

THE HUMAN BODY IS NOT DESIGNED FOR AMBIVALENCE: ODES

Tammy Walker, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2007

APPROVED:

Bruce Bond, Major Professor

Jacqueline Foertsch, Committee Member

Corey Marks, Committee Member

Robert Upchurch, Program Coordinator

David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English

Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.

Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Walker, Tammy, The Human Body is Not Designed for Ambivalence: Odes.

Doctor of Philosophy (English), December 2007, 68 pp., references 33 titles.

The critical analysis section of this dissertation seeks to define the ode using examples in translation from Greek and Latin odes and examples in English written from the 1500s to the 2000s. Although most definitions of the ode contend that this subgenre of the lyric is an occasional poem of praise that includes a meditative or mythological element, the ode is far more complex. An ode is an occasional poem, but it works to privilege rather than strictly praise its subject, allowing for the speaker's ambivalence toward the subject. Meditation is a key element of the ode, since the poet uses the subject as a means for moving to the meditation or as a conduit through which the meditation occurs. The meditation in the poem is also a way for the poet or speaker to negotiate the relationship between the subject and herself; thus, the ode is concerned with power, since the poet must place herself or the speaker in relation to the subject. Power thus may be granted to either the speaker or the subject; the poet names and speaks of the subject, and often the poet names and speaks of himself in relation to the subject. Additionally, odes usually contain some exhortation, generally directed to the subject if not to those surrounding the reader or capable of "listening in" to the performance of the poem. This definition, it should be noted, is intended to be fluid. In order for a poem to be relevant to its age, it must either adhere to or usefully challenge the contemporary concerns. Thus, while many of the odes discussed will contain the elements of this definition, others will work against the definition. In the remainder of the introduction, I examine ancient models and twentieth- and twenty-first century examples of the ode as a means of exploring what an ode is and how it can undermine the

elements of the definition and still work as a poem of this subgenre. In the second section of the dissertation are lyric poems, many of which fit in varying degrees the definition laid out in the critical analysis.

Copyright 2007

by

Tammy Walker

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PART I: CRITICAL ANALYSIS.....	1
Toward a Definition of the Contemporary Ode	2
A Brief Introduction to the Following Odes	22
Works Cited.....	24
PART II: POEMS.....	27
Ode: Decay Theory	28
Ode: Brain Field Theory	30
Ode: Learned Helplessness	31
Ode: On the Law of Use	32
Ode: Abney's Effect.....	33
Aloft	34
Hunger.....	35
Ode: Escape Learning.....	36
Ode Exile	37
Isolated Sleep Paralysis	38
Lyric Poem as Phenomenon.....	40
Familial Sleep Paralysis	41
The Hyacinth Girl Speaks of the Night Sky.....	42
Iridium Flares.....	43
Sleep Paralysis with Hypnogogic Hallucinations	43
Weight	45
Sleep Paralysis with Hypnogogic Hallucinations and Silence.....	47
Ode: Topaz.....	48
Hypnopompic Sleep Paralysis	49
Aubade	50
Ode: On Solitude	51
Ode: Law of Closure.....	52
Polarity	53
Ode: Example.....	54

Game.....	55
Ode: On the Principle of Advantage	56
Evening, News.....	57
Ode: Mere Exposure Effect	58
After “Poet’s Obligation”	59
Ode: Thoughts.....	60
Ode: Surface	61
Coda.....	62

PART I
CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Toward a Definition of the Contemporary Ode

In “Ode to Food,” Darrell Gray describes his subject:

All day I have been dreaming of a dazzling stew,
and now it is time for dinner.
Oh food! How casually and yet punctually you arrive,
providing a focus, from out of nowhere, for the table. (lines 1-4)

Horace, translated here by Charles Wright, states in “III.8”:

I vowed to Bacchus a white goat and a big feast [. . . //]
This is the first anniversary of the vow,
The first feast, and I've got a wine jar
Smoke-sealed and aged from Tullus' time I'm set
To break the pitch on and uncork. (lines 6, 9-12)

Gray's poem from the late 1980s and Horace's from the first century BCE share certain characteristics, aside from the obvious use of food in these lines as a meditation on time. Both poets name their work odes; both move from the celebrated feasts to meditation on political issues, Gray on hunger in China and Ireland and Horace on the need to focus on other things besides war. Horace worked in what Charles Martindale supposes to be a “weirdly experimental” style that used both contemporary subject matter and Greek styles predating him by hundreds of years (3). And yet poets from Spenser to the present have adopted this style of poem, adapting it to suit the needs of their subject matter and of their age. Gray's poem is of its time; lines such as “the a priori legumes of the soul” from elsewhere in the poem point to its sense of play. But it is also “high flown” in its language—the dramatic opening gesture is an example of this. The upper register of language is noted in the work of the odist Pindar by many critics. It is also unabashedly celebratory. Thus, “Ode to Food” works as both a poem of its

moment—one that addresses the age in which it is written in a manner that fits with its contemporaries—and an ode, the ancient form.

Contemporary poets are still very much in conversation with the ancients, though each age speaks in its own conventions. We still call lyric poetry by a name that implies a score, for example, though its melic qualities have long been rendered solely in language. In this case, the form may have changed, but the spirit of the lyric, its musical and introspective quality, has not. Sappho's meditations on love, Alcaeus' exhortations that his friends enjoy good wine while they can, and Horace's appreciation for rural life on his Sabine farm all have parallels in later ages. Ancient lyrics, as all lyrics do, provide useful models for contemporary poems.

While models of ancient lyrics are useful in their spirits, they are not always useful in their form. For those who look solely to the ancient models, the urge to render replicas of Greek forms such as the Pindaric in the English language runs counter to the fact that Greek and English are not similar enough for poets to achieve the same effects in both languages. Similarly, hymns to Aphrodite from the ancients are immediate in a way that those from Renaissance poets are not, because the goddess holds less weight as a literary conceit than she does as a deity. But for those poets who use the spirit and not the concrete structural elements of a subgenre as a model, the outcomes have been much more successful poems since they addressed the concerns of their age using contemporary conventions.

In the late 1980s, C.D. Wright put out a “call to arms” for American poets to take up writing odes as a means to balance out the political climate at the close of the Reagan era. She argues that the ode may be adapted to late twentieth century

American concerns and explores poets that do accomplish this adaptation, such as Frank O'Hara's "Ode to Necrophilia." As well, she notes, "the ode is given to improving upon things as they are actually to be found" (288); thus it is a form well suited to accomplish the task of rendering America in more appealing terms than she found it under Reagan. By rendering America, blighted though it may be by any number of things the poet disagrees with, in lofty, lovely terms, the poet can create an ideal America, one to be hoped for and worked toward. Praise must extend beyond euphemism to the realizable. Her end, thus, is to create the aesthetic America as a prototype for the real America that could be achieved.

Therefore the ode is, for the most part, rooted in a type of image-making: Pindar, whose odes celebrated athletic and political victories, openly stated in his poems that he reserved his praise only for the best among men, the winners. By weaving in myth concerning the virtuous, Pindar further elevated the image of his subject. Thus the odes which Wright proposes are centered in praising their subjects as a means of achieving their ends; Pindar's odes follow much the same pattern.

This sort of praise, however, is not to be found in all odes, for as much as Pindar praises his subjects, Horace chastises. As in many of his odes, he chides women for improper behavior: to Pyrrha, he asks, "Who's caught up in your net today, your coil/ of elegant coiffure" (*Odes* 1.5); to Lydia, "In the name of all that's holy, / Lydia, why such determination/ to break Sybaris // with love?" (*Odes* 1.8). Alcaeus uses songs to attack political enemies, for example, calling one such tyrant "Potbelly" and warning him through use of myth about the dangers of political intrigue (Miller 42). Praise, so commonly associated with the ode, is far from a universal characteristic. Praise is not

always present in odes, but the speaker must have a position from which to speak to the subject and any others capable of hearing the ode. And the ode is less concerned with addressing the real than demonstrating an ideal, though its end may be to affect the real.

