


A Critical Review of Elemental Odes by Pablo Neruda

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Abstract

This paper explores the reconstituted style of the classical Ode by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda in his *Odas Elementales*. Pablo Neruda is the pen name of Ricardo Eliecer Neftali Reyes Basoalto. He was born in Parral, Chile on July 12, 1904. Pablo Neruda wrote his odes in the latter half of the twentieth century. His first volume of odes known as *Elemental Odes* published in 1954. In his odes, Neruda has explored and celebrated the wonder of ordinary things. The simplicity of his odes is very surprising to see that it is an ode, which traditionally meant a poem to be sung in an elevated manner for celebrating a person or an object. Pablo Neruda has written four volumes of Odes, *Elemental Odes* (1954), *New Elemental Odes* (1956), *Third Book of Odes* (1957), and *Voyages and Homecomings* (1959). In order to distinguish Neruda's odes from that of the classical prototypes of the ode as a poetic form one needs to dwell briefly on its birth and growth as a poetic form. Therefore, the current research will focus on the comparative study between the traditional ode form and the odes written by Pablo Neruda in his poetry.

Keywords: *Elemental Odes, Pablo Neruda, Classical Ode, Poetry.*

Introduction

A classical ode was a poem that was meant to be sung, accompanied by music, and it originated in Greek. An ancient Greek writer who mastered one form of the classical ode was Pindar and the ode after his name was called 'Pindaric ode.' He is credited with the invention of the ode form which was imitated by a number of future ode writers. As M.H. Abrams writes, "The prototype was established by the Greek poet Pindar, whose odes were modelled on the songs by the Chorus in Greek drama. His complex stanzas were patterned in sets of three: moving in a dance rhythm to the left, the chorus chanted the strophe; moving to the right, the antistrophe;

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then, standing still, the epode” (203). Another classical writer of odes was the Roman poet Horace, whose odes were named after his name as the Horatian ode. He was less formal, less ceremonious and much suited to reading than a theatrical performance. His odes mostly have a regular, recurrent stanza pattern, and are generally more tranquil and contemplative than those of the Pindaric odes. Pindar is best known for his ‘victory odes’, which are grouped into four books titled after the name of the games as Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean. He often composed odes to celebrate athletic victories, and they were performed with a chorus and dancers. His ‘victory odes’ laid the foundation for the English odes.

M. H. Abrams refers to his odes as, “The regular or Pindaric ode in English is a close imitation of Pindar’s form, with all the strophes and antistrophes written in one stanza pattern, and all the epodes in another. This form was introduced into England by Ben Jonson’s ode ‘To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison’ (1629)” (203). The Pindaric Ode consists of three major parts: the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode. The strophe and the antistrophe are identical in length and meter whereas the epode differs in length and meter.

The English ode was very much influenced by the odes of Pindar and Horace. As Robert Shafer in his *The English Ode to 1660: an essay in literary history* suggests: The ode was developed during the Renaissance and Sir Thomas Wyatt can be regarded as the first modern English poet whose some of the poems regarded as odes. The word ode was first used by Thomas Watson in 1582. The third form of the ode which was called the irregular ode was developed by Abraham Cowley. “Irregular ode, a rhymed ode that employs neither the three-part form of the Pindaric ode nor the two- or four-line stanza that typifies the Horatian ode. It is also characterized by irregularity of verse and stanzaic structure and by lack of correspondence between parts called pseudo-Pindaric ode or Cowleyan ode” (“Irregular Ode”). Cowley tried to emulate Pindaric's odes, but he did not regulate the various strophes to the triad order as Pindar did in his odes. He did not even retain the uniform stanzas of the Horatian odes and his odes differed in purpose, line length, meter, rhyme and number of lines.

In the nineteenth century, with the works and efforts made by the Romantics, the ode form advanced to a greater extent. They also worked on the classical prototypes of the ode form with some variations to suit the purpose and understanding of their time. “As with other poetic forms, the Romantic poets mastered and elevated odes. In his brief 26 years, John Keats

composed two of the world's most famous poems, 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'" ("The Exalted Ode"). John Keats was the most famous and notable successful practitioner of the ode form among all the Romantics. He chose the Horatian ode form for the plot of his odes, and he made so many changes to it to suit the needs of his purpose and for the understanding and enjoyment of his time. With the touch of Keats's genius, the ode became a great poetic art form during the nineteenth century. The Keats' Odes differ from the Horatian Ode in that its structure of line and stanza is a set pattern of meter, rhyme and length. Among the other notable Romantic practitioners of the ode were Coleridge, Wordsworth, P.B. Shelly, Thomas Gray and Byron. But none of their odes became as popular as those of Keats.

