

THE EVALUATION OF LYRIC AND ODE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Greek song was divided into two classes – *melic* or *lyric* song, which was sung by a *single* voice to the accompaniment of a lyre; and *choric* song. The first of these divisions is responsible for the Lyric as we know in English verse. The Lyric can be divided into three distinct parts, corresponding to the three moods through which the poet passes when inspired by some emotion. Like its parent form, the lyric, the Ode is of Greek origin. It is a serious and dignified composition, almost always in rhyme and longer than the lyric proper. It is often in the form of an address, and is sometimes used to commemorate an important public occasion. The Greek Ode had two forms: The Dorian Ode, so called from the district and dialect in which it arose, and the Lesbian Ode, named after the island of Lesbos, where it originally flourished. The Dorian Ode was choric and was sung to the accompaniment of a dance. Its structure was borrowed from the movements of the dancers.

Keywords: Lyric, Ode, English, Greek, Dialect

The Lyric

Greek song was divided into two classes – *melic* or *lyric* song, which was sung by a *single* voice to the accompaniment of a lyre; and *choric* song, which was intended for *collective* singing to the accompaniment of instrumental music, supplemented, probably, by a dance. The first of these divisions is responsible for the Lyric as we know in English verse. True to its Greek origin, it still has the two characteristics implied in the above description: a) it is an expression of a single emotion, and b) it is a musical composition.

The Music in the Lyric

In ancient time's music provided by the minstrel's harp or lyre formed an *external* accompaniment to a Lyric. However unpolished the language of the song, it was made musical by the voice of the singer keeping tune with the sound of the instrument. The subject-matter also

was of little importance so long as the singer's voice could give it the right emotional effect. Later ages discovered the rhythmic possibilities of the words themselves unassisted by music. The Elizabethans, in particular, were past masters of the art of investing words with the highest musical quality. Their lyrics are unrivalled for their word-music or verbal melody. The vowels and consonants are so artistically arranged as to compose a music of their own, independent of the aid of a musical instrument-an art which was closely studied and developed in later times by such poets as Keats, Shelley, Tennyson and Swinburne. Here is a stanza from Tennyson, which has been universally praised for its word-music. Note the alliteration and the artistic arrangement of the consonants, r, n, s, f, and l.

*O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!*

There is sufficient music in the words themselves. The lyric has become independent of the lyre.

The subject-Matter of the lyric

As has been pointed out above, the Lyric gives expression to a single emotion or feeling. It appeals more to the heart than to the intellect, or, to be more precise, its appeal to the intellect is through the heart. Just as the songs we sing are usually not very lengthy, so a lyrical poem is as a rule quite brief. When he chooses the lyric form the poet does not intend to make any long flight: he wishes to convey his impression swiftly, memorably, and musically. Indeed Edgar Allan Poe, the American poet who wrote several famous lyrics, declared that a long lyric was not possible, as "that degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained through a composition of any great length." Thus the term Lyric is usually understood to cover the song, the ode, the sonnet, and such poems as, in the definition given by Palgrave in the preface to his *Golden Treasury*,

The structure of the Lyric

The Lyric can be divided into three distinct parts, corresponding to the three moods through which the poet passes when inspired by some emotion. The first part, which generally consists of the first few lines or, at the most, of the first stanza, states the emotion or the subject which has set the poet's imagination working. N. Hepple calls it the "motive" (literally, "cause of movement", here emotional movement), since it sets the ball rolling. The second part, which forms the bulk of the poem, consists of the thoughts suggested by the emotion. By this time it is well advanced in intensity, and therefore the expression reaches its highest pitch of eloquence or

passion. The third and final part, which is almost as short as the first and which usually comprises the last stanza, marks the poet's return to his initial mood, the mood of reason, for by this time the emotion which had stirred his mind and heart has found release in fitting words and images. Unlike the first two parts, the closing part tends to be intellectual in character, embodying, often, a judgment, a pointed summary, and ending with a parting smile or sigh.