In this introduction, I will use models of odes, both ancient and in the English language, to create a dynamic definition of the subgenre. The odes used to create this definition are either identified as such by the author, or, in the case of twentieth and twenty-first century works, both fulfill the definition of the ideal-making ode and the expectations of contemporary poetry, which resists idealism, without being identified as an ode.

A Definition of the Ode

Although most definitions of the ode contend that this subgenre of the lyric is an occasional poem of praise that includes a meditative or mythological element, the ode is far more complex. An ode is an occasional poem, but it works to privilege rather than strictly praise its subject, allowing for the speaker's ambivalence toward the subject. Whereas praise focuses on the individual subject, privilege negotiates a position for the subject among its own kind or holds the subject up against the criteria of a better class. Ode writers sing about the "best" and "most virtuous," about that which is an ideal specimen of its kind. Praise may be an element of this act of privileging, but the result of the poem as a whole is far from merely noting the better points of the subject.

In addition, meditation is a key element of the ode, since the poet uses the subject as a means for moving to the meditation or as a conduit through which the

meditation occurs. Meditation is intense focus that allows the poet to speak to her knowledge of the subject by setting the subject in a context, such as Pindar's mythic context or Horace's rural and urban contexts. The meditation in the poem is also a way for the poet or speaker to negotiate the relationship between the subject and herself; thus, the ode is concerned with power, since the poet must place herself or the speaker in relation to the subject. Power thus may be granted to either the speaker or the subject; the poet names and speaks of the subject, and often the poet names and speaks of himself in relation to the subject.

Additionally, odes usually contain some exhortation, generally directed to the subject if not to those surrounding the reader or capable of "listening in" to the performance of the poem, gods and readers, for example. Finally, odes may make moves associated with other subgenres of the lyric, such as ekphrasis, elegy, lament, hymn, epithalamium, genethliacum, and so forth, in order to move from the subject to the meditation. Often, the exhortation works in tandem with the characteristics of other subgenres in order to reach the audience, for example, or to keep the ode in the realm of apostrophe.

This definition, it should be noted, is intended to be fluid. In order for a poem to be relevant to its age, it must either adhere to or usefully challenge the contemporary concerns. Thus, while many of the odes discussed will contain the elements of this definition, others will work against the definition as characteristics of given genres can clash with conventions of poetry in a given age. In the remainder of this introduction, I will examine ancient models and twentieth- and twenty-first century examples of the ode as a means of exploring what an ode is and how it can undermine the traditional idea of

an ode and still work as a poem of this subgenre. Because of the scope of this essay, earlier English examples of the ode are limited in this discussion.

A Sense of Occasion

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the ode is a sense of occasion. The victory odes of Pindar were commissioned and composed as a means of celebrating athletic victories, but the poems did not focus only on the event of the victory itself. Pindar's odes generally do explicitly name their occasions:

Read me the name of Arcestratus' son
the Olympian winner: it is inscribed upon
the tablets of my heart; it slipped my mind that I owed him
a song of pure delight. O Muse, and Truth as well,
Zeus' daughter, check with your
right hand the charge
that I have wronged a friend. (lines 1-6)

Here, the occasion of “Olympian 10” is double, for not only was the poem written to celebrate the victory of Hegesidamus of Western Locri at boys' boxing, it is an apology to the boy's father, Arcestratus, for not writing the ode sooner. D.S. Carne-Ross notes that the sense of occasion tied to poems was part of the larger celebration (17).

Although Horace's odes are less concerned with a public occasion—his works were meant to be read privately—the sense of occasion remains. In “1.37,” translated by Ellen Bryant Voigt, the occasion is the death of Cleopatra: “Now it's time to drink, loosen your shoes/ and dance, now bring around elaborate couches / and set the gods a feast, my friends!” (lines 1-3). As V.G. Kiernan notes, the Horace wrote poems of

political occasion in order to gain patrons (109). Horace also brought the occasion for lyrics into the realm of the personal, as many of his odes discuss the virtues of farm life, good friendship, lost love, and proper behavior. Each personal ode begins in a moment, an occasion, in which Horace invites his friends to enjoy rural life and share Roman gossip, or in which he urges women and men to act in a manner that befits their ages. Clearly, in each poem, some event has triggered the writing.

Much of this sense of occasion remains in English odes. Spenser's "Prothalamion" and "Epithalamion," occasioned by weddings, are considered by some critics to be the first odes written in the English language (Maddison 289). Milton wrote odes occasioned by Christmas, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" and his own birthday, "On His Being Arrived to the Age of Twenty-Three." Poets as diverse as Byron, Dylan Thomas, and Phillip Larkin have written birthday odes as well. Occasions as mundane as time of year or time of day have give poets adequate reason to write celebratory verse--Collins' "To Evening," or Keats' "To Autumn," for instance. Religious holidays were also occasions for odes; Dryden's St. Cecilia Day odes are an example of this.

Because occasion is fairly ubiquitous to lyric poetry, it is not problematic for poets writing under twenty-first century expectations. As Robert Pinsky notes in "Occasional Poetry and Poetry on Occasions," "a poem creates or calls for an occasion: the re-creation of its words in the reader's voice. [. . .] The process from maker to work to recipient, a process that is so ancient that it seems natural, is itself a human creation, like any other social form" (77). Thus, poetry is so linked with occasion, whether external or internal, that I could say this element is not exclusive to odes, but to all

writing in general. The occasion for some odes may be far less grand than for others—compare Horace's poems about relaxing on his farm to Pindar's choreographed celebrations of Olympic victors—but the occasion, like the speaker and subject, can be elevated or diminished through the ode. And through this elevation of the subject, the ode moves beyond observation of the occasion to engagement with it.

Privilege, Praise, and Power

Whereas praise and privilege may seem to be synonymous or at least nearing each other, the two are necessarily quite different. The act of praise is an act of commendation or glorification focused on the object itself. As Susan Stewart argues, “[e]xpressing praise, the poet displays a mastery over lack or suffering by transposing a focus on the self to an orientation outward, toward an object” (Stewart 236). Praise—or more specifically, praising—requires a self, but a self that is not concerned with its own state as much as it strives to be concerned with the state of an external object. Thus, the power of praise lies in the object being praised. Granted, the observer does have the power of his own gaze, but in the case of praise, the view is not questioned. Rather, this is the function of privilege. If praising an object is the act of pointing out its worthiness, then privileging it is granting the object some special status because of that worth (or lack thereof) relative to other objects. The self plays a larger role in this process because it must be in a position to grant or deny status. So praise is a sort of conduit to privilege since the act of praise glorifies or betters the real through its language. Privilege comes through the granting of a status because of the worth noted in the praise.

Pindar establishes himself as worthy of celebrating victors by creating a persona that is as virtuous as those for whom he writes (Lefkowitz 113-116). In his first Olympian ode, Pindar calls his own skill as a writer “*my swift chariot*” and contends that his goal is to succeed at “winning contests consummate in art among all Greeks.” Thus, Pindar is as much a victor as the men he praises; his skills equal theirs. In praising men, he privileges them by placing them in a category worthy to receive praise. To Pindar, victory is the ideal; thus, the victorious subject becomes the ideal because this is what he seeks to be himself.

Horace is more complex than Pindar in his persona. He establishes a persona that gives him the necessary voice to console his patron Maecenas, speak about the trials of war, and discuss the difficulties of love. His ambition is obvious in the first ode of his first book, translated here by Pinsky: “It’s a wreath of ivy, crown of poets, that I/ Need to believe I’m among the gods on high” and later, “Count me among the poets, and I feel like a god--/ Bumping the stars with my exalted head.” The ambition Horace has to equal his master both establishes Maecenas’ authority as a patron and poet and raises the stature of Horace, since he must accomplish the sort of poem he writes about in order to successfully praise his patron. Many times, he claims himself too old for love and too modest a poet for certain subjects. In another poem addressed to Maecenas, Horace acknowledges that the wine he will give to his patron is “ordinary Sabine / out of plain cups but I sealed it myself / in Greek wine jars” (lines 1-3). This poem, “1.20” translated by W.S. Merwin, demonstrates Horace’s struggle with his position in relation to his patron more clearly than “1.1”—Horace must justify the wine that he serves to his patron, and he accomplishes this by telling Maecenas that he was involved in its

making. Thus, in order for the wine to be equal to the greater man's taste, Horace's influence on the wine must raise it from its common origins. And Horace must be privileged himself in order for this to take place.

