



Four Temperaments And The Forms Of Poetry

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GREG ORR: Four Temperaments And The Forms Of Poetry

Now there are diversities of gifts but the same Spirit
—1 Corinthians 12:4

I'd like to propose that poets are "born" with a certain innate form-giving temperament that allows them to forge language into the convincing unities we call poems. Different poets are born with different temperaments, and the nature of their temperament is shown in the work. Needless to say, since the sense of wholeness is perhaps the most essential defining quality of a poem, this form-giving gift is more important than any other a poet might possess.

These temperaments are distinct from each other, even antipathetic at times. If a poet is born with one temperament, then he or she grows as a poet by developing that temperament, but *also* by nurturing the others. The greatest poem is one in which all four temperaments are present in the strongest degree, though no one in English but Shakespeare could be said to exhibit all four with equal vigor. The main point is, great poems show the presence of all four, though in varying proportions.

Quick Definitions and Dynamics

The four temperaments are: story, structure, "music," and imagination.

1. Story: dramatic unity—a beginning, middle and end. Conflict, dramatic focus, resolution.

2. Structure: the satisfaction of measureable patterns. It is akin to higher math, geometry, theoretical physics—the beauty and balance of equations. It manifests itself in sonnets, villanelles, sestinas (closed structures) and, to a lesser extent, in metrical lines, rhymed couplets and repeated stanza patterns (open structures).

3. "Music": rhythm and sounds. Its developments and resolutions involve syntax, the syllabic qualities of English that determine rhythm (pitch, duration, stress, loudness/softness), and the entire panoply of sound effects (alliteration, assonance, consonance, internal rhyme, etc.).

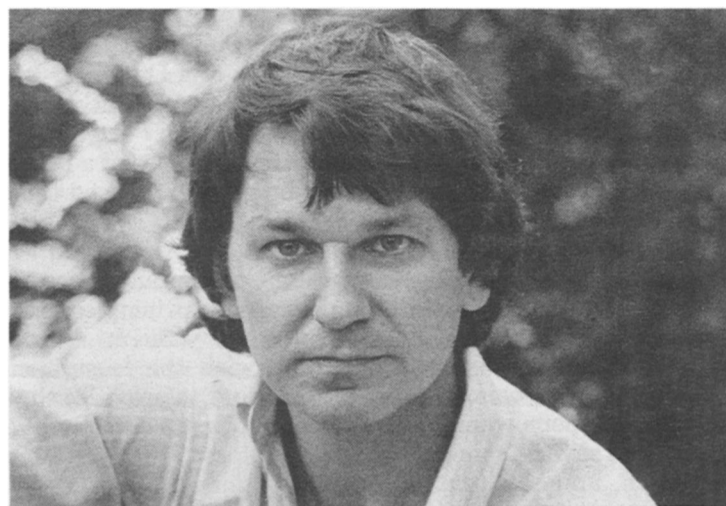
4. Imagination: the flow of image to image or thought to thought. It moves as a stream of association, either concretely (the flow of image) or abstractly (the flow of thought).

It is essential to recognize that the four temperaments form another pattern. Story and structure are INTENSIVE in their impulse; "music" and imagination are EXTENSIVE. Story and structure concern limits and correspond to our desire for and recognition of the role of law. "Music" and imagination concern our longing for liberty, the unconditional and limitless.

(limiting impulse)	(limitlessness)
Story	"Music"
Structure	Imagination

Although each of the temperaments is capable, in and of itself, of creating the unity we call a poem, for a poem to have the stability and dynamic tension that comes of a marriage of contraries, it must fuse a limiting impulse with an impulse that resists limitation. Thus Dylan Thomas's most successful poems are those where his primary musical temperament is constrained by the limiting qualities of structure (the villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night") or of story (the minor but effective story progressions of "Poem in October" or "Over Sir John's Hill"). Likewise, Richard Wilbur's structural temperament has need of those qualities that resist limitation, as when the run-on syntax, alliteration, and elaborately-varied vowels of "A Baroque Wall Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" enact a watery music that flows around and over the structure.

