

Elementary Odes

Singing the Praises of the Ordinary World

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THE process of writing odes gets with particular economy and directness at one of the great pleasures of poetry—its capacity to celebrate and to transform, to help us appreciate things we often don't notice (a toothbrush, a piece of paper, an eraser) or things we might at first revile (a cockroach, a garbage can). That paying attention to these things is funny, that students laugh when they read their poems on these subjects, is part of the point. As an unpaid volunteer poet at the Jessie Beck Elementary School in Reno, Nevada, I visit many classes, each for no more than one or two sessions a year. The students come from mixed backgrounds, and while many are enthusiastic about poetry, quite a few have had very limited experiences with it. Because our interaction is intense but very brief, I have worked to find exercises that function as a kind of sales pitch for poetry. I want to introduce some of the things that make poems distinctive and pleasurable; I want students to know that poetry can be fun and funny; I want to show them that they can be poets. Odes, I have found, fulfill my teaching goals especially well, partly because the ode in some ways permits the poet to show off what he can see and imagine but also to acknowledge what he doesn't know.

An ode is a formally complex, often public poem of praise, a poem designed to give pleasure. Yet the pleasure odes give is complex, partly as a result of the burden attached to the directive to praise. As scholar Paul Fry has eloquently argued, this burden fills odes with conflict, doubt, and reversal. The odes of the originator of the genre, Pindar, commemorated the feats of the original Olympian athletes and involved a variable but highly formal triple stanzaic structure that marked a series of dance steps to be performed, then reversed, then altered.

Odes in English have only rarely adhered to this rigid structure, but they do tend to shift, meander, consider alternatives, and contradict themselves. Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for example, moves between description of the urn's stillness and the apparently living characters it depicts, between concrete details and abstract meditation, and between praise ("Ah happy, happy boughs!") and critique ("Cold pastoral!"). Each

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self-contained stanza represents a new beginning, a different approach. Odes often express their speakers' uncertainties about the efficacy of praise itself. As they do so, even modern or irregular odes, which often retain the tone and themes of classical odes while opening up the poem to a range of formal possibilities, tend to employ archaic language and modes of speech, including the direct address of whatever is praised: *oh flower! oh tree! oh insomnia!* Perhaps this is why odes sometimes seem old-fashioned and excessive; certainly the ode, according to *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, is the poetic mode that most readily invites parody.

The best recent odes not only acknowledge but revel in such conundrums. Kenneth Koch's poignant and funny collection, *New Addresses*, comprises fifty poems, all of whose titles begin with "To," which use the classic poetic device of apostrophe to address their subjects. The poems consider such varied topics as the speaker's twenties, piano lessons, Jewishness, and marijuana, as well as more conventional topics, including friendship, sleep, experience, and fame. As they both address and praise these entities, they poke fun at them; the poems, and the volume as a whole, delicately balance parody with celebration, linking the capacity to praise with the speaker's awareness of how silly he's being. "To the Ohio" begins,

**You separated my hometown from Kentucky
And south of us you deftly touched Indiana. Ohioans drove back over you
With lower-priced (untaxed) beer and Bourbon in the trunks
Of their cars to take to Cincinnati and get drunk
Less expensively than with Ohio purchases.**

The poem's "you" here is funny partly because the addressed river is so homely, so hard to personify, so unpoetic, as Koch's uneven line lengths, parenthetical interjection, and awkward wording ("get drunk / Less expensively") reveal. Yet the poem is also, slyly, a celebration of the river's variability—"You flooded! You overflowed your banks! / Everything was wet / For miles around you"—and its resultant fame:

**You were in the papers... I kept a scrapbook
A big one, of newspaper coverage of you
That was so much admired for its pasted-on white and pink clippings
I was happy about it for a month.**

The poem ends with an insight of a more conventionally poetic kind. Describing the shores of Kentucky and Ohio, on one side "wild good times" and on the other "the regular life," the speaker concludes, "From one you took your name, and from the other, then, your meaning." In the course of its river-like meanderings, the poem considers mutability, fame, and the relation between names and meanings—themes that recall the concerns of the great English Romantic odes of Keats and Coleridge. Yet Koch accomplishes this through humor and deflation.

Elsewhere in *New Addresses*, Koch is more explicit in his praise, although often the praise emerges out of critique, as in "To Kidding Around," which begins "Kidding

around you are terrible sometimes” yet comes to the assertion that “sometimes you are breathtaking / Kidding around!” and goes on to explain why, in a precise, imagistic evocation of the present moment:

To be rid of the troubles
 Of one person by turning into
 Someone else, moving and joking
 As if nothing mattered but today
 In fact nothing
 but this precise moment—five thirty-one a.m.
 Celery growing on the plains
 Snow swirls in the mountains.

Similarly, Insults, Competitiveness, and even Stammering get their due. In fact, the dynamic persists throughout the volume: the less noble the entity praised, the more the speaker exerts himself to convert it into something exalted and inspiring. Yet he always manages it, and the poems always seem more tender for their awkwardness.