Latin American Odes

For the first time in Latin American literary history ode form was introduced by Jose Joaquin de Olmedo with his "La Victoria de Junin: Canto a Bolivar" ("The Victory at Junin: A Song to Bolivar") in 1825. Olmedo was the first notable practitioner of the ode form in Latin America. A year later Venezuelan writer Andres Bello also tried some odes among them the most popular was "Silva a la Agricultura de la zona torrida" ("Ode to the Agriculture in the Torrid Zone") in 1826. After Bello, the other notable ode writer from Latin America was the Cuban writer Jose Maria de Heredia who wrote some notable odes of the nineteenth century in a neoclassic manner. The most popular among his odes were "Oda to Niagara" (1827; "Ode to Niagara") and "El una tempestad" ("In a Storm"). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Roben Dario also wrote a few odes and he had written a ten-part ode in memory of Bartolome Mitre "Ode to Mitre" (1906). Later Leopoldo Lugones also wrote a collection of odes in his *Odas Seculares*. In his odes, he talks about nature and has dedicated his odes to his native land. Apart from these writers, there were not many notable practitioners of the ode form in the history of Latin American literature as well as of Chile before Pablo Neruda.

Pablo Neruda wrote his odes in the latter half of the twentieth century. His first volume of odes known as *Elemental Odes* published in 1954. In his odes, Neruda has explored and celebrated the wonder of ordinary things. The simplicity of his odes is very surprising to see that it is an ode, which traditionally meant a poem to be sung in an elevated manner for celebrating a person or an object. Pablo Neruda has written four volumes of Odes, *Elemental Odes* (1954), *New Elemental Odes* (1956), *Third Book of Odes* (1957), and *Voyages and Homecomings* (1959). George Schade in the introductory section of his *Fifty Odes* is of the view that:

The verb to sing (cantar) and the noun sing (Canto) recur often throughout the collections, reminding us of the classic Greek model from which these elemental odes came. The reader will also frequently come across the verb to recount (contar), for Neruda likes to tell us the story of a little thing that has become sublime. Whether he focuses on an abstract idea or concrete things doesn't matter; Neruda is an engaging and jolly companion throughout the odes. We share his joy in simple things, in simply living. His appetite for life seems insatiable, and the reader savours that too. (ii)

His odes became very popular and have been read widely all over Europe. Maria Jacketti has selected and translated the most popular odes from these four volumes of Neruda in her *Neruda's Garden: An Anthology of Odes* (1995). The present study depends on this volume which is the primary source of the present study.

Form of Neruda's Odes

A traditional ode is defined as a poem that is elevated in its style and quite elaborate in the stanza pattern. The structure of a classical ode known as the Pindaric ode is divided into three parts i.e. the strophe, the antistrophe and the epode. About the structure of the Pindaric ode, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A Handbook of Literary Terms* point out that, "His complex stanzas were patterned in sets of three: moving in a dance rhythm to the left, the chorus chanted the strophe; moving to the right, the antistrophe; then, standing still, the epode" (203). They further say, "The regular or Pindaric ode in English is a close imitation of Pindar's form, with all the strophe and antistrophes written in one stanza pattern, and all the epodes in another" (203). Whereas the Horatian ode is colloquial and does not have a formal language as those of Pindaric odes, has a single repeated stanza pattern and is also shorter in length than those of the Pindaric odes. And the irregular ode which was introduced by Abraham Cowley, has an irregular stanza structure that is free to alter according to the need of the writer. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* are of the view that "He allowed each stanza to establish its own pattern of varying line length, number of lines, and rhyme scheme" (263).

Latin American history suggests that the ode form reached them only in the nineteenth century. Jose Joaquin de Olmedo from Ecuador was the first poet to practice the ode form with his "La Victoria de Junin: Canto a Bolivar" (1825) ("The Victory at Junin: A Song to Bolivar"). He had written that in the manner of an epic in a neoclassical style. During the same period, Andres

Bello from Venezuela also wrote some of his odes and the most notable of his odes was “Silva a la Agricultura de la zona torrida” (1826; “Ode to Agriculture in the Torrid Zone”). Arturo Torres-Rioseco in his *The Epic of Latin American Literature* is of the view that “Bello has followed a strictly antique classical pattern; he has even been called ‘the creator of a new classic form.’ Indeed, the very first verse of Bello’s “Ode to the Agriculture of the Torrid Zone,” . . . is a faithful repetition of Vergil” (56). The third poet of the nineteenth century who practised the ode form was Heredia. The Cuban Jose Maria de Heredia wrote some odes in a neoclassical manner, the most notable of his odes were “Oda al Niagara” (1827; “Ode to Niagara”), and “En una tempestad” (“In a Storm”).