If the basic minimum formula for success is a kind of Chinese menu—one from Column A (the limits of story and structure), one from Column B (the limitlessness of "music" and imagination), then it should be added that combining two impulses from the same column can be fatal. Hart Crane's reputation, despite his great gifts, is precarious in large part because he so frequently relied on a fusion of "music" and imagination to make his poems. One can say the same of Dylan Thomas. Such a marriage makes it almost impossible to create closure, to constellate a wholeness. If the dangers of a "music"/imagination combination are quite obvious (think of Swinburne), the converse—a fusion of story and structure—also presents characteristic problems. The prime example of this is the later Wordsworth. His great early work was sustained by a tension between the poles of imagination and story. When he lost faith in



Greg Orr: photo by Tom Cogill

his basic story of the benign interfusing of man and nature ("Elegiac Stanzas" dramatizes this loss), he felt oppressed and frightened by the chaotic flow of imagination ("Me this unchartered freedom tires . . ."—"Ode to Duty"). His response was to repudiate imagination and turn to structure. Seeking "brief solace," he created hundreds of lifeless sonnets. Doubly lifeless, because he fused the pale echo of his story gift with a rigid structure for which he had no real affinity.

Story

Aristotle's *Poetics* is a trove of insights into the nature of story. The primary importance of action and event; the need to create dramatic focus around a single action. ". . . So too the plot of a play, being the representation of an action, must present it as a unified whole; and its various incidents must be so arranged that if anyone of them is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted."

The role of beginning, middle, and end; that beauty is the result of harmonious proportion of parts; how the power of "discovery" and "reversal" function as pivot points in the best stories.

Story is magical. When Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" begins "There was a ship" quoth he . . ." we are at the beginning of story and we, like the Wedding Guest, yield to its enthralling power—"listen(ing) like a three years' child."

Thomas Wyatt's poem locates itself in the conflict of story in its opening line: "They flee from me, that sometime did me seek. . . ." But the second stanza goes on to reveal the extraordinary focusing power of story: ". . . but once in special, / In thin array, after a pleasant guise. . . ."

Conflict is essential to story—without conflict there is no dramatic tension. As Blake says: "Without Contraries is no Progression." This conflict at the source of story is what the poem resolves, as in the Renaissance motto, "Harmonia est discordia concors."

Hollywood's oldest formula for story corresponds well to Aristotle's terms if not his spirit: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl again. But the conflict that is the essential ingredient of story needn't be something out of melodrama. What is essential to story is that there be at least two centers of energy, two poles of awareness around which the conflict can organize itself. This is why Stanley Kunitz counsels young poets to "polarize their contradictions."

The dramatic conflict Kunitz wishes to generate with that formula lies within the individual self and might be seen to derive from Yeats's remark, "out of our quarrels with others we make rhetoric, out of our quarrels with ourselves poetry." It is the self-quarrel of attraction and repulsion vis à vis sensuality that galvanizes Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

But, of course, the dramatic conflict is just as likely to concern two figures in the world, as in Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" where father and son enact their tragic dance of misunderstanding and fear.

Or the self is at odds with the external world; either the social/political world as in Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" or "Among School Children," or the natural world as in his "The Wild Swans at Coole."

Yeats provides further insight into the nature of story when, in a letter written a few weeks before his death, he speaks of trying to put everything he knows into a single sentence and comes up with: "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it." The embodied meanings of event, gesture, and deed are how story expresses its truths.

Story is the embodied truth of contraries seeking resolution. Story, in poetry, is seldom concerned with the elaborate and unpredictable contingencies of the world we live in; those belong to fiction. Nor is story in poetry narrative (a larger, looser term). In story, events constellate around a single conflict (Aristotle's "unity of action").

