otherwise anomalous. Poetic interaction is thus an elementary form of situating reason, in that it is the initial form out of which such reason develops. (p. 22).

However, following this analysis, he argues that:

But my narrative cannot end here, for it is also the story of how poetic interaction became lost -- theoretically occluded and practically proscribed. (p. 201)

The metaphysical prescriptions of Aristotelian thought occluded poetic interaction altogether.... Philosophy and other sciences... could make no use of poetic utterances... poetic interaction could not even be recognized as an independent form. (p. 400)

In a useful review of these issues, Chad Lykins (*The Practical and the Poetic: Heidegger and James on Truth, Chrestomathy*, 2003) concludes that:

James believes the very desire for a more primordial account of truth is rooted in the practical, psychological need for novelty. Heidegger thinks that to reduce poetic engagement to a form of practical engagement is to forget the essence of the former and mistake it for the essence of the latter. James holds that if one wants to get at poetic engagement, then one ought search in the places from which it actually emerges, "the muckiness" of practical engagement.... The poetic engagement that James and Heidegger seek to preserve emerges as an answer to practical needs, not as proof that those needs presuppose a necessary foundation. While Heidegger argues in vain that practical engagement presupposes deeper structures, James demonstrates that the very concept of a deeper structure emerges from our practical needs for rationality and poetic engagement

Is this confusion the fundamental reason why the strategies of governance, articulated with "reason", have proven to be so boring, sterile and unfruitful -- especially in response to situations especially characterized by "muckiness"?

**Lost archetype?:** Other than through the expression of audience appreciation, **is poetry now to be understood as a non-interactive art form?** Indeed, **where are the "poets" that can "think on their feet (creatively), in the "heat of the moment" (strategically), and in response to the existential challenge of "the other" (fruitfully)?** If poetry is to offer any guidance to debate of higher quality, then there is a need for poetic discourse and debate to practice skills it might expect others to adopt in some measure. Detecting traces of such skills and their practitioners is a first step.

It is unfortunate, given the archetypal models they represent, that neither *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) of [Hermann Hesse](#), nor the *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949) of [Robert Graves](#) offers indications as to how such an interaction might ideally function.

**Medieval Europe:** Unfortunately the vital possibility of this process is obscured by widespread use of the phrase "poetic debate" to denote "debate about poetry". A less confusing term "[debate poetry](#)" is clearer -- an early form being known as *conflictus*. A review of this tradition in Europe is provided by Emma Cayley (*Debate and Dialogue*, 2006). Cayley herself distinguishes:

- "debate poetry" as referring to the genre itself
- "poetic debate" as being a more fluid term that encompasses both "debate poems", and "debate about poetry"
- "poetic encounter" as relating to her concept of a "collaborative debating community" in the sense that it might

both refer to poetic responses (brought about through the encounter), or to the encounter itself, whether a textual or human one.

**Clearly some "poetic debates" would have been pre-scripted, and performed (or simply read) as set pieces, rather than improvised by genuine opponents in response to genuinely controversial positions they upheld.** The terminology does not help to distinguish these various forms or even any "poetry about a debate".

One insightful description of the interesting variant is that provided by John M. Hill, *et al* (*The Rhetorical Poetics of the Middle Ages: reconstructive polyphony*, 2000) quoting [Jon Whitman](#) (Hebrew University of Jerusalem):

The adversaries [in a poetic debate] share a common frame of reference, that on some level they both contribute to a single community. Indeed, one of the salient features of the poetic debate is its effort to show contraries complementing, rather than simply opposing, each other, a feature that leads many debates to end either without a clear "winner" or with some kind of reconciliation... A more complex cosmological approach to the strategy of interdependence, based on broader philosophic sources and principles, will develop by the twelfth century, but already in the poetic debate, there is a constant tendency to turn metaphoric figures into metonymic terms of a larger whole.

The medieval courts of Europe were entertained not only by a male [troubadours](#) but occasionally by a female [trobairitz](#) -- known to have engaged in poetic debate together. In the [Provençal literature](#) of **France**, the *partimen* is a poetic debate, but it differs from the *tension* in so far that the range of debate is limited; in the first stanza one of the partners proposes two alternatives; the other partner chooses one of them and defends it, the opposite side remaining to be defended by the original propounder.

**Dialogue in Islamic cultures:** Potentially of special relevance to the strategic challenge is the understanding of the process associated with the Arabic term *munatharah* through its various associations:

- as theory building, whereby an individual introduces his/her theory and others comment on its strengths and deficiencies (Abbas Ali. [Organizational development in the Arab world](#). *Journal of Management Development*, 1996)
- in relation to "*Munatharah ma' tantheem al-jihad al-islami*", a recording, widely available on the internet, of a controversial debate ([A Debate between Sheikh Nassir Addeen Al-Albaani and a supporter of "The Islamic Jihad Organization"](#))
- as descriptor of appropriately respectful conditions for debate, notably as envisaged as calling for the re-creation of the classical [majalis](#), where people would sit and exchange conflicting views in the spirit of collegiality and the common search for meaning (Mohammed Arkoun, *Conference on Cultural Diversity and Islam*, 1998)
- as a form of controversial debate (Sheikh Al-Shanqiti, *Art of Jadal and Munatharah*) -- argument and controversy (referenced in [The Counterfeit Salafis: deviation of the Counterfeit Salafis from the methodology of Ahlul Sunnah Wal-Jama'a](#) by Tariq Abdelhaleem)
- as a debating method that strengthens [ijtihad](#), namely the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. The opposite of *ijtihad* is [taqlid](#), meaning "imitation".