What could be problematic to odist writers in the twenty-first century is the idealism with which odes present their subjects. For postmodern poets, the negotiation of power and privilege is more complex than for their predecessors. Odes are considered to be poems of praise, but they are more accurately poems of privilege. Praise may be a by-product of this privilege, but it is not necessary element for an ode. Many of Horace's odes view their subjects through the lens of the ideal. Women, for example, who torture their often younger lovers, are chastised; they are not acting up to the standards of the ideal. First, that the women are not condemned outright privileges them above common whores; that they can be redeemed through their kindness toward their lovers demonstrates some inherent worthiness. Second, he negotiates the position of the women through the poem; the women are in the privileged position over the men since they "control" the love-sick men by accepting, rejecting, tormenting, or adoring them. (Horace was not a feminist; the women in his poems are not powerful in the same way that he is as a citizen, and thus they do not have a privileged position as a whole.) Praise, as Stewart notes, "is affirmative—it reveals, augments, and at the same time creates surpluses in excess of what it discloses" (236). But privilege is more dangerous; it implies a limit to power, a finite supply of something that the poem negotiates. Privilege assumes that something must be subjugated to something else. The idea of the absolute, the Platonic ideal, parallels this.

For contemporary poets—and for liberals to whom Wright addresses her essay—privilege is not a simple matter. If through language, through the poem, a poet can place himself above another person or group, then the ode becomes a weapon rather than a tool. But the larger issue is the idea that privileging someone grants them a special law or position which others cannot attain (unless they are found as worthy as the subject of the poem). Odes, thus, could easily work against the ideals of equality and equity in that they set apart what is better than the common, what is more virtuous or worthy. This is not to say that all privileging is negative; rather, poets must be cautious about their language(s) as well as their subjects. But the act of privileging carries with it too a way out of the potential dangers in that it allows its speaker to demonstrate ambivalence in a way that the act of praise does not. The latter attempts to glorify the subject, whereas the former attempts to negotiate with the subject. One can grant power, legitimacy, attention and so forth on a subject by demonstrating its worth, but one can also do this by sharing one's own power with the subject. Thus, the speaker puts himself at the level of the subject; he can do this by lifting the subject, lowering himself, or the reverse as the case requires.

Poets continue to write odes, in spite of this issue. In Paul Hoover's "Ode to the Protestant Poets," the speaker states that he is both poet and Protestant, moving the poem in the realm of celebrating his in-group. Hoover starts with a playful jab at the Protestant poets of early America: "Oh, dour! Oh, Mayflower! But enough of that." He turns the criticism on himself, by demonstrating his lack of intellectual faculties: "Probably Stevens again, though I'm beginning to think / I said it" and "I know next to nothing about [philosophy] / I prefer to think I thought everything up, but I'm dumber

than Aristotle.” Even his better points are shallow: “There’s my beautiful head on a chair propped on the usual ascot” and “I’ve been pretty poetic lately. / I’ve got to stop that or no one will talk to me.” This is less a poem of praise than of privilege, since the poem takes the speaker through his own situation then out to the external world, which can be praised. Praise comes after the privilege is granted to the external world. After the poet considers his own intellectual capabilities and physical attributes, he turns away from himself toward what he sees outside a train as it passes through Chicago. The poet renders himself fallible, humanly so, so that he can turn to see what surrounds him. Off the pedestal of the professor who quotes Stevens and concerns himself with whether or not he understands Aristotle and Kafka, the poet moves himself to a position that is equal to the figures outside the train:

In Chicago, a yellow dog leans from a window,
watching trains go by. I can see an elbow
drinking beer in Uptown. A child is dancing on a porch
and looking up at the sky.

The poet, de-privileged by his negotiations, can now view the world outside of himself, something he could not do while preoccupied with his position. Thus, by taking himself out of the realm of the privileged, Hoover addresses the problem of hierarchies by denying that he is any more or less than those around him. The ideal “Protestant Poet,” if there can be one, is a poet less self-concerned than he is.

Meditation: Myth, Metaphor, and Memory

Meditation in the odes serves two purposes: to set the subject in a context and to negotiate the relationship between the speaker and the subject in light of the context.

This context—or categorization of the subject—gives the speaker a means of speaking about the subject because it contains a set of criteria against which the subject is implicitly or explicitly judged. This is the case because there is an assumed ideal that the subject must either be or become. The speaker then assumes a position from which he can speak about this larger context and its criteria, potentially elevating himself.

Meditation is connected with the act of privileging because the act of placing the subject into a context is also an act of establishing a hierarchy; meditation is the act for which privilege is the outcome.

Pindar's odes follow a fairly consistent pattern of praising the subject then moving into a discussion of myth related to the victor or his home city in which the song was to be performed. The meditation via mythology serves a purpose that Maddison deems necessary: “imagery that relates the immediate subject to a larger context and adds fitting dignity and weight to the poem” is a vital aspect of the ode (4). Without this meditation that is also mediation, the ode would merely be description of the subject. Beyond this, though, the myth gives Pindar a context into which he may set the subject. By meditating on the virtues of an allied mythic figure, Pindar implicitly judges the athletic victor by the same criteria with which the mythic figure is judged: both live up to some standard of courage, strength, or piety.

Horace relied on myth as a means of meditating on the subject, but for him, another avenue of meditation is possible: metaphor and memory. Horace does use mythic figures to make a point:

To love a slave girl, Xanthias,
Need cause you no embarrassment,

Heroes of Greek mythology

Furnish ample precedent. (lines 1-4, "II.4", trans. Rachel Hadas)

But in the next poem, "II.5," translated by Donald Hall, Horace uses a series of metaphors to warn a man away from pursuing a girl who is too young for marriage: "Put away for now / your desire for grapes not yet ripe." And in "II.7," translated by J.D. McClatchy, memory brings Horace from the past to celebrating a renewed friendship: "Just remember how we used to drink / The day long, leaves in our hair / All slick with Syrian oils." Thus, the personal or private nature of Horace's poems give him greater flexibility in his voice; he is not always, like Pindar, the victory poet, but at times the wise friend, the adviser, or the veteran of combat.

Myth provides fixed associations necessary for understanding the context and its ideals that metaphor and memory do not. Horace's odes rely instead on more relative and shifting contexts, ones that are far more personal and perhaps more affecting because of it. By comparing the young woman in "II.5" with the sour green grape, Horace tacitly insists that the man deserves the better good, the sweet ripe grape, to consume. Similarly, in "II.7," the context he places himself and his friend in is that of war, which carries with it a number of criteria against which he may judge himself and his friend. In both instances, the device used provided Horace with flexibility to move beyond fixed mythic references, giving him a wider range of contexts to work within. But both are universal enough for the reader to understand the context and its associated criteria.

Most contemporary odes follow Horace's lead; the range of techniques in his poems provides multiple useful and relevant models. But if postmodern poems capitalize on a wealth of contexts, they often complicate the sense of the speaker. One

example of this unfocused speaker is that of Joshua Beckman's "Ode to the Air Traffic Controller," in which the speaker is multiple. Unlike Pindar or Horace, the virtuous poet and the wise adviser, Beckman does not establish an identity that he negotiates power with in this poem. No first person pronouns guide the reader to a particular speaker; the multiplicity of voices compounded with the lists of destinations resists the idea of one speaker. The meditations seem to be those of air traffic controllers, since the voices speak the language of the field: "good on five good on six gentleman" and later "tiny planes please circle oh tiny places" (lines 32, 37). What, then, is the "larger context" into which Beckman must place the air traffic controller? The speaker notes many cities; the first two lines are comprised of such a list: "Melbourne, Perth, Darwin, Townsville/ Belem, Durban, Lima, Xai-Xai" (lines 1-2). This pattern recurs throughout the poem. By moving into the controller's thoughts and out into the names of the destinations, the subject is elevated, for the entire litany of cities is both meditation and recognition of places the air traffic controller, if indirectly, affects.

