

Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#508 (c.1862)

I'm ceded – I've stopped being Theirs –  
The name They dropped upon my face  
With water, in the country church  
Is finished using, now.  
And They can put it with my Dolls,  
My childhood, and the string of spools,  
I've finished threading – too –

Baptized, before, without the choice,  
But this time, consciously, of Grace –  
Unto supremest name –  
Called to my Full – The Crescent dropped –  
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,  
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank – too small the first –  
Crowned – Crowing – on my Father's breast –  
A half unconscious Queen –  
But this time – Adequate – Erect,  
With Will to choose, or to reject,  
And I choose, just a Crown –

#### ANALYSIS

“Now, this poem partakes of the imagery of being ‘twice-born’ or, in Christian liturgy, ‘confirmed’--and if this poem had been written by Christina Rossetti I would be inclined to give more weight to a theological reading. But it was written by Emily Dickinson, who used the Christian metaphor [reducing her Christian faith to a metaphor is projected Atheism] far more than she let it use her. This is a poem of great pride--not pridefulness, but self-confirmation--and it is curious how little Dickinson's critics, perhaps misled by her diminutives, have recognized the will and pride in her poetry. It is a poem of movement from childhood to womanhood, of transcending the patriarchal condition of bearing her father's name and ‘crowing -- on my Father's breast --’. She is now a conscious Queen ‘Adequate — Erect / With Will to choose, or to reject’.”

Adrienne Rich  
“Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”  
reprinted in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*  
(Norton 1979)

“Poem 508, probably composed a year or so before ‘My life had stood -- a Loaded Gun --’, describes her psychological metamorphosis in terms of two baptisms which conferred name and identity: the first the sacramental baptism in the patriarchal church when she was an unknowing and helpless baby; the second a self-baptism into areas of personality conventionally associated with the masculine, an act of choice and will undertaken in full consciousness, or, perhaps more accurately, into full consciousness. Since Emily Dickinson was not a member of the church and had never been baptized as child or adult, the baptism is a metaphor for marking stages and transitions in self-awareness and identity. The poem is *not a love poem or a religious poem*, as its first editors thought in 1890, but a poem of sexual or psychological *politics* [emphasis added] enacted in the convolutions of the psyche [This is another Atheist falsification of a

Christian poem—politically correct revisionism. Baptism in the Holy Spirit may be entirely personal and need not take place in a church].

Albert Gelpi

“Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman poet in America”  
*Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*  
(copyright by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar 1979)

“The speaker disavows her infant baptism and the identity conferred with it and then asserts another baptism enacted by and for herself. Baptism in New England Puritan churches and their successors served as a child’s introduction to the community and as the seal of God’s covenant with the saints. Although not conferring full church membership (dependent upon conversion and certified by eucharistic participation), it indicated the community’s expectation that God intended the child’s salvation. The baptized child and young adult could pursue salvation hopefully. Yet full grace was wanting. This speaker has experienced a narrow ‘Crescent’ or empty ‘Arc’ rather than a complete circle of faith. Now, as an adult, she rejects the identity imposed on her by other people’s choices.

Perhaps she senses the frustration of those earlier covenantal hopes and thinks of the sacramental ritual as simply another empty game by which as a child she experimented with roles she never got to play as an adult. The dolls that she mentions were given, after all, in anticipation of eventual mothering responsibility; yet Dickinson never raised a child. And the string of spools prepared little hands either for manual labor like that performed by women in New England factories (and that Dickinson never for a moment considered) or for the fancy needlework she apparently despised. She has simply not matured into the stereotyped woman she assumes her family had anticipated, and she rejects her baptismal identity as a sign of those false expectations. But ritual confirmation of the sacredness of her new identity still captures her imagination, so she conducts her own adult baptism to seal a different sort of election--her own choice of self-image and its symbol. Not surprisingly, the symbol she chooses is a circular one indicative of status and plenitude. Instead of the skimpy arc or crescent, she will have a diadem--a crown. No longer a potential part of someone else’s circle, she draws her own circumference.”

Jane Donahue Eberwein

*Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*  
(U Massachusetts 1985)

“While such poems as ‘I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Their’s --’ use biblical types and language obliquely, they lack a center in a specified referent or experience, such as a recognizable religious rite [baptism?]; the effect of such poems is to dramatize and enhance the speaker’s progress toward an exalted status that, while also contingent on the biblical backdrop, threatens to supersede it:

Here the speaker describes a transfiguring experience, in some ways related to her baptism as an infant, yet not precisely a second baptism. She makes it clear that she is done with the water ‘in the country church’ and with other tokens of her childhood. ‘Baptized, before, without the choice,’ she undergoes a figurative baptism this time, ‘consciously, of Grace --’, in a transformation of identity that appears to have cosmic significance: ‘Called to my Full -- The Crescent dropped -- / Existence’s whole Arc, filled up, / With one small Diadem.’ Her reference to a woman’s diminutive adornment is clearly ironic in view of the magnitude of the change described.

