"Contamina(c)tions: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Teaching American Literature in an Italian University. The Case of 'Dickin*song*'"

Abstract: Given the enormous unpredictable changes that our world is undergoing, it is irrefutable that one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century is the building of a sustainable and durable future. The transforming dynamics investing our time are making our lives increasingly uncertain, thus encouraging reflection on the complex nature of human inquiry and on the role of education as one of the most powerful instruments of change. However, the more complex our knowledge seems to become, the more fragmented our approaches toward its understanding and interpretations are. We tend to believe that intricate issues may better be tackled by reducing their complexity through methods and techniques of simplification. The academic world is no exception to this tendency, since disciplines provide the rationale for both university departmental organization and their pedagogical agendas. In this essay, I provide the case study of a course in American literature, where Emily Dickinson's poetry is taught through music and sculpture. The purpose is to demonstrate how transdisciplinarity, transformative education, and contamina(c)tion offer a method to develop a new way of thinking that transcends disciplinary boundaries and engages students in an active participative learning process based on the respect of their individual vocations and creativity, on the integration of their multifaceted acquired knowledge, and on its application in the larger context of life.
Key Words: Complexity, Transdisciplinarity, Transformative Education, Emily Dickinson, Poetry, Sculpture, Matilde Domestico, Folk Music, Malecorde

On Complexity and the Inadequacy of Current Educational Systems

The unprecedented and persistent complexity that characterizes our time is the result of a rapid change that we handle with great difficulty. The relentless flux of information, the unsurpassed accumulation of images, the invasiveness of technology, the increasing economic pressures, the crucial environmental urgencies and relative issues such as wealth distribution, governance, and sustainability - just to name a few - are leading to multiple instabilities. Extensive research on the complexity of our historical moment[1] has repeatedly emphasized how ineffective conventional critical approaches have become in the understanding of our reality (Bateson; Nicolescu and Kern; Nicolescu). More importantly, scholars have highlighted that "the dominant Western epistemology, or knowledge system, is no longer adequate to cope with the world that it itself has partly created" (Sterling 3). There is wide consensus that in order to assess and face the uncertainty and ambiguity of such a pluralistic, interconnected world, we should stray away from traditional thinking and paradigms of inquiry focused on bipolar, mutually exclusive alternatives. As Alfonso Montuori explains in his introduction to Edgar Morin's pivotal volume *On Complexity* (2008)

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[1] (Kauffman, Capra, Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons;* Taylor; Bocchi and Ceruti; Morin, *On Complexity*)

and elsewhere (Montuori), we are in the need of a new organization of knowledge, since "the question is not just *what* we know, but *how* we know, and *how* we organize our knowledge" (xxvi).

One recurring suggestion to overcome this modern impasse is the replacement of the conventional Aristotelian and Cartesian foundations for inquiry with what Edgar Morin defines as "*la pensée complexe*," namely a way of thinking that breaks with straightforward disjunctive models and a reductionist, linear approach to understanding phenomena. This approach, which has been present in much of Western history, has eventually discarded complexity from most thinking processes, further compartmentalizing knowledge and isolating scholars within strict disciplinary precincts.

According to Taylor, this dynamic of separation should be seen as a legacy of the Cold War era (49). The simplification of complex relations, aimed at creating orderly and precise oppositions, has been systematically applied in various fields of the human existence through the building of dividing walls, which seem to provide security. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, however, marked the beginning of a new political and economic order, which on its turn generated a "network culture system". All of a sudden, grids and walls lost all their power to protect from "spreading webs," which in fact link and connect, while engaging people and ideas in manifold, mutually transforming, and viscous processes of interchange: "As connections proliferate, change accelerates, bringing everything to the edge of chaos: This is the moment of complexity" (Taylor 23).

The academic world has not been exempted from this shift. Yet, its complexity seems to be more of a formal nature and to involve its bureaucratic, administrative, and structuring systems. Indeed, the escalation of new study areas, departments, agendas, programmes, courses, laboratories, exams, in short, the fragmentation of both the American and the European university systems has clearly accentuated all their inadequacies. One of the most criticized infirmities of mainstream education consists in its hyperspecialization (Nicolescu 2008; Montuori 2010), which often prevents a free circulation of knowledge through different disciplines. The rigidity conveyed by an atomistic approach, in fact, only perpetuates the same old dynamics of wall seclusion instead of favoring what I call a contamina(c)tion of ideas, namely a constructive awareness of critical issues studied from different perspectives and leading to active participation in life. This is made viable through an integration of Complexity Theory, which not only wishes for a dialogue through sciences, but also demands an openness of mind while considering new epistemological quests. This requirement stems from a historical deceptive persuasion that the paradigms that control science - and the so-called "hard sciences" in particular - are immune to errors and illusions,

and that only rigorous scientific knowledge can treat "ethical, philosophical, or epistemological questions" (Morin, *Seven* 6). On the contrary, new ways of thinking are possible. The old divide between natural and human sciences, for example, can be bridged by avoiding the common propensity to favor one specific framework instead of contemplating multiple interconnections. As Richardson and Cilliers argue,

