

The Genre of ODE in 18th–20th Century Russian Literature

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the poetic evolution of the ode genre in Russian literature from the second half of the 18th century to the 20th century. It explores how the genre, initially formed within the framework of classicism, gradually acquired humanistic, philosophical, and lyrical features. The article highlights the contribution of poets such as G.R. Derzhavin and A.S. Pushkin, who transformed the ode into a vehicle for expressing personal and moral ideas. Additionally, the study examines the modernization of the genre in the 20th century by poets like V. Mayakovsky and A. Voznesensky, who introduced irony, political pathos, and journalistic tone into their odes. The work also addresses genre transformation, including the blending of ode with other poetic forms such as essay and publicist poetry. Overall, the article demonstrates that the ode genre, although rooted in tradition, remained dynamic and continued to evolve in response to socio-political changes and aesthetic demands.*

Key words: *ode, genre, Russian poetry, Derzhavin, Pushkin, Mayakovsky, Voznesensky, classicism, lyrical subject, irony, philosophy, political poetry, genre transformation, personal lyricism.*

In the second half of the 18th century, among the poets who worked in the ode genre in Russian literature, figures such as Gavril Derzhavin, Vasily Petrov, and Mikhail Kheraskov can be named.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin (1743–1816), in his odes such as “God” (1784) — a philosophical ode about the nature of God and man — and “Monument” (a philosophical ode expressing the poet’s literary legacy and his service to the people), exemplifies the key characteristics attributed to the ode genre. The very themes artistically interpreted in these works demonstrate the elevated qualities typical of the genre.

As Vissarion Belinsky remarked, “Derzhavin humanized the genre; he filled the ode with human emotions and personal experiences. It was no longer about emperors — it was about people.”

In Derzhavin’s “God”, the greatness of God and the relationship between man and the Creator are conveyed in artistic language. Derzhavin depicts God as a supreme being, eternal and the force behind the creation of the universe. In his view, God is manifested in everything in nature. His influence and power encompass the entire world. The poet connects every element of nature — particularly the sun, stars, and the waves of the sea — to the divine power of God.

Nothing! — and yet You shine within me

With the grandeur of Your goodness;

You mirror Yourself in me

Like the sun in a drop of water.

Nothing! — and yet I feel life,

Soaring endlessly,
Always striving toward the heights.
My soul yearns for Your being,
It contemplates, thinks, and reasons:
I exist — therefore, surely, You exist too.

The excerpt above from the ode illustrates how the divine light appears in a person's life through closeness to God, the manifestation of divine attributes within the individual ("Nothing! — and yet You shine within me"), and the philosophical meditation that even in a single drop of water ("Like the sun in a drop of water"), the presence of God is reflected. This is a powerful poetic and philosophical reflection on divine immanence and the spiritual elevation of man through communion with the Creator.

Overall, Derzhavin's "God" ode is a powerful and beautiful work that expresses the spiritual and divine connection between God and man. The light received from God by the individual in this ode points to the creative power within human life.

A. S. Pushkin is one of the most prominent literary figures of the second half of the 18th century in Russian literature. The influence of the ode genre is clearly evident in his early poetic works. During his years at the Lyceum (1813–1817), he composed several poems in the traditional ode style. Among these are "Liberty" (Volnost') and "The Village" (Derevnya). While these poems reflect the influence of classical odes, Pushkin simultaneously sought to express his individual spiritual and philosophical views through them. These odes promote themes such as freedom, justice, human dignity, and criticism of government.

"Liberty" is a politically and philosophically charged ode in which Pushkin criticizes the autocratic regime and advocates for justice and human freedom. In the poem, the poet condemns the tyranny of monarchs and asserts that power must align with the will and rights of the people.

It is important to note that the main generic feature of classical odes is praise. However, in "Liberty", Pushkin does not praise monarchy—instead, he critiques it. This was a radical and non-traditional approach for the Russian classical ode of the 18th century. In this way, Pushkin effectively reformed the ode genre, transforming it into a means of speaking truth.

Begone, hide from my sight,
O feeble queen of Cytherea!
Where are you, where are you,
Proud singer of Freedom, dread of kings?
Come, tear the wreath from my brow,
Smash my delicate lyre...
I wish to sing of Freedom to the world,
To strike corruption on its throne.

Here, "Cytherea" refers to Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love and beauty in Greek mythology. The poet's description of her as a "feeble queen" implies her inadequacy in the struggle for justice and freedom.

I wish to sing of Freedom to the world,
To strike corruption on its throne.

For Pushkin, freedom is a natural, divine right of every individual. No one—not even a monarch—has the right to deprive a person of this fundamental liberty.

“Liberty” represents Pushkin’s first bold statement on society, politics, and human rights. In it, the poet enriched the traditional ode form with new content—introducing ideas about popular sovereignty, the rule of law, and personal freedom.

This ode remains significant not only as a poetic work but also as a political manifesto.

Alongside Derzhavin, several other writers of the second half of the 18th century—such as Pushkin, Bogdanovich, Viskovatov, and Karamzin—also composed odes. Each, in their own creative style, addressed pressing social, moral, and religious issues of their time. However, many of them enriched the ode genre with personal, social, and aesthetic meanings. Moreover, the ode began to move away from its purely classical structure, increasingly incorporating new approaches and romantic sentiments.

1. Post-Classical Tendencies in the Ode Genre (20th Century)

In the 20th century, the classical form of the ode genre was used less frequently, though its spirit remained. During the Soviet literary era, the ode was revived mainly as a means to glorify the Party, the homeland, labor, and heroism. Key characteristics of odes from this period can be summarized as follows:

A) A re-emergence of the ode genre marked by personal emotions, inner turmoil, and aesthetic renewal.