The poem contains an implicit contradiction. At first the speaker acknowledges that ‘I’m ceded --’, suggesting that she has been surrendered to a higher authority than the elders who officiated at her baptism. Her choice of such a word implies her powerlessness and withdrawal from action, but as the poem moves toward her acquisition of the ‘Diadem’ and her ‘second Rank,’ she gains in stature and authority. Eventually she makes it clear that her ‘Will to choose, or to reject’ is the significant agent in her gaining of a crown. Dickinson uses an association implicit in the Christian rite of baptism and nearly lets it overshadow the traditional doctrinal implications of that sacrament: ‘Baptism was, on Biblical authority, associated with royalty; Peter conveyed the efficacy of baptismal unction when he addressed those newly converted as a ‘chosen generation, a royal priesthood’ (I Peter 2:9)....

Like several of Dickinson's poems, notably 'A Wife -- at Daybreak I shall be --' (461), 'I'm ceded --' can be interpreted as descriptive of a 'heavenly marriage' in the biblical sense, the speaker taking the part of the Church as 'Bride of Christ,' in the antitypical fulfillment of the type of the Bride from the Canticles; but in that case the Bridegroom is inexplicably absent. In fact, the speaker in the poem, though clearly female, most resembles Christ in her relinquishment of past earthly ties and in the magnitude and enormity of her choice. Once a 'half unconscious Queen --', she is now fully Queen, 'Adequate -- Erect, / With Will to choose, or to reject.' The speaker's passive posture as recipient of the baptismal rite in the first stanza gives way to her new resplendent self, radiant in transfiguration."

Diane Gabrielson Scholl  
"From Aaron 'Drest' to Dickinson's 'Queen': Protestant Typology in Herbert and Dickinson"  
*Emily Dickinson Journal* III.1 (1996)

"The child speaking in these poems triggers a retroactive appreciation for the limitless centrifugal potential of prevocal language so frequently at odds with the stabilizing language of the adult—that voice whose authority depends on conformity within the social order. The child, not yet constrained by history or identity, defines for the reader a space within which language and the speaking subject articulate a potential never fully realized but most evident just prior to the subject's entering history. For an instant, the child speaks the language of pure potential. To hear this voice, we must listen for unencumbered utterances.

Wolff's comments are again useful in clarifying the proximity of voices that 'are not always entirely distinct from one another: the child's [v]oice that opens a poem may yield to the [v]oice of a young woman ... The diction of the housewife may be conflated with the sovereign language of the New Jerusalem...' Thus, even in a poem like 'I'm ceded — I've stopped / being Their's --', in which the speaker is determined to sever all bonds to childhood, the advance into adulthood is not clear. What we see instead is the hierarchic, rule-bound adult consciousness opposed to the child's assumption of supreme authority. Dickinson shows us the tension that complicates and binds these very different discourses as a means of challenging the notion that the child is subsumed by the adult. Within her formulation, abstract social codes and the artificial demarcations of class and age are all adult means of confining the child's limitlessness.... Because the speaker retroactively recalls an authority she surrendered unknowingly, we can hear the voice of that earlier authority in her present determination.

When the speaker puts her dolls behind her and proposes for herself a new baptism ('But this time, consciously, / of Grace --'), she finds her achievement on a historically based perception of self—all sense of accomplishment depends on the perception that change is possible only if she clings to what she has been in the past instead of becoming what she hopes to be. Her insistence that there be a new baptism shows her intent to improve upon what happened 'before, without the / choice.' The poem reads as a prelude rather than an entrance into new consciousness; the last line suggests a state about to be entered and not a presence already achieved. The speaker sees herself as having been a '[half] too unconscious Queen / But this time' things will be different, this time she possesses the 'Will to choose...just a Crown --'. And here the poem leaves us: in a place somewhere between the child and the adult. The speaker's dismay at having been named and baptized without the knowledge that she was subscribing to an external authority opens her mind to the infinity of her experience as a child. An upward-pointing dash after 'Crown' counters the downward-pointing dash after 'Queen' as a way of underscoring the speaker's overly simplistic belief that she can correct the error of her earlier 'unconscious' station.

Dickinson's considerable use of visual effects like these dashes alerts readers to the constructed nature of language that the speaker wades through in an effort to reassert her independence. Through lineation, in particular, Dickinson further disrupts culturally determined continuities already undermined by dashes. Separating 'being Their's' from the first line magnifies the speaker's detachment from her parents, a violation of conventional notions of physical, emotional, and spiritual connectedness that is extended to her face in line 4 and the church in line 6, and concludes with 'Crown.' The collective impact of this fragmentation is first an increased awareness of the centrifugal force that dismantles the ritual of baptism and second a heightened sense of the speaker's struggle to make the now disassembled ritual come together and serve her ends.

