



# laetus in praesens

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## Multivocal Poetic Discourse Emphasizing Improvisation

### Clarification of possibilities for the future

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## Introduction

The contents of this document originally appeared as sections within *Poetic Engagement with Afghanistan, Caucasus and Iran: an unexplored strategic opportunity?* (2009). These sections are presented separately here since together they also constitute an appropriate annex to a more recent document in which the possibilities of poetic discourse are further developed (*Enactivating Multiversal Community: hearing voices in the global wilderness*, 2012). Some of these possibilities have also been discussed in *Enabling a 12-fold Pattern of Systemic Dialogue for Governance* (2011). The argument has been subsequently further developed in *Improvisation in Multivocal Poetic Discourse: Basque lauburu and bertsolaritza as catalysts of global significance* (2016).

## 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 both to the other contributors and to 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 (glorification) or diatribe (invective) -- 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](#) -- a mode well-echoed in international strategic debate.

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 spontaneously in response to content formulated in the moment.**

Curiously this lost art is again 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. Opposing speeches are even known to have been written by the same speechwriter. Any passionate sense of suffering, or appeal to larger value frameworks, is then a rational construct (at best decorated with poetic flourishes). Any written outcome of the event may also have been scripted and agreed in advance -- transforming the whole exercise into a piece of theatre.

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 conventional poetry now to be understood as a non-interactive art form, even elitist?** See discussion by Maureen N. McLane (*On the Use and Abuse of "Orality" for Art: reflections on romantic and late Twentieth-Century poesis, Oral Tradition*, 2002), although this does not highlight improvisation..

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 practioners 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 *troubadour* 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*).

Needless to say there is little indication of their relevance to the conflicted dialogues in the Middle East.

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*

## 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 currently to be found in Slavic poetry, known for its relationship to nationalist politics):

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)

Verbal improvisation of poetry now takes the form of slam in western cultures (notably described as poetic jousting), involving a degree of enactment of a recital -- where normally the text is fixed before performance. [Poetry slam](#) is the competitive art of performance poetry. It originated in the US as a means to heighten public interest in poetry readings. It has now evolved into an international art form -- as described by Susan B.A. Somers-Willett (*Slam Poetry: Ambivalence, Gender, and Black Authenticity in Slam*, 2001; *Can Slam Poetry Matter? Rattle: poetry for the 21st century*). See also: Chris Mooney-Singh, *Getting Out Of The Poetry Ghetto; Poetry and Improv: A Perfect Match?* (2009). Its origins in the Chicago rap culture merit reflection as suggesting a potentially viable mode for engagement with other cultures, such as those of Afghanistan. President Barack Obama has spent a significant period of his professional life in Chicago.

Improvisation is also valued as enabling cultural renewal (James W. Fernandez, *Playfulness and Planfulness: improvisation and revitalization in culture*. p. 97-119).

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

Armistead, for example, offers as anecdotes:

- 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

There is an active Arabic *hija'* tradition of improvised invective, diatribe and insult in verse (C. Pellat, 1971; C. Elliott, 1960). One popular form is *naqa'id*. 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"*. p. 135-159; Adnan Haydar, *The Development of Lebanese Zajal: genre, meter, and verbal due*, 1989). Various authors discuss modern Arabian improvised invective (S. A. Sowayan, 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). Pre-Islamic Arabs are known to have hurled curses at the enemy as they went into combat.

**Flyting** is a public contest of extravagant insults, often structured in the form of a poetic joust. It is similar to African American practice of **freestyle battles** and the historic practice of the **dozens**. In Germanic cultures, the convention can be detected earlier, for example in the confrontation of Beowulf and Unferð in Beowulf. Flytings were a feature of early Germanic cultures either a prelude to battle or as a form of combat in their own right. Taunting songs are part of many cultures predating Scottish flyting, such as Inuit civilization. A comparable form is to be found in the competitive verses of Japanese *haikai*.

**Folk traditions:** It is appropriate to note that the journal *Oral Tradition* (Center for Studies in Oral Tradition) has an extensive database of readily accessible articles, in addition to offering sound files from various traditions. Relevant to this exploration are forms which are notably recognized by terms such as "poetic wrestling" or "poetic jousting".

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. Sbait, *Debate in the Improvised-Sung poetry of the Palestinians, Asian Folklore Studies*, 1993).
- In the **Philippines**, *balagtasan* 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; another form is *dupluhan*, a popular poetical debate competition; *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, Almeria 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 **G Galicia** (*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 **West Africa** the role of poet / praise singer / wandering musician, known as a **griot**, continues to be valued as a repository of oral tradition. Although they may know many traditional songs, they must also have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene -- including gossip, satire, or political comment.
- Amongst the **Gikuyu** of **Kenya** (believed to have originated in West Africa) there is a poetic tradition which fosters competition among various poets. These have been described as poetic wrestling matches between various regions -- highly respected as an art form.
- 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 dialogic projects:** In addition to those identified above, and especially that of the [Center for Studies in Oral Tradition](#), 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
- **Fondation Royaumont** has developed a creation program devoted to slam, and the way it relates to music and language. Poetry slam normally takes the form of competitive poetry recital of previously written work. The initiative focuses on [slam / improvisation](#). The initiative explores the poetic and rhythmical worlds of slam in an innovative way, creating a space where the sound-word and music model each other.

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":** The following table could notably be enriched by the insights of John Miles Foley (*Comparative Oral Traditions*, 2005).

Towards a clarification of connotations of the phrase "poetic debate" to highlight most relevant to socio-political poetic engagement (tentative) [interactions in the lower right portion 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 ritualised within a tradition)	Principles/Values			
	People exemplifying values			
	Impersonal archetypes			
	Socio-political issues			
<b>Constrained improvisation in poetic form</b> (thematic challenge by one participant imposing a theme 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"

The following comments do **not** adequately take account of the insights to be obtained regarding the active disciplines of engagement characteristic of the different folk traditions mentioned above.

**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 regarding 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.
- 'Duet' 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 Elshain 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 significance 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 of 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 with respect to improvised oral poetry, whether sung or accompanied by music). For example, work on the thriving Basque *bertsolari* is extensive, as documented by Linda White (*Orality and Basque Nationalism: dancing with the devil or waltzing into the future? Oral Tradition*, 2001). As she notes:

The artists (*bertsolariak*), often called 'Basque troubadours,' perform in competitions broadcast on television and become regional celebrities. The audience does not need to read Euskara in order to enjoy the 'sport of words,' as it is called.... The verses created by the *bertsolari* must comply with specific rhyme patterns. When aficionados discuss *bertsolari*ta, such rhyme patterns are often at the center of their evaluation of an artist's creative production. To the novice, it can often seem as though these oral artists are faced with the onerous task of counting rhymes and syllables as they versify. However, the rhyme patterns and syllable counts per line are an intimate part of the melody being used for a particular verse, and the music is what makes it possible for a *bertsolari* to keep all these schemes in mind...

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 "poetical 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.

- 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).

- 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.

- Elucidation of rules consistent with particular **musical genres**, if the improvisation is to take place within some such genre
- 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](#)).

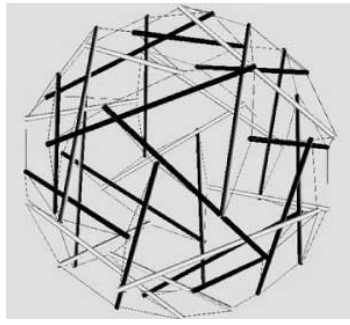
#### Indicative design possibilities interrelating contrasting perspectives in a poetic debate

##### 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 poetic interface with Europe of the cultures by which the West is challenged. 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:

- the **mnemonic significance of rhythm and rhyme** in enabling long-term retention of complex **non-linear patterns of association**. This function was originally noted with respect to use of *saj'* in Arabic speech. In addition to such a purely mnemonic function is the degree to which **such patterns represent the subtler feedback loops essential to the viability of the knowledge cybernetics** that are a challenge to represent adequately in prose or in conventional strategic "plans" and agreements.

It is these feedback loops, implicit in sets of folk tales, that form the identity of any group and give coherence to it. Hence the importance in any strategic encounter of engaging through rhyme and rhythm. There is also the possibility that the binary alternatives of *fakhr* (glorification) and *hija'* (satire, lampoon, invective) may be in some way associated with positive and negative feedback loops -- lending themselves to representation **together** as in the tensegrity image (above, left), rather than vainly endeavouring to stress one at the expense of the other (*Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative*, 2005)..

- 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 is the focus of a periodic Mediterranean festival (*Poetarcantando nel Mediterraneo - dall'ottava rima al rap*). This draws on many cultures of the Mediterranean which have preserved a tradition that is highly appreciated at evening gatherings and village festivals: vocal jousting in which poet-singers confront each other, improvising with wit and irony on various subjects: love, politics, social commentary, etc.

- **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 precisely those modes that 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?

- **implication of a sense of "poetic justice"** as an understanding of the appropriateness of the outcome of an interaction in which "virtue" is ultimately rewarded or "vice" punished, notably through an ironic twist intimately related to the conduct of either protagonist. A contrast can however usefully be made between a purely aesthetic sense of justice and one which reflects the strategic values and priorities of those engaged through a challenging poetic debate -- as with the focus here. This "sense" is important to the viability of any resolution of strategic differences and to the ability to comprehend and accept it -- especially within a wider population that must necessarily be engaged by the aesthetic outcome.

Relevant to a common appreciation of poetic justice in the cross-cultural conflict of concern here is how different aesthetic criteria apply and interweave. This may well be exemplified by any juxtaposition between different musical genres in an encounter (as with the Eurovision / EU anthem images above). In such cases, as with **fusion music**, there is an understanding of the possibilities (Tod Swift and Norton Phillip, *Short Fuse: The Global Anthology of New Fusion Poetry*, 2002). An annual **Fusion Poetry Contest** is now held -- juxtaposing genres, but not in the kind of improvisational encounter envisaged above.

However the challenge in any encounter, involving poetic improvisation meaningful within Islamic cultures, is more easily comprehended in the musical case (especially given the reservations indicated above) and all the more so given the deep-seated sense of injustice driving the strategic conflict. What insights are to be drawn from the theory of **musical harmony**? The question is how the aesthetic resolution enables a non-trivial transformation of that sense of injustice (and pain) into an existentially appreciated sense of poetic justice -- for all involved. This goes beyond the rationale of the classic strategic negotiating objective of *Getting to Yes* (1981) -- which clearly has proven to be totally inadequate to the "clash of civilizations". Hence the merit of exploring the possibility of a multi-genre improvisational epic.

<b>Relevant strategic implications of Japanese warlord poetry</b> (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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