

Owed to the Ode

Poetry from the Greek Poiesis “making” or “creating” deals with the aesthetics of a language beyond its meaning or communicative purpose. Poetry in of itself is normally thought of in relation to verse, which is not entirely correct. Poetry and verse are more succinctly a relationship between substance and form. Whereas poetry is defined as lofty thought, passions and/or emotions expressed with an imaginative and descriptive vocabulary, verse therefore becomes any container or grouping of such expressed words which simply conforms to accepted metrical rules and structure. Though phonetically fluid as the harmony of song against musical accompaniment, such metrical rules and structure are nonetheless artificial, that is to say they are deliberately formed by a person or persons thus laying a template by which when other poems conform to these constraints, they too become classified and categorized as such. A poet therefore composing a sonnet would be aware of what defines a sonnet which is of no great feat in of itself. However the play of words and syntax are what defines the poet regardless of the poetic format used since many great Poets use more than a single form to compose throughout their career. The linguistic structure of a poem then beyond its construct often becomes a lyrical signature. Though every poetic form has its justified place in poetic history, the ode is unarguably one of its greatest forms.

ode (ōd) n.

1. A lyric poem of some length, usually of a serious or meditative nature and having an elevated style and formal stanzaic structure.
2.
 - a. A choric song of classical Greece, often accompanied by a dance and performed at a public festival or as part of a drama.
 - b. A classical Greek poem modeled on the choric ode and usually having a three-part structure consisting of a strophe, an antistrophe, and an epode.

This above definition in more familiar terms describes the ode as “a solemn heroic, and elevated form. . . . full of flatteries, exaggerations and claims for the excellence and high standing of the subject” (Strand and Boland 240).

The ode’s origin derived from a Greek word meaning “to sing” was very general to the specific definition it would eventually assume. In literary genres only the Hymn and Epic are older followed by the Ode which has close ties to the Hymn, the Ode within Greece’s classical period would also come to embrace the Epic by the time of Pindar. From its classical roots it was the crescendo of lyrical brilliance in past eras. Gradually throughout the ages with reference to the English language it culminated to its loftiest form during the Romantic period where without the metrical constraints of many other forms, the ode allowed poets full range of free expression and thorough rendering of the sublime. The imagination and creative faculties were not limited to rigid structures which narrowed the lyrical selectivity of language. Its form has survived the changing tides of time relatively intact down to our age. As Carol Maddison in her book Apollo and the Nine a history of the ode so eloquently puts it:

“At different periods it has satisfied the Renaissance taste for the antique, the baroque for the flamboyant, the Augustan for the classical, and the romantic and Victorian for the sublime. To fifteenth-century Italians it brought back the day of Latin triumph, of universal empire, and the pride and dignity of rational man. To sixteenth-century French poets it was the form that could liberate them from the oppressive rules.....of medieval poetry” (Maddison1)

The Greek melos was originally a song consisting of two parts namely the utterance of the poet and the choric song accompanied by dancers. The archaic period of Greece (800 to 500 BCE) is the birth time and place of the ode. Alcman is listed as the first of the nine lyric poets of ancient Greece, this list compiled by scholars of Alexandria during the Hellenistic period of Greece stretching from 4th century to the 1st century BCE. Alcman from Sparta is thus considered the earliest of the following poets discussed. His importance to the ode is a result of the introduction of the strophic into poetry namely a repeating melody with each stanza which became a defining element of ode form. The next two poets of note both from the Greek island of Lesbos are Alcaeus (circa 620 BCE to >6th C) who was a contemporary and lover of Sappho (circa 630 BCE – 570 BCE) who also composed odes. Sappho’s linguistic sophistication indicates she was from a wealthy and prominent family. Her poetry concerning friendship and love within the circles of other women was concluded by Victorian interpretation to be allusions to sexual love as opposed to the platonic love commonly expressed in such poetry, hence the corruption of the word “lesbian” into its modern meaning though lesbian originally applied to any inhabitant of the island of Lesbos. She is best known for what came to be known as the Sapphic stanza. An example of the Sapphic stanza by Alcaeus takes the form below (Hymn to Aphrodite (stanza 1)):

Iridescent throned Aphrodite, deathless
Child of Zeus, wile-weaver, I now implore you,
Don't--I beg you, Lady--with pains and torments
Crush down my spirit,

Much of Sappho’s poetry has been lost save some fragments and copies, whether she created this form or whether it was already part of the Aeolic tradition is not known. Greek meter tended to be consistent with the use of alternating long and short syllables grouped in regular pattern. As can be seen from the above example the Sapphic stanza is identifiable by 3 identical lines and a fourth, shorter line, in the following pattern. (Notation below: - indicates a long syllable, u a short syllable, with the x being known as a "syllable anceps," which is a free or irrational syllable, one that can be either long or short.). The "Hymn to Aphrodite" written in this meter was a form used regularly by Sappho.

