

A
LITTLE BOOK
ON FORM

*An Exploration into
the Formal Imagination of Poetry*

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An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

2017

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ODE

1. The word in ancient Greek meant "song," from *aeidein*, to sing or chant. In English the term is used very loosely and has come to mean, roughly, either a poem of praise—Neruda's *Odes*—or an emotional outburst—Ginsberg's "Plutonium Ode." "Plutonium Ode" in the 1950s felt like an oxymoron, marrying the world's newest poison to the quaint old poetic term. One idea of the ode was that it was a formal poem. And there is the other that it is a casual and spontaneous poem. There are reasons for this split history.

2. The form matters to us partly because, as it developed in the English tradition, it came to mean a poem that broke out of the other forms. By the nineteenth century it was a longish lyric poem, often with an elaborate stanza structure written in lines of varying and irregular length and often with different formal patterns in different parts. That meant that it came to seem an appropriate form for tracking a complicated emotion or series of emotions or thoughts and that, because of its irregularity, it was one of the natural—conscious or unconscious—models for the longish free verse poem.

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3. And also because, begun as a formal and public, or informal and private poem of praise, it came to be the model for expressing or enacting a relationship to the values on which poetry seemed to depend. So it is particularly useful and interesting to study its history.

4. It evolved in Greece out of the choral songs sung at religious festivals that acted out the adventures and sufferings of gods, goddesses, and heroes. The Greek model of the form that came down to the European Renaissance was that of Pindar whose poems are said by critics to have, typically, three movements: strophe, antistrophe, and epode, to which Ben Jonson gave the English names of turn, counterturn, and stand. The strophe and antistrophe had the same stanza pattern, and the epode a different one. The movement was thought of on the analogy of dance.

Pindar's poems celebrated victories in sporting events, a genre that seems more or less incomprehensible to us now, and his were the only ones to survive, until a manuscript turned up in 1896. It contained remnants of fourteen victory odes by a poet named Bacchylides. Their form reinforced scholars' understanding of the way the genre worked.

In translation the three-part metrical pattern isn't evident, but the basic formal pattern is. In translation the odes read like very clever after-dinner speeches at a sports banquet. The poem begins by mentioning the victory and the winner, or if a horse or chariot race is involved, the winner and the owner, and then launches into the heart of the poem, which was intended to flatter the victor's place of origin, or the horse's, or the mythic origins of the particular festival. In a mix of geography, genealogy, and myth typical of the oral tradition, the poem tells stories, teases the audience with digressions, and returns at the end to compliments for the victor, or to a patron, or to useful platitudes. Bacchylides's poems seem fairly straightforward; one of his ends, in English translation:

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To the wise my words have meaning: the sky
Is undefiled, the sea's water
Does not decay, and gold is joy,
But a man may not cast off

Gray age and recover the bloom
Of youth. Virtue's sheen
Never fades away like the body's;
The Muses preserve it, Hiero

Hiero was the owner of the chariot that won an Olympic race in 468 BC. Pindar's poems are more complex, but they follow the same pattern. The clue to the formal structure—what gets echoed in the history of the ode—is the way they begin in a place, and then take their audience on a journey—the entertaining stories in the middle part of the after-dinner speech—and then come to their graceful conclusion.

(Early Greek Lyric Poetry, ed. David Mulroy, University of Michigan Press, 1992)

5. Two thousand years later critics would notice this pattern in the romantic ode—in poems that announced themselves as odes and in the less formal poems that followed the same pattern. Wordsworth begins with the scene from a hillside above an old abbey, Coleridge with the midnight quiet in his cottage on a winter night, Keats with a moment of awe before a Greek vase in a museum. Then the poem takes you on what one critic, M. H. Abrams, describes as “an inward journey” where some work of transformation is done, and then returns you to the place where you began, with that place altered by the process. Perhaps this is a little neat. John Ashbery parodies it in “The Instruction Manual.” In the beginning of that poem, the speaker is working in an office and bored. So in his imagination he

visits Mexico in a stretch of writing that reads like a 1940s movie travelogue with sunshine and sombreros and serapes and smiling señoritas, and then returns you to the office, where, a little nearer five o'clock and slightly refreshed, you have survived the day.