In the twentieth century, the psychological century, Freud has given us archetypal stories such as the Oedipus complex and the Electra com-

plex by which we might dramatize the theme of identity. Likewise, he has given us a heightened awareness of the family triad: father, mother, child. What a rich source of stories it has proven to be, whether organized as a two person conflict as in Plath's "Daddy," Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," or Adrienne Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," or the triadic richness of Louis Simpson's "My Father in the Night Commanding No" and Stanley Kunitz's "The Portrait."

In conclusion, we might consider the liabilities of a temperament that relies too exclusively on story. No one has expressed them better than Auden in his essay on Robert Frost in *The Dyer's Hand*, and it's easy enough to adopt and adapt his terms of "Ariel" and "Prospero" for (respectively) the limitless and limiting impulses in a poet. Auden remarks that both the Ariel and Prospero principles are present in all true poets, in all good poems, but that William Wordsworth, of all English poets, "is perhaps the one with the least element of Ariel compatible with being a poet at all . . . and so provides the best example of what happens when Prospero tries to write entirely by himself. . . ." One could say the same of Frost at his worst, though Auden only implies as much, and say that dullness and portentousness, though not the exclusive domain of the story temperament, are frequently its epitaphs.

Structure

The structural temperament expresses itself in pattern making in a profound sense. This temperament can manifest itself in either open or closed structures. By open structures I mean such things as metrical lines or the infinitely-extensible form of rhymed couplets. A poem consisting of metrical stanzas would also be an open structure. A closed structure would be something like a sonnet, a villanelle, or a sestina, all of whose defining limits can be seen as approaching an ideal.

In order to properly appreciate the structural temperament, we must realize that for poets of this sort the beauty of pattern is itself a form of meaning. In trying to characterize its aspiration to a transcendent purity, it's worth noting this passage from Plato's *Philebus*: "The beauty of figures which I am now trying to indicate is not what most people would understand as such, not the beauty of a living creature or a picture; what I mean . . . is something straight, or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe or a carpenter's rule and square produces from the straight and the round. Things like that . . . are beautiful, not in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their very nature, and they carry pleasures peculiar to themselves and which are free of the itch of desire."

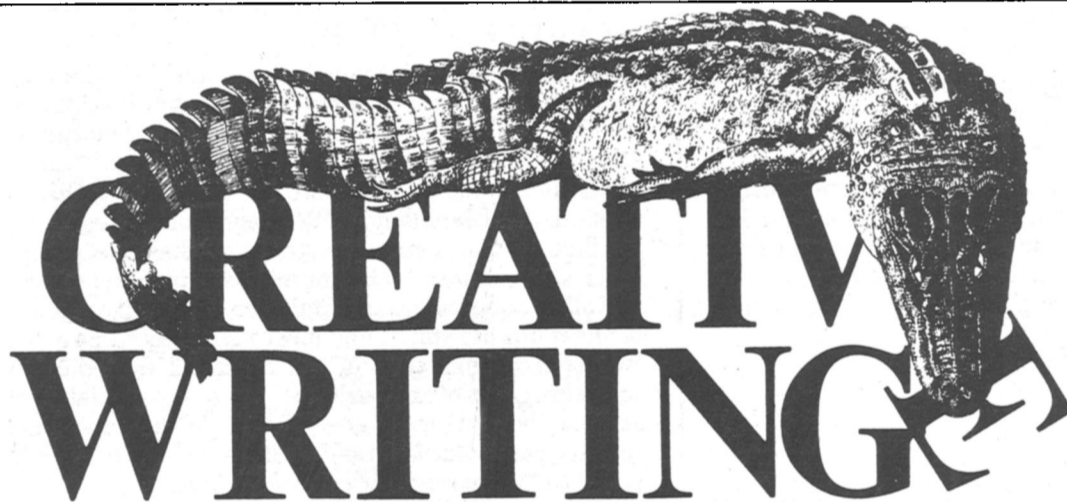
A statement from a structural perspective: "The correction of prose,

because it has no fixed laws, is endless; a poem comes right with a click like a box" (Yeats, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley).