Unlike all his predecessors Pablo Neruda has written his odes with a new kind of form and in free verse. He has challenged all the classical prototypes of the ode form by writing his odes in an innovative style of his own. The odes are arranged in brief, sinuous lines that flow down the page and connect the poet to the animal, mineral, and vegetable world, to people and objects, and to the landscape of history. About the structure of Neruda’s odes, Margaret Sayers Peden in the introduction to her *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda* is of the view that:

Neruda’s *Odas Elementales* conform in large measure to the traditional concept of the ode. Most are long and lyrical. It has been demonstrated that although visually Neruda’s innovative form seems quite different from the classic verse, the lines naturally fall into time-honoured seven- and eleven-syllable rhythms. Neruda reiterates the word canter throughout the odes; he “sings” this poetry as odes were sung in ancient times. Exuberantly, his odes exalt their subject matter. But they are not characterised by an elevated style; it is here that the Neruda poem consciously differs from its prototype. (1)

He has written his odes in various styles and there is no fixed pattern in his writings. He has written all his odes without bothering about the traditional ode form. “Neruda cannot be categorized by a single poetic style. No sooner had he mastered one poetic form or mood than he moved to another.

The most notable features of Neruda’s odes are their simplicity, sound effect and shape. As his odes are in free verse therefore the tone and sound effect is the most important feature for writing an ode-like poem. He has taken care of the alliteration effect and musicality in his odes as he is celebrating the common thing in his odes. “One of his major works, *Odas Elementales* (Elemental Odes), was published in 1954. Its verse was written in a new poetic style – simple, direct, precise, and humorous” (*The 100 Most Influential Writers of All Time* 300). About Neruda’s ode style, Jose Quiroga in an article “Spanish American Poetry from 1922 to 1975” in *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature: the Twentieth Century* is of the view

that, “Neruda did not employ the same style in the books that followed, cycles of love poems like *Los Versos del Capitán*, and three volumes of *Odas Elementales* where he prefers a much shorter line form (in the *Odas* these at times consist merely of one or two words).” He further says, “In the *Odas*, Neruda was able to sense a new mode of poetry appearing in Spanish America at the time, principally in Nicanor Parra’s *Poemas y antipoemas* (Poems and Antipoems). This poetry was much more colloquial and explored issues that were not generally accepted as “poetic.” The odes entail the suppression of the subject; they collapse the distinctions between the poetic and the political by erasing the class distinctions that make certain objects more “poetic” than others” (331). To point out the reason behind Neruda’s inventing a new kind of form for writing his odes Margaret Sayers Peden in her *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda* is of the view that:

What makes the old new in the odes is Neruda’s recognition that if he is to champion the common man, he must write in a manner that is accessible to him. To effect this new commitment, Neruda adopted (invented) a new form, a sinuous, brief line that leaves more white space than print on the page. The fact that the *Odas* was initially intended to be published serially in newspapers, a format highly inappropriate for these long thin poems that he cannibalize space and the fact that he retained the form through several collections speaks to Neruda’s strong conceptualization of his new poetry. Along with form and rededication to social and political responsibility, the most salient feature of the *Odas* is their tone of affirmation and celebration. (2)

Thematic Concerns in Neruda’s Odes

In the context of the theme, a traditional ode being a sub-division of the lyric is defined as a long lyric poem that is serious in subject. Most usually in a traditional sense an ode has a single but dignified and exalted theme. It may be of a personal kind or of an objective nature with an address or apostrophe. Kathleen Kuiper in *Poetry and Drama: Literary Terms and Concepts* is of the view that, “An ode is a ceremonious poem on an occasion of public or private dignity in which personal emotion and general meditation are united” (51). M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A Handbook of Literary Terms* are of the view that Pindar wrote his odes in order to praise or glorify someone that is they were encomiastic. For example, his victory odes in which he celebrates a victorious athlete in the Olympic Games. The Horatian odes are calm and meditative in their theme. The English odes of the earlier times were also written to eulogise something, for instance, a person as in John Dryden’s “*Anne Killigrew*,” the art of music or poetry as in Dryden’s “*Alexander’s Feast*,” time of the day as in Collins’ “*Ode to Evening*,” or any abstract concepts as in Wordsworth’s “*Ode to Duty*.” The Romantic poets

gave perfection to the Horatian ode (203-204). They further point out that, “Romantic poets perfected the personal ode of description and passionate meditation, which is stimulated by an aspect of the outer scene and turns on the attempt to solve either a personal emotional problem or a generally human one” (203).

Latin American writers like Jose Joaquin de Olmedo practised and emphasized patriotic themes in his poetry. He wrote his ode “La Victoria de Junin: Canto a Bolivar” (1825) (“The Victory at Junin: A Song to Bolivar”), in the praise of Bolivar and his liberating armies on the occasion of their victory in the War of South American Independence. Andres Bello chose Latin American peoples and landscapes as themes in his poetry. He combines classical and romantic content in most of his poetry. His ode “Silva a la Agricultura de la zona torrida (1826; “Ode to Agriculture in the Torrid Zone”) portrays rich images of fertility. Another great Latin American poet of the nineteenth century who wrote some odes was Jose Marti Heredia. He wrote his “Ode to Niagara” to Niagara Waterfall. Roben Dario in the last decade of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century wrote his odes in which he celebrates the life of a few peoples of his country, for instance, his “Ode to Mitre” is written in the memory of Bartimore Mitre. Another poet who practised ode form was Leopoldo Lugones who with his *Odas Seculares* (1910) brought out themes about nature and dedicated his odes to his native land.