6. The nineteenth-century poems were probably not modeled on Pindar or the eighteenth-century ode. They more nearly resemble the seventeenth-century meditative poem, which (see Louis Martz, *The Meditative Poem*) followed the pattern laid down for meditative prayer. Begin with a scene from the story of the man-god and his suffering. Take the story in, focusing on its details and their meaning, and then return yourself to the scene fully in possession of it. As we've seen, the ode begins in the praise poem and the prayer. The formal ode seems to be a way of conjuring and taking possession of the desired object or person or value. That's why it has been so easy to use the form of an erotic poem to write religious poetry or of a religious poem to write an erotic one. The ode impulse can take you to that place or conjure an anguished distance from it, or simply name it: "So much depends upon / a red wheelbarrow / glazed with rain water / beside the white chickens."

7. A tradition of English Pindarics developed; it seems to have started or at least been popularized by a seventeenth-century poet named Abraham Cowley (pronounced Cooley). There aren't any Pindaric odes in most anthologies of English or American poetry. As a strict form, it has not had legs. The best way to get a sense of it is to get a hold of a modern translation of Pindar and a volume of Cowley that includes his own odes and his Pindar translations.

8. The other idea of the form comes from the odes of Horace.

9. Things change: I bought a hardback copy of his odes in Latin sometime in the 1970s for fifty cents in a used bookstore in Berkeley. It was published in 1898 and the editor begins this way: "What to say of these poems, every line of which is already well known to all students of literature?"

10. Horace wrote the four books of his odes between 23 and 13 BCE during the reign of Augustus. According to scholars, he called his poems *carmina*, or "songs." I'm not clear on when or how they came to be called odes. The Greek word *ode* means "song." For our purposes, the poems might just as well have been called "lyrics." His odes—probably the best known, most widely studied Roman poems in Europe from the Renaissance to the twentieth century—were mostly modeled on early Greek song forms. Horace was conscious of, in fact boasted of, having brought the Greek meters into the Latin language. His main models were Sappho and Alcaeus and he wrote in the stanza forms, various kinds of quatrains, in which they had composed. The idea of lyric—of written poems intended for reading, public or private, based on forms intended to be sung—may begin here, or a generation earlier with Catullus.

Of the 104 odes Horace wrote, all but twenty-five are written in quatrains, and the other twenty-five—a nineteenth-century German scholar reports—have a number of lines divisible by four. Like Emily Dickinson, Horace thought in fours, and he wrote about everything. "The situations of many of his poems," his translator David Ferry writes, "was pointedly ordinary: inviting a friend for a drink, proposing a party for a friend's return from abroad, advising somebody not to drink too much, praising a friend for his virtue, or his skill in poetry or public affairs, or his sexual success." There are also more public poems of occasion nearer to Pindar in spirit. But the idea of the ode that comes down to us from him is mostly informal: casual, unbuttoned, and elegant.

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11. The other, the idea of his public poems, involved viewing the public world from a distance, with a certain detached irony. To track the influence of that sort of Horatian ode, much of which was tonal, once could look at I, 37, his ode about Cleopatra and compare it to Marvell's "Horatian Ode" to Cromwell, which is modeled on Horace, and then look at Robert Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning," which is based on Marvell.

12. Among prosodists, Pindarics are often called "greater odes," Horatian "lesser odes," though these terms are almost meaningless now. Except in the sense that the smaller ode is a briefer lyric of praise like Neruda's and the longer ode takes its tradition from the romantic ode—a longer poem, often characterized by devices like apostrophe that enacts a crisis or celebration of the poet's relation to the sources of poetry.