It would appear that *munatharah* is best understood as an appropriate mode of debate whose nature may be notably modified if the focus is theological, secular or a form of literary entertainment. Although he argues that, as such, *munatharah* "has almost completely disappeared", Abbas Ali ([Business and Management Environment in Saudi Arabia](#), 2008, p. 190) provides a very helpful distinction, in the light of facilitation possibilities in corporations, between the complementary set of 5 Arab debating styles of which *munatharah* is a part:

1. *Mudarasa* or *Munagasha* (spirited debate): a means to stimulate discussion, generate better ideas, and develop new perspectives. Seemingly this is now only to be found in traditional informal Dewan, when there is call for debate on a particular subject...
2. *Muthakrha*, or specific goal-oriented arrangements that will be the subject of intensive *mudarasa*.
3. *Murajaha*, a process in which the facilitator summarizes critical points (of a *mudarasa*) but also highlights interrelationships and synergy in offering a synthesis
4. *Mudardha*, in which competing ideas are introduced by designated or volunteer individuals, then to be prioritized and steered in ways that lead to relevant and practical perspectives. In its common use as a form of poetic debate by informal group, each participant then picks up from the end of the previous one; the challenge being to recite a verse which starts with a letter with which the previous contributor finished. In this way meaning may continue to be built through the succession of verses.
5. *Munatherah* (or, more commonly, *Munatharah*), is then understood to be a theory building, whereby an individual introduces his/her theory and others comment on its strengths and deficiencies. This method tends to

be restricted to use by people of special authority or skill.

As Ali notes, all methods have been used in traditional Islamic culture and have helped, to some extent, in maintaining cultural transition. He considers their utility in organizational development should not be underestimated. As such they may call attention to the need for a different facilitation style (*Islamic Perspectives on Management and Organization*, 2005, p. 225). What is not clear from his focus on dialogue among executives is the manner in which these forms are reinterpreted with respect to either theological or poetic discourse -- as an art form (Sheikh Al-Shanqiti, *Art of Jadal and Munatharah*).

It would be interesting to explore any influence that such processes had, through the occupation of Spain by the Moors, on the development of debate in Europe -- notably the poetic style of debate of the 14th century, as documented by Emma Cayley (*Debate and Dialogue: Alain Chartier in his cultural context*, 2006).

## Examples of poetic interaction

**Improvisation in oral poetry:** It is to be expected that oral poetry, whether associated with folk traditions or not, would offer some degree of insight into interaction between poets in a discourse mode (Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 1984; Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: a guide to research practices*, 1991; [John Miles Foley](#), *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 2002). Again however it is typically far from clear from the terminology when the oral poetry is improvised -- composed during the recitation -- irrespective of whether this is done in interaction with one or more other poets.

With regard to improvisation, the Center for Basque Studies (University of Nevada) organized a [Symposium on Oral Improvisational Poetry](#) (2003) sponsored by the Bernard and Lucie Marie Bidart Fund. The [programme](#) featured studies of improvisational songs in various cultural traditions, including the Castilian *romances*, the Judeo-Spanish ballads, the Ibero-American *decimas*, the Asturian *cante jondo*, the Santanderian *trovas*, the Slavic *guslari*, the Arabic invectives, and the Basque *bertsolariak*.

The published contributions (Samuel G. Armistead and Joseba Zulaika, [Voicing the Moment: improvised oral poetry and Basque tradition](#), University of Nevada Press, 2005) also mention current traditions in:

- Cuban *decimistas*, Puerto Rico, San Domingo, Ecuadoran *cantores*, Argentinian *payadores*, Brazilian *cantadores* (and *repentistas*), Mexican *troveros*, Uruguayan *payadores*, Venezuelan *galeronistas*
- Cretan *pytaris*, Maltese *spiritu pronto*, Sardinian *cantadori*, Balearic *glosadores*, Andalusian *troveros*

In his contribution, Samuel G. Armistead ([Improvised Poetry in the Spanish Tradition](#), 2005) notes:

Such poetry, often involving verbal dueling and mordant invective, has been cultivated by Hispanic peoples for many centuries. Its origins remain obscure, but they undoubtedly involve a variety of Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural currents... In these poetic contests, known as *echarse pullas*, "one person wished all sorts of misfortune, for the most part obscene, upon another, who replied in similar strain.... Invective poetry, much of it -- originally at least -- orally composed and some of it undoubtedly improvised on the spot and as needed, is surely of very ancient origin and is probably worldwide in distribution. There can, however, be little doubt that Hispanic verbal dueling is ultimately connected in direct oral tradition to Horace's *opprobria rustica* and to an ancient Pan Mediterranean heritage of poetic competition. (p. 30-1)

These ancient origins were also cited by Maximiano Trapero ([Improvised Oral Poetry in Spain](#), 2005), describing the Homeric tradition (of which active traces are now to be found in Slavic poetry):

This poetic contest had certain rules: whoever started had the right to choose the subject and his opponent had to answer him, to such an extent that the latter always remained at the mercy of the former's chosen topic and subject to his 'attacks'; yet the second one could both answer and counter attack at the same time, thereby giving rise to a duel of attack and counter attack that could go on until one of the contestant's strength (and reason) waned, or until both of them (as was the norm...) declared himself the winner. (p. 46)

As remarked by David R. Olson (*From Utterance to Text: the bias of language in speech and writing*, 1977), Trapero also notes that poetry today is immediately associated with its written form, whereas **written poetry is an extremely modern phenomenon whose origin is in millennia of oral poetry.**

Initially, the medieval literary genre of *debates* (also known as "*recuesta*", "*tenso*" or "*partiment*") became famous, with Provençal troubadours taking the genre to its highest levels and spreading it throughout Europe. The debate might bring forth real, flesh and bone, people or instead concern abstract, allegorical beings, to which human conditions were ascribed. This all took place in a context of opposites: male/female, love/dislike, wine/water, winter/summer, rich/poor and so on. (p. 49)

**Invective poetry:** The above-mentioned compilation ([Voicing the Moment](#), 2005) also variously drew attention to the long tradition of invective poetry.