> If we allow different methods, we should allow them without granting a higher status to some of them. Thus, we need both mathematical equations and narrative descriptions. Perhaps one is more appropriate than the other under certain circumstances, but one should not be seen as more scientific than the other. (12)

Another strong critique directed at academia is that the predominance of its fragmented structure often induces to consider knowledge as a ready-made tool (Morin, *Seven*), as both currency and profitable commodity, even distributable through telematic technologies (Taylor 235). In the view of this kind of education that Montuori defines "Reproductive" ("The Quest for a New Education"), students are perceived as "consumers of knowledge" ("Creative Enquiry 65). This pedagogy, in fact, frames education as an informative, transmissive process, whose contents are *produced* by (hyper)expert scholars, whose expectations revolve around a faithful *reproduction* of that very knowledge. As a result, students are often caught within a mechanistic *modus operandi* that does not contemplate their personal inquiry, set of values, critical thinking, and creativity. Not surprisingly, this sanitized method has amplified misconceptions about scientific research, to the point that adjectives such as "academic" or "scholarly" have ended up conveying a derogatory meaning, often implying a sterile, passive, unemotional process.

Transdisciplinarity, Transformative Education, and Contamina(c)tion

The term "transdisciplinarity, which "constitutes neither a new religion, nor a new philosophy, nor a new metaphysics, nor a science of sciences"[2], was coined almost three decades ago and started circulating in the publications of scholars such as Edgar Morin, Jean Piaget, and Eric Jantsch to stress the need to cross the limits of discipline or science boundaries. In 1987, theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu contributed to found the Centre International

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[2] The quotation is taken from Art. 7 of *The Charter of Transdisciplinarity*. It was written in 1994 and adopted as a moral commitment by participants at the First World Congress of Trandisciplinarity, Convento da Arrábida, Portugal, November 2-6, 1994.
www.basarab.nicolescu.perso.sfr.fr/ciret/english/charten.html, last visit on 13 July 2012.

de Recherches et Etudes Transdisciplinaires (CIRET) in Paris, with the aim "to lay bare the nature and characteristics of the flow of information circulating between the various branches of knowledge"[3] and his is the *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (2002). Nicolescu expresses all his perplexities for the extant gap between the exponential progress in scientific research and the implementation of relative findings in reality, in other words between knowledge and action, especially in the light of a constant threat of "complete self-destruction" (Nicolescu, *Manifesto* 6), that involves three aspects of the human condition: the material, the biological, and the spiritual.

Self-destruction today seems to be more than the projection of a future simulacrum. Similarly, positive change should not be viewed as a mere futuristic vision. Transdisciplinarity advocates, in fact, posit an active response to overcome the mismatch between knowledge and action, based on the conviction that the transdisciplinary viewpoint "allows us to consider a multidimensional Reality, structured by multiple levels replacing the single-level, one-dimensional reality of classical thought" (Nicolescu, *Manifesto* 49), while rejecting all closed systems of thought (121).[4] It engages the inquirer in an active transformative process - that is relational and participatory - and contemplates a view of education that discards a mere transmissive function. The purpose is to elicit an awareness of social, historical, political, environmental, and cultural issues, and the potential for ethical action as an effective vehicle of change. An intermingling of different scientific paradigms can successfully lead to contamina(c)tion, a complementary process of integrating a wide array of methods with the clear purpose to search different solutions for the problems under investigation.

Since the inquirer's engagement is a key factor, also his/her creativity and imagination play substantial roles. In Reproductive Education the student is viewed as a simple cog in the complex machine of university; in Transformative Education, by contrast, his/her required involvement implies a creative act, capable to surpass the limits of a mechanistic process of data input/output (sometimes mere notions), in the respect of the learner's personal vocations. "Creativity, claims Montuori, "is now increasingly seen as a distributed, networked, paradoxical, emergent process that manifests in all aspects of life" (Montuori, "Creative Enquiry" 66). It is hard to believe that, of "all aspects of life," the learning process should be creativity-exempt.