Koch, of course, is not alone: odes are everywhere in contemporary poetry, often, like Koch’s, humorously or critically approaching their own compulsion to praise. (For a nice selection of odes both contemporary and older, see *The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*.) J. D. McClatchy’s “Late Night Ode” is explicit about loss, describing its speaker’s aging body, unrequited desire, and loneliness; Mary Jo Salter’s “Home Movies: A Sort of Ode” conveys the poignancy of watching familiar characters and objects in home movies from the removed, chastened position of the adult. Other recent odes mix praise with condemnation, at times adopting a kind of mock-heroic tone. Frank O’Hara’s odes are highly ambivalent; one of the best known, “Ode to Joy,” champions a deathless future in which love—or perhaps lust—has triumphed, a realm both glorious and grotesque. Robert Pinsky’s “To Television” evokes the guilty pleasures associated with watching television, marveling at how something so contained—a television is “A box a tube”—can give access to a kind of infinitude. The poems in Gary Soto’s accessible, teachable volume *Neighborhood Odes* are far homelier, rendering ordinary things (including “Mi Gato,” “My Library,” and “el Guitarron”) tender and poignant; his mixture of English and Spanish might be especially appealing to bilingual students.

The fondness I feel toward these poems—especially Koch’s, whose *New Addresses*, I often tell other poets, is among the most enjoyable books of poems I have ever read—may be partly informed by the debt I owe Koch’s books on teaching for my success as a poet at Jessie Beck School. The exercises I have stolen or adapted from Koch—mostly from *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*—often involve a gesture similar to the one he repeats in *New Addresses*: as Koch updates the rhapsodies of conventional odes, his exercises invite students to reimagine old poems. A poem asking questions of an animal (based on Blake’s “The Tyger”) or describing a series of simultaneous, geographically dispersed actions (based on an excerpt from Section 26 of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”), a poem structured as an apology for something one isn’t really sorry for (based on William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say”)—these exer-

cises work so well partly because they give student poets a structure within which they can write about whatever they like. The results are often touching and hilarious, or both at once. These exercises, and the poems that result, both respect the original and allow students to play with it. In their balancing of homage and playfulness or parody, they are like odes.

I tend to turn for models of odes in the elementary-school classroom not to Koch's poems—which I suspect would work wonderfully for middle- or high-school students—but to Neruda's *Elemental Odes*, published in three separate collections by Neruda late in his life, selections from which are available in simple, lyrical translation in a single volume. Like Koch's odes, these poems celebrate ordinary things, ranging from the everyday (a lemon, a tomato) to the startling or whimsical (a ship in a bottle, a pair of socks) to the evocative (age, sadness). Although less explicitly parodic than Koch's odes, they employ a range of tones. And they use, for the most part, language simple enough to be understandable to children as young as seven. One poem that works especially well for both younger and older students is his "Ode to the Lizard." Others I've used with success include "Ode to Salt" and "Ode to My Suit."

In the classroom, I suggest that poems can help us see ordinary things in new ways; I define an ode as a poem that celebrates something, often something ordinary. When I teach "Ode to a Lizard," I begin by asking students, before they've read the poem, to talk about what they've noticed about lizards. They often describe some of the

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same things Neruda does—that lizards move quickly and freeze, that they are easily camouflaged, that they can change color. I ask them to think of questions they might ask a lizard if they could; these often focus on how lizards feel and why they move the way they do. Then we read the poem, first in Spanish if a student is willing, and then in English. "How does Neruda talk about the lizard?" I ask, and then list on the board what the students notice. They notice that the poem has lots of details—it describes the lizard's color, shape, and way of moving.

It shifts in scale—the lizard is at times tiny, "a stone / with two small ancient/eyes," and at times enormous: "To / a fly / you are the dart/of an annihilating dragon." It compares the lizard to other things and creatures—the lizard has "a sandy tail," its head is "leaflike," it's "a stone." It imagines the lizard in different places, including a beach, a forest, and outer space. It asks questions of the lizard: "from what planet / from what / cold green ember / did you fall?"; "from / the emerald / did your color climb the vine?" This list of features is useful when students are writing their own poems—it gives them somewhere to turn if they get stuck. I point out that their ideas about lizards, which they came up with before they read the poem, are similar to what's in the poem: they are already thinking the way Neruda did when he wrote his ode; already, they are thinking like poets.

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Next I ask students to list some ordinary things. Rainbows, sunsets, and other beautiful or “poetic” topics are off-limits. Instead, students focus on homely animals, objects in the classroom, clothing, or household objects; sometimes the list goes one way, sometimes another. Students are generally full of ideas, all of which I write down. When the board is full but before the last hand has gone down, I ask students to take out a piece of paper, choose an object from the board or from their imagination, and write the title: “Ode to a...”. Then they begin writing. If they can’t think of an idea, I refer them to the list of topics on the board. If they get stuck, I remind them of the list of features of Neruda’s poem and encourage them to think of a metaphor, a detail, a question to keep them going.