- u - X - u u - u - -
- u - X - u u - u - -
- u - X - u u - u - -
- u u - -

The Alcaic verse for which Alcaeus is known for consists of a dominant iambic pattern but one that varies with a degree of complexity. Its stanza made up of four lines in which the first two are divided into two parts broken by an audible pause known a caesura after the fifth syllable. This pause can be a comma, period or semicolon and when accompanied by music would normally be enforced by a musical rest or cessation of musical time. Using the same notation as described above with the addition of a colon (: here indicates the audible pause or caesura) Its form thus resembles this:

- u - - : - u u - u -
 - u - - : - u u - u -
 - u - - - u - -
 u u - u u - u - -

Prior to this, 'twas | irreligious to waste
 Old Caecuban wine | whilst, for the Capitol
 Mad ruination plots the Queen, and
 Even a funeral for the Empire.

The above is an example of Alcaic form as used by Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BCE). This verse form was later adopted by both the French then English during the Renaissance period though also became particularly strong in Hungarian use.

Bacchylides 9th and Pindar 8th on the list of the nine lyrical poets of ancient Greece are considered the greatest of them all with Pindar (522 to 443 BCE) standing predominant. His victory odes and are the only whole surviving body in complete form. These odes were written for the aristocratic victors of the four main athletic festivals held in Greece. Victors in the games are spoken of in lofty term with parallels, metaphors and similes used in connection with Greece's pantheon of Gods and mythology. Many of his odes also touching upon pederasty which was considered normal conduct within Greek culture of the day. Below is an example of Pindar's first Olympian Ode.

Strophe 1

Water is the finest of all, while gold, like a lambent fire,
 Shines through the night in pre-eminence of superb wealth.
 And if, my heart, you wish to tell
 Of prizes won in trials of strength,
 Seek no radiant start whose beams
 Have keener power to warm, in all the wastes of upper air, than the sun's
 beams,
 Nor let us sing a place of games to surpass the Olympian.
 It is from there that the song of praise, plaited of many voices,
 Is woven into a crown by the subtle thoughts of poets,
 So that they chant the praises of Krono's son
 As they make their way to Hieron's rich hearth,

Antistrophe 1

Who wields his lawful scepter in Sicily's orchard lands,
 Culling the crests of every kind of excellence.
 The man is brilliant, above all,
 In blossomings of the Muses' matters,
 At which we poets often vie
 In friendly company around his board. So take from its peg your Dorian
 lyre,
 If victor's Grace at Pisa, of Victory Bearer there,
 Set your mind that day on the sweetest trains of thought,
 When the courser flaunted, hurtling down his lane of the tracks,
 A mettle that needed no touch of the lash,
 And twined his master thus into power's embrace,

Epode 1

The kind of Syracuse, a passionate horseman. His fame blazes
 In the man-proud daughter-city of Lydian Pelops
 That youth with whom the mighty Poseidon fell in love,
 Because, as a babe, the goddess of fate had drawn him forth from the
 cleansing
 cauldron
 With a gleaming shoulder, wrought of ivory.
 Oh there is many a marvel, and doubtless often; the reports of men
 Are tricked beyond the just account by lying tales of cunning
 workmanship.

The increasing complexity from earlier odes can be observed in the above ode. Broken into three sections the strophe or turn is sung by a chorus in a movement from east to west, next the antistrophe or counterturn is sung in response by the chorus in a returning movement from west to east with the final Epode sung in unity brings closure to the song in a stationary position. Pindar's complex form and stanza arrangement formulated what was called the heroic ode. As Greece was eventually succeeded by the expanding Roman Empire, Rome embraced many of Greece's advances as a culture thus absorbing their art forms as well. At some point the Greek ode's accompaniment to music gradually died out returning to the earlier more personal Sapphic and Alcaic forms of the lesbian lyricists. The former influencing Catullus and the latter Horace considered two of Rome's greatest poets. Horace in an effort to preserve discipline adopted these forms directly into Latin but this translation resulted in a loss of spontaneity and with some detachment. However these losses were compensated with an elegance and dignity which Horace lent to the form. Horace himself cautioned against the Pindaric form due to its complexity. Most of his odes are reflective and intimate, harping on friendship, love and poetry itself.

