

THE ODE: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT UNTIL THE ROMANTIC AGE

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ABSTRACT

Ode is a Greek word meaning song. It is a form of a lyric poem. It is of ancient origin. It became popular during the Renaissance and Classical times. Southern and Drayton are its early practitioners. Its popularity continued through the Metaphysicals and Augustans — Cowley, Dryden, and Pope are well-known names as writers of the Ode. But it is in the Romantic Age that it is variously enriched. Wordsworth, Shelley, and other Romantics wrote great odes. Keats's famous odes can never be lost sight of.

Keywords: *Lyric; Renaissance; Augustan; Metaphysical.*

Ode is a Greek word meaning song. It is a form of lyric poem known for its length, its grandeur of style, its seriousness of purpose, and its intricate stanza forms. It has a venerable history in classical and Renaissance literature. A choric song accompanied by a dance using a threefold pattern — a dance rhythm of strophe (moving to the left), antistrophe (moving to the right), and epode (standing still) — originated with Alcman (7th century B.C.). Its tragic structure of strophe, antistrophe, and epode was the gift of Stesichorus (640–555 B.C.). In fact, the odes formed an integral part of drama in which both action and commentary on it were equally important. In Latin, this term did not appear until very late. Horace admired Pindar but no Latin poet tried to emulate him, as Horace considered it a presumptuous flight of Icarus. Horace admired Pindar's eloquence, the boldness of his metaphor, and his use of myths. Pindar also provided a model for his own ode, though Horace's odes are more meditative and personal. Horace's *Carmina*, written in stanzas of two or four lines, are now universally called odes. In literature after the Renaissance, they were qualified by the epithet Pindaric or Horatian. There is not much in common between the Pindaric and Horatian odes of modern literature.

How did the Renaissance poets respond to Pindar and Horace? The Renaissance poets preferred Pindar to Horace. Luigi Alamanni (1495–1556) published his Italian imitation twenty years after Aldus Manutius's first edition of Pindar's poems (1513). It was only after 1550 that Pierre de Ronsard published four books of odes in French. In England, the Italian poet Gabriello Chiabrera wrote Pindaric odes on Ronsard's model.

The first songs of the fashion are found in John Southern's *Pandora* (1584). Michael Drayton (1563–1631) was another poet who wrote an ode on the Battle of Agincourt, although he was denigrated as a facile versifier and his poem was said to have no substance. Drayton was the

first to produce a collection of odes in Poems Lyric and Pastoral (1606), in the preface to which he described the kind and acknowledged his principal debt to Horace.

Some other poets, like Abraham Cowley and Cotton, continued with Pindar. Abraham Cowley invented a modified form of the Pindaric ode called the irregular ode, in which each stanza follows its own pattern with varied line lengths, rhyme schemes, and number of lines. Abraham Cowley (1618–67) was a link between the Renaissance and modern times. In his Pindaresque odes, he attempted to introduce Pindar's manner, an attempt which brought into fashion an irregular ode — a deformation of that of Pindar. His Pindaric Odes contained weighty lines and passages, buried in irregular and inharmonious masses of moral verbiage. The long cadences of Alexandrines with which most of the strophes close continued to echo in English poetry from Dryden to Gray. Ben Jonson and Marvell were the other experimenters with different kinds of odes. Ben Jonson imitated the Pindaric triad, but his tone was Horatian. However, it was left to Marvell to attempt the finest Horatian ode in the English language. His An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland (1650) is in a four-line stanza, reproducing Horace's Alcaic metre.

The Augustan Age witnessed a good number of odes associated with the names of Dryden, Pope, William Collins, Thomas Gray, and others. These odes were written to eulogize either a person (Dryden's Anne Killigrew) or the arts of music or poetry (Dryden's Alexander's Feast), a time of day (William Collins's Ode to Evening), or abstract concepts (Gray's Hymn to Adversity), as well as Wordsworth's Ode to Duty and the Immortality Ode.