Armistead, for example, cites:

- an historic incident in the year 912, during an Hispano-Arab siege of a stronghold, in which an acrimonious poetic exchange took place between one of the rebels who hurls down a poetic challenge from inside the fortress, to which a muleteer instantaneously responds, with a poetically improvised answer
- the exchange of ten-verse *decimas* across the Mexican-Texan border in the late nineteenth century

The Arabic *hija'* tradition of improvised invective, diatribe and insult in verse (C. Pellat, 1971; C. Elliott, 1960). This would seemingly have contributed to the development of the tradition in Ibero-American cultures (James T. Monroe. [Improvised Invective in Hispano-Arabic Poetry and Ibn Quzman's "Zajal 87" \(When Blonde Meets Blone\)](#). p. 135-159). Various authors discuss modern Arabian improvised invective (S. A. Sawayan, 1985, 1989; G van Gelder, 1988). Of particular relevance to the current exploration is the fact that during the 1991 Gulf War, rival radio and television broadcasts, made use of *hija'* poetry -- with Iraqis and Saudis trading poetic insults on a daily basis (Ya'ari and Freideman, 1991)

- C. Pellat. *Hayawan*. Encyclopedia of Islam. Leiden, Brill, 1971
- *Oral Tradition*, 4, 1989 Haydas, Sbeit and Sawayan \*\*\*\*
- Arabized Hebrew poets of Andalusia \*\*\*\*
- classical Arab poetry Monroe 1972
- *irtidjal* -- Arabic "improvising, extemporizing a poem -- Bonebakker 1978
- James W. Fernandez. [Playfulness and Planfulness: improvisation and revitalization in culture](#). p. 97-119
- John Miles Foley ([Comparative Oral Traditions](#), 2005)
  - Tibetan "paper-singer" Grags-pa seng-ge
  - [www.oraltradition.org/hrop/](http://www.oraltradition.org/hrop/)
  - Chinese Suzbos storytelling

**Folk traditions:** Also to be noted, in addition to those mentioned above, are:

- The **Persian** poetic form of Qasida is unprecedented in Arabic or New Persian, but it is part of the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) tradition. The Pahlavic poetic debate *Draxt i Asurik* shows that this form of debate has had a long history. Of great potential interest is that the five debates on record ([Monazerat](#)) are called *Arab o 'Ajam* (The Arab vs the Persian), *Mogh o Mosalman* (the Magian vs the Muslim), *Shab o Ruz* (the night vs the Day), *Neyza o Kaman* (the Spear vs the Bow) and the *Asman o Zamin* (the Sky vs the Earth). [\[more\]](#)
- Ironically web resources give unusual prominence to a **Palestinian** example (D. G. Sbeit, [Debate in the Improvised-Sung poetry of the Palestinians](#), *Asian Folklore Studies*, 1993).
- In the **Philippines**, [balagtasán](#) is a traditional literary form -- a poetic debate in which two poets engage each other for about 20 minutes on a designated topic, in versified Tagalog; *cancionan* is a form of argument in song and verse, with *bantayonan* as another form of poetic debate.
- In **Bangladesh**, *kabigan* is a form of poetic debate.
- In the **Mariana Islands**, the [Kantan Chamorita](#) is the contemporary name given to traditional call-and-response, impromptu verse-making.
- In **Sicily**, known as the island of poets, *contrasti*, is a poetic debate between two poets.
- Poetic debate has been a feature of [Russian internet participation](#).
- In **Lebanon**, [zajal](#) is semi-improvised and semi-sung form of oral strophic poetry, often performed as a debate between *zajjaali* (poets who improvise the *zajal*).
- Improvisation is central to traditional musical activity in **Corsica**, as is the case in many other Mediterranean cultures -- the *tour de force* being the [chjami è rispondi](#), a spontaneously improvised poetic debate set to a relatively stable melodic prototype which is nevertheless personalized by each individual singer as well as being adapted to the shifting stresses of the textual line in the moment of performance.
- Improvised poetry in Castilian-speaking areas of **Spain** (Santander, Murcia, Almería and Granada), competitively sung in the form of *quintillas* and *decimas* as late as the 1950s.
- Competitive improvisation continues to be practiced in the **Canary Islands** in the form of *decimas* by poets (*verseadores*) who, even though semi-literate, spontaneously compose with ease ten-verse strophes with a fixed

rhyme scheme.

- In **Chile** one singer or poet poses a versified problem (riddle or paradox), to which the antagonist must instantaneously supply a poetic answer. In Ecuador, in one mode one singer provides three verses and the opponent must provide the fourth. Related practices are known in **Galiccia** (*enchoyadas*) and in **Portugal** -- in the form of challenging songs (*cantigas ao desafio*) among two or more contenders. In the **Cape Verde Islands**, abusive songs may be sung against each other all evening
- In a detailed report of a politically influential [Deelleey](#) poetic debate in **Somalia**, Ali M. Ahad ([Could Poetry Define Nationhood? the case of Somali oral poetry and the nation](#), 2007) notably states:

The aim of that debate as conceived by its proponents was to rekindle nationalism and national values versus clan ideology and kinship. The Deelleey poetic debate was coordinated by one of the modern Somali poets, the scholar who discovered the metrics of Somali poetry. Although most of the poets who participated in the debate knew how to read and write, their poems were in oral form and were tape-recorded. The fixed rules were that every poet must alliterate his/her poem in D and must produce the poem in *jiifto* or *maanso* genre

How ironic that Somalia should have so recently explored so seriously a political possibility that less conflict-torn countries have failed to do. However this initiative should be compared with the commentary, noting the role of poetry, by Martin Kramer ([Arab Nationalism: mistaken identity](#), *Daedalus*, Summer 1993).