Horace Odes 1:17 lines 1-4 & 17-20

In swift passage Faunus often changes
 Lycaeus for fair Lucretilis, and wards off
 from my goats the fiery heat and rainy winds
 during all his stay.

In this spot shall rich abundance of the glories of the field flow
 to the full for thee from bounteous horn. Here in retired valley
 shalt thou escape the dog-star's heat, and sing on Teian lyre
 Penelope and Circe of the glassy sea, enamoured of the self-same hero.

The above translation taken from Harvard University Press also states this explanation concerning the above sample excerpt:

“In the *Odes* I.17, Horace addresses Tyndaris, enticing her to visit the Valley of Ustica by describing its charms and the safety and pleasure it affords. The spot to which Horace refers is generally taken to be his villa because of the mention of Mt. Lucretilis in the first line, although the place name Ustica is not otherwise known. It is interesting that in sketching the delights of the place, Horace concentrates exclusively on nature, ignoring the comforts of the house that stands on his property.”

We can thus see a shift from the praise of man to the praising of nature which would later be a central theme during the Romantic period. From two of its greatest champions, the ode eventually became classified as either Pindaric or Horatian. The Greek word “ode”, traveled with Rome’s greatness being accepted in most modern European languages. The ode also gained entry into pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, where it flourished in the form of the qasidah reaching its peak in the 8th and 9th centuries. Used also in Persian poetry for panegyric and elegies in the 10th century, but was gradually replaced by the shorter ghazal form for bacchic odes, essentially love poetry. The ode also remained in Italy, temporarily dormant before moving into France. The Renaissance in many aspects of its artistic embrace saw a rebirth of many ancient classical forms and here both Pindaric and Horatian ode forms were revived. From France it found its way to England with Pierre de Ronsard’s application of Pindaric form being the main source of inspiration for English poets.

From the years 1584 to 1616 there are a number of individuals accredited for introducing the Ode in to English poetics. Beginning with John Sootherne who quoted “that never before,/ Now in England , knewe Pindars string” (Maddison 288). Pindaric Odes have a triadic stanza structure as seen in an aforementioned example namely comprising of a strophe, an antistrophe and an epode. Sootherne’s poems had this Pindaric form but were rough and irregular with none of Pindars grandiose. Sootherne was shortly followed by Edmund Spenser and then Barnabe Barnes however their loosely

defined odes have also been debated as to their classification as true odes, Spenser's work "Epithalamiums" self proclaimed as an ode is not classified by many scholars as an ode but for the form indicated by its title, while Barnes odes have a closer resemblance to the Italian pastoral sonnet (canzone). Maddison sees Michael Drayton (1563 – 1631) as the first person to compose the first true ode in England. Though many of his poems are called odes of his last called "To the Virginian Voyage" is considered by Maddison to first true original ode in England.

You brave heroique minds
 Worthy your countries name
 That honour still pursue
 Goe and subdue
 Whilst loyt'ring hinds
 Lurke here at home with shame

This poem is in Horatian form with its repetition of stanzaic form but has the lofty exultation of Pindar victory odes. Drayton's poetry also marks a departure in style by a blending of medieval tradition with that of the new classical style which was more fashionable for its day (Maddison 294). Horatian odes by comparison with Pindaric odes are almost always homostrophic i.e. the initial stanza shape is repeated throughout the entire poem. In 1656, Abraham Cowley introduced the "irregular ode," in style, mood and subject matter it modeled the Pindaric style, however loosening the constraints to allow for greater freedom. The strophic triad was dropped thus permitting each stanza to be individually shaped, in length, meter and rhyming scheme. This "irregular" stanzaic structure, created different patterns correlating with changes of mood or subject, became a common sight in English tradition.