Anne Killigrew is an example of a Pindaric Ode about which Dr. Johnson speaks most highly, calling it the noblest ode in the English language. Its theme is the innocence of Killigrew, and the expression used to describe her is 'vestal virgin'. Another poem is the Ode to St. Cecilia, which consists of seven stanzas and a chorus. It invokes music both in the making of the universe and in the subtleties of human emotions and piety. Dryden's Alexander's Feast is a second ode in honour of St. Cecilia, a Christian martyr and patron saint of music. This ode is more elaborate, as Dryden introduces characters and places them in a dramatic setting. It resembles the Pindaric ode in its lengthy and irregular stanzas, yet its linear organization follows the tradition of Horace.

Some poets of the Augustan period also wrote odes experimenting with different forms and subject matter. Some discuss abstractions like 'Liberty', 'Fear', or a 'season'. Ode to Evening is William Collins's masterpiece. It is considered to be the most exquisite lyric of the century. Collins preferred short unrhymed stanzas, often running together without a break but always bringing in two short lines in which his voice seems to fall to a whisper in the shadows, lest it make too much stir:

*Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat,
With short shrill shriek, flits by on leathern wing,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,*

*As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path,
Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum:
Now teach me, maid composed,
To breathe some softened strain...*

For the eighteenth century, the spirit of Horace was more congenial. Four important odes are attributed to Gray: The Progress of Poesy, The Bard, Ode on Spring, and Ode on a Prospect of Eton. Thomas Gray achieved the Pindaric sublime in The Bard and The Progress of Poesy. Ode on Spring is a conventional piece of writing. The reader sees very little of spring. The poet draws the reader's attention to the following:

*How vain the ardour of the crowd,
How low, how little are the proud,
How indigent the Great!*

Why such a thought should occur in spring is not clear. It sounds rather odd that spring is defined by its insect life. Is the age of man as ephemeral as the insects? The answer of the insect is as follows:

*Methinks I hear in accents low
The sportive kind reply:
Poor moralist! and what art thou?
A solitary fly!
The joys no glittering female meets,
No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
No painted plumage to display:
On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone —
We frolic, while 'tis May.*

Gray's Eton College is portrayed as an abode of happiness. All the high spirits and tenderness he could well know there are present, yet he found that the happiness and joy of early life were to be lost in later life. The poem is a piece of traditional Christian moralizing. In his later odes, particularly The Progress of Poesy, Gray successfully imitated the original Pindaric form.

The ode in the Romantic Age pursued a course of its own as regards subject matter, style, treatment, and outlook, unbound by classical traditions. It was either regular — consisting of a series of exactly similar stanzas like the odes of Shelley or Keats — or irregular, as in Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. Wordsworth wrote not only longer poems like The Prelude but also some short poems like odes, such as Ode to Duty and the Immortality Ode. Ode to Duty

is an important poem in the sense that it represents, in a measure, a recantation of Wordsworth's early faith in the spontaneous and unguided impulses of the heart. It came at a time when he was feeling more and more the need of some invariable standard. He was seeking a 'confidence of reason' to counterbalance excessive emotional pressure. The poet honours the happiness of those who act from an instinctive joy and confidence:

*These are who ask not if thine eye
Be on them; who, in love and truth,
Where no misgiving is, rely
Upon the genial sense of youth:
Glad hearts!...*

When this self-trust begins to fail, the power of duty must be called in to take its place. The poet is thoughtful when he defines duty as 'light' and 'the stern daughter of the voice of God'. It checks the erring and sets one free from 'vain temptations' and 'calms the weary strife of frail humanity'. Duty is further described in the following words:

*Stern Lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;*

Thus the poet prays to Duty to end his weakness. He further seeks 'the spirit of self-sacrifice' and 'the confidence of reason' and concludes:

*Oh, let my weakness have an end!
Give unto me, made lowly wise,
The spirit of self-sacrifice,
The confidence of reason give.*

It is the Romantic poets who perfected the personal ode of description and passionate meditation, which turns on the attempt to solve either a private problem or a generally human one, as in Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. This ode reads like the poet's spiritual autobiography, composed contemporaneously with his Prelude, and with greater literary artifice in long strophes with varied line lengths. It has a sustained lyric splendour. The poet says:

*Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

The above lines seem to recreate the atmosphere of Vaughan's The Retreat. Vaughan's happy days were the days of his infancy. The child's infancy is angelic, but as the child grows into manhood, his proximity to God or divinity becomes a matter of the past — an irreparable but natural loss. So far Wordsworth seems to go with Vaughan. But unlike Vaughan, Wordsworth

would not wait until eternity to be reunited with the primordial divinity, the great creating Nature. So he says:

*We will not grieve, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In years that bring the philosophic mind.*

And he chants:

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

Thus this longing to reunite with primordial, incorruptible Nature is a seminal Romantic idea, expressed by poets whose variety of Romanticism otherwise differed from that of Wordsworth. All other Romantic poets, despite their differences, were influenced by Wordsworth and a new set of ideas about man.

Dejection: An Ode is the swan song of Coleridge's poetic career. It is an autobiographical poem originally planned as a long verse letter to his beloved Sara Hutchinson. It deals with the loss of his poetical powers, the dulling of his response to Nature, the breakdown of his marriage, and the paralyzing effect of metaphysics. Wordsworth partly answered it in his Immortality Ode. In his ode, Coleridge tries to find in natural forms symbols of his own emotions, as Shelley does in his Ode to the West Wind. Both end on a note of optimism. In the last stanza, Coleridge invokes 'Joy' to lift his spirit and attune 'her voice'. He thus continues his exploration of the relationships between man and Nature.

The long ode stanzas of Dejection are metered in iambic lines ranging in length from trimeter to pentameter. The rhymes alternate between bracketed rhymes (ABBA) and couplets (CC), with occasional exceptions.

France: An Ode is another important poem written by Coleridge, known for its account of the poet's relationship with the French Revolution. His engagement was more vehement and his disillusionment more sudden than Wordsworth's. Coleridge had been a strong supporter of the French Revolution, having rather adored it as the spirit of divine liberty. He says:

*With what a deep worship I have still adored
The spirit of divinest Liberty.*

But France's invasion of Switzerland caused him to lose his faith in the revolutionary cause.

The immediate cause for Byron's Ode to Napoleon was the rumour of his abdication and exile. Byron had admired most Napoleon's titanic qualities as a great strategist, a dynamic soldier, and a statesman. How could the poet reconcile himself to the abdication and exile of his hero and 'Pagod' and human divinity? Extremely angered, he wrote:

...Yesterday a king!

...And now thou art a nameless thing:

So abject — yet alive!

To die a prince — or live a slave —

Thy choice is most ignobly brave.

Odes continued to be written even after Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron. Ode to Naples and Ode to Liberty are two formal odes written in the eighteenth-century style by P.B. Shelley, who later became famous for his Ode to a Skylark and Ode to the West Wind. Ode to Naples refers to Shelley's visit to the Italian city of Naples. It describes the feelings of alienation he was suffering from. The real cause of his dejection was his estrangement from his wife, who held him responsible for the death of their child. His visit to the 'Elysian city' was meant to relieve his suffering. The city, with all its immense natural beauty, proved no healer. He could not soothe his pain by observing its landscape, its sea, or its mountains. Shelley's message was clear: while it is true that Nature is both a revealer and a healer, it is also true that however much harmony may exist between Man and Nature, man must first be in a condition to find joy or pleasure in that harmony — and Shelley was nowhere near such a condition.

Ode to Liberty is a long poem of nineteen stanzas by P.B. Shelley. In this poem, Shelley stresses the necessity of man's freedom everywhere. Inspired by the Spanish Revolution of 1820, he discovers:

A thousand years the earth cried, 'Where art thou?'

And then the shadow fell on me: I knew

A glorious people vibrated again

The lightning of the nations: Liberty.

The key word here is Liberty. The poem thus carries bold support for revolutionary causes. Liberty, to Shelley, spells the removal of priests and monarchies, among other things. It would be no surprise if a fuller revolutionary portrait of Shelley were to emerge in Ode to the West Wind.

P.B. Shelley's To a Skylark and John Keats's Ode to a Nightingale are the 'two glories of English Literature'. Both poems give pre-eminence to the songs of birds. There are, however, differences between the two birds. Keats's Nightingale is a bird of darkness while Shelley's Skylark is a bird of day. Another difference is that while the Nightingale makes the poet drowsy, the Skylark brings rapturous joy to Shelley.

Shelley welcomes the 'blithe spirit' — the skylark — that 'pours forth melodious notes in profuse strains of unpremeditated art'. At the same time, it is said to be no bird: 'Bird thou never wert.' Is it because it is a bird whose habitat is heaven, or 'near it'? In fact, Shelley struggles long to establish the elusive, enigmatic identity of this blithe spirit. He tries to evoke, through a series of images, diverse shapes and forms of the lark's carefree existence. It is a number of things — a star of heaven, an unseen presence, a high-born maiden, a glow-worm, a poet, and

a rose. Thus a cosmic range of exploration is attempted, only to find that 'what thou art we know not'. But the poet knows he is overwhelmed by its 'showers of melody' from its unseen presence. The joyful form as represented by the lark is never seen, still less achieved, but it remains a vivid and keenly felt envisioned form. Another evocation is the contrasting human characteristic, well reflected in the self-pitying utterance of the poet:

Yet if we could scorn

Hate, and pride, and fear;

If we were things born

Not to shed a tear,

I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Man cannot scorn hate, fear, and pride, and so he cannot partake of the purity, sweetness, and simplicity of Nature that the Skylark embodies. This is why the poet asks the Skylark to teach him 'gladness' and 'harmonious madness' as would enable him, as a poet, to be a teacher to whom the world would listen, just as he is listening to the Skylark.

The ending of Ode to a Skylark resonates with that of Ode to the West Wind. Shelley uses objects of Nature as a catalyst for both inspiration and introspection as to what his own purpose is as a poet. He immediately refers to the skylark as a 'blithe spirit' and makes the bird a supernatural object.

P.B. Shelley was a poet of love. To quote Legouis: 'He was inspired by love — a love not limited to mankind, but extending to every creature, to animals, to flowers, to the elements, to the whole of Nature.' The poet holds passionate communion with the universe. He becomes one with the lark (Ode to a Skylark), with the cloud (The Cloud), and with the West Wind (Ode to the West Wind). The poet's prayer to the West Wind makes this amply clear:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

...the tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness...

Shelley seeks an identity with the West Wind. Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley does not merely revere Nature; his very being is fused and blended with it.

Structurally, Ode to the West Wind is divided into five stanzas, each of which is a sonnet. Shelley tries to find in natural objects symbols for his own emotional patterns. His eyes are fixed on a phenomenon of Nature called the West Wind. The poem opens with an invocation personifying the West Wind, which is described as the 'Breath of Autumn's being'. The West Wind is wild, uncontrollable, and invested with superhuman powers. Its depiction as 'Destroyer and Preserver' likens it to a divinity. In stanza one, themes of death and rebirth are announced.

Stanzas two and three picture it in its terrible and stormy aspect. Major images such as the Mediterranean and the Atlantic figure in their response to the wake-up call of the wind. Shelley is thus largely impersonal and objective. From stanza four, he becomes extensively personal, dwelling upon his own sense of oppression and constraint. He is driven to make a prayer to the wind to unchain him from the 'heavy weight of hours':

Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed

One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

Ode to the West Wind ends on a note of optimism. The poet trumpets his prophecy:

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley does not hide his strong support for a better revolutionary cause and individual freedom. He thus appeals to the West Wind to infuse him with a new spirit and new power to spread his revolutionary ideas across the world through the incantation of his verse.

Ode to the West Wind is enriched with stylistic excellence, occurring in the form of poetic devices such as personification, invocation, alliteration, and varied imagery.

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