

# Emily Dickinson Woman of Letters

*Poems and Centos  
From Lines in Emily Dickinson's Letters*

*Selected, Arranged, and Augmented  
by LEWIS TURCO*

*Together with Essays on the Subject  
by Various Hands*



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# Contents

*Acknowledgments / ix*

*Introduction / 1*

## **Poems: A Sampler of Hours**

Cloth of Dreams / 11	♦	The Harper of Stillness / 12
Crimson Children / 13	♦	The Ear of Silence / 14
Epithalamion / 15	♦	The Mower / 16
A Memoir of Evening / 17	♦	Scarlet Expectations / 18
Mansions of Mirage / 19	♦	A Dainty Sum / 20
Marble Rooms / 21	♦	An Old Tale / 22
Morning Music / 23	♦	Twilight Touches Amherst / 24
The Gift / 25	♦	Home / 26 ♦ Sampler / 27
The Cage / 28	♦	Four Small Songs / 29
The Deep Stranger / 30	♦	Brown Study / 31
Nocturne / 32	♦	The Amherst Fire / 33
A Pearl Jail / 34	♦	May, Merely / 35
An Amherst Haiku / 36	♦	The Miller's Tale / 37
The Naked Eye / 38	♦	A Morning Picture / 39
Passing / 40	♦	Theme and Variation / 41
A New Year / 42	♦	Summer's Chariot / 43
Small Victory / 44	♦	Housekeeping / 45
Among the Stones / 46	♦	First Snow / 47
Delay / 48	♦	Company / 49
An Amherst Pastoral / 50	♦	Death / 51

Asea / 52 ♦ Just God / 53	
A Dream of Roses / 54 ♦ Lamps / 55	
Fading Things / 56 ♦ An Orator of Feather / 57	
The Winter Garden / 58 ♦ Adventure / 59	
Winter Bouquet / 60 ♦ Flowers in Season / 62	
Late Summer / 64 ♦ Late Fall / 65	
Amherst Neighbors / 66 ♦ Passages / 68	
Epistle / 70 ♦ An Amherst Christmas / 71	
Poetry / 72 ♦ An Amherst Calendar / 74	
The Clock / 77	

### **Essays by Various Hands**

"Knock with / tremor": When Daughters Revise "Dear Father"	85
<i>Jeanne Holland, University of Wyoming</i>	
The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire: Emily Dickinson's Letters and Poems to Susan Dickinson 1850-1886	99
<i>Ellen Louise Hart, University of California at Santa Cruz</i>	
Words Doing: Dickinson's Language as Autonomous Action	129
<i>David W. Hill, State University of New York College at Oswego</i>	
The Shot Bird's Progress: Emily Dickinson's <i>Master Letters</i>	147
<i>Marta Werner, State University of New York at Buffalo</i>	

*Index of Poetry Titles and First Lines / 153*

*General Index / 157*



## Introduction

Everything in this book is a response to the letters of Emily Dickinson—not to her poems, her *letters*. My own response was to write a series of poems titled *A Sampler of Hours*, poems and centos from lines in the notes and epistles she sent to her friends and relatives, and the response of the critics included here has been to discuss, sometimes in a scholarly way, sometimes historically or critically or appreciatively—even lyrically—the letters in particular or in general. Some of the essays make the connection between the letters and Dickinson's poems. The critics did not know these poems and centos existed when they wrote their essays, nor did the author/editor of this book know the essays existed. The reader will find here insights and concerns that grew out of a contemporary burgeoning interest in the prose writings of one of the most important American poets, if not the greatest we have had to this point in our history, as I believe is the case.

If Dickinson's poems were usually dramatic works rather than egopoetic confessions, and they were, it was in her letters that the poet spoke most often in her own personal voice. During the winter of 1980 I read an essay by Van Wyk Brooks which quoted four lines from Emily Dickinson's letters: "The Moon rides like a girl through a topaz town"; "Tonight the Crimson Children are playing in the west"; "The lawn is full of south and the odors tangle, and I hear today for the first the river in the tree," and "Not what the stars have done, but what they are to do is what detains the sky" (Brooks, 260).

I was struck by the modernity of these prose expressions; their sounds and images seemed to me to have more of the feeling and flavor of modernity than even Dickinson's poems, or for that matter the lines of many and many a poem of the twentieth century. Immediately, I wrote four poems that included, and tried to live up to, the Dickinson lines I have quoted.