Exhortation

In an ode, the speaker establishes himself through the meditation as a person in a privileged position, one who can speak about the subject in context. Tied to the identity of the speaker, the exhortation establishes the relationship of the audience to the speaker/poet, and complicates the voice of the speaker by allowing him to speak both as the poet and in some other role. Pindar thus is both poet and victor; Horace is poet and adviser. Each role strengthens and legitimates the other; the poet shapes the language, the adviser shapes the admonishment.

Exhortation, either to the subject of the poem or to any readers or deities listening to the poem, does not pose a difficulty to the postmodern odist; rather, like occasion, this device is to be found in many non-ode contemporary lyrics. Pindar exhorts the victors to be mindful of hubris, exhorts the gods to hear him and guide his words, and even exhorts himself to do his job well, reminding himself and the audience of his privileged position: “let me soar on the wings / of my craft with the task which is now my debt” as in “Pythian 8.” Pindar's exhortations are part of his persona, since he has to invoke muses to compose the poem, warn the athletes against being too prideful, set himself up as worthy to praise the victors, and so on.

Horace's voice speaks directly to most of the subjects of his poems. His exhortations are tied to his relationship to the subject and his persona. In speaking to his patron, Maecenas, Horace asks: “Spare me the Roman wars, and those / who battled in myth” in “Il.12,” translated by Carolyn Kizer, to set himself up as a poet more concerned with love than battle, Maecenas' favored subject. In “11.19,” translated by Linda Gregerson, Horace's further justifies his subject matter by exclaiming: “So spare me, Bacchus. Liber / with your dreadful rod. I'm only / following orders here” in writing about wine, women, and love. His advice to youth who are unlucky in love also foster Horace's “adviser” persona:

Don't mope and moan, o Albius,
that Glycera's unsweet,
or drone in dragging elegies
of how you can't compete
with the likes of white-hot youth, as he
who broke her faith now strokes her knee (lines 1-6).

In this translation of “I.33” by Heather McHugh, the exhortation gives Horace a means of working toward his meditation on love and his own bad experiences with it. The direct advice is strengthened by Horace's admission that he, too, was unlucky in love, but it also justifies his persona in this case as well: he can give advice because he has personal knowledge—memory, again—of what happens when love does not work the way one intends.

Matthew Rohrer's “My Government” is not a self-named ode, but it fulfills the definition of an ode. In the poem, the speaker negotiates his relationship to the “World” as he calls it; since the ode is regarding “Government” rather than “World”, it is possible that the latter indicates the mediation between speaker and world. The speaker addresses the “World” directly:

No man is an island. Also, no one is interested
in excessive indeterminacy. The French
will eat the horse right out from underneath you. That,
and so much more, have you taught me, World.

The speaker, knowledgeable about the world, is able to confront it directly, laterally, because the knowledge allows him to escape subjugation by the subject of the poem. The exhortation works to demonstrate that understanding and leads to the final stanza, in which the speaker explains a means—meager though it is—for escape: “It is possible to live only on what you grow yourself/ if you eat little and lie very still.” But the exhortation also allows the reader to understand the relationship between the speaker and the subject, and thus it also provides a means of expressing the anger that the speaker harbors toward the “World.”

Other Subgenres in the Ode

Another means of demonstrating the relationship between the speaker and the subject is through the use of other subgenres that are loaded with their own implications. Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" elevates the vessel from krater to art; even if the wine vessel was a piece of applied art, the poet's ekphrastic focus on the figures rendered on its surface brings the piece to the realm of fine art. Hymn is common among Pindar's odes; not only must he invoke muses to compose the poems, he must also sing to and about the deities who will lend depth to the odes and the celebrations worthy of the splendor that accompanies them. Sappho's "Fragment 1," an exhortation to Aphrodite, is an ode that is also a hymn; other fragments of Sappho praise hair ornaments, which could be seen as a move toward ekphrasis. Surviving fragments of the poems of Alcaeus, a contemporary and countryman of Sappho, demonstrate that he, too, wrote hymns and songs of personal counsel. Later English odes were also elegies, such as Dryden's ode for Anne Killigrew.

For Pindar and the other Greeks, the move toward hymn may be traditional. But what all of these subgenres—elegies, hymns, ekphrases—have in common is that they are genres of praise. Elegies generally highlight the strengths of a person's life. Hymns demonstrate the power of the deity and the subjugation of the speaker to that power. Ekphrasis involves a response to art; this presumes that the artwork was somehow compelling enough to converse with its physical aspects or its assumptions. Praise can be useful; it demonstrates the ways in which the subject already fulfills the characteristics of the ideal. When a poet writes an ode that is also a poem of praise, the subject is both privileged and praised, doubling the effect of the attention to the subject.

As Susan Stewart argues, “in hymns and odes, the poetic speaker extends praise as a gift or implicit sacrifice offered by an individual out of a position of authority, license, or supplication. The odist's expenditure will be rewarded by forms of grace or blessedness, or by a more concrete payment” (236). Thus, the doubling effect can be beneficial to the subject as well as to the poet/speaker.

Thomas Sayers Ellis's “Atomic Bride” is both ode and ekphrasis. Although not titled “ode,” the poem arises from an occasion, the drag show/wedding; negotiates the privileging of the subject; meditates on the meaning of the subject; and contains a brief exhortation to the subject at the end of the poem (“Go ahead, Andre / Toss the bouquet.”). Before Ellis identifies the subject of the poem, Andre, a cross dresser, he sets up the idea that Andre's act is art:

A good show
Starts in the
Dressing room
And works its way
To the stage. (lines 1-5)

The connection of “show,” “dressing room,” and “stage” to “legitimate theatre” brings the drag show up to the level of this art form. That the “show” “works its way / To the stage” reflects some focus on process that one would expect from higher art. Although the remainder of the poem meditates on Andre via other metaphors, the initial move in the poem is necessary to the negotiation of privileging Andre. He is compared to a bride, something given away and thus powerless; a “star witness,” who has power because he has a platform from which to speak; and finally to a bride again. This modulation Andre's position would not be possible were it not for the initial movement: Andre's actions are art, and thus gives him a voice, taken away, returned, and finally taken away again by

the series of comparisons. But the final exhortation involves the throwing away of a symbol of subjugation, for without the bouquet, the symbol of the bride, we are left wondering if Andre can be subjugated. This is complicated by the fact that Andre is instructed to act in a ritual manner, not out of any personal power he may have.

Complex as the issue may be, one thing can be concluded: if Andre's position has made a circle, then he is at least back to the point wherein his act is art, because the ekphrasis is never refuted. And that legitimization of Andre's act as art, at least, is a place of privilege.

The Ode as a Contemporary Genre

Contemporary poetry resists the sort of ideal making that is associated with the ode, a legacy of modernist poets' shift away from Victorian poetry of solace through beauty. The ode, according to Wright, "is one of the few literary tendencies left on the lot that admits wonder and presumes a future" (289). And as much as grappling with privilege can be a risk, wonder and hope are also risks. This ties into Wright's search for a place from which new odes may draw models: "I am aiming for the ode as a recourse, however short-term, to the same-old same-old careerist poem of no note, no risk, and no satisfaction, and to the equally vulgar obsession with newness" (290). While Wright made her complaint in the late 1980s, John Barr notes in an essay from the September 2006 issue of *Poetry*, "Poetry in this country is ready for something new" (433). Barr laments the current situation of poetry and strikingly parallels Wright's contention: "Although poets pride themselves on their independence, when did you last read a poem whose political vision truly surprised or challenged you? Attitude has replaced

intellect” (435). Tony Hoagland addressed the same issue in a March 2006 essay in the same journal: “Perhaps, in their deliberate intention to escape the confinement of one system, they have also accidentally escaped another. Perhaps, in their effort to circumvent linearity, or logic, or obviousness, they have eluded representing anything but Attitude—one of the familiar problems of modern American culture” (518).