**Interactive dialogue projects:** In addition to those identified above, a variety of projects and initiatives touch on related concerns and merit reflection on their successes and constraints with respect to the encounter between cultures:

- [Dialogue through Poetry](#): This initiative has aimed at building a culture of peace and non-violence through poetry. A UN conference was seemingly held in 2002 to investigate ways to stimulate dialogue among cultures through poetry using new technologies and international resources. The central focus is the development of an internet portal for poetry through [Poetry International Foundation](#) in Rotterdam and an organizational structure to facilitate interaction and events programming. The arguments and cautions of [John Kinsella](#) ([Statement for Dialogues of Cultures Conference](#), New York, United Nations) merit careful attention
- [Debating Culture in Europe](#) (1300-1500), directed by Emma Cayley at the Centre for Medieval Studies (University of Exeter)
- [Poetic Dialogue Project](#): an exhibition of collaborative works by artists and poets

Whilst not directly relevant to this exploration, there have been numerous international initiatives to enable poetry in different ways (as recorded in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*). Curiously an unusual proportion of them have not proved to be viable.

**Framework for clarification of "poetic debate":**

Towards a clarification of connotations of the phrase "poetic debate" to highlight most relevant to socio-political poetic engagement ( <b>tentative</b> ) [interactions in the <b>lower right portion</b> of the table are potentially most significant]				
Degree of improvisation	Thematic content	Number of active participants in the debate		
		1 "interactant" (possibly simulating alternating voices/ views)	2 "interactants" (preferably representing alternative views)	3 or more "interactants" (preferably representing alternative views)
	..			
<b>Pre-prepared, set-piece articulation in poetic form</b> (possibly allowing for a degree of thematic response to the other participant )	Principles/Values	.	.	.
	People exemplifying values	.	.	.
	Impersonal archetypes	.	.	.
	Socio-political issues	.	.	.
<b>Constrained improvisation in poetic form</b> (externally imposed theme and possibly positions to be taken; even	Principles/Values	.	.	.
	People exemplifying values	.	.	.
	Impersonal archetypes	.	.	.

ritualised within a tradition)	Socio-political issues	.	.	.
<b>Constrained improvisation in poetic form</b> ( <i>thematic challenge by one participant imposing a theme</i> on another)	Principles/Values	.	.	.
	People exemplifying values	.	.	.
	Impersonal archetypes	.	.	.
	Socio-political issues	.	.	.
<b>Improvised, but making spontaneous use of selected verses from classic poems</b> (free with thematic focus emerging through interaction)	Principles/Values	.	.	.
	People exemplifying values	.	.	.
	Impersonal archetypes	.	.	.
	Socio-political issues	.	.	.
<b>Spontaneous poetic improvisation</b> (free with thematic focus emerging in response to the dynamics of interaction)	Principles/Values	.	.	.
	People exemplifying values	.	.	.
	Impersonal archetypes	.	.	.
	Socio-political issues	.	.	.

This table of course echoes the range of forms of participation in conferences of any kind -- from reports about them (or about hypothetical events), through typical presentations of pre-prepared documents, ritualised set-piece dialogues, to improvisation in response to the thematic content of others. In the case of "poetic debate" or "poetic dialogue", the possibility is to **heighten the degree of resonance between participants in an improvisation** -- to enhance the reverberations of the encounter as a whole. Concrete examples, such as those cited above from different cultures, could be appropriately positioned within the table in the light of the precise process implied by the terms currently used to describe them.

## Towards an imaginative reflection on possible "Rules of Poetic Engagement"

**Collaborative aesthetics:** A form of aesthetic collaboration may be said to take place through a common inspiration, even though there is no direct interaction (Lloyd Halliburton, *Poetic Symbiosis: Hart Crane and Federico García Lorca*, *Neohelicon*, December, 2001). The term "poetic collaboration" is widely used to describe various forms of mutual consultation in the preparation of poetic works. There may indeed be concern of the degree to which the contribution of one is "flattened" at the expense of another or allocated in some overly rational manner. The challenge is helpfully articulated for only two poets by Lucy Newlyn (*Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion*, 2001) who asks what method do we adopt to describe the interweaving of literary emotional strands in a relationship so complex? What word do we have for a friendship which was at once productive and destructive? She comments:

- 'Literary friendship' or 'literary partnership' are too bland, too general.
- 'Collaboration' and 'mutual influence' deal only with literary and intellectual content.
- 'Symbiosis' is inaccurate, given that both writers were in so many ways an emotional liability to each other.
- 'Affinity' does not account for the important differences which emerged as the relationship unfolded.
- 'Duet' is too choreographed, too organized, and mutually enhancing.
- 'Duel' plays too much on antagonism.
- 'Dialogue' is too circumscribed, given that more than two voices can be heard during the process of any intellectual and emotional exchange.
- 'Competitive/collaborative relationship' is accurate, but cumbersome. (p. xiii, *reformatted for emphasis*)

Also noted was the "threat of amalgamation" which collaboration involves, implying a need to avoid the "complete merging of voices" if they were to preserve their distinct identities. With respect to the two poets, Newlyn notes:

Their divisions, when they acknowledged them, tended either to be rationalised as compatibility or transcended by the ideal of a shared vision.... When the merging of 'compounding' of opposite styles proves impossible, collaboration is figured as an experiment that has gone wrong. (p. xxxiii)

Missing from the above is the sense in which the poets might be struggling aesthetically, even existentially and to a far higher degree, with the contrasts that their respective sensibilities represented. Rather than a "shared vision" that they held in advance -- and had already agreed upon -- **the question is whether the interaction between their differences enabled the emergence of a "shared vision" that encompassed those differences without diminishing their**

**significance** -- one that had not previously been envisaged, namely something new with whose aesthetic significance they could resonate.