No doubt this was a foolhardy thing to do, but I had attempted the same sort of thing with Robert Burton's seventeenth-century tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and I produced a book of poems the whole title of which reads, *The Compleat Melancholick*, "A Sequence of Found, Composite, and Composed Poems, based largely upon Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*." I felt then, and I still feel, that my poems did little damage to Burton. The first four poems I wrote in a similar series based on Dickinson were "The Harper of Stillness," "Crimson Children," "The Ear of Silence," and "Epithalamion"—they will be found early on in the series.

People have asked me what I mean when I say that some of the imagery from her letters is particularly "modern," and that is a legitimate question. I mean by "modern" that the lines are written often in "abstract syntax," which was first identified and discussed by Donald Davie. The idea behind what I call "abstract syntax" and Davie calls "musical syntax" is the same idea as that which is behind "abstract art," which is to approach the condition of music in language or in painting.

Music is the most abstract of the arts in that there are no "meanings" attached to notes or musical phrases. There may be a kind of general *feeling* attached to some aspects of music; for instance, minor keys "feel" sad whereas major keys do not; fast music feels happy, but slow music feels moody. Aside from that sort of thing, no meanings inhere in music, yet we enjoy it because we can perceive musical structures and progressions, harmonies, dissonances, counterpoint, and so forth.

If painting, let's say, wants to approach the abstract condition of music, one must get rid of figures. If one is an abstract painter one gets rid of identifiable representations, of figures,

in one's work. The same thing must be done in language, as well, if one is going to write using abstract syntax, and of course T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is written partly in abstract syntax, Wallace Stevens is an abstract syntax poet, and one of the first Dickinson lines I read in the essay by Van Wyk Brooks that I mentioned was a line written in abstract syntax which I used in the poem titled "The Harper of Stillness": "The lawn is full of south / and the odours tangle, / and I hear today for the first / the river in the tree."

What does that *mean*? The syntax of the line does not come to a point where one can say, "Oh, that means this, that, or the other thing." It is an approach to music, and I think the line is stunningly beautiful. One of the other three is like that, too. The poem that I call "The Ear of Silence" starts with a sentence written in abstract syntax: "Not what the stars have done, / but what they are to do / is what detains the sky." So, two of the four Dickinson lines that Van Wyk Brooks quoted from her letters were sentences written in abstract syntax.

The point with most poems written in abstract syntax is that there is no meaning other than the poem itself. As Jenkins wrote,

The vastness of the thought she wished to express defied, sometimes, the limits of her cryptic pen. She knew what she meant. It was all clear to her, but certainly after many years, and in the silence of those to whom the message was sent, it is difficult to catch the meaning of some of the notes even in my modest collection. I confess my inability to understand what is beneath this message sent to my mother in Pittsfield. What its occasion was or what gift, if any, it accompanied I do not now recall, if indeed I ever knew. She writes:

"Dear Friend,

"Were the velocity of Affection as perceptible as its sanctity, Day and Night would be more Affecting"  
(Jenkins, 115-16).

What one is really doing with words when one employs abstract syntax is manipulating connotations, associations and overtones, and not primary meanings, denotations. Dickinson did not get those overtones into her poems as often as she got them into some of the lines from her letters.

The other kinds of syntax, according to Davie, are "subjective" syntax: sentences that express personal opinions, "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody too? / Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!"; "objective" syntax, sentences that express actions: "The flowers have reached the eaves / and are heaving against the roof / which has begun to buckle—"; and "dramatic" syntax, as when Dickinson puts words into the mouth of a person who is dead: "I heard a fly buzz when I died." Those are the three traditional syntaxes.

Abstract syntax is really a twentieth-century phenomenon, except, of course, I am showing that it appeared in the work of Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century. And it appeared in both her letters and her poems—in other words, in both her prose and her verse, which in itself is an unusual phenomenon because there is not a whole lot of abstract syntax prose in the world, although James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* may perhaps be examples.

In the twentieth century various writers use abstract syntax for various purposes. The major abstract poet of the twentieth century so far is Wallace Stevens. Oddly enough, he was a message poet. His message was that mankind had to get rid of romanticism, religion, and all that emotional baggage that we ought, as a race, to have cast aside by now. We ought to substitute for them an existential viewpoint which would allow us to get through life with dignity, without resorting to the crutches of tradition.