By the time of the Romantic period in the early eighteenth hundreds the ode had been perfected reaching its greatest form in the English language "The ode might have remained a static and historic form. But the Romantic movement galvanized it." (Strand and Boland 240). "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats and "Ode to a Skylark" by Shelley are both classified as Horatian Odes though modified versions of it but are constructed very differently. Both are homostrophic but Shelley's is written with a 5 line stanza of rhyming iambic meter, Keats in 10 line stanzas with a different iambic meter. Keats great odes are the Pinnacle of Ode form in the English language. Such odes came to be known as "Romantic meditative odes". Regarding this A Guide to the Study of Literature defines it this way:

The Romantic meditative ode was developed from these varying traditions. It tended to combine the stanzaic complexity of the irregular ode with the personal meditation of the Horatian ode, usually dropping the emotional restraint of the Horatian tradition. However, the typical structure of the new form can best be described, not by traditional stanzaic patterns, but by its development of subject matter. There are usually three elements:

- the description of a particularized outer natural scene;

- an extended meditation, which the scene stimulates, and which may be focused on a private problem or a universal situation or both;
- the occurrence of an insight or vision, a resolution or decision, which signals a return to the scene originally described, but with a new perspective created by the intervening meditation.

Keats ode, a passionately charged, personal, reflective ode has facets of Sapphic and Horatian intimacy reminiscent of the earlier lesbian odes but without sapphic form, it being Horatian with its stanzaic repetition though irregular and with a heightened eloquence and fluid lyric. Its lofty speech and elevated style both a defining element of odes and romanticism is seen from the very first two lines. This style was well suited to the romantic period as it allowed the imagination to soar in its exulting beautification of the natural world by means of the sublime. The ode thus became the perfect goblet for the wines of the romance poets.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness, -
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
 O for a beaker full of the warm South,
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

With the joy of her song Keats was inspired to write his ode in the spring of 1819 when a nightingale built her nest by his house. As a romantic meditative ode, it does not embrace the themes nor praises of Pindar, it is personal, escapist and seeks inspiration. Honest transcendental soliloquy being its hypnotic meditative force. References to sedatives like hemlock, also a poison used to kill Socrates, transport us directly to classical Greece. Keats is removing himself from a world of pain and sickness which was a very real presence in his life after loosing a brother to consumption, he himself was also ensnared by the disease that eventually took his young life. The use of synesthetic metaphor in

stanza two, indicating a level of confusion and ambiguity “a draught of vintage tasting ofcountry green, Dance,..... and Provençal song”!

Greek mythologies enhance his separation with allusions to wood nymphs and Hippocrene, a sacred spring on mount Helicon used as source of poetic inspiration, even the simple epicurean pleasures of wine are all fantastical elements which transport us back to classical Greece the birth place of the ode. The Ode is thus imbued with heightened ethereal lyric that overcomes the reality of the day transporting the reader effortlessly to mythical sun drenched lands. There is thus a blending of contemporary themes with elements of classicism. Keats odes also seem to employ abstract elements of Pindaric form in that throughout his ode he turns between two directions, worlds or states of mind, touching upon dualities reality/ideal, life/death, mortality/immortality, connection/dislocation and thus in one stanza leaving the realities of his painful present and disappearing into the bright joyous fantastical followed by his return to the present in succeeding stanzas but with a renewed perception.

Even after its favorable fashion at the brilliant height of the Romantic period, its presence endured. It then moved effortlessly into the Victorian period. The stanza below is a Victorian example of the sapphic as used in 19th century England by Algernon Swinburne.

Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
Saw the reluctant

A similar sapphic excerpt from the 20th century is shown below, this poem by Allen Ginsberg gives further testimony to the endurance and strength of this form now well over two and a half thousand years old.

Red cheeked boyfriends tenderly kiss me sweet mouthed
under Boulder coverlets winter springtime
hug me naked laughing & telling girl friends
gossip til autumn.

And so from Pablo Neruda in the latter half to the twentieth century down to recent years the ode continues to make its impression, and not just within the realm of poetry but shifting back to musical accompaniment even within the popular music of our day, examples can be found in music from The Cranberries “Ode to my Family” to the Smashing Pumpkins “fuck you (an ode to no-one)”. Though it can be argued that such are not truly odes in the traditional sense of the definition, the very perseverance of such an archaic term highlights its transcendental existence and tenacious endurance in defying time, thus reinventing itself so as to remain perpetually modern and fashionable.