

The Ode

Overview

From its origins in classical antiquity, the ode was a solemn, heroic, and elevated form. It elevated the person, the object, the occasion. In ancient times, in the Pindaric ode, athletes were praised, statesmen were applauded. Therefore the early examples of the ode are full of flatteries, exaggerations, and claims for the excellence and high standing of the subject.

The ode might have remained a static and historic form. But the Romantic movement galvanized it. Suddenly these poets, struggling with their new and volatile arrangements of the inner and outer world, discovered themselves in this form.

In the nineteenth century, the ode transited from its old heroic mode and became a form that examined and exalted lyric crisis. In this form Keats celebrated the nightingale, the Grecian urn, and the darkening weather of Autumn. In this form also, Shelley wrote his powerful “Ode to the West Wind.”

But the ode, like the pastoral and elegy, was part convention, part mode, and all opportunity. Modern poets have taken the spirit of the ode—its address, its decorum—and widened it to include a much more panoramic landscape of reference and celebration.

In the nineteenth century, when Shelley wrote “Ode to the West Wind” or Keats “To Autumn,” two things are obvious: The ode is no longer a ceremonial form, and the writing of the sonnet has influ-

enced the structure of the ode. Shelley's "Ode To The West Wind" is largely made of sonnets, but Wordsworth's defining "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is irregular, exuberant, shifting from long lines to short, and from epigrammatic to philosophical statements.

For poets in this century, the ode was almost a lost form. Its straight-faced and unswerving elevation of objects and persons no longer seems so possible in an age of lost faith and broken images. But, as in Robert Pinsky's dark and witty meditation on its power, the ode still casts a long shadow over the contemporary poet.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Ode to the West Wind

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odors plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge
 Of the dying year, to which this closing night
 Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,
 Vaulted with all thy congregated might
 Of vapors, from whose solid atmosphere
 Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
 The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
 Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,
 Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
 And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
 Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
 For whose path the Atlantic's level powers
 Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
 The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
 The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
 Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
 And tremble and despoil themselves: oh, hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
 The impulse of thy strength, only less free
 Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
 I were as in my boyhood, and could be
 The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
 As then, when to outstrip thy skyey speed
 Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
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.

v

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

JOHN KEATS

To Autumn

I

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,

Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer hast o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

II

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
 Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
 Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
 Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
 Steady thy laden head across a brook;
 Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
 Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours.

III

Where are the songs of Spring? Aye, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—
 While barréd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnáts mourn
 Among the river shallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

JUDITH WRIGHT

Australia 1970

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
dangerous till the last breath's gone,
clawing and striking. Die
cursing your captor through a raging eye.

Die like the tigersnake
that hisses such pure hatred from its pain
as fills the killer's dreams
with fear like suicide's invading stain.

Suffer, wild country, like the ironwood
that gaps the dozer-blade.
I see your living soil ebb with the tree
to naked poverty.

Die like the soldier-ant
mindless and faithful to your million years.

Though we corrupt you with our torturing mind,
stay obstinate; stay blind.

For we are conquerors and self-poisoners
more than scorpion or snake
and dying of the venoms that we make
even while you die of us.

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
the drying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still;
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.