Odes are poems of intellect. The speaker must have an understanding of the power struggles between herself and the realm of the subject in order to capture them. The poet must demonstrate some critical capacity to relate to the “larger context” via the meditation on the subject. And successful odes allow for the complexity of contemporary concerns; the ode would have long since been dropped completely were it not able to comply with the requirements of good poetry from the 1500s to the present. That Wright calls for its revival as a political tool indicates that her audience at least has some underlying familiarity with the genre.

Moreover, odes are well suited to address the concerns of Barr, Hoagland, Wright, and numerous others concerned with the direction contemporary poetry has taken. Moving away from attitude toward intellect is, inherently, political, because it does privilege reason over trends, logic over vague associations. The contemporary world is a place filled with ephemera and fast-moving identities, but does this necessarily preclude the desire for knowledge? Intellect is as much in flux as attitude; what a person can know over a given span of time necessarily changes as much as anything else. Why are knowing and categorizing something, even when the categories will change a moment later, necessarily futile acts? What underlying assumptions must be addressed before that attempt at knowledge can be made?

A Brief Introduction to the Following Odes

As with any application of form, a danger lies in the potential abuse of content to achieve formal ends. There are many examples of odes that fit the definition I have laid out but which fail to adhere to larger poetic concerns. When I first drafted odes for this dissertation, I found my own work fit the definition but lacking as lyric poems. While odes are poems of intellect, the theories and abstractions I used as subjects served to remove from the poems the emotional—and even visceral—qualities successful lyric poems require. Thus, as a solution, I crafted a speaker, the divorced woman, to bring in those more human aspects.

Through her voice, as with other voices I have used, I was able to embody the ambivalence needed to grapple with the limitations of the mind as well as our limited ability to understand it. Unlike the classical poets and earlier poets writing English odes, I do not establish my own voice as the one of authority or narration. Rather, by letting the divorced woman (and at times, her daughter and other figures) speak, I tried to solve a couple problems at once. Primary among them is the human detail necessary for the emotional conflict of the odes: the divorce. And in a larger context, I maintained a sense of narrative while questioning the subjects of the odes.

I do not see the odes in this dissertation as an end point. Rather, they provided me with an opportunity to understand better that coming to a poem from a purely intellectual standpoint is useless. The pages of notes I drafted for each ode at times robbed the subject of its mystery, and if a subject can be explained in pages of prose notes, there is no need left for a poem to attempt the task, even if the poem fails. So I

had to re-evaluate my own writing process, the result of which was the above use of a speaker.

Among the purposes of poetry is consolation. Beyond the intellectual pursuit of defining the odes, I wanted to explore the ode as a poem of ambivalence and a poem that resists closure. Since ambivalence prevents conclusion—or, in other words, ambivalence prevents one from making conclusions unless the ambivalence is resolved—odes offer the sort of consolation useful to readers toward whom Wright's proposed political poetry might be addressed. If our better America is one in which morality cannot be a closed system, then the ode works well as method for finding our way—or ways—to it.

Works Cited

- Barr, John. "American Poetry in the New Century." *Poetry*, 188(5):433-441.
- Beckman, Joshua. "Ode to the Air Traffic Controller." In Dumanis, pp. 17-18.
- Carne-Ross, D.S. *Pindar*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- Codrescu, Andrei, ed. *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late*. New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1987.
- Dumanis, Michael and Cate Marvin, eds. *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century*. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2006.
- Gray, Darrell. "Ode to Food." In Codrescu, pp. 388-9.
- Hoagland, Tony. "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment." *Poetry*. March 2006. Vol. 187, no. 6. pp. 508-519.
- Hoover, Paul. "Ode to the Protestant Poets." In Codrescu, pp. 422-3.
- Horace. "I.1." Trans. Robert Pinsky. In McClatchy, p. 17.
- "I.20." Trans. W.S. Merwin. In McClatchy, p. 65.
- "I.33." Trans. Heather McHugh. In McClatchy, p. 93.
- "I.37." Trans. Ellen Bryant Voigt. In McClatchy, p. 103.
- "II.4" Trans. Rachel Hadas. In McClatchy, p. 117.
- "II.5." Trans. Donald Hall. In McClatchy, p. 119.
- "II.7." Trans. J.D. McClatchy. In McClatchy, p. 123.
- "II.12." Trans. Carolyn Kizer. In McClatchy, p. 133.
- "II.19." Trans. Linda Gregerson. In McClatchy, p. 153.
- "III.8." Trans. Charles Wright. In McClatchy, p.187.
- *The Complete Odes and Epodes*. Trans. David West. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- *The Odes: New Translations by Contemporary Poets*. Ed. J.D. McClatchy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.

- Jump, John D. *The Ode*. (Series Title: The Critical Idiom; General Editor: John D. Jump. Vol. 30). London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1974.
- Kiernan, V.G. *Horace: Poetics and Politics*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1999.
- Lefkowitz, Mary K. *First-Person Fictions: Pindar's Poetic 'I'*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.
- Maddison, Carol. *Apollo and the Nine: A History of the Ode*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins P, 1960.
- Miller, Andrew W. *Greek Lyric: An Anthology in Translation*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, 1996.
- Mulroy, David. *Early Greek Lyric Poetry*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.
- Pindar. *Pindar's Odes*. Trans. Roy Arthur Swanson. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1974.
- Pinsky, Robert. "Occasional Poetry and Poetry on Occasions." *The Paris Review*. Spring 2000. Vol. 42, no. 154. pp.76-82.
- Rohrer, Matthew. "My Government." In Dumanis.
- Sappho. *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. Trans. Anne Carson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.
- Sayers Ellis, Thomas. "Atomic Bride." In Dumanis, pp. 105-8.
- Stewart, Susan. "What Praise Poems Are For." *PMLA*, 120(1):235-245.
- Wright, C.D. "The New American Ode." *The Antioch Review*. 1989 Summer; 47 (3): 287-296.

PART II

POEMS

Ode: Decay Theory

In the emptied house,
the phone's ring shudders
a moment like cold flesh,
then decays. You have moved

the bed into the bed of your pickup.
It was yours before the marriage, after
all. It never learned my shape, the way
it learned your shape. Or I never learned

to fit inside it. Inside the house,
I watch you, forgetting
to answer the phone. Forgetting
the ritual of the phone.

Hello, this is she, a properness
discarded weeks into the courtship.
I began to say, it's me,
it's me. You will unlearn

my body as you learned it. Quickly,
as quickly as I learned the informal
ritual of call and response.
Marriage decays with disuse,

a language you once knew but now
never speak, and we the idioms, fallen
out of common speech. Easy enough to say,
again, This is she, this is she—to correct

myself to unlearn the informal,
to let the phrases decay.
A sensation, the phone
pressed against my ear and released,

triggering the memory of a fingertip
tracing the shell of my ear, then lifting.
The pulse between your finger and my ear
lost. The knowledge of the pulse

not lost. I will have to unlearn
myself. I will have to let decay
the practices of marriage until you
too become a stimulus I cannot

answer: a call for which there is no
response, an echo for which
there are no walls.

Ode: Brain Field Theory

The spoon will not refuse its duty.
Nor will the water,
which takes the cup's shape.

The tea does not neglect the water.
Nor has the water failed
the spoon's agitations:

only, I must think of them
turning against the ease
of the morning.

Ode: Learned Helplessness

You lift the last box: the mechanisms
of your hand clasping and gripping, the fold
your body makes over itself to lift what it is not.

I should be cleaning the stained carpet.
I should be fixing the chipped paint.
Instead, I watch you lifting and carrying.

I watch you as if listening for some echo.
Something decaying and inevitable.
I cannot break away from it.

Divorce, you said, would free us from love,
the way a dog is freed from a kennel.
But we have learned too much.

