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English 492

Poem 454: "It was given to me by the Gods"

Poem 454 originally appeared in Fascicle 21 alongside several other "poems about poetry": "It would have starved a Gnat," "This was a poet," and "They shut me up in Prose." These poems were all written in 1862, the year that Dickinson wrote her first letter to Higginson and was probably thinking the most critically about her role as a poet.

The form of this poem differs from the majority of Dickinson's poems, including the aforementioned poems of Fascicle 21, which are written in four-line stanzas. However, the poem contains sixteen lines, so the lack of division does not stem from its inability to conform to quatrains. The style of the poem is also unusual, lacking the parataxis and repetition so abundant in her other poems.

The poem's subject concerns the unusual gift given to the speaker "by the Gods." Although the identity of the gift is purposely ambiguous, Dickinson uses the metaphor of earthly riches to connote her own treasure of writing. Her insistence that her writing was a gift bestowed upon her rather than an art she honed herself reflects the sentiment of many of her poems and letters: she often implies that her words are channeled through her rather than being native to her. For example, she describes her creative impulses in a letter to Higginson as a supernatural "Force" that she cannot restrain (Johnson 178). A poem beginning "The wind didn't come from the Orchard today, " implies that her thoughts come from someplace far away; another that her "Thought[s] belong to Him who gave it -/ Then - to Him Who bear," (poem 709). Dickinson seems to be almost possessed, or "haunted" as one of her poems conveys, by this gift of the Gods.

The poem begins at a time when the speaker was "new - and small" and

chronicles her growing realization of the significance of her "Present." Dickinson was eager to receive her gift when she "was a little Girl," clutching it "in [her] Hand" without putting her pen down. She didn't eat or sleep, "For fear it would be gone." Her ear seems to become more finely tuned to the music of poetry as she gets more experience writing: she reports that she "heard such words as 'Rich' / when hurrying to school." Her rhyme of "heard" and "word," emphasize this acute sense of hearing. The word that her ear picks out of the crowd illuminates Dickinson's deepest thoughts, as does the condescending smile that she tries to keep hidden. She looks down on those "lips at Corners of the Streets," which evoke the sensual mouths of prostitutes, for their lack of linguistic skill. This distaste for loose lips is confirmed in a letter to Higginson: "Of 'shunning Men and Women' - they talk of Hallowed things, aloud - and embarrass my Dog - He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side" (Johnson 178). Certainly then she "wrestled with a smile" when her sensitive ears were assaulted with the inferior language of women who concealed nothing, least of all something as private as their sexuality.

Dickinson seemed to feel the contrast between herself and the rest of the world at a particularly young age. She asks Higginson, "How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live." (Johnson 208). The world's conception of "Rich" lay in golden bars, but Dickinson realized that she could "take the [very] name of Gold" and manipulate it. Her capitalization of "Gold" here emphasizes it as well as connoting the Biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain."

Dickinson alone understood the meaning of words such as "Rich" and "Gold" that went far beyond street smarts, and she alone was worthy to use these words. She realized the power of a single word as well as the blinding light of words such as Truth ("Tell all the Truth but tell it Slant") that shine brighter than any earthly gold. Her

preoccupation with the “Word” takes on an almost religious fervor in this poem, foreshadowing other poems that deal with this subject, such as “The Word made Flesh.” Her final line stresses her convictions with the second and last rhyme of the poem: “The Difference - made me bold.” The exact rhyme of “gold” and “bold” emphasizes both of these words. Compared to the boldness of those on the “Corners of the Streets” throwing around words, Dickinson must have been bold indeed. She is bold to judge others, bold to assume that she may “take the name of Gold,” and infinitely bold to write such impertinent poems and send them to the editor of the Atlantic Monthly.

Christanne Miller writes of this “Difference - that made [her] bold” and tries to link it to other poems in Fascicle 21: “These are poems of difference and of strength, whether these qualities stem from unique starvation, [as in “It would have starved a Gnat”], or mysterious wealth, [seen in this poem and “This was a Poet”]” (121). However, Miller is mistaken in her attempt to align the darker undertones of “It was given to me by the Gods” with “This was a Poet.” Her claim that ““This was a Poet’ begins with what appears to be shared wealth but ends with the speaking poet’s ‘ceaseless Poverty’” is misguided (Miller 121). In fact, the Poet “Entitles Us, [meaning the readers], - by Contrast - [or “Difference”] / To ceaseless Poverty.” The majority of people live in a fog and only when they read poetry such as Dickinson’s do they realize what riches they have been missing in life.

Miller is correct in sensing a shadow over Dickinson’s gift, however. As Dickinson grows older and realizes the power of her words she also realizes the sacrifices that acceptance of the gift entails. Any power necessarily distances one from other people and takes away certain freedoms. Her fear of losing the gift and being forced to live in “ceaseless poverty” with the rest of the world is another cross that she must bear: Dickinson admits that she “did not dare to eat - or sleep-/ For fear it would be gone.” The amount of time that her gift demanded required sacrifices in other areas of her life:

she spent increasing amounts of time alone, neglecting her friends and family and conforming to the myth that Amherst expected of her; marriage was out of the question. In one letter to Higginson she writes, "When a little Girl I remember hearing that remarkable passage and preferring the 'Power,' not knowing at the time that 'Kingdom' and 'Glory' were included" (Johnson 197). As a young poet she was clearly unaware of the sacrifices that her gift required, and states in the poem that for this reason "[the Gods] give us Presents most - you know -/ When we are new - and small." She seems to feel slightly deceived by "the Gods," the plurality of the word evoking the Greek Gods who prey upon humans rather than the loving Father of Christianity.

Dickinson's final indication of the burden of her gift is in the next to last line: "And Gold to own - in solid Bars." Bars refer to blocks of gold, of course, but they also connote the bars of a prison. Dickinson seems to infer that her gold, though powerful in its own way, is like fool's gold: It shines brightly yet has a rough and often sharp interior. Dickinson does not bemoan the confines of her gift, but she also is not clear on whether she would accept this gift of the Gods again, were it offered when she was not "new - and small."

John Ruskin, whom Dickinson cited as an influence in an early letter to Higginson, held that "art's purpose is to see and then project in clear *pictures* the relation between mortal nature and the enduring universe" (*Handbook* 62). Poetry, too faces the task of exploring the relationship between nature and humanity, and more specifically, between God and humanity. Dickinson took a similar view: "Nature is a Haunted House - but Art - a House that tries to be haunted (Johnson 225). The role of art is to convey through pictures the intangible that connects all living things to each other and to their creator. Poetry also attempts to convey the rules of nature, but creates images that are even more intangible because the images reside solely in the brain. Without these images, the words on the page mean nothing. Dickinson's "It was

given to me by the Gods” is a good example of such poetry because the subject matter deals with the art form given as a gift from “the Gods.” Dickinson’s failing vision could not have supported an art form such as Ruskin’s. Rather, her transcendental eye fostered the art form of poetry that, for her, became the “Difference.”