I have been startled—amazed may not be too strong a word—by the poems written in ten or fifteen minutes by students as young as seven. Their poems are precise and mysterious in just the way that Neruda’s odes, and for that matter Koch’s, are. They reflect, not surprisingly, what the students find most striking in Neruda’s poem. A class of second-graders, for example, was fascinated by Neruda’s questions to the lizard and came up with question-filled poems of their own. This one shifts from general questions to one that animates and demonstrates empathy with the inanimate addressee:

Ode to a Door

Door, door, I love you so!
You can open and close so
what’s wrong with that?
No burglar can come into my
house! What can I ask for
with that? Sometimes you
slam. Does that hurt? Hope you
don’t scare ants!

Another combines scientific, observation-based questions with more mystical ones (replete with more poetic terms such as “roam”). The poem’s final question poises wonderfully between these two modes: it is at once literal (what is your scientific category?) and magical (what kind of planet would contain nothing but reptiles and amphibians?).

Ode to a Poison Frog

How beautiful you are with all your colors
Even though they are poisonous.
Just don’t touch me.
You look beautiful jumping lily pad to lily pad,
Maybe even climbing up your special plant with your
Baby on your back.
Always squirting poison and eating ants,
Sometimes swimming in water at the bottom.

How do you hold your breath for so long,
 and how do you swim in such dirty water?
 Do you come from the moon where aliens roam?
 Oh I love you so so much, frog,
 My poisonous frog.
 You and your beautiful colors, orange and black.
 With such a long tongue,
 You can catch any fly that dares to fly.
 Did you come from the same planet
 Of all reptiles and amphibians?

In another second-grade class, we talked a lot about Neruda's similes and metaphors. Here is an ode, written by a student in that class, which uses bird-like imagery to describe a pillow:

Ode to a Pillow

Pillow, your softness
 helps me sleep
 every night. You're
 quiet. Your feathers
 lie down inside
 you and are still
 except when I
 move you. To a bug you're
 a trampoline. But I
 think of you as
 a big white feathery
 bird flying in the
 cushiony bed as its
 sky.

The final lines of this poem also contain a Neruda-like change in scale; part of the poem's charm comes from its shift from the matter-of-fact opening to the bug's point of view to the idea of the pillow as a bird aloft. The fact that the feathers are at first quietly still makes the final evocation of movement more beautiful.

Other students are drawn to Neruda's impulse to praise useful, ordinary objects. Here is a poem from a mixed third/fourth-grade class in which the practical borders on the hilarious:

Ode to my Pants

In the morning I put my old blue pants on. They make me feel warm
 and so people will not see my boxers. They protect my legs from spiky
 bushes in the park. I'm grateful for my pants. If we did not have them
 we would get so embarrassed.

In other student poems, the mysterious gives access to the practical, as in this fifth-grader's poem:

Ode to my Skateboard

Rolling in the skatepark
with wheels of shiny black.
black and thick griptape.

To my skateboard,
whoever made you
must have built
you with golden
tools.

You have never
broken, or never
let me down.

I've never
slipped, never
fell, so I'm
glad to
have you
around.

And in still others, the relation between beauty and usefulness is less easy to measure; the two mix in lovely ways. This poem is by a fifth-grader:

Ode to the Sky


Blue yet cloudy, always there. The sun curls up within your grasp. You wrap around the world and reach out and touch the deep shades of space. Hundreds of brilliant blues swirling around in you, you help keep oxygen cooped up inside so we all don't die, you make it rain, you make it snow, you make the hail come smashing down, you make the sun's rays come down and touch us all. Bad or good, rain or shine, you're always there keeping us alive.

Another aspect of odes that is appealing to some writers is a Koch-like near-exaggeration of the praise. Here is an especially delightful examples from a fifth-grade class. The poem treads a fine line: it is extreme without mocking its addressee. Rather, its hyperbole reveals a genuine impulse to praise:

Ode to my French Toast

Oh French toast
 warm on a plate
 I come to you
 in the morning
 and stare in hunger at you.
 I rush for the fridge to find some
 eggs to cook but you are quite lovely
 without them. Then I run to the cabinet
 and grab the syrup. Then I dunk the
 lovely you into the syrup and take a bite
 of you. I know you might not appreciate me
 eating you but you make me shine when I
 do. Your golden brown crust with warm syrup
 in my mouth melts and I savor your taste.
 You taste so wonderful and that wonderful
 taste makes my tired body strong once again.
 You make me ready to do a day's work and fun.
 Oh thank you, French toast, you help me get
 ready to do wonderful things. Oh I wish I
 had some of you now.

Any of these poems, I think, would do well as models of odes alongside the Neruda poem or on their own. They reveal students unafraid of being tender and excessive, of playing within language.

The ode, as I began by suggesting, mixes tenderness and humor; it expresses the relation of knowing to not-knowing. It reveals that one thing poems can do is find a language for that balancing, in which we can love, for a moment, what's unlovable and in that way transform the ordinary world. Once mastered, this capacity remains. Before I leave each class, I encourage the students to keep noticing ordinary things and keep writing odes about them. They always seem eager to do so. 

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See Also

The entry on odes in the *Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, edited by Ron Padgett.