

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#67 (c.1859)

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

ANALYSIS

“Once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite.... The effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing.... Certainly Emily Dickinson’s critics are right in calling this poem an expression of the idea of compensation—of the idea that every evil confers some balancing good, that through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet, that “Water is taught by thirst.’ The defeated and dying soldier of this poem is compensated by a greater awareness of the meaning of victory than the victors themselves can have: he can comprehend the joy of success through its polar contrast to his own despair.

The poem surely does say that; yet it seems to me that there is something further implied. On a first reading, we are much impressed with the wretchedness of the dying soldier’s lot, and an improved understanding of the nature of victory may seem small compensation for defeat and death; but the more one ponders this poem the likelier it grows that Emily Dickinson is arguing against the *superiority* of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession. What do the victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savor or clearly define? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. For the dying soldier, the case is reversed: defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness, and material loss had led to spiritual gain. Emily Dickinson would think that the better bargain....

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire, and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off worlds like ‘Brazil’ or ‘Circasian’ appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned-for. So identified in her mind are distance and delight that, when ravished by the sight of a hummingbird in her garden, she calls in ‘the mail from Tunis.’ And not only are the objects of her desire distant; they are also very often moving away, their sweetness increasing in proportion to their remoteness.... ‘Heaven,’ she said, ‘is what I cannot reach.’ At times it seems that there is nothing in her world but her own soul, with its attendant abstractions, and, at a vast remove, the inscrutable Heaven.... ‘Enough is of so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits.’ The writer of that sentence could not invest her longings in any finite object.”

Richard Wilbur
“Sumptuous Destitution”
Emily Dickinson: Three Views

(Amherst 1960)