All these three parts may be distinctly noted in Herrick's lyric "To Blossoms", reproduced here. The first two lines state the theme – sadness at the brief life of the flowers on a fruit tree. The next four lines and the stanza that follows embody the thoughts arising from this emotion: 1) The flowers are falling, though they still look fresh and might have stayed to delight us a little longer; 2) it was their whole destiny to live for only a few hours, and then to vanish; 3) it seems sad that Nature should produce them to show how lovely they could be, and then take them away for ever. So the poet concludes that all earthly beauty is evanescent like the blossoms; it only shines for a moment and is heard of no more

*Fair pledges of a fruitful tree,
why do ye so fast?*

*Your date is not so past,
But you may stay yet here awhile
To blush and gently smile,
And go at last.*

*What, were ye born to be
An hour or half's delight
And so to bid good night?
Twas pity Nature brought ye forth
Merely to show your worth
And last you quite.*

*But you are lovely leaves, where we
May read how soon things have
Their end, though ne'er so brave:
And after they have shown their pride
Like you awhile, they glide
Into the grave.*

The Lyric summed up

- 1) It is a short poem, dealing with a single emotion; 2) It is a musical poem, word-music being an important element in its effect; 3) It is a subjective poem, expressing the varying moods of the author; and 4) It is a well-knit poem, possessing a definite structure. The division into three parts, however, should not be pressed too far. Some lyrics may not reach an intellectual conclusion at all. A poet's emotion is a law unto itself and pursues a course no critic can prescribe.

2. THE ODE

Distinguishing Features

Like its parent form, the lyric, the Ode is of Greek origin. It is often in the form of an address, and is sometimes used to commemorate an important public occasion. Each of these characteristics may be analysed separately as follows:

- a) It is exalted in subject-matter, and elevated in tone and style. Neither the theme nor its treatment can be trivial or undignified. The poet is serious both in the choice of his subject and in the manner of its presentation. He must show himself at the height of his power. Note, for example, the difference between the style of Wordsworth's poems on simple country scenes and incidents and that of his sublime "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality."
- b) It is longer than the lyric proper, for the emotion it embodies is of a kind that admits of development. It does not, like the lyric, aim at giving the effect of "unpremeditated art." It may be full of deep and sincere emotion, but its expression is expected to be much more consciously elaborate, impressive, and diffuse.
- c) Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" begins 'O wild west wind'; Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Thou still unravished bride of quietness", Tennyson's "To Virgil," "Roman Virgin, thou that singest," and so on. The mode is maintained throughout in each case.
- d) Sometimes the ode has for its theme an important public event like a national jubilee, the death of a distinguished personage, the commemoration of the founding of a great University. Marvell's "Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" and Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of the Wellington" are instances in point.

The Dorian or Pindaric ode

The Greek Ode had two forms: The Dorian Ode, so called from the district and dialect in which it arose, and the Lesbian Ode, named after the island of Lesbos, where it originally

flourished. The Dorian Ode was choric and was sung to the accompaniment of a dance. Its structure was borrowed from the movements of the dancers. It consisted of three parts: a stanza form, known as the Strophe during the recitation of which the dancers made a turn from the right to the left; a similar stanza-form, known as the Antistrophe, during the recitation of which the dancers made a counter-turn from the left to the right; and a third stanza-form, different in structure from the previous two, known as the Epode during the recitation of which the dancers stood still. This sequence of a Strophe, an Antistrophe, and an Epode could be repeated any number of times in an Ode of this type. It is repeated thrice in Gray's Odes, "The Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard", which are among the most successful imitations of this form in the English language. From its brilliant use by the ancient Greek poet, Pindar, the Dorian form is more usually known as the Pindaric Ode.

The Lesbian or Horatian Ode

The Lesbian Ode was simpler in form than the Pindaric, and has therefore proved easier for poets to imitate. As exemplified in English verse, it consists of a number of short stanzas, similar in length and arrangement. The treatment is direct and dignified, and the thought clearly developed. It was popularized in Latin by two great Roman writers, Horace and Catullus. The works of Horace in particular served as a model to English imitators of the form, and Odes of this type are commonly known as Horatian Odes, a practice which tends to obscure their Greek origin. The following two stanzas from Andrew Marvell's "Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland", which is a Lesbian or, as the author termed it, Horatian Ode, illustrate its characteristics. They describe Charles I's conduct on the scaffold.

He nothing common did or mean

Upon that memorable scene,

But with his keener eye

The axe's edge did try;

Nor call'd the Gods, with vulgar spite,

To vindicate his helpless rights;

But bow'd his comely head

Down, as upon a bed.

As is evident, the stanzas are short (having only four lines each) and similar (observing the same arrangement in respect of rhyme and metre), and convey the thought

in a plain, straightforward fashion. Their style is sober and stately, after the Latin manner, with none of the passionate warmth of the Pindaric Ode.

The Ode in English Literature

Except for a few attempts in the Pindaric or the Horatian form, the English Ode has pursued a course of its own as regards subject-matter and style, treatment and outlook, not strictly bound by classical traditions. It is either Regular, consisting of a series of exactly similar stanzas, like the Odes of Shelley and Keats, or Irregular, when each stanza follows a different arrangement, as in Wordsworth's *Immortality*. Ode and several of the Odes of Tennyson and Robert Bridges.

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