B) A departure from classical forms, embracing individual styles, and reflecting the influence of modernism and postmodernism, resulting in a reconfiguration of the genre.

C) In the 20th century and beyond, odes began to evolve outside strict ideological frameworks, shaped increasingly by various aesthetic schools and movements.

D) The blending of the ode with other poetic forms such as lyric poetry, journalism, and essays significantly expanded the genre’s expressive capabilities, resulting in new intonational and semantic dimensions.

Many prominent poets of 20th-century Russian literature wrote in the ode genre. These odes often took on celebratory, ironic, personal-lyrical, or philosophical forms. The genre moved away from its traditional structure and acquired new meanings and functions. This transformation was reflected not only in its aesthetic traits but also in its social roles.

Notable poets such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Yesenin, Andrei Voznesensky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Robert Rozhdestvensky each reinterpreted the ode genre in their own stylistic and thematic directions.

Vladimir Mayakovsky is one of the most prominent Russian poets of the 20th century. Some of Mayakovsky’s poems can be seen as modernist reinterpretations of the ode genre. His works exhibit several traditional ode elements—celebratory pathos, elevated intonation, and the glorification of a particular figure, idea, or event. Mayakovsky did not retain the formal structure of the classical ode, but his works incorporated its contemporary and journalistic manifestations. Therefore, his poetry can be interpreted as a new poetic form of the ode.

His work "Ode to the Revolution" (*Oda revolyutsii*) is considered a significant socio-literary phenomenon in 20th-century Russian poetry. In this poem, Mayakovsky artistically expresses his loyalty to socialist ideals, his zeal for building a new society, and his faith in the future.

"Ode to the Revolution" is dedicated to the October Revolution and its socio-political significance. The poet presents the revolution not merely as a political upheaval but as the core of moral and social reform in human life. The poem focuses on themes such as building a new society, human rights and freedoms, and social justice.

To you,

booed,

mocked by batteries,

to you,
scarred by the slander of bayonets,
with ecstasy I lift
above the flood of insults
a solemn ode –
“O”!
O, bestial!
O, childlike!
O, pennyworth!
O, great!

This ode was written by Vladimir Mayakovsky based on the events of the October Revolution of 1917. For Mayakovsky, the revolution was not merely a political event but also a spiritual and cultural upheaval. In these lines, Mayakovsky does not idealize the revolution but rather views it as a struggle between destiny, life, hope, and violence. Through paradox, he portrays revolution as not only light but shadow, not only justice but also sacrifice, not only freedom but also responsibility. The poet does not shy away from the painful and complex nature of revolution. This realistic and romantic approach continues throughout the poem, including in its powerful final lines:

With rifle butts you drive grey-haired admirals
headfirst
off the bridge in Helsingfors.
Yesterday’s wounds you lick and lick,
and again I see opened veins.
To you, from the philistine –
“O, be thrice cursed!” –
and from me, the poet –
“O, be four times blessed, exalted!”

In these lines, Mayakovsky expresses his loyalty to the revolution, and more importantly, his unshaken belief in its greatness. Even if others condemn it, the poet still raises his voice: "Revolution, be blessed!"

In contrast, Andrei Voznesensky’s “Ode to the Gossipers” (Ода сплетникам) also belongs to the ode genre in title, but unlike the classical ode, it is ironic and modern in tone and style. The poet anthropomorphizes “gossip”, creating a satirical portrayal.

He describes gossipers’ mouths as “royal mouths” and their ears as “toilets”, thus clearly displaying his irony and critical attitude toward them:

Oh, gossipers! Oh, their tales!
I adore their royal mouths,
their ears,
like toilets –
infallible and clean.

Toward the end of the poem, the poet discusses gossipers’ attitudes toward love and passion. In the line:

“So falsehood becomes the guarantee

of your love, of your longing...”

he presents a poetic interpretation of how gossipers intertwine love and slander. The poem ends with an unexpected twist, declaring:

Shout on, my dears, howl louder!..

Long live the slanderers!

Savor it! Twitch from your ties!

But why is it so terribly quiet?

You are not judged, not blamed,

and no telephones are ringing...

Andrei Voznesensky does not glorify “gossipers” in his ode; rather, he ridicules them, portraying them as an absurd part of life. For this reason, the work can be classified as an ironic or even postmodern ode.

Overall, the formation of the ode genre in Russian literature dates back to the first half of the 18th century, where it initially appeared in a formal and celebratory tone, serving as a means of glorifying authority. Classical figures such as Lomonosov and Derzhavin developed the genre not only as a poetic form but also as a platform for expressing national, moral, and political ideals.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the ode underwent a transformation in its spiritual-aesthetic and social content. Especially in the 20th century, poets like Mayakovsky and Voznesensky distanced the ode from traditional celebratory poetics and enriched it with journalistic spirit, emotional pathos, and reflections of modern reality. This evolution demonstrates the dynamic nature of the ode and its continuous development within literary processes.

By the second half of the 18th century and into the 19th century, the Russian ode genre became enriched with personal, philosophical, and lyrical content. In his ode “God”, Gavril Derzhavin explored the relationship between God and man through a philosophical and spiritual lens, while A.S. Pushkin, in his “Liberty”, expressed political and social critique through a form traditionally used for praise.

In the 20th century, the ode was reimagined and reshaped, as poets like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Andrei Voznesensky offered new poetic interpretations of the genre. During this period, the ode began to blend modernist and postmodernist elements, incorporating irony, publicist tones, and personal lyricism, thereby fulfilling new social and aesthetic functions.

Thus, the ode genre in Russian literature retained its poetic potential through continuous evolution and inter-genre integration, affirming its relevance across different historical and cultural contexts.

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