Love is a cage with an electrified floor.
Between the shocks, we tell ourselves,
there will be no more shocks. The gate

locked, the cage boxing us in, we stay.
We stay because we are told, it's good
to stay. We stay because we learn to stay.

Even when the cage is opened, even when the gate
swings open, when we are given too much
room to stay on the electrified plate,

we stay. I am watching you pause
before the truck, the box in your arms.

Go, I want to say, go and I will go.

Ode: On the Law of Use

Boxed behind the window glass,
the cat, still as a specimen, watches

a stimulus: a bird too quick
to classify, too quick for the cat's

unpracticed grasp. Distance and gas
trapped between the double panes

keep the bird's heat from calling
the cat to hunger. This too

is a practice that leads to power.

Ode: Abney's Effect

You asked me once, why sweep
in the darkness? I say
to cover the floors methodically,
to let friction guide each stroke.

I say, because I will not clean
what seems clean. I did not
say: the light, the pleasure of shaking
the dustpan, the sudden glint

of a lost peridot among the dust.
A light switch clicks; a sudden field
illuminated, ununified. A center: a white
Styrofoam cup against a white t-shirt.

A hand surrounding, yours, white
vapors from the cup's white rim.
Was it you who told me the paradox?
Light as both wave and particle,

but neither, but behaving as both.
And all behaving the same, reaching
some target and back to our eyes,
instantaneously, or instantaneously enough.

And I, seeing only your center: a hand,
yours, a coffee cup, a field you have been
so many mornings waking me.
Your white t-shirt still damp with sleep.

Your hand around a coffee cup.
You wake me. You turn on the light.
Illuminated from the center outward.
The light naming your parts.

Not the light,
but my perception of you
names you.

Aloft

I have tied the tarsal
bones of our marriage

to balloons,
released them,

the helium in them cold
and joyful.

When they land in rural Kansas,
a place we will never go,

a girl not our daughter
will mistake them

for assent.

Hunger

Outside, the two-hundred twenty miles pass:
a succession of hay-laden fields, cattle and goats,
fields relieved of their late summer crops
and readied for what will fill them over the short
southern winter, rows of new houses
built to buffer the edges of cities
the way sunflowers buffer the borders between
crop and chaff, built to distract the hungers of flocks,
a succession of neat medians, the white lines and yellow
lines keeping traffic between them,
the highway carved and paved and maintained
and traveled—the lot of us who choose the early
Sunday to take the Interstate while it is free
cannot choose our ways through the state.

We take paths already imagined.

Ode: Escape Learning

For the run of the film,
three weeks, I have come,
sat in the velvet seat.
On the first night, I watched
a group of children
nab a street cat and hold it still
against the asphalt.
There must be rules for this,
the way there are rules for all
children's games. Each swings
a stick the length of a child's
arm, once, hitting
the cat's midsection.
The blows parallel the fur's stripes.
The stripes parallel the rib cage.
When the game is finished, the children
throw the limp cat into the river.
The moon says nothing:
the river reflects its borrowed
light back in the impact.

I could not watch
the moon after that.
But nights I would
come to the theater,
watch up until the point
the cat was thrown.
Later, I could only
stay until I saw the cat,
then until I saw the children
watching, then until some somber
prescient note
foretells their arrival.

Tonight, I cannot stay,
cannot look at the screen's
light, reflected

light like the moon's.

Ode: Exile

You came to me disguised
as one of my own. I tried
to exile myself, to remove
myself to another city.

I tried to exile myself by lying
very still. Somewhere, you tell
a story about us.

I must fly back to you.

Isolated Sleep Paralysis

1.

My mother, painting at the kitchen table only
when my father is away. Unnamable flowers,
shadowless against a wash of cotton:

since unpickable and dry and tatted into the paper,
I call for them. Since unmovable and small,
their edges breathe into everything.

2.

What is less than vision:
Blindnesses hover over objects
or over the touch of object and object.

Sleep as a portrait of my mother:
Light, free of amplitude and boundary,
as if I too recall the loss of movement.

3.

The physical movement of prayer, folded
into itself. Sparrows among my mother's
flowers. Nothing moves but light.

Were I to die now, my hands would remain
rigid and unclasped. My mother
prays for paint again and I for light which flees from it.

4.

When my father is home, my mother's hands
shrink. In the water she has left her brushes,
light pauses, turns around. Asleep,

I hear none of this light's scattering. What diagnoses
wake me from vision? It is time
to tell them.

5.

There are a number of conditions
to explain my blindness: Flecks of scarred cells
broken and floating in my left eye.

My left retina completely detached.
A tumor blocking the optic nerve.
When my father is home, my mother is sleeping.

6.

What moves is never vision: An object
between. My mother paints curving things.
I am awake and stilled, watching

the arc of light floating in my left
visual field. A halo. Nothing
bounces from it to return to me.

7.

When my father and mother are asleep,
the flowers speak. I drift
from my room to name them.

The one with the halo becomes
brittle with age. She has painted
flowers onto her own skin.

8.

What I tell them, after the MRIs and the blood
work, is that I have taken up her occupation.
Mother, I am painting flowers

again. I am drying in a series of lights,
trapped and withering.

Lyric Poem as Phenomenon

The poet only perceives vividly his own state and describes it.

-- *Arthur Schopenhauer*

This is how I imagined you:
not a mania of the body, but a mania of will,
gorging on thought and touch.

No noumena in biography. In yours, the self
stepping in front of the self I assume:
a shy child, a row of toys, a park.

In yours, I emerge. I blush
behind my kite as you pass, my mother
pinching my hand, letting go

a length of string long as a treatise.
I want to say: my soul above my body.
In yours, I say: I am reeled in.

When, years later, I meet you
I want to ask, what if
the soul were an object of the body,

some wind the curtained frame
catches and consumes. Your laughter
aches over me: I am a woman

reading a book. Later, after plates of bread
I walk behind you, breathing for hours
what you have thought to breathe.

No noumena in biography: no wind
separates kite from child, body from soul,
word from word. You chide me—

this is how I imagined you. How else
to say what I know but through this
pacing between sensed thing and sensed thing

this flight of skin, this flight
of being?

Familial Sleep Paralysis

We wait until the silence passes.
Mother, I have gone
to noise absolutely. Some instinct
in giving me a nightlight that hums.

Some instinct in giving me
hymns enough to fill you in
like watercolors in a line drawing.

A continuity not of sound but of hearing:
what waits on these edges,
these sirens, these flitting slams
of doors?

The Hyacinth Girl Speaks of the Night Sky

What did I want from these blue and gaping mouths
around me? Unwound from the stems,

or plucked from them: not the *AI* you thought you heard:
Apollo's voice filling my arms --

(You gave me hyacinths first a year ago)
Apollo's voice calmed by a year

of grief and watching, a constellation made
of petals and grief -- not the *AI*

which marks the hyacinths. These are not his blood
still blue in his arms, in his eyes.

These petals torn from your blindness, filaments,
peduncles, and anthers still hold

my arms, my hair: a constellation not seen
when late in the evening I

returned alone, the sky wet and starless, wet
and malleable as a stem.

Iridium Flares

My father, still as a pillar in darkness,
marks by the slope of pines the arc
the satellite has taken, will take.

Bricked against movement, we become
a temple by the highway to observe this flare,
this *lowest absolute*,

though I am swatting at mosquitoes,
and my mother has bent down
to pet a neighbor's cat.

Headlights dawn from the curved road,
eclipsing the darkness with vision:
My father tilting his watch

toward my mother and the cat,
the satellite tilting toward the sun.

When the light comes, we fall away.

Sleep Paralysis with Hypnagogic Hallucinations

A woman dreams she is a child-emperor. No one believes her hands extend beyond the small circle her body makes.

When she orders the cathedral covered in the wet and singing heads of poppies, it is decided, she will be given twenty wives of her choosing.

She sings about girls thrown into rivers, found, bodies carved into harps and violins. When she orders the cathedral covered in the wet heads

of her fiancées, they bind her hands, leave her in the poppy fields.

Weight

1.