The structural temperament will always place great emphasis on the conscious pattern-making intention of the poet. The epitome of this, almost a parody, is Edgar Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition," where he elaborately sets forth his construction of "The Raven." A structural temperament has an intuitive understanding of how pattern and meaning fuse, as when Richard Wilbur's essay "The Poe Mystery Case" sheds light directly on Poe's work and indirectly on his own.

The most important thing to realize is that to poets whose gift is for structure, structure is PRIMARY, an essence. It isn't something imposed on the poem, not even something chosen in the ordinary sense of the word. It certainly is wrong (how much blood spilled on this false issue) to contrast structure with free verse as if it were simply an esthetic choice rather than a fundamental form-giving tendency in certain poets. Ezra Pound, usually so perceptive about poetry, is uncharacteristically dismissive of "symmetrical forms." Intent as he is on promulgating a new sense of rhythm and a new idea of the nature and role of the image, he betrays a significant lack of sympathy for the structural temperament as he warns "don't put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush" ("A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry*, March 1913). In fact, Pound also rejects the other limiting impulse, story, having incorporated "the great discovery of the French symbolists" which was "the irrelevance and hence the possibility of abolition of paraphrasable plot" (Hugh Kenner, *The Art of Ezra Pound*, p. 9). Given these rejections of the limiting temperaments, it's not surprising that Pound's "three kinds of poetry" (melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia, from the essay "How To Read") in fact only represent the two "limitless" temperaments, melopoeia corresponding to "music," phanopoeia to concrete imagination and logopoeia to abstract imagination. Such a blindness to the role of the limiting impulse had severe consequences for Pound's own later poetry as it struggled to find a convincing and cohering form.

That the great majority of poems written in English since the sixteenth century have aspired to metrical regularity and used a pattern of rhyme and stanzaic repetition does not mean that they are all products of structural temperaments. One need only consider Donne, whose temperament is clearly centered in imagination, the flow of one image or idea into another. If lasting poetry demands metrical regularity, then Ben Jonson was right and Donne did "for not keeping of accent, deserve hanging." But Coleridge comes closer to Donne's genius of imagination when he declares that its power and purpose is to "wreath iron pokers into true-love knots."



POETRY

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INFORMATION

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Music

The "musical" temperament manifests itself in the individual qualities of syllables (pitch, duration, stress, loudness/softness), in syntax, and in assorted sound effects (assonance, consonance, alliteration and subtler phenomena) as they interact to create the poem's aural and rhythmical structure.

"Music" in poetry is irrational; it works directly on the emotions, regardless of the purported content of the language. Primitive and powerful. Dionysus' flute rather than Apollo's lyre—more ecstasy and trance than measure and order. Thus Plato bans certain musical modes (and the poems associated with them) because they have the power to generate undesirable emotions in the hearers.

The cadences of evangelists, orators, and demagogues—the undeniable, even physiological response, but casting a deeply ambiguous moral light.

Primitive in an emotional sense, but also ontologically primitive in the individual—the infant's joy in the babble and coo of sound, the child's pleasure in nursery rhymes. And how central those pleasures are to poetry's power over us, as when Coleridge insists "the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it" is an essential prerequisite for a poet.

No matter how carefully you analyse Hart Crane's "Voyages" in terms of imagistic unity, the fact remains that it is "music" that makes the poem cohere. There is no question that thematic patterns are developed and fulfilled in Keats's "To Autumn"—but its power and unity derive from the same source as its pleasures: a masterful manipulation of sound and rhythm. We hear it in the elaborate musical/emotional parables of Roethke's "The Lost Son."

"Music" shares with imagination the difficulties of closure. In many completed and fulfilled patterns of sound and rhythm, there is still something left over, some vowel, say, that calls out across the poem's final period to its fellow in the silence beyond, asking to go further, to generate new possibilities and combinations. When Keats, in "Endymion," deliberately and constantly enjambed his couplets, he created a self-defeating structure, especially since he had no story grip on the poem—and so it flowed ("You will be glad to hear that within these last three weeks I have written 1000 lines" he writes to Haydon), formless, a sweet meander.

