

THE INTERCULTURAL APPROACH: MANUEL BANDEIRA AND EMILY DICKINSON COMPARED AND CONTRASTED

Leticia Niederauer Tavares Cavalcanti

Universidade Federal da Paraíba

Any teaching process should start from what is known, and move towards the unknown; and as poetry is rarely, if ever, read by young Brazilians, I believe I would select a poem by Manuel Bandeira "Do Que Dissestes..." as an introduction to the course¹. The text, in Portuguese, follows:

"Do Que Dissestes..."

Do que dissestes, alma frias,
Já nada vos acode mais?...
Éramos sós... Fora chovia...
Quanta ternura em mim havia!
(Em vós também... Por que o negais?)

Hoje contudo, nem me olhais...
Pobre de mim! Porque seria?
Acaso arrependida estais
Do que dissestes?

É bem possível que o estejais...
 O amor é coisa fugidia...
 Eu, no entanto, que em tal dia
 Gozei momentos sem iguais,
 Eu não me esquecerei jamais
 Do que dissestes.

The question, then, imposes itself: what aspects of Brazilian culture are here present? How are they linguistically presented? First and foremost, there is the punctuation: there are seven instances of ellipsis and a number of interrogation marks — four in all — juxtaposed by two exclamation marks, five commas, and one full stop. The great number of ellipses suggests that the text is not complete — that it is left to the reader to guess what was actually said. The four interrogation marks, on the other hand, determine actual ignorance stressing both distance and separation implied by the use of the second person, plural form.

Exclamation marks are common in Portuguese texts — but very rare in English, as they imply emotion in both cases: tenderness first and commiseration next. As to commas — they interrupt the flow of the poem, and naturally lead to the final stop.

Next, there is the choice of words. To call a soul cold, not to remember words, to describe the circumstances in terms of loneliness and the rain as well as mutual tenderness right now denied — all these elements are followed by the stanza describing the present state of affairs — no recognition at all. Is it because of repentance of what was said in the past? And the final stanza stresses the sense of repentances, or the realization that love is flighty to the mute addressee, as it is unforgettable both in the enjoyment of the experience and in words exchanged in the past, and still remembered in the present. The exchange of words and caresses may have taken place during Mardi Gras — a point in time when people meet and exchange vows and intimacies to be totally forgotten not only on Ash Wednesday, but also in years to come.

As the poem is read and discussed by class groups in English, there is, no doubt, a statement of the problem followed by fact-finding on the students' part, to reach the final evaluative stage that could be written in short pieces of paper to be handed in to the instructor at the end of the class meeting. Even though the introductory text is in Portuguese, class discussion and written statements should be kept and made in English, as a suitable transition to the English material.

Next, students should be introduced to Emily Dickinson's "A word is dead"², here transcribed as follows:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That lay.

Introduce the text, but do not identify the author. Identification will come later, after first group discussion of theme and statement.

The words speak for themselves, as they are simple, direct, and easy to understand by any beginner in the study of the English language. The universal nature of the truth expressed in the first stanza is opposed to the personal and singular statement of the second. The two stanzas stand worlds apart — and yet they constitute a meaningful whole.

The punctuation is sparing, and the words selected belong to everyday use; however, the repetition of words related to said (which echoes dead), twice, and the parallel rhyme say and day — create a poetical truth that transcends both place and time. There is economy of words and objectivity in feeling quite different from the detailed prolixity of the three stanzas in Portuguese; and yet...are they not

stating the same basic fact? What was forgotten still lives in the poet's minds, in the poem in Portuguese; what is universally dead to all and sundry lives particularly for the second poet in the poem written in English.

The Brazilian poem was first published in 1919; the second poem may perhaps have been written in 1872, and was first published in 1894. The first poem, written by a man with all Brazilian sensitivity and details, in essence coincides with the English one, written by a woman who lived in the United States between the years of 1830 and 1886. But such dates remain as starting points for a "fact-finding" process, in order to lead students to investigation, leading to a definition of the problems, and through comparison and contrast, to reach a final evaluation of both poems.

Of course identification of Emily Dickinson and her secluded life may have already taken place. Other poems written by her may be selected and discussed in terms of American Culture as a "way of life" as defined by McArthur³, and as it was often expressed by her exquisite sensitivity.

In a process of juxtaposition of both Brazilian and American texts, a general point is immediately evident: the frequent ellipses of the former are totally absent from the latter that reads as a universal statement rather objective and concise in form.

The excessive punctuation of the first text is another point to be analysed and discussed in comparison with the second, as Emily Dickinson's rather personal punctuation was not understood or respected even by the editor in the first edition of Dickinson's poems.

Then there is the essential freedom of her text to be contrasted with the formal prison of the three Brazilian rhymed stanza.

The reading of Emily Dickinson's poems, selected according to genuine American themes, may naturally lead to Walt Whitman's, as they sharply contrast with her gentle and elusive nature. However this really depends on the amount of time dispensed for the course work and the themes discussed. Reversing the traditional

order by teaching Dickinson first and Whitman second has at least two advantages: first, her language and construction are simpler; so much so that Widdowson writes a rather illuminating passage discussing “A Word is dead” as a good sample for the teaching of meaning⁴. Widdowson’s points and comments diverge from ours, though they may coincide in substance; this fact somehow indicates the essential wealth of poetry that may be analysed in different ways and for different purposes. And to expose students to Widdowson’s remarks may be another positive addition to the coursework, after the group discussion.

The second advantage relies on the peculiar nature of the teaching of Literature nowadays. Surrounded as we all are by all kinds of information provided by computers, videos, tv. sets, films and what not, the important point to teach is not chronology, but to develop sensitivity to words, to educate taste, and to suggest ways and means of comparison and contrast. And to examine foreign texts as culture products comparable to our own is, indeed, a first and rather important step.

Teaching literature should be geared towards the study of a problem, concrete and precise, as for instance, the one examined here: how can two people of different centuries and different cultures, not to mention different sex — how can they coincide in content, even though they may differ in style? Such is a problem to be solved only through “fact-finding” and “evaluation” of cultural values in Literature, both national and foreign; or, as Emily Dickinson herself once said in poem 1287, composed c. 1873:

In this short Life
That only lasts an hour
How much — how little — is
Within our power.⁵

Notes

- 1 BANDEIRA, Manuel. "Do Que Dissestes..." *Carnaval* (1919) in: *Poesias*. Rio de Janeiro, José Olímpio Ed. 1955. p. 103
- 2 Poem 1212 in: *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson* ed. T. H. JOHNSON. London, Faber, 1975. pp. 534-5.
- 3 McARTHUR, "Culture" in *The Oxford Companion to English Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 274.
- 4 WIDDOWSON, H. G. *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991. pp. 179-180.
- 5 JOHNSON, H. ed. *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson*. p. 562.

Bibliography

- BANDEIRA, Manuel. *Apresentação da poesia brasileira*, seguida de uma antologia. Rio de Janeiro, Livraria Editora da Casa do Estudante do Brasil. 2a. ed. /1954/ 443 p.
- _____. *Poesias*. 7a. ed. Rio de Janeiro, Livraria José Olímpio Editora, 1955. 401 p.
- JOHNSON, T. H. ed. *The complete poems of Emily Dickinson*. London, Faber, 1975. 770 p.
- McARTHUR, Tom. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992. 1184 p.
- STERN, H. H. *Issues and options in language teaching*. ed. ALLEN & HARLEY. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992. 404 p.

WIDDOWSON, H. G. *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford, O x f o r d University Press, 1991. 213 p.