It is difficult to locate resources on collaborative aesthetics acknowledging the above nuances -- where the emphasis is on a common aesthetic outcome and not primarily on group process or group learning techniques (cf [Leveraging Web 2.0 Technologies: building innovative online learning communities](#)). Anindita Basu and David Cavallo ([Full-Contact Poetry: creating space for poetic collaboration](#)) describe a collaborative digital play space for children, written in [Squeak](#), and developed at the MIT Media Laboratory. A software experiment in computational poetry, as described by Eric Elstain and Jon Trowbridge ([Gnoetry 0.2 and the Transcendence of the Human Poetic](#), January 2007), analyzes how words are used in an extant text and tries to discern patterns. However it does allow for a degree of interplay:

Gnoetry0.2 also allows for the human end-user to facilitate "conversations" between disparate authors and epochs; a conversation enhanced by Gnoetry's ability to statistically weight the texts during composition. That is, the end-user may "ask" that 23% of the time, solutions to the problem of "haiku," for example, be found in *Emma*; 21.7% in *The Custom of the Country*; and so on up to 100%. This function allows the "voices" of the texts to be raised and lowered throughout the composition, much like a do-wop group trading solos and singing in different harmonies.

Following on the initiative of Bruno Latour ([Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern](#), *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2), one initiative by Marsha Bradfield and Jem Mackay ([An Aesthetics of Matters of Concern](#), *Critical Practice*, 2008) raises questions rather than immediately providing answers:

What might a collaborative aesthetics involve? How might it look, feel, taste, sound, smell? More specifically, what are the possibilities of a collaborative aesthetics grounded in Latour's notion of 'matters of concern'?

**Collaborative creativity:** This is the focus of the [Collaborative Creativity Group](#) within a programme of the United Nations University, centered at the Maastricht Economic and Social Research and Training Centre on Innovation and Technology ([UNU-MERIT](#)). The group investigates the socio-economics of creative collaboration across all domains, but presumably with relatively little emphasis on the aesthetic creativity of concern in any strategic poetic engagement regarding a "matter of concern". It is currently collaborating with the Wikimedia Foundation to undertake a [survey of the Wikipedia process](#).

Collaborative creativity is clearly a preoccupation of tangible product innovation (cf Hillevi Sundholm, Henrik Artman and Robert Ramberg, [Backdoor Creativity: collaborative creativity in technology supported teams](#), 2004). A focus for such reflection is provided through the [PICNIC](#) gathering which periodically brings together and disseminates the ideas and knowledge of creators and innovators, highlighting relevant products and services at the intersection of media, technology, arts (including poetry) and entertainment.

As a form of collaborative creativity, unfortunately it is possible that it is precisely what has proven to be viable and practical in the mysterious success of [open source](#) and related projects (*Linux*, *Wikipedia*) that inhibits recognition of the subtle strategic challenges of cross-cultural engagement, as in the Middle East. At this point in time these challenges may well be better represented by the challenges and possibilities of improvised poetic debate as a reflection of contrasting aesthetic preferences. The aesthetic considerations, expressed poetically, are then intimately related to issues of collective identity -- and to challenging differences in ideological perspectives and their strategic implications.

Such reservations would clearly also apply to optimism regarding the possibilities of [collective intelligence](#), notably as expressed by Mark Tovey ([Collective Intelligence: creating a prosperous world at peace](#), 2008). What is carried by poetry and through poetic debate is subtler than the forms of knowledge which are the focus of innovative [knowledge management](#).

**Practical concerns:** There are particular issues in exploring the aesthetic possibilities:

1. Cultures that highly value aesthetics tend to appreciate style -- possibly even above substance. Traces of this are to be found in the appreciation of the speeches of politicians in the West, notably in France, Italy and Germany. Style may be recognized as indicative of a degree of coherence and maturity which conventional presentations of "substance" may lack. Curiously style is a significant factor in urban gang cultures -- however much the preferred style may be offensive to other cultures.
2. Problematic modes of interaction may, to some extent, be fruitfully reframed as "bad" poetry (or song), namely lacking any attractive qualities (or seriously "out of tune"). Avoiding such a possible framing is a challenge to



negotiators -- as a potential stimulus to bad press in an aesthetically critical culture.

3. As is well-recognized, notably in the world of opera, there are major problems in choreographing the engagement of *prima donnas* -- whether or not these are analogous to those experienced in diplomatic encounters and "managed" there by protocol. What are the necessary aesthetic protocols? There are of course some with skills in eliciting a degree of order from what is aesthetic chaos to others -- choreography on the fly.
4. To the extent that any exploration focuses on a "conference" of those interested in this possibility and its implications, there are a range of concerns with how such an event might itself be organized in practice as discussed in [Proposal for an Exploratory International Conference: Poetry-making and Policy-making](#) (1993)
5. A range of organizational possibilities and precedents have been reviewed elsewhere ([Organizational implementation](#), in *A Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?* 2006) notably a collective process following the logic of crowdsourcing ([Participative Development Process for Singable Declarations Applying the Wikipedia-Wikimedia-WikiMusic concept to constitutions](#), 2006)

### Characteristics of possible "rules":

1. Creative ways of combining useful rules, whatever they might be, with the possibility of a "no holds barred" approach that would avoid inhibiting creativity. Indications of how to reconcile these incompatible approaches might perhaps be obtained from the philosophy and practice Eastern martial arts, such as aikido.
2. Recognition of viable patterns of improvised poetic dialogue. Indications regarding such patterns might be obtained from:
  - **music improvisation**, as, for example, with the perspective of an avant-garde composer ([Vinko Globokar](#), *Drama and Correspondences*. Harmonia Mundi, 20 21803-1) regarding "the principle of mutual psychological reactions and attempts to 'join' the four participants with each other and to make them increasingly dependent on each other. There are four levels:
    - a. the musical material is entirely fixed, but the choice of instruments is left open.
    - b. Each musician possesses only incomplete instructions. In order to be able to play, each musician must search for missing material in the performance of the neighbour (pitches from the first, length from the second, etc) and react to it in different ways: imitate, adapt himself to it (if need be, further develop), do the opposite, become disinterested or something else (something 'unheard of').
    - c. The composed material is completely substituted by the description of the possibility arising from the reactions of the performers to their neighbours.
    - d. On the last level, it is left up to the performers whether to cease playing or to continue; for not even the selection of reactions is now necessary"