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[3] CIRET is a no-profit organization, gathering scholars from different specialities and scientific domains. Its objectives, Charter, and moral project can be seen at:
www.basarab.nicolescu.perso.sfr.fr/ciret/english/indexen.htm , last visit on 13 July 2012.
[4] For an overview of the state of the art of Transdisciplinary research see Hirsch Hadorn, G. et al. (eds.). *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research*. Springer, 2008.

The Complexities of the Italian University System

If current educational systems are ineffective in preparing us for the complexities of our existence, universities in Italy present more challenges than elsewhere. Starting from the late Sixties, politicians from both the right and the left wings of the government have persistently debated the need to reform a highly complicated, over-bureaucratic, underfinanced, and unjust academic system, whose obscure dysfunctional and rigid hierarchical mechanisms merely reflect the widespread general corruption of the country. The theme of university and research modernization in Italy, however, has provoked modest interest, despite the fact that it could be viewed as the litmus test to determine the seriousness of other socio-political and economic national plagues (Sylos and Zapperi, *I ricercatori*). Several proposals to reform university education have been mooted over the years, and yet recurrent failures to implement them have to do with the very nature of these reforms, aimed at mere structural restylings rather than at pedagogical innovations, so much that 1984 Physics Nobel laureate, Carlo Rubbia, has commented that, "Physicists have developed a theory for chaos, but Italy is now running an experiment in chaos" (Abbott).

More recently, educators at all levels in Italian universities have been confronted with several issues concerning their educational scopes and roles. Due to their responsibility in the formation of new educational environments and processes, and to the recent "epochal"[5] university reform that the second Berlusconi's government has introduced in December 2010, also teaching approaches have undergone serious changes. Unfortunately, not for the better. The claimed priorities of the so-called "Gelmini reform" (Law 240/2010), named after the much opposed (now former) Minister of Education, include: new evaluation and recruitment systems based on merit, transparency, and productivity; an increment in research funding; a generational turnover; research internationalization, and salary increments. In words, everything that Italy needs to become more competitive on the international scene. Moreover, all these good intentions were (and still are under the "technical government" of current Prime Minister Mario Monti) widely publicized by the Italian media (most of which are notoriously owned by Silvio Berlusconi himself) in order to elicit popular consensus. As a result, when the huge discrepancy between *flaunted* innovations and *real* provisions became very evident, the disappointment was equally enormous: this was Italy's missed opportunity and Minister Gelmini just another "reformer without reforms" (Bull and Gardini).

[5] This is the definition given by Mariastella Gelmini, Minister of Education under Berlusconi's government.

As a matter of fact, the measures adopted in the past few years are just an effective way to put into practice a theoretical orientation that had been lingering in the Italian Parliament for over two decades: a drastic reduction of funds traditionally devoted to research and culture;[6] a more rigid recruitment system with the purpose to decrease the number of positions offered and make the precariousness of thousands of researchers permanent; a gradual process of privatization of public universities, with a consequential involvement of banks and private industries let free to decide for many aspects of the public academic life (teaching included). No wonder that a massive protest against the measures of austerity and the denial of basic democratic rights arose in 2010 throughout the country, especially among the ambiguous "categories" of assistant professors, precarious researchers (who mostly have a one year contract, often with neither wage nor reimbursements), and temporary teachers,[7] thus encouraging the massive phenomenon of "*la fuga dei cervelli*," the exodus abroad, where the work of Italian scholars is much more appreciated and credited than in Italy. Paradoxically, then, internationalization has recently become more a risk than an opportunity for both university institutions (that may lose their national talents after investing in them) and precarious researchers (who may lose an opportunity to be hired while being abroad).

For reasons of space, I will not offer here a detailed list and description of the multiple infirmities of the current Italian academic world and/or the disastrous aftermaths of the Gelmini law. Nevertheless, there are some crucial aspects that have deeply affected my teaching over these last years and that I would like to briefly discuss. These are, in fact, starting points of my Italian experience as an assistant professor, returning to Italy after several years as a Fulbright scholar and visiting professor in the United States.

Teaching American Literature in Italy

When I moved back to Italy to comply with the two-year home requirement that Fulbright scholars are subjected to, I immediately realized that teaching in an Italian university was

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[6] Minister of Treasure, Giulio Tremonti, justified many cuts by stating that "You don't eat with culture" ("*La cultura non si mangia*"), a sentence that has become