Therefore, this study shows that the themes of the earlier ones were the heroes of war and other heroic figures and there were more epic-like poems. While in the nineteenth century, poets brought some romantic features in their writings and wrote some odes on the natural landscapes of their respective countries. But before Neruda the numbers of odes written in Latin America were scant and their subject range was limited compared to the subjective and thematic range of Pablo Neruda. Neruda’s *Elemental Odes* are the celebrations of the simple things of everyday life. About this book, Jodie A. Shull in her *Pablo Neruda: Passion, Poetry, Politics* is of the view that:

This was the first of a series of books of odes, poems of praise. In his odes, Neruda pointed out the wonder of ordinary things. *Odas Elementales* was a huge success with readers and critics. Neruda brought out two more books of Odes, *Nuevas Odas Elementales* (New Elemental Odes) in 1956 and *Tercer Libro de las Odas* (Third Book of Odes) in 1957. According to one critic, Neruda wanted the odes to surprise people with new visions of ordinary objects, “helping us to see . . . the marvellous significance of the world in which we live.” (86-87)

With his odes, Neruda has shown us that there are a lot of beautiful things around us whether big or small everything has its own importance.

About Pablo Neruda's choosing such simple routine objects for writing his odes, Rene de Costa in his *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* is of the view that, "The urge to simplicity and to shock the reader with simplicity caused Neruda to ferret out the most outlandish subjects for his elementary odes" (172). About his *Elemental Odes*, Rene de Costa says that, "Political without appearing to be politicized, simple without being simplistic, it appealed to an extraordinarily wide range of readers through a seemingly artless, almost breezy series of compositions exalting the most basic things of our daily existence, the plain and the ordinary, fruits and flowers, threads and bread" (145). George Schade in the 'Introduction' to his *Fifty Odes* quotes Neruda:

Of great interest is what he has to say about the odes in a few short paragraphs. Let me cite the beginning of this meaningful declaration, "I proposed to myself a foundation for the odes going back to origins, from birth on. I wanted to rediscover many things already sung about, told and retold. My deliberate point of departure was to be like the child's undertaking, while chewing on his pencil, the obligatory composition assigned on the sun, the blackboard, the clock or the human family. No theme would be beyond my orbit; I could touch everything, walking or flying, expressing myself with the utmost clarity and freshness." (i)

With these words Neruda has cleared that he wants a change in the ode writing by taking as subject matter, various things or objects whether large or small, important or mundane, and grand or ordinary. George Schade further says:

"In the odes, Neruda focuses on a single thing, whether it be fish or fowl, vegetable or fruit, animal, a spoon, or a red truck with barrels. Then he digs into origins, its purpose, and magic existence. . . . The reader, wondering what Neruda can possibly do with such an object, finds himself on the one hand submersed in a new dimension of everyday existence, and on the other, tempted by the poet to rise and read the ode aloud" (i-ii).

Conclusion

With this simple style and form, Pablo Neruda has achieved what he must have wished while writing an ode-like poem in the glory of the common things. Physically the most perceptive feature of his odes is their shape with most of the lines containing only a single or two words. To achieve a poetic effect in his free verse he has made abundant use of metaphors, similes, rhetorical figures and various kinds of alliteration effects. The musical sound effect which he

has achieved through various poetic devices such as alliteration, and ‘repetition and parallelism’ etc. is also the most significant feature of his odes. His odes are read as if we are chanting a song and that is for which an ode as genre is traditionally known. Therefore, like a good writer, he has followed the tradition by retaining the musicality of the ode form as well as altered the tradition by inventing a new kind of ‘form’ with the requirements of the twentieth century.

And in thematic concerns, one discovers that Neruda’s choice of subject matter differs from all of his predecessors since he chooses to write his odes on such trivial and ordinary objects or things used by common people as tomatoes, onions, beds, chairs, salt etc. Odes on such trivial and ordinary things have never been attempted by anyone before him. Apart from this his treatment of the subject matter in his odes is quite different from those of his predecessors. Unlike them, he gives a simple and beautiful description of the subject matter of his odes without any kind of romantic or philosophical comments. His odes evoke nature and he sings in the praise of fundamental and essential subjects/elements. In this way, his odes glorify the ordinary things and mundane life of a common man. He tells the story of an ordinary thing and makes that sublime.

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