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Explication of Poem #67

In Dickinson's poem, "Success is counted sweetest" a trio of richly evocative sensorial words combine to tempt the reader with the very fabulous and untenable aura of ultimate satisfaction which success itself promises yet, according here to Dickinson, can never deliver. The word "nectar" in the first quatrain, "purple" in the second quatrain, and "strains" in the third quatrain appeal respectively to the senses of taste, sight, and sound. All three are loaded words. That is to say that each pushes the reader to the limit in his ability to imagine its actual sensation. The word *nectar* in no other way defined brings in its wake images of smooth, golden, honeyed substances. The word *purple* when in no way limited conjures up visions of a deep, royally rich pool of pure pigment. The word *strains* occasions the recollection of a few bars of a childhood melody made perfect by time and distance. All three words short circuit the human capacity for imagination because all three represent essences, pieces of perfection, what Locke calls the *sin qua non*.

In choosing these words to anchor her poem (there is one to each quatrain) Dickinson is able to convey her idea regarding success through example instead of mere description. After reading this piece a reader must realize that the rare nectar on being tasted, the purple color on being seen, the strains on being heard, lose some of what Dickinson calls their "sweetness" in relation to the degree that they gain real and calculable degrees of gustatory, visual, and auditory measurement. Just so, this poem

posits that success is most highly valued by those who have not yet realized it and so still have the ability to equate attainment of success with false notions of perfection.

Perhaps ironically, this poem itself is one of the ones that earned Dickinson some part of the small degree of success she achieved while living. Helen Hunt Jackson upon seeing the copy Dickinson enclosed in her fourth letter to Higginson urged her to publish and it was included in *A Masque of Poets* in 1878. The poem also appeared in the Brooklyn Daily Union on April 27, 1864. In both instances Dickinson was displeased with editorial revisions – the poem for her lost some of its “sweetness.”

Conjectural Higginsonian Criticism

Dickinson sent “Success is counted sweetest” to Thomas Wentworth Higginson along with three other poems in July of 1862. That Higginson appreciated the piece can be inferred from the fact that he at some point shared it with Helen Hunt Jackson. It was Jackson who was instrumental in getting the poem published. There are several reasons why Higginson might have been especially favorable towards this piece. In his article in the Atlantic Monthly, “Letter to a Young Contributor,” Higginson writes, “You are writing for the average eye, and must submit to its verdict.” Poem 67 is one of Dickinson’s most normal compositions in terms of the actual appearance of its lines and its progression of thought. Only one word is set aside by the characteristic Dickinsonian dashes and Dickinson’s at times perplexing practice of syntactic doubling which Cristanne Miller writes of in *A Poet’s Grammar* is nonexistent. Also, the fact that the poem uses many full and dead on rhymes and ends on one of these with a distinct and definitive final line coincides with Higginson’s admonition in the same article not to “leave loose ends.” Yet another element which might have attracted Higginson to this

piece is the martial air which runs throughout it. As a military man Higginson could have very well identified with the battlefield conceit Dickinson employs in the second and third quatrains. Perhaps his greatest criticism would not be of the piece itself but in Dickinson's attitude toward revision of the piece in preparation for publication.

Throughout "Letter to a Young Contributor" Higginson places the greatest emphasis on the merits of revision. While the word lists found under many of Dickinson's poems suggest that she too appreciated the value of thoughtful revision, Dickinson was not willing to make concessions to the accepted poetic conventions of the day that the editorial pens represented and her dissatisfaction with the published version of this poem illustrates this.