A child holds a mirror to herself.
She weighs herself in it. Her reflection,
massless and crying, says
I cannot see you.
(Is this the way we must find things?)

2.

Not like a calyx, shrugging
open to reveal
a flower, or the weight
of a flower:

I love you,
madly for love
means I am looking
at you, and madly
means I don't know
I am something
other than you.

3.

What is like a calyx
is highly heated dust, the only
sign of black holes other than
absence.

Something that blooms
too much.
Something rimmed
by what will become
a part of itself.

4.

We set the mirrors
up to reflect themselves.
My daughter only wants to see
herself in too many reflections,
all mouthing, *I love you.*

I cannot say, *I love you,*
madly until she collapses
in on herself,
until I swirl around her,
dust around a silk flower.

Sleep Paralysis with Hypnagogic Hallucinations and Silence

I am supine and cleaning
the kitchen as I have done
too many nights. My mother

goads me: I am dropping glasses
again. I know the sound
will wake my desire to move.

(Sleep as introversion and loss
of the conscious self.)

I cannot, Mother, I
cannot. Cleaning the kitchen
with you always, though I am

strangely capable in my still
and horizontal state, rag in hand.
At least, this is what I feel

summoned cut my hand. I am dropping
glasses again, Mother. All this small
laughter that comes of fracture

will not break my stillness.
Is this what you warned me about:
taking myself too far from the world?

Ode: Topaz

To see it, we are behind glass,
the world's largest blue topaz, cut,
without inclusions.

If not the world's largest, then ours.

My daughter reaches up,
touches her thumb to the glass,
cleaves the illusion of vision from vision.

There should be clarity in this moment,
clear as an expletive, clear as the glass
that surrounds the thumbprint's greasy whorls.

But someone with ammonia and a rag
will wipe the occlusion from the glass.

We tell each other that the glass box is a ring
box, the topaz an unopened gift for the pterosaur
whose bones fly above us on wires.

We tell each other that the museum's great
hall is really the pterosaur's tomb, the topaz
and the giant amethyst geodes
treasures for the afterlife.

We cannot decide if the stone
fish were meant as companions or food.

And we tell each other it is good
that we must adore the worlds
we cut for ourselves.

Hypnopompic Sleep Paralysis

Sleep as an incompleteness. I wake
divided: My body beneath myself.

A body held still by a body of dreams--

No dreams. I wake in my childhood
bedroom, beneath the lean of box

shadows, beneath the refinished walls,
the retiled ceiling, the recarpeted floor.

How nice, you would have said, it looks.
How nice. A small darkness repainted,

and I in it.

My body disturbs its own sleep.
To see myself, and not move myself,

To recede back
into that vague sleep,

I recreate myself to look
down on my body, and see

nothing more than what the body
pulls from itself, creates from itself,

this breathing and passive thing
I can no longer occupy.

To be both body and desire to move
the body into some altered form;

To be both body and desire and not
the embodiment of that movement:

What dream was it that left me
supine, still, and struggling?

Aubade

She paced our visits
in tellings I could not count.
A rehearsed joke
told to audiences
we became, now older,
now minutes older.

The last lucid visit,
1980, and driving away
from the south Texas coast,
the first hurricane of the season.

A storm that returns
to rehearse the same half-
tales before waning.

A morning of broken pines.

Ode: On Solitude

I spend an evening watching the way
a nail's point breaks a layer of paint.

Each nail in the box of fifty, each half-inch
driven nearly flat to the matte eggshell latex
on the empty apartment wall.

Less a line of heads than a line of busts.
Hatched and incorporate,
incapable now of bearing weight.

No, no. This is not a gallery.
None among them speak.
In the space beneath, nothing

hangs: no mirrors, no acts against mirrors.
Once, when the figure we made
lay in the replica of a bed,

a docent came and explained to the crowd
around us that divorce too could be a product.
Onlookers applauded. The guard prodded us

off the platform. When we joined
the audience, we could not see the shapes:
the Lethean mounds our bodies made.

No, no. Nothing can be seen in this.
We mutely watched the way
inaction celebrates absence

as if the image of something so still
and solid would shelter us
from our parting.

Ode: Law of Closure

Figure One: the curving lines create the incomplete figure on a page. The brain connects them and perceives a face, whole and absolute.

Figure Two: the slight offset slant of the second figure is corrected in perception. The imbalance perceived as balance, as symmetry.

Figure Three: the dark lines arcing but not touching, the heavy lines of two figures, nearly touching but not. The tendency to perceive marriage as a correction of the incongruent.

Polarity

An over-lit photograph: A frog,
midsection splayed liked a trumpet's
bell. Only the steel pins and white vinyl are labeled.
A thing to keep it open; a thing to keep it up.

Because of the vivisection in this photograph,
a dead frog as still life, a frog
lodged in a medical waste bag
and tossed away, I have to believe
all frogs have been gassed and dissected.

I have tried to make new frogs
out of their beautiful parts.
Ones with red spots and legs
jutting from the junction of pin and midsection.
Frogs in petting zoos, frogs in pixilated newsprint,
mid-hop, frogs in plaster, velveteen.
A swirl in wood paneling,
its throat sac puffed out.

You, with your mammal-heart,
and its four-chambered hopping and call,
long ago swallowed me up,
or molded me—I can't recall which.

I try to line myself with a frog's shape.
The pins slip from my skin,
and I can no longer hold the camera.

Ode: Example

```
/*  
  
    Come after, you who watch  
    me call out. Utility implies  
    an audience.  
  
    Call this an example.  
    This is a simple program, designed  
    to demonstrate the language,  
    the way a ringing phone  
    explains a symphony.  
  
*/  
  
class {  
  
    // All demonstrations begin with a call to main().  
    public static void main (String args [] ) {  
        System.out.println ("Hello, World!");  
  
    }  
}  
  
Hello, World!
```

Game

They are so young, so full of blood
and stories. They hold hands. They cling,
until they do not want to cling anymore.
They talk constantly, as if by the effort
of their speech, they could ignite
themselves and take the rest of us
up into their narratives. They do not
watch us, those who walk past.

They cannot enjoy themselves
exhausting us. There is nothing
left to carry them across to us,
nothing to carry us to who
they will become.

Ode: On the Principle of Advantage

Against the apartment wall, the absence of a portrait
presses itself, the lack of nail and wire holds
nothing up. There is no mute reflection
of my face against the face of someone else.

Like a child reaching into an urn, I slide
my hand into the unpacked box.
At the nadir of what was once ours,
your framed photograph. On its surface,
shards of glass, the ground bones of the body
once the softness of the body is burned away:

No, no. Do not go to the unemptied boxes, neither seek
sconces nor the curio case in which you would only
put the small particulars of distraction and fear;
for the wall is not designed for wit or witness.

But when the flatness of its surface calls
you to act against its form, drive your hand
against it. The shape the handprint makes,
the bits of glass in the blood:

a bright impression of a face,
a bright impression of absence.

Evening, News

And here you are again, holding a remote,
keeping the volume lower than you can
possibly hear.

When you watch this rumbling surface,
the evening news, everything is wrecked
cars stalled, freeways closed.

A camera pans in on a candle's
flicker, follows the wax down the drip ring.
Who all this is for

you do not know. Somewhere a body lies
praying. You turn the volume all the way
down, toward silence,

toward that moment: Nothing.
You starve yourself of sound. This, your stillness,
is sanctified not

by its small movement toward compassion,
but by its coexistence with passion.
Somewhere else a body

lies as still as the bones in your ears.
Somewhere, you will pause, after the flicker
of the news is gone,

open your hands and move past this silence,
which is a nearness too great to cross.

Ode: Mere Exposure Effect

You are rooted to this place only
because you have lived through

its seasons: these mountain laurels,
these oleanders, these wide medians

blue and present with what has been
planted there. This does not mean

you would not love another place,
only that you would need its springs

and what those weeks expose.

Even exiles must learn to let
what surrounds them also attract;

that the asphalt's black pathway,
the one that led me to this place,

is not the same as that which keeps
me rooted here. I could leave,

but I have learned through exposure
the highway has its own season.

