

Emily Dickinson: literary images and post-media representations

Abstract: Evoking Umberto Eco's model of the contemporary reader of mass culture works, the essay examines some post-media representations of Emily Dickinson, especially a series of cartoons entitled *The Writer at Work* available online at www.cabanopress.com in October 2005. Possible associations between elements in the cartoons and aspects of Emily's persona and biography, as well as recurring images in her poetry, are taken as markers of the contemporary reception of Emily's work. The essay likewise notes the contrast between the simplicity of her imagery and the experimental character of her writing as a whole.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson, recurring images in Dickinson's poetry, the contemporary mass culture reader.

Resumo: Evocando o leitor de produtos da cultura de massa contemporânea, segundo o modelo de Umberto Eco, o texto analisa algumas representações pós-mídia da persona e da vida de Emily Dickinson. Contempla especialmente uma série de cartuns intitulada *The writer at work*, disponível no endereço <<http://www.cabanopress.com/News/news-5.ED.htm>> em outubro de 2005. Rastreado relações entre essa representação e algumas imagens recorrentes nos poemas, o ensaio detém-se na seqüência de cartuns como marcadores da recepção contemporânea à obra da poeta. O ensaio observa também o contraste entre a simplicidade das imagens e o experimentalismo de seus poemas.

Palavras-chave: Emily Dickinson, imagens poéticas, leitor da cultura de massa.

In not so recent years, scholars have been witnessing the rise of a new kind of academic research, which takes as its object media creations formerly confined to the domain of children's literature or of popular culture. This trend has of course a lot to do with the influence of cultural studies and their insistence on the impossibility, in fact, the undesirability, of barriers between high and mass culture. The new orientation also owes a great deal to the high quality of some of the work I have in mind, including, for instance, sequential art, cartoons, digital photography and TV series. Nothing to wonder at, then, that in

the 1970's cartoons and sequential art began to attract an adult, educated public, readers of the albums found in special shelves of comic shops. Artists like Will Eisner, with his sophisticated craftsmanship and social concerns, have thus come to win worldwide recognition and become the object of serious study. The trend soon extended to other mass culture products. In an age and context already dubbed post-media, academics involved with the relationships between literature and the arts – or, we might add, the media – can not ignore the increasingly blurred frontiers between literature and popular media products or virtual reality. Aware of this fact, some of our colleagues have tackled such formerly ignored topics as cartoons and sequential art¹ or TV series like *Desperate Housewives*.² Their work draws attention to the fact that some of the so-called mass media productions may share with high culture extremely interesting metalinguistic, intertextual and intermedial³ relationships, sometimes with significant cultural and literary implications.

These considerations jumped to my mind, as, browsing in the internet, in the hundred-twentieth anniversary of Emily Dickinson's death, I came across a series of cartoons entitled *The Writer at Work*, available at <<http://www.cabanonpress.com/News/news-5.ED.htm>>, which tell a story resembling one in a comic book, balloons and all. The poet's name on the left side of the sequence makes sure the reader identifies the character represented. In the first cartoon Emily sits writing in her bedroom, with a man's portrait hanging on a wall behind her. A balloon above her head indicates she says "Oh dear," as she realizes there is a man knocking on her door on the floor below. In the second cartoon Emily stands up but ignores the visitor. In the next he goes on knocking, but the poet continues to ignore him. The last drawings show the unwelcome visitor finally giving up the visit and walking away. The words "Peace at last" in a balloon above Emily's head suggest her relief. In the last drawings, she goes to the window and watches the man go away, and then stays there gazing at the scenery.

What first caught my eye in this sequence was the irreverence of the representation. The woman who stands for Emily in the cartoons looks like Olive Oyl, Popeye's girlfriend in the famous comic strip series, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2004. It is this most unlikely sex-symbol that the cartoon Emily Dickinson is made to resemble: all in black, her dark hair caught in a demure bun, the figure looks like a cruelly comic version of Emily's portrait circa 1850. In this photo, the poet wears a stiff black gown, hardly softened by a white collar; her dark hair held down, fitting her image as a recluse, the "nun of Amherst."

Surfing the internet again, I was able to trace other re-creations of Emily's portrait. In the *American Women Writers Index*, available at <www.accd.edu/sac/english/bailey/amwomlit.htm>, I met another image of Emily, in strong contrast with the well-known photo. Looking younger, her black dress replaced by a light white gown (it is said Emily only wore white after the Civil War), the plain collar by frilly ruffles, this Emily, created by Roger Blackwell Bailey, PhD, (possibly an academic) stares prettily at the internet surfer. In another prettified image of the poet, a participant in the *Women and Creativity Conference*, held at the West Virginia University Eberly College in 2004, portrays Emily in a performance entitled *Emily Dickinson Lives*. Here again a sentimentalized, living version of the poet, in a beautiful white blouse with bouffant sleeves, smiles confidently, even coquettishly, in a pose hardly compatible with the woman in most literary people's imagination.