13. This is pretty much the notion of the ode that has come down to us, the ode from the romantic poets, specifically from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. And, I would add, the long Whitman poems modeled on the English odes, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Some of their poems—Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode and Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode"—are based on the formal idea that an ode is a poem in parts with varying metrical and rhyming schemes. Some of them, the blank verse poems like "Tintern Abbey" and "Frost at Midnight," seem formally nearer in their movement and prosody to seventeenth-century meditative poems. A helpful way to what's happening in these poems is in an essay by M. H. Abrams, "Style and Structure in the Greater Romantic Lyric." It's Abrams who observes the formal movement characteristic of many of these poems—that they begin in a place, that they take the reader (and the speaker of the

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poem) on an inward journey, that they return by way of ending to a transformed place. If the ode evolved from a simple praise poem into a longish poem dramatizing an attempt to get into right relation to some power or good, then it gives us a way to track the work being done by the inward journey at the center of these poems.

14. The term *romantic* is a convenience for observing a shift in the notion of the poem from the idea that the work of the imagination was to make vivid and attractive the ideas that are available to us through reason or an empirical common sense to the idea that imagination was not illustrative, but creative, that the imagination embodied its own kind of knowledge, deeper, phenomenologically fuller, than the kinds of thing the other labors of knowing afford us. This was an idea being worked out—sometimes in startling form. Whitman could begin a poem “I celebrate myself.” And it’s a way to think about the formal movement of these poems. The power they are addressing, in one way or another, is the source of their own creative power.

15. The modernist generation steered clear of the word *ode*. For them, I think, it stood for an emotional effusiveness they aimed to avoid. They wanted to insist on the power of the artist as maker and not on inspiration as a breeze out of nature filling their sails. (Out the window a hawk just flew past as I wrote that sentence, riding the wind.) But it seems increasingly that their work doesn’t represent a break with the romantic impulse but a reframing of the issue. Byzantium for Yeats is a symbol of the source of the power of art. “Among Schoolchildren” is the interior journey of an old man stunned into a memory by the beauty of a child in a classroom he is visiting. Several of Wallace Stevens’s poems seem modeled fairly directly on Keats and Whitman. Many of Pound’s early Cantos almost imitate Pindar by being shaped around a mythic journey. Each of the *Four Quartets* is a poem in parts

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modeled on the formal ode. Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is a journey and a quest with an evolving formal shape.

16. One of the great projects in the ode form in the second half of the twentieth century was Pablo Neruda's. He wrote odes early on. Some of them appear in the *Residencia en Tierra* volumes, but later in life he contracted with a Venezuelan newspaper to write an ode a week for a period on the condition that they appear in the news section, not the arts section, of the paper. And like Horace, only more so, he wrote about everything, his socks, watermelons, tomatoes, a woman's scent, Walt Whitman, movie theaters. They are mostly written in very short lines—as a way of naturalizing and modernizing the formal ode. And they are mostly litanies, characteristic of a Catholic culture. Here he is, for example, on elephants, a bit of the poem laid out by me as if it were a litany in a prayer book, one item of praise per line:

Thick, pristine beast, Saint Elephant,
 sacred animal of perennial forests,
 sheer strength,
 fine and balanced leather of global saddle-makers,
 compact, satin-finished ivory,
 serene as the moon's flesh,
 with miniscule eyes—to see and not be seen—
 and a singing trunk, a blowing horn,
 hose of a creature rejoicing in its own freshness,
 earth-shaking machine, forest telephone

In his lineation it looks like this:

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Neruda knew elephants from his time in the diplomatic service in India, Ceylon, and Burma and the poem may well be an elegy, may be an instance of how close to elegy the ode often is. And a place to think about what work metaphor does in the ode tradition.

17. *Europe*: The German ode got called an elegy because it was written, by Friedrich Hölderlin principally, in an imitation of the Greek elegiac meter (alternating hexameter and pentameter lines). Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*—he was a reader of Keats—is a set of odes.

18. *Postwar Poland, the still life as ode*: Theodor Adorno said, famously, that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbarism. After Auschwitz and in its neighborhood, Zbigniew Herbert wrote poems about objects that are a sort of dark, opposing mirror to Neruda's exuberance. They might be thought of as a turn taken by the ode form. What is a cup, after Auschwitz? What is the human hand for which the cup was designed, after Auschwitz? This is ode at the edge of satire: the world stripped bare. "Violins" is an instance:

Violins are naked. They have thin arms, with which, clumsily they try to protect themselves. They cry from shame and cold.