And yet, when a poem of musical temperament resolves successfully, it does so by a powerful marshaling of its inherent qualities, as in the extraordinary last line of Hopkins's "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord":

"Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain." The two heavy internal pauses, the alliteration, the fact that each of the last four monosyllables is heavily stressed, the assonantal thread of the long "i" (mine, life, my) and the extraordinary variety of vowel pitch playing off against this assonance—all these factors impinge on the line with an authority that can only be followed by silence.

Imagination

A poet can and frequently does possess both abstract and concrete imaginations, but sometimes there is a peculiar antipathy among these poets of imagination. For instance, the hostility and condescension Pound and Williams (both finally poets of abstract imagination in my opinion) felt toward Whitman, a poet of decidedly concrete imagination.

A few poets of imagination: Donne, George Herbert (abstract imagination), Blake in his "Prophetic Books," Wordsworth, Whitman (concrete imagination), Dickinson, Rimbaud, Pound, William Carlos Williams, Eliot, George Oppen, Pablo Neruda.

With imagination, as with "music," it is easier to recognize its presence as the dominant form-giving temperament in particular poets than it is to characterize the temperament itself. Why is this? Is it that an individual poet's imagination moves in ways so peculiar and particular to them—so Wordsworth would seem to say in the very poem in which he endeavors to set forth both the principles and processes of his own imagination:

*Hard task to analyze a soul, in which
Not only general habits and desires,
But each most obvious and particular thought,
Not in a mystical and idle sense,
But in the words of reason deeply weigh'd,
Hath no beginning.*

(*"The Prelude"* Bk. II, ll. 232–237)

Even when we can trace an individual poet's way of moving by imagination, it doesn't mean that we can pull back and generalize about the process of imagination itself, in part because it IS a process and has a way of quicksilvering through our hands—we're like Menelaus trying to capture the metamorphosing Proteus in Book iv of *The Odyssey*.

Having said that, it's worth looking at section 6 of Whitman's "Song of Myself" in order to watch an imaginative temperament unfolding

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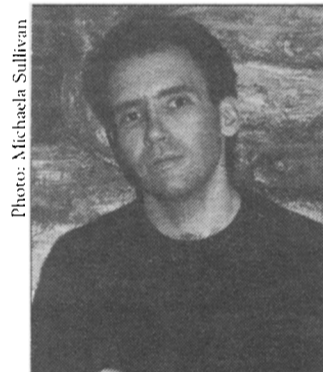


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explicitly and inexplicably in language. In the opening lines, the poem (and the temperament) frees itself by "guesses" from an analytical, descriptive stance toward reality:

*A child said "What is the grass?" fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.*

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

(ll. 1-3)

And launching into the dizzying and audacious metaphors that are the poem's lifeblood:

*Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and
remark, and say 'Whose?'*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

(ll. 4-7)

We can analyse Whitman's leaps: that he consolidates the general term "grass" into a rectangular shape with "flag" and this suggests "woven" and the two together result in the image of the handkerchief. But what analysis is adequate to the awesomely condensed implications of the resulting image: God (as a woman?) has flirtatiously dropped the perfumed handkerchief we know as grass so that we, according to the elaborate rituals of assignation or courtship, might thus seek out the divine creator? And this is only three lines—no sooner presented than cast aside for a further image, and another one after that.