To my mind these and other sentimental visual recreations seem hardly half as interesting as Olive Oyl's look-alike in the cartoons. I attribute this to the fact that Emily's caricature illustrates notions developed in Umberto Eco's *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1984). According to Eco, contemporary man cannot help revisiting the past. It cannot be destroyed, as abundantly proved by the constant re-writing of canonic works, in pastiche and parody, in art and in the media. However, Eco adds, now, that everything has in fact been said and written and painted and sung, the past can only be revisited with irony. This, I believe, is what the cartoon *The Writer at Work* has done. In fact, its comic twist sums up aspects of a humorous, imaginative interpretation of Emily Dickinson's persona and creative work: the cartoon can be read at several levels, depending on the reader's cultural background. The casual eye may first be caught by the resemblance between the figure in black and Popeye's Olive. This will be accessible to readers who have barely heard of the poet and her achievement. For this unsophisticated viewer, the cartoon may work as a first step towards this knowledge. To those already familiar with Dickinson's life and works, the humor of the sequence may carry other undertones. The presence of the male visitor and the man's portrait on the bedroom wall make the viewer wonder. Will the male figures refer to the two men people speculate Emily may have been in love with, her correspondent, Reverend Charles Wadsworth, and Samuel Bowles, to whom she addressed many poems? If so, why does the woman in the cartoon ignore both of these male figures? In the same line of thought, the reader may muse on the paradox of Emily's longing for love, apparent in some of her poetry, and on the voluntary seclusion that

may have pushed away possible lovers. Can it be that the poet pondered *the choice* to which W.B. Yeats's poem owes its title – *perfection of the life or of the work* – and, having done so, chose the latter? The woman in the cartoon seems indeed more interested in her writing than in the men pictured in the cartoons.

This kind of reader's guessing game may yield to less banal reflections. For, as reading response criticism has often insisted, the concretization of the text will depend on the reader's grid of associations. In the same vein, in *The Role of the Reader* Eco reminds us that mass culture products may be read at different levels. An informed reader will spot intertextual and metalinguistic implications which evade naïve eyes.

For myself, a longtime lover of Emily Dickinson's poetry, the cartoon that particularly invites reading is the one that shows her staring out of the window after her visitor has gone away. We see that she gazes at something. After all that has been said and published about the poet and her work, this set look, frozen in the cartoon, makes me think of the visual images that haunted her imagination, and can now be recaptured in her poems. Most of these images recall romantic poetry, especially Blake's. However, as in Blake, the simplicity of the images contrasts with the originality, sometimes the idiosyncrasy, of her text. We cannot forget its experimental character, which made it so influential on modern poetry, or its idiosyncrasy – her frequent use of dashes, sporadic capitalization of nouns, off-rhymes and broken meter. T.W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd's 1901 *Preface* to their dead friend's poems already calls attention both to her originality and to the resemblance to Blake:

The thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found, – flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame.

Re-reading her poems, we feel the presence of these traits as if we were meeting them for the first time. We are also struck by the contrast between Emily's innovative style and the simplicity of her romantic imagery – again as in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. A quick perusal of Emily's first lines suffices to demonstrate the kind of imagery I have in mind. Images suggestive of sumptuous objects like *jewel*, *diamond*, *alabaster*, *amber*, *emperor*, *castle*, and *mansion* are comparatively rare. So are those calling up violent conflicts, like *storm*, *thunder*, *volcano*, and

maelstrom, which have caught the attention of feminist criticism. By contrast, nature imagery abounds in most poems. It can be safely said that Dickinson's staple imagery clusters around words like *earth, sky, cloud, ground, forest, sea, pool, river, brook, grass, lawn, field, mountain, hill, abyss, flower* (also *rose, mistletoe, daisy, lilac, gentian, dandelion*), *seed, blossom, garden, leaves, petal, thorn, dew, tree* (also *laurel, sapling, bramble*), *root, clover, hill, mountain, abyss, bird* (also *jay, sparrow, robin*), *wind, breeze, frost, snow, flake, ice, fog, sun, sunset, sunrise, dawn, moon, crescent, star, sea, water, wave, rain, rainbow, thunder, dust*. Some images like *bee* and *bird* recur by the dozen. Also frequent are images focusing on natural events associated with the passage of time, like *day, night, morning, morn, season* (*summer, spring, winter, autumn*), *light*. Animals like *tiger, lamb, dog, reindeer*, briefly cross this poetic landscape, but insects (*spider, butterfly, beetle* and especially, *bee*) come out uppermost.

Going back to the Dickinson cartoons, the reader acquainted with the poet's biography may imagine that the caricature that shows her gazing out of her window suggests that her eyes rest on the landscape outside her Amherst home, and so on objects evoked by the nature imagery recurrent in her poetry. This reader will also note that the window which she stands at is crossed with bars, hinting at the notion of a prison – maybe the prison of the doubtful status granted to female writers on her day, no less than the prison of her own self-imposed seclusion.

Notes

1. I particularly refer to Chantal Herskovic's work on Will Eisner and on the TV series *The Simpsons*, cited in the References.
2. Cf. Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis, cited in the References.
3. I refer to the concept of intermediality as defined by Claus Clüver: interrelations among the various media or specific forms of transference among the media (intersemiotic transposition). This concept is likely to replace the traditional label of interart studies, owing to the problematic definition of "art" nowadays.

References

- Clüver, Claus. "Estudos interartes: conceitos, termos, objetivos". In: *Literatura e Sociedade*. Revista de teoria literária e literatura comparada. Universidade de São Paulo, 2, 1997, pp. 37-55.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. London: Hutchinson, 1981.

- _____. *Postscript to "The Name of the Rose"*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Herskovic, Chantal. *Chegando em Springfield: um estudo crítico sobre a série "Os Simpsons"*. Dissertação (mestrado). Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2005.
- _____. "A intermedialidade na obra de Will Eisner". In: *Lugares dos discursos: Anais do X Congresso Internacional da ABRALIC*. Rio de Janeiro, 2006.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Poems: Second Series*. Higginson, T. W.; Todd, Mabel Loomis (eds.). Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1901. Project Gutenberg's Poems: License included online at <www.gutenberg.net>.
- Reis, Eliana Lourenço de Lima. "Intermedialidade como remediação". In: *Lugares dos Discursos: Anais do X Congresso Internacional da ABRALIC*. Rio de Janeiro, 2006.