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That's why. Not, as the music critics maintain, for beauty.
That isn't true.

(*Selected Poems*, tr. John and Bogdana Carpenter, Oxford, 1977)

See his "Object," "Drawer," "Study of the Object," "Pebble" in the *Selected Poems* translated by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott. See also Czesław Miłosz's "Song on Porcelain" and Wisława Szymborska's "Still Life with a Balloon" and "Starvation Camp Near Jasło." And in the next generation Adam Zagajewski's "Ode to Plurality."

19. *Postwar American poetry*: So much of it might be said to belong to the manner of the lesser ode. Frank O'Hara especially. James Schuyler seems a Horatian poet. Sylvia Plath's ferocious descriptive poems like "Blackberrying" might belong with Herbert's poems to the anti-ode. Charles Wright. Yusef Komunyakaa.

Some readings:

THE RENAISSANCE ODE

John Donne: "Good Friday, Riding Westward"

Ben Jonson: "An Ode to Himself"

Robert Herrick: "An Ode for Him"

John Milton: "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"

Richard Crashaw: "A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Theresa"

Andrew Marvell: "An Horation Ode"

RESTORATION AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

John Dryden: "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day"

Anne Finch: "On Melancholy"

John Dyer: "Grongar Hill"

Note: The mid-eighteenth-century ode. Dyer published his first in irregular stanzas and then modernized it into its present form by recasting it in headless tetrameter couplets. Compare the two and you can watch the classical ode get transformed into an early example of the landscape poem, which some critics have also described as a georgic.

- Thomas Gray: "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College"
 "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in
 a Tub of Goldfishes"
 William Collins: "Ode Written in the Beginning of the Year 1746"
 "Ode on the Poetical Character"
 "Ode to Evening"
 Christopher Smart: "For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry" [from
Jubilate Agno]

ROMANTIC ODE

- William Wordsworth: "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"
 "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey"
 "Ode to Duty"
 Samuel Coleridge: "Dejection: An Ode"
 "Frost at Midnight"
 "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison"
 Percy Bysshe Shelley: "Ode to the West Wind"
 "To a Skylark"
 "To Night"
 John Keats: "Ode to Psyche"
 "Ode to a Nightingale"
 "Ode to Melancholy"
 "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
 "To Autumn"

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Walt Whitman: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"
 "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"

Note: Because it had come to seem the quintessential romantic form, the modernists avoided the term "ode." But many of their orienting poems have what seems very much an odelike structure. Later the form's open-endedness and shifts dissolve into the long free verse poem.

MODERNISM AND THE ODE

W. B. Yeats: "Among Schoolchildren"
 Wallace Stevens: "The Idea of Order at Key West"
 Ezra Pound: "Canto II"
 T. S. Eliot: "Burnt Norton"
 "The Dry Salvages"

Note: Interesting to compare the prayer in the fourth section to the prayer in the fourth section of Coleridge's "Dejection"

Hart Crane: "Voyages"
 "To Brooklyn Bridge"
 Allen Tate: "Ode to the Confederate Dead"

MIDCENTURY AND AFTER

Lorine Niedecker: "Paeon to Place"
 Robert Lowell: "Waking Early Sunday Morning"
 Allen Ginsberg: "Sunflower Sutra"
 "Wales Visitation"
 "America (MP)"
 "In the Baggage Room of the Greyhound"
 A. R. Ammons: "Corson's Inlet"

John Ashbery: "The Instruction Manual"

"Syringa (MP)"

"Melodic Trains"

Adrienne Rich: "Toward the Solstice"

Yusef Komunyakaa: "Ode to the Chameleon"

"Ode to the Guitar"

And see the odes of Pablo Neruda and of Adam Zagajewski.

Further reading: C. D. Wright, "The New American Ode"

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