After "Poet's Obligation"

And I shall broadcast, saying nothing. . . .

-- *Neruda*

The sea has become too full of voices.
Who built this pipeline to carry them across?
Who dug the trench for the cable?

Tea from the ashes of burned news
papers stains the china,
though no one drinks loose tea anymore.

And no one brews tea with brine.
Here, let me dab at your chin a bit.
It is not the heart that is shuttered.

I, being poor and small, carry around
a tea cup's broken handle, edges
worn smooth as windows.

How can I bring you the sea?

Ode: Thoughts

You are like an atom of a heavy element.
Force holds you together.
Many forces, like an empire.

When I try to invade you,
you resist.

If I do not try to control
you, my thoughts,
you fall apart.

Ode: Surface

The skin around the cut curls back
as if the knowledge of its
rupture shocks it.
It knows it cannot be two
halves of anything. It is a plane,
single sided. The beginning and end
two points set on a graph.

But the skin knows nothing.
It will not remember this.
It will not recall the principle
that keeps the bellies of birds
light against the sky, the backs
of fish dark against the dark
surface of the water above.

Beneath the bandage, I believe
my palm is as it was
before the glass broke
the image: my hand as a solid thing.

The closing wound
refuses to remain
skin. It will become
a thing with dimension,
without color. The skin
will remain only a surface.

Do not heal. Do not scar over.
Do not turn inward.
Within no possibility for belief
or the denial of belief.

Coda

I.

Beneath the body, the pitch
nearly reversing, nearly sung;
the physical pitch and roll
water assumes as its duty,
to which the more solid
details within the water's
order must submit;
the high ambivalent pitch
masks itself as a low constant,
against which the movements
of the body must be judged.
The movement itself will deny this:
it cannot judge; it is only
an expression of force
made corporate, incorporate.

The body cannot know this.
Instead, the body, moved
by the water, imagines the ocean
holds it up. Their contact
is buffered by a wooden
ship's hull. The sides of the hull
are wooden beams; the body
cannot know with certainty
how to cut and cure
and bend the wood lashed
together for this. The body
cannot know the chronology
of the wood's growth,
its manufacture into useful shape.
A shape of accepting the water
beneath: the water above becomes
an apparition or a disaster.
The body imagines it knows the water.
It knows the misalignments of stars
and sight. This is how we find
ourselves, it thinks.

The body imagines itself
shipboard. The body senses the sails'
snaps, the unforeseeable
wind caught in the cloth's

tight weave. The body senses the deck's
wooden beams; its weak-arched feet
pressing against parallel boards.
The body senses the sudden
drop: not less air pressing
down on its surface, but less force
pressing the air down.
The slackened vertical
force of the air
met by a new lateral
slap of wind. The body knows
equilibrium must be kept.
When one force weakens, another
exerts itself. Systems must
replace systems.

So it is too the body imagines
with itself. The body
watches the storm's edge
blur the edge between ocean,
air. The water above,
the water below. None of it
senses the body in return.
The body imagines it
must remain between the waters'
bodies. Who can decide
whether to drown
in the rain water above,
in the ocean's water
beneath?

The body imagines
the storm: the ship's
pitch heightened by the new
system's force, the force
it must exert to keep
upright on the deck.
If the body were not
afraid of drowning, it would
define the storm, step away
from the danger of the rain,
the danger of the broken masts
slamming down on the fragile
body, as easily as the body might cross
an untrafficked street
further calmed by a stoplight.

If the body did not fear
the storm, it might
quote other bodies' knowledge.
Here, a graph of barometric
pressure, falling with the storm's
approach. Here a view of an image
taken by a weather satellite,
far above the storm's reach.
Here is where the storm will go.
The bodies in its path have bought
insurance, the companies who insure
the threatened bodies are themselves
fully insured. If no one drowns,
no one will be hurt.

If the body did not fear
the storm, it would fear its lack
of knowledge about the storm.
The body knows the satellite's
value. The body knows
the storm's value.

When the rain stops, the guests aboard
the party boat console the bride: good
luck, this coincidental precipitation.
The captain steers the boat around the lake
one more time, extends the reception
into the evening. Guests drink more in the dark,
the dark of evening, the dark of rain.
The lake is small enough that a bridge
extends from the man-made island
back to the man-made banks. The bride
remembers the problem of the odd-
numbered bridges and the banks in a city
whose name has changed, bridges over
a river whose name has also changed.
The challenge of starting in a random place,
walking once over each bridge and returning
back to the starting place impossible:
the need for one less bridge, one less shoreline.
She cannot imagine the man who solved
this challenge with a graph; she would have
walked the city over and over, tried
each path until she lost her way,

until she would have to ask a stranger
which street would lead her back.

If the body did not fear
the storm, it would not know
it is not a body.

Not like Jonah, shouting in a whale's belly,
not like Odysseus, tied undeafened to a mast:

the body lies among the boat's instruments,
pinging a constant epithalamium to itself.

Somewhere above it, the signal returns.
This soothes the body, which keeps pinging.

We have always made gods of metals and shadows.
We have always spoken only to ourselves.

My man sent me walking,
because I had a troubled mind.

My man sent me walking,
because I had a troubled mind.

He said walk right through this city,
leave your troubles all behind.

Walk over all those bridges,
then come right back home to me.

Walk over all those bridges,
then come right back home to me.

When you've crossed the river, baby,
you'll be just where you need to be.

My momma always told me,
you can't cross a bridge but once.

My momma always told me,
you can't cross a bridge but once.

....

When the rain stops, the guests
move from beneath the tent-like
shells on party boat's deck.
The bride has re-emerged. She is
leaning against the boat's railing,
looking out over the water, the lake
moving beneath the boat only
because someone decided to build
a lake from water and absence.
Someone is recording her on video:
her gown white against the white
railing, the water dark behind her.
In the distance, rain falls.
She is holding a drink, green
liquid in a martini glass.
Someone else records her
from a different angle. In this shot,
the camera captures her free hand
lifting the hem of her skirt from the wet
deck. A little of her drink
spills when the boat nods at the waves.
This does not concern her.
The evening is nearly over.
The deck is lined with a slip-
proof texture. No one will fall
into the water. No one
will drown in the lake.

II.

They recount small things to each other:

Lack hits at once, a light
too quick for the eyes to measure.
The sudden presence of a delivery
man standing at my desk.

Everything comes in brown
boxes: paper clips, reams
of paper, realization. And I open
each box, giving the contents

a swift shake. What is there, what is

not there. You, the delivery man,
standing over me, watching me
parse the packing slip as though it were

something I could translate into wonder.
Nothing comes of it.
Boredom, forgive me for personifying
you. I have nothing else

to do but wait. When you arrive,
you arrive like light.
When you do not come to me,
I do not wait for you.

In the distance, a band plays
some unrecognizable melody,
the complexity reduced by distance
to bass thudding against what remains
of the higher registers. This is all
that will come across: the underlying
structure, from which the guests
can overlay a tune, a few
chords and perhaps some lyrics,
something which says this is my
condition as emphasized by this key,
accepted as carrying the connotation
of sadness
or loss.

The body cannot hear this.
It hears the pinging, its own,
the return pings. It hears the engine
pushing the boat in measured
circles around the man-made banks.
It hears the voices of the guests
filtered through themselves;
the sound is not speech but feedback.
It also hears the captain inhale,
let out a little breath, and hum
something that could go with the distant
bass line, something he could not
hear himself for the sounds
that the boat makes, that the distance
makes against the water.

III.

She thinks as she arcs her hand
over her head, the moment she
releases the white, ribboned bunch:
how many times will I have

to injure myself before I can see
all my own bones? The solid
white against the soft grayness:
the quantifiable image of herself.

A motion, stripped of ornament,
this ornament that play becomes,
drops from the body as easily
as the bouquet into the lake.

Someone shouts: The lake will be
the next bride. The water swallows
anything we throw into it. The body,
she knows, cannot take in more

than the ringing signal it hears.