Now, Stevens could have said that in so many words, and in a way he did in some of his poems, but really what he did was to wrap around this idea some amazing tropical images when he was young and, when he was older, images of the arctic. It is often extremely difficult to get down beneath the imagery to the bedrock of statement, to the condition which he

called, in his early poem "The Snowman," a "mind of winter." It takes a mind of winter for modern men and women to bear up under the weight of mortality and the perception of that mortality.

Stevens used abstract syntax because he had to in order to write the "larger poem for a larger audience" that he talked about and called for—the largest audience being, one supposes, all of the race of Man. Otherwise, it was just, write an essay and get it over with. But writing poems was how he proposed to get through life without the lush security blanket of religion wrapped around him. Do we suppose that Dickinson had a significantly different purpose in writing her poems?

What about her letters? Often Dickinson included poems in her letters, and in fact many of the poems that appear in her *Complete Poems* were culled from letters that were sent to her correspondents.

When I had finished the first four Dickinson-inspired pieces I sent them to a magazine at the State University of New York at Buffalo entitled *Escarpmnts* whose editor, Carol Sineni, accepted them immediately and published them under the title "A Suite for Emily" (Spring 1981). However, I was by no means satisfied with them myself, for I felt I had not assimilated Dickinson's tone and style, nor had I made my additions indistinguishable from her quotations. I went to the library and checked out Dickinson's *Letters*, hoping to find other lines I might quarry. Much later I was fortunate enough to find a copy I could purchase for my own library.

The images in Dickinson's verse are striking, but it seems to me that when she put tropes into her verse something about the process changed the quality of the images—perhaps she was merely not quite so self-conscious when she was writing letters.

By 1984 I had written sixty poems in a series I have titled *A Sampler of Hours: Poems and Centos from Lines in Emily Dickinson's Letters*. Some readers of these pieces, nearly all of which first appeared in the literary periodicals and various anthologies and books, wish to know which lines are Dickinson's and

which are mine. At first I tried italicizing her words, as I had done with Burton, but that practice seemed to break up the poems badly, whereas in the Burton poems it actually seemed to help. As a result, some people have fallen into a guessing game almost automatically, which I deplore, but it *can* be amusing, to me at least, because the conjectures are generally wrong.

If they were not, I would have been unsuccessful in assimilating Dickinson's style, and the poems would be failures. Perhaps they are—readers will have to judge that for themselves. The subtitle of this book indicates that I have "selected, arranged, and augmented" Dickinson's lines. In the first four poems I simply used each of her quotations as the first stanza of a poem, breaking the passage at the ends of phrases—what William Carlos Williams called "the breath pause"—and writing subsequent stanzas in the syllabic line-lengths into which Dickinson's phrases happened to fall. For instance, the first stanza of "The Harper of Stillness" fell into the form of a quatrain, the lines of which happen to be 6-6-8 and 6 syllables long; thus, the succeeding stanzas are quatrains with the same syllable counts line for line.

At times I have done little more than select a complete passage from a particular letter and cast it into syllabic prosody; more often, I have taken lines from various letters and arranged them in some sort of order. Reasonably often I have augmented Dickinson's lines with my own. Some poems are almost entirely hers, others are more mine than hers, but "The Gift," a single couplet and the shortest poem in the series, may serve as an example of the method of composition I used most often—the first line is Dickinson's, the second is mine.

A poem that is made entirely from Dickinson's own lines culled from various parts of her letters is one I titled "Poetry." It is practically everything that Dickinson had to say about the art and craft of writing poetry. It is what might almost be called a "found" poem. A poem that is a true collaboration is a lyric titled "A Dainty Sum."

On one occasion, when I was giving a reading from these

poems in Portland, Oregon, I was accused by someone of "tampering with an American classic," but this is not so. I have touched none of the canon of that classic, the poems themselves; I have worked only with her letters, which few people read. If any of these poems work, then all I have done is bring to the attention of a modern audience a number of Emily Dickinson's beautiful and startling observations that would otherwise have remained buried in the bulk of her prose.

This, it seems to me, would be a shame. There is a real sense of her personality that comes through her writing. I mean, you feel as though you know her, as though she were your next-door neighbor, and you feel fortunate in the friendship. I have never met a person who had such a brilliantly wide-ranging mind, or such an ability to toss off, seemingly at random and on any occasion, images as arresting and colorful as any in American poetry, or to match in depth of perception and succinctness of expression the flowers of anyone's intellectual garden.

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