Inspired by [jamming](#) in jazz groups, internalizing the polar tensions between musical score and improvisation, such possibilities have been used by [John Kao](#) (*Jamming: the art and discipline of business*, 1997). A jam session is a musical act where musicians gather and play (or "jam") without extensive preparation or predefined arrangements.
  - **polyphony**, whether involving only distinct instrumental voices or the addition of lyrics in relation to the separate melodic voices (cf [All Blacks of Davos vs All Greens of Porto Alegre: reframing global strategic discord through polyphony?](#). 2007)
  - **multi-participant juggling**, as extensively documented in the form of [passing patterns](#), which have been extensively documented. A juggling group can of course shift between patterns and include extra jugglers during the process, or drop them from the pattern.
  - **dance**, offers both a considerable range of [dance moves](#) (integrated into more complex dance patterns) as well as the possibility of improvisation (see [Glossary of dance moves](#)). Any codification of the patterns could be indicative of possibilities for poetic interaction within groups of different sizes whose contrasting perspectives were represented by distinct sub-groups. [Square dances](#) provide an example of formalized dance patterns.
  - **card games**, point to a range of possibilities of interaction between collaborating and competing parties in which "improvisation" is integrated into game strategy. There are web sites under the theme "poker poetry". Dave Morice ([Poetry Poker: Misfit Improvisations on Language, Teachers and Writers](#), 1992, ) describes a strategy that allows a student to write a poem by playing cards.
  - **piston engine operation** offers a more mechanical insight into the manner in which a cycle of creative "sparks" can be used as the motive power of a common vehicle. An engine can have many [pistons](#). The

challenge is to convert the insights from any such technical metaphor into valuable features of a poetic debate -- each participant functioning as a "piston" in the creative initiative. In all types of piston engine the linear movement of the piston is converted to a rotating movement (via a connecting rod and a crankshaft or by a swashplate); a flywheel is often used to ensure smooth rotation. The more cylinders a reciprocating piston engine has, generally, the more vibration-free (smoothly) it can operate. The power of a reciprocating engine is proportional to the volume of the combined pistons' displacement.

All these patterning possibilities together lend themselves to **formal mathematical analysis** to identify the range of interactions that might be called upon in any aesthetic interaction.

3. Insights from traditional practices of poetic dialogue between several participants (as noted above)
4. Insights from contexts in which there is an appreciation of the "**rhythm of debate**" or "rhythm in debate" as in the educational process in Buddhist philosophy. In mathematical physics, Andrew Warwick ([Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics](#), 2003) highlights the unfortunate consequence of the shift from the formal procedure of a disputation (with the rhythm of public debate between opponent and respondent by "[Wranglers](#)") to the written examination. Related to this is the significant issue of the balance between qualitative and quantitative perspectives in any adversarial assessment process, as discussed by John Danvers ([Assessment in the Arts: qualitative and quantitative approaches](#)):

These differences emerge as the result of the adversarial process of advocacy and argument that characterises most assessment meetings. This process is a mixture of negotiation, rational argument and peer pressure, centred on subjective opinions about the degree to which students have achieved particular learning outcomes, as manifested in the artwork or texts presented for assessment. In most assessment meetings there is an alternating pattern of convergence and divergence of opinions, interpretations, prejudices and insights – energised by the particular dynamics of the group. However this rhythm of debate and open-ended exchange is always constrained by the need to arrive at a definitive single mark, the holy grail of quantitative assessment. In some ways the process would be much more transparent and informative to the student if the marks of each assessor were published and a cluster of marks were awarded for each unit of assessment – not one mark! This would reflect the variety of evaluations and suggest that the process, and the mark, is conditional rather than absolute.

5. Insights from the tradition of "**poetical rhetoric**", aptly introduced in terms of historical understanding of the problematic relationship between poets and philosophers by [Stanley Rosen](#) ([Plato's Republic: A Study](#), 2005):

The philosopher...uses poetical rhetoric for purposes of persuasion, but at least his or her rhetoric is informed by the truth....The poet... produces copies of the items of genesis, or what one could call simulacra (images of images). The poet thus deludes us into believing that he or she knows the truth, and this illusory knowledge is more attractive to the general populace than is the rigorous and genuine truth of philosophy. To make a long story short, if they are not checked, the poets will become the unacknowledged legislators of society, thereby usurping a role that ought to be filled by philosophers. (p. 3)

This matter is of some relevance given the current appreciation of the "poetic rhetoric" of Barack Obama as President of the USA. However, any implication that philosophers are especially endowed with the truth is radically undermined by their own inability to dialogue fruitfully with each other, as noted by the philosopher, [Nicholas Rescher](#) ([The Strife of Systems: an essay on the grounds and implications of philosophical diversity](#), 1985). He responded to their distinctly unintegrative conflict by concluding:

For centuries, most philosophers who have reflected on the matter have been intimidated by the strife of systems. But the time has come to put this behind us -- not the strife, that is, which is ineliminable, but the felt need to somehow end it rather than simply accept it and take it in stride.

It is perhaps the interplay of poetry and philosophy that could be more fruitfully envisaged, through patterns as suggested below.