The first stanza concludes with a powerful visual comment on the unraveling of logic that is extended through the second stanza and countered in the third. Dashes that frame 'too' at the end of line 12 combine with the misplaced horizontal cross of the manuscript 't' to effectively reduce the symbolic coherence necessary to see 'too' as a word and not as a meaningless duster of marks... We 'read' the word as a cartoon enactment of the speaker's determination to cease her 'threading' of adult logic; now she will take advantage of her power to act as she believes adults do by making symbols serve her authority.

This illustration of the way readers must consent to symbolic meaning by making raw data conform to anticipated patterns sets the tone for the next stanza's interrogation of the highly symbolic ritual of baptism. When Dickinson situates three crosses in the spaces between lines 18 and 20 and then writes in the word 'Eye' on line 19, she seems to be commenting on the way readers actively exercise their eyes to gather all the physical data that must be processed before discerning meaning. The combination of three crosses simultaneously suggests a pun on 'eye' and 'I' that positions the speaker among three crosses, as if her earlier baptism corresponded to Jesus' mortification on Golgotha—a humbling experience over which she will ultimately achieve Christlike triumph. Ironically, the poem so effectively demonstrates the reader's role in the construction of meaning that it erodes the speaker's efforts to turn ritual authority to her own ends. Though she may not be conscious of what she has done, her deconstruction of baptism has emptied it of the very power she wishes to employ.

By introducing a speaker who rejects a known past and is about to enter an imagined but undefined future, the poem establishes a link connecting past and future at the instant that the speaker's anticipation of change is greatest. Thanks to visual signals and the disjunctive power of dashes, we see the speaker's entrapment in circular reasoning, where all she imagines of a more liberated future—a future in which she has 'stopped / being Their's'—is what she has learned from adults. As readers, we see more than she does: that in order to achieve her aim of discarding all that she now finds burdensome and oppressive, she must step outside of herself, creating what Kristeva describes as 'an area of chance' that makes possible the discovery of a new semantic and ideological self: 'a localized chance as condition of objective understanding, a chance to be uncovered in the relationship of the subject of metalanguage to the writing under study, and/or to the semantic and ideological means of constitution of the subject.' We contribute to the makeup of this 'area' by reading the poem's visual commentary on meaning construction and setting it in dialogue with the expectations we attribute to the speaker.

This participation in the speaker's desire for change increases our awareness of a primary instability that de-centers the subject. Our activity as readers parallels that of Dickinson who, as poet, reads what she has written and responds by creating new text based on her experience as a reader of her own words. The visual signals built into the poem are our clearest indication that she wants readers to participate with her on this level. If the voice that emerges is allowed to register the many shifts in perspective that inevitably occur as the writer grasps the implications of a particular stance or attitude, the resulting poem is necessarily made up of many voices, not a single unified voice.

As the poem's interplay of thought and perception proceeds, each voice is subjected to the same destabilizing process, and each voice acquires new form as new choices occur to the writer and the readers. The area of chance defined by the repeated rupturing of logical sequence feeds a growing realization that the self is far greater than any linguistic manifestation. In this sense, Dickinson's child speaker surfaces through a voice that dissipates once it enters language, making the child the least stable of all Dickinson's speakers. Listening to the child, therefore, is always a matter of hearing a voice that mutates in the direction of adulthood even as it speaks. If we as readers decide that the speaker who claims that she has already 'ceded' in the first line is the same speaker who is in the act of choosing in the last line, we do so as a matter of choice, not because the poem commands such a reading.

We are left with a speaker who, by assuming the crown, claims dominion over time and identity. The inconclusiveness of the last line, as signaled by the disjunctive dash, reminds readers of the discrepancy between pure potential and the certainty of limited existence. The poem shows us that the crown symbolizing the speaker's achievement of personal authority is incapable of fulfilling the child's expectations because its power depends on conformity within established symbology. Situated at the

threshold of a present that is about to unfold, the speaker approximates as closely as possible the limitless potentiality that characterizes the child.”

Paul Crumbley

*Inflections of the Pen: Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson*  
(U Kentucky 1997)

“In ‘I’m ceded—I’ve stopped being Theirs --’, Dickinson makes an explicit rejection of one of the initiation rituals of patriarchal religion, that is, baptism. The power of this institution’s control over language and identity is acknowledged in her specific rejection of ‘The name They dropped upon my face.’ In a typical Dickinsonian move, however, she builds a syntactical ambiguity into the stanza with the fourth line: ‘Is finished using, now.’ Are we to read it as she is finished using the name now? Or that it (the name) is finished using her now? In either case, use of the name is done with now, but the ambiguity of agent/object in the line creates a complexity rich in implications, by the simple omission of a pronoun. For Dickinson, such clear-cut binary distinctions need to be problematized. Tellingly, her rejection of the religious rite and its power to name is juxtaposed in this stanza with her rejection of the female socialization process [mostly conducted by Victorian women], indicated by the dolls of childhood and the women’s work of threading spools. The three systems of social control are mutually supportive, and Dickinson is well aware of the interconnections among the power of naming, the dogma of traditional Christianity, and the social construction of ‘femininity.’ [This falsely implies that she was an Atheist and not inherently feminine.]

