

## 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