6. Insights from understandings of "**poetic resonance**" in relation to the landscape with which any myth of cultural identity is associated and cultivated, notably as highlighted in commentaries on [José Lezama Lima](#)'s *La Expresión Americana* (1957) -- who, as a poet, contrasts North and Latin American understandings that are of great political significance. For example, William Rowlandson (['Un mito es una imagen participada'](#), *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 2010) notes:

Periods of history that fail to awaken in the interpreter the awe of *la imago* fail to achieve the poetical resonance that we see characterised in the historical reconstruction of *La expresión americana*. Similarly, *la imago* itself becomes the animistic heart of the poetic (and historic) moment... Furthermore, it is not simply the historical moment that becomes the interactive text to be interpreted; a similar signifying process takes place converting the '*espacio gnóstico*' that is '*naturaleza*' into the defining text that is '*paisaje*'. Much has been written on this process of transformation from nature to landscape... Nature itself is the unwritten text that awaits the creative participation of the subject to transform it into a meaningful entity, and by extension into a cultural construct.... the epistemological dimension of the creative interpretation of both landscape and history. The subjective interaction with nature becomes a hermeneutic process – one of interpreting – and such a process is integrally linked to the processes by which we gain knowledge.

Such perspectives may be valuable in challenging the assumptions of the foreign policy of the USA (and the West in general) regarding cultures like those of Afghanistan (and the Middle East in general).

7. Insights from "**pattern language**", notably as developed by [Christopher Alexander](#) (*A Pattern Language*, 1977) as a part of a set of writings, themselves described as poetical (Jonathan Price, *What Technical Writers Can Learn from Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language*, 2001). One of its chapters is entitled *The Poetry of the Language*. In introducing the deep nature of patterns, Alexander comments (*The Nature of Order*, 2003):

A pattern language is a created thing. It is a work of poetry, a work of art. It is potentially as profound in its way as a building can be.

But there seems to have been no attempts to associate the focus of Alexander's 253 interrelated patterns (see [comment](#)) -- most of which have long been a focus of poetry -- with any attempt at structuring poetic insight into the pattern they constitute as a whole. The comment however indicates how the set of physically-focused patterns has been used experimentally as a template for the elaboration of 4 additional sets of patterns (*5-fold Pattern Language*, 1984): an abstract variant, a socio-organizational analogue, a cognitive analogue, and an intra-personal analogue.

8. Elucidation of rules consistent with particular **musical genres**, if the improvisation is to take place within some such genre
9. In the spirit of **experimental poetry** in three dimensions ("3D poetry"), it may be fruitful to explore the possibility that the Islamic distinction between the poetic forms of [eulogy \(panegyric\)](#) and denunciation (diatribe) would lend itself to their mapping onto three dimensional structures (of association and dissociation). The question is whether participants in a poetic debate could together -- through their poetic consonance and dissonance -- "build" such memetic constructs, effectively bridging their differences without denying them. Further to any such achievement, there is the possibility that they might then transform, such structures aesthetically into richer poetic constructs involving more complex resonances between the aesthetic elements. The images below are indicative of the principle (on the left) and a possible complexification (on the right). The structure on the right of course recalls features of Islamic architecture whose principles it reflects ([Keith Critchlow](#), *Islamic Patterns: an analytical and cosmological approach*, 1999). Either structure is in effect a three dimensional interweaving of appreciation and criticism into a mimetic "carpet". In this memetic architecture, there may be the possibility of poetic epics embodying radical difference appropriately in what could then be understood as memetic analogues to [geodesic domes](#) (even of opposite [chirality](#)).

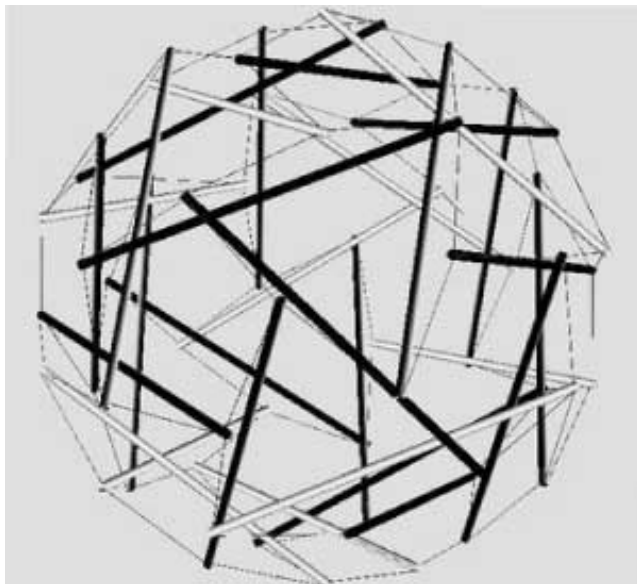
#### Indicative design possibilities interrelating contrasting perspectives in a poetic debate

##### Example of tensional integrity ([tensegrity](#)) structure

in which aesthetic elements of poetic dissociation (denunciation) might be indicated by solid, incompressible rods and those of association (eulogy) might be indicated by linking, tension elements; circuits might then represent verses interlocking to constitute a larger whole

##### Example of aesthetic elaboration of a polyhedral configuration

in which more complex patterns of association enrich the memetic structure as a whole, enabling its further transformation or simplification (image developed using [Stella Polyhedron Navigator](#))



*[In Quest of a Strategic Pattern Language: a new architecture of values](#) (2008)*

## Conclusion

The emphasis here has been on enabling skills that combine the following:

- improvisation -- namely composition during recitation, whether or not some content is derived from classical verses
- interaction with one or more others -- such that each responds to thematic content and aesthetic parameters introduced by the other
- debate responsive to radically divisive socio-political and ideological issues -- variously represented by the interactants as "stakeholders" -- namely beyond any emphasis on entertainment or representation
- cultural sensitivity, especially with respect to Islamic reservations

The ambition need only be modest, whatever the potential. It might be fruitfully framed as a means of engendering a different framework of mutual respect -- independent of other more conventional indicators of strength. Framed in this way, there is the possibility of more fruitful outcomes, mutually valued.

Given the modest costs associated with this possibility -- compared to other forms of more physical engagement between cultures -- it is easy to argue that there is little to lose, with the potential of there being much to gain. It might be questioned how "serious" is any such initiative. This would be a matter of collective concern in ensuring that any exploration is fruitful

The argument here is that there is little to lose and the cost of investing in such possibilities could be low. More intriguing is the choral interface with Europe. Perhaps a cognitive and policy reframing of the Eurovision approach -- as argued in some detail (*[Singable Earth Charter, EU Constitution or Global Ethic?](#) 2006*). Certainly there is scope for work by musicians, poets, songwriters, choirs and strategists -- with outcomes that might be taken more seriously by wider segments of the concerned populations than those conventionally envisaged.

Perhaps a more fundamental challenge, to enhance the potential viability, would be exploration of the relevance of:

- a process of [autopoiesis](#) as redefined by Amal Alayan (in a book in preparation) to apply to self-creation, recreation and renewal, amongst a group who are both poetic and altruistic. This then takes the form of an evolving, cascading, thematically intertwined sung epic in relation to change on a collective, bi-national and a global level. Autopoiesis is envisaged as a lens and a mechanism for organizing social, cultural and economic change in the Middle East and in its relationship to the West. For Alayan this approach is inspired by the Arab phrase *Nathama Al-Shi'r* -- poetry as organizing -- inviting creative new possibilities for more appropriate collective initiatives of every kind.

Indeed, given the common root (auto-poiesis), is there not the possibility that poets could engender larger memetic structures through a dynamic interaction whose nature is yet to be discovered? A relevant set of insights is perhaps offered by Anthony Blake (*[The Supreme Art of Dialogue: structures of meaning](#), 2008*). The challenge lies in the **ability of a group of poets to introduce moderating processes to correct for individual tendencies to neglect the collective product** -- a skill which is vital in musical improvisation in groups. Arguably poets

need seriously to internalize collectively the challenge they face in working collectively.

Of interest is the manner in which intervention is followed by riposte in a process of escalating significance -- with some sense of emergence of memetic structures transcending such binary exchanges. Understandings from current explorations of multi-level metadialogue could offer indications of possibilities (Maurice A. Finocchiaro (*Arguments, Meta-arguments, and Metadialogues: A Reconstruction of Krabbe, Govier, and Woods. Argumentation*, 21, 3, September 2007, pp 253-268).

- enabling a dynamic of **improvisation between poets**, as is much more frequently done in other arts (*Musical improvisation, Singing Improvisation, Theater, Dance, Film, Comedy, Poetry, Television, Role-playing games*). This implies an ability for both poetic improvisation **as well as the capacity to respond to another poet**, amplifying or challenging the content -- but retaining a degree of overall connectivity with it. Impressive examples of the result, but typically in the absence of improvisation, are to be found in song, notably some folk songs in which singers effectively challenge each other through alternating verses -- as may be done in opera and multi-voice choirs.

The practice by single poets is also known in Russia and is the focus of a periodic Mediterranean festival (*Poetarcantando nel Mediterraneo – dall'ottava rima al rap*). Known as *bertsolarismo*, it is the most important and popular display of oral Basque poetry.

- **poetic debate**: Clearly (as implied by the above table) **considerable clarification is required to distinguish the variously related uses of this and other terms** in order to highlight those relevant to current socio-political challenges. "Debate" may itself be inappropriate, where "encounter" or "dialogue" offer other possibilities -- but also fraught with the possibility of other misunderstandings and what might be considered (by those with greater expectations) as aesthetic indulgences. There are many ways in which "poetic" interaction can take place avoiding what might prove fruitful to a problematic socio-political situation like Afghanistan. In that sense poetic debate emulates -- or provides a model for -- the binary logic of parliamentary rhetoric between representatives of opposing parties.

It would be intriguing to discover that the Islamic formal reservations about poetry implied a valuable disciplinary corrective against individualistic poetic indulgences -- inhibiting effective emergence of collaborative insights. What might be the criteria for fruitful critical dialogue between worldviews through poetic debate? (cf *Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews*, 2006). In this respect the quadrilemma articulated from an Asian perspective by Kinhide Mushakoji (*Global Issues and Interparadigmatic Dialogue*, 1988) call for reflection on the distinctions between: Poetry, Not-Poetry, Poetry-and-Not-Poetry, neither Poetry-nor-Not-Poetry.

Again, how ironic it would be if Somalia should have explored so seriously a political possibility that less conflict-torn countries have failed to do. More curious is the extent to which such "debates" have been significant thought the history of many cultures. Jeffrey Walker (*Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, 2000) demonstrates that in antiquity rhetoric and poetry could not be viewed separately. Missing however is a sense of the poetic engagement between those of opposing views -- and perhaps not just two -- and the extent to which a richer and more fruitful framework emerged from their interaction.

What would it take to engender a larger aesthetic framework embodying contrasting viewpoints in challengingly significant ways of relevance to situations such as Afghanistan, the Caucasus or Iran?

#### Relevant strategic implications of Japanese warlord poetry

(Sengoku-jidia, 1467-1600)

When Japan was churning in continuous, contagious arson and killing among warlords from the 16th century onwards, there were three samurai leaders who would lay the foundations for modern Japan today -- the first whose vision of the country was of one nation-state. They were to rule Japan in succession.

The three samurai leaders tried to unify the country: Nobunaga was known for his cruelty, Hideyoshi for his impetuosity, Tokugawa for his patience. A poetic parable (now learnt by all Japanese school children) was told about them.

There was a little bird who wouldn't sing, they were asked by a Zen master what they would do::

Nobunaga said, "little bird, if you won't sing, I'll kill you"  
Hideyoshi said, "little bird, if you won't sing, I'll make you sing"  
Tokugawa said, "little bird, if you won't sing, I'll wait for you to sing."

Tokugawa became Shogun (leader of Japan) in 1603, and his dynasty ruled until 1867.

## References

Because of the number and range of relevant references, these have been placed in a separate document: [Strategic Dialogue through Poetic Improvisation: web resources and bibliography](#)



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