It is interesting to note the role that ‘They’ play in this as well as in other poems. Although Dickinson is using a seemingly [?] ambiguous pronoun by not providing us with a proper referent, it soon becomes very clear that ‘They’ are [include] her own family members. ‘They’ are the ones who name her and have control over the things of her childhood. The most significant part of her relationship to ‘Them’ in terms of sexual politics, however, is that ‘They’ have tried to own her, and it is this possessive power that is the first ground of her rejection: ‘I’ve stopped being Theirs --’. This resistance implies, again by the use of a political term (ceded), the definitively political nature of this rejection. [“When the progressive popular novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote her in 1872 asking for her aid in the women’s cause, she burned the letter and mailed her a flat refusal. This indifference to political feminism was part and parcel of serious authorship during the American Women’s Renaissance.” David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Harvard 1989, 423]

Even as we can deduce that in this poem ‘They’ represent the people who would have the most immediate control over her life, her family members, the ambiguity of the pronoun serves a further purpose. In colloquial terms, ‘They’ is often used to represent the power structures of society itself. ‘They’ are the legislators of life, the unseen yet fully felt powers that institute an oppressive ideology. It is a given that Dickinson would have experienced ‘Their’ interdiction even if she had left her close family circle, whether ‘They’ took the form of a husband, lover, minister, politician, or editor. In short, ‘They,’ when taken as the agents of sexual and linguistic oppression, are everywhere in the world at large, and the only space where ‘They’ can be denied the right of occupation is within Dickinson’s own mind. [Dickinson was the first...to fuse contrasting views in a single text and individual metaphors. The literary fusion enables her to achieve a far more rounded view of marriage than was advanced by either the pro-marriage or anti-marriage groups.” Reynolds, 422-23]

Throughout the second and third stanzas here, the issue of choice becomes central to the poem. Denied choice in the original baptism, she is now asserting her own power and right to choose. As in 613, ‘They shut me up in Prose --’, it is ‘With Will to choose, or to reject,’ that she will overcome the control ‘They’ have imposed on her being. Now conscious of her ability to choose, Dickinson will choose the ‘supremest name,’ that of a poet, enabled to name herself. In this choice she is ‘Called to my Full --’ and although the phrasing here is incomplete (full what? potential? being? name?), it is clear that her choice gives her a sense of plenitude. Yet this plenitude is marked by irony. For it is the crescent moon, the Arc of Existence, the incomplete whole that can be ‘filled up.’ The sense of plenitude that Dickinson conveys here is not based on completion and closure, but is born out of incompleteness, potentiality, a sense of plenitude as an ongoing process, as amplitude.

Defiantly crowned and crowing from her 'Father's breast --', literally, the 'heart' of patriarchy and its religious dictates, she will (consciously) choose to be 'A half unconscious Queen --'. The oxymoron implied here indicates to some degree the complexity of Dickinson's vision. For consciousness—awareness of her power to choose—involves also an awareness of the unconscious, and its power to inform both life choices and the powers of poetic vision. If a poet refuses to acknowledge the power of the unconscious in her life, she will cut herself off from one of the most important sources of poetic knowledge. It is with this both/and vision, of living in the space between and beyond the dichotomous distinction conscious/unconscious without deeming these two states to be mutually exclusive, that she has full power. In an appropriation of sexual imagery of male power, she names herself as 'Adequate — Erect,' even as she chooses the 'Crown' of a 'Queen,' a decidedly female image. By blending the genders implied by these words of power, Dickinson is subverting the distinctions between genders, a move that is relevant to her choice to be a woman poet.... In choosing to be such a Queen, she will maintain power over herself with a self-given name and role, not one bestowed on her by others.

In a final ironic twist to this poem, Dickinson again selects a strange locution to represent her choice. The last line ends with a dash, implying an indeterminate outcome. But the phrase preceding this 'final' dash 'just a Crown --', creates an indeterminacy of meaning. Does 'just' mean 'such,' as in 'just the crown such as I've been discussing?' Or does she mean 'only,' as in 'I could have chosen a role even more powerful than that of poet/Queen, but in all my modesty, I will limit myself to choosing 'just a Crown?' True to her strategy of slanting the truth even as she tells it, Dickinson's line can sustain either interpretation."

Mary C. Galvin  
*Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*  
(Praeger 1999)

Michael Hollister (2014)