How then does a poem governed by the imaginative temperament overcome its own centrifugal impulses and finally cohere? Again, the Whitman poem might give us one important answer—even the wildest, most free-ranging imagination has its themes and obsessions which it tends to circle around. When, in line 12, Whitman introduces this metaphor for grass—"And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves"—he has stumbled upon one of his fundamental thematic obsessions, death. For the remaining twenty-one lines of the poem, the imagination circles in an obsessive spiral around images of graves and death. This fierce spiral shape his imagination takes from this point forward in the poem is not the scattering violence of a tornado, but that of a whirlpool sucking into its centripetal vortex the most disparate objects. And there at the still point of the whirlpool's bottom, one passes

through (as if it were really the narrow part of an hourglass) and catches a glimpse of the expanding calm beyond: "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier."

Eros and Thanatos are two deep channels in the wide river of imagination, and quite often the two channels join and roil together their currents. It's easier to generalize about a poet of concrete imagination like Whitman, whose poems are frequently in contact with Eros and Thanatos and their lesser attendant mysteries and emotions, than someone like Pound or Oppen, whose poems of abstract imagination give the impression of being freer from the cohesive or focusing power of these two major human obsessions. Perhaps one could argue that abstract imaginations are characterized by a "train of thought." Literalizing that dead metaphor for a moment, we might say that each thought, idea, or didactic anecdote is a baggage or passenger car—a discrete unit yet linked to its counterparts and propelled by another discrete unit, the engine, which has energy sufficient to give the whole train movement and purpose.

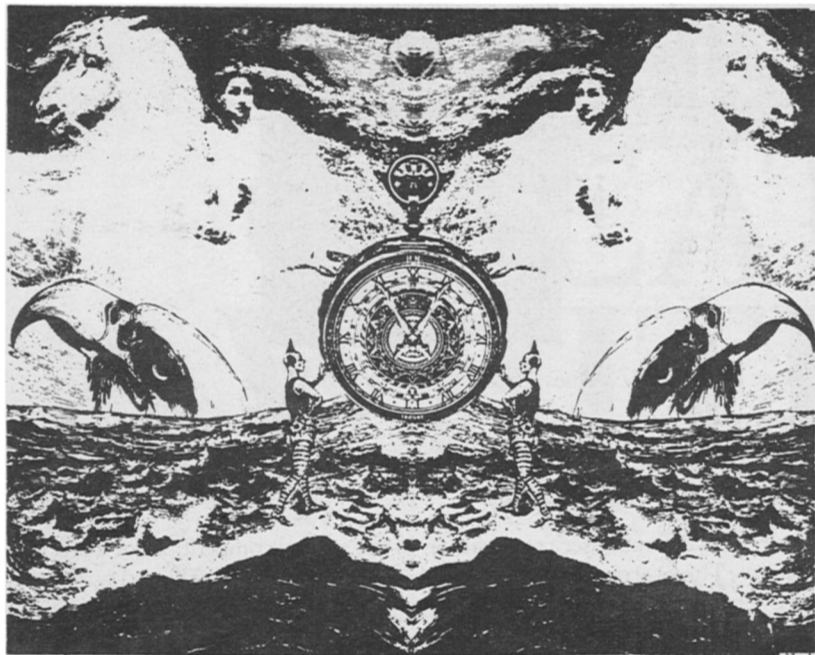
A Few Thoughts for Poets

It's possible to imagine a poet who proceeds entirely by instinct, one poem succeeding another in a dazzle of ignorant bliss. But all real poets exist also in the long spaces between poems where a lot of thought takes place. A poet is always trying to decide who he or she is and who he or she might become. To me, the notion of the four temperaments holds the promise of an underlying pattern that can orient and guide a poet as well as a critic.

The first issue is always one of self-knowledge or self-recognition. Once a poet has a sense of his or her fundamental temperament, the possibilities for growth are twofold. The first is to go further into the gift, but such a decision carries with it the risk of a narrowing as well as the promise of a deepening.

The second direction is to expand. Such an expansion can be understood as the poet's struggle to nurture and develop the other temperaments in such a way that their energies and constraints enrich his or her poems. Again, no one can hope to have all four temperaments in equal strength, but the goal will always be to have all four temperaments present, though some will arrive as gifts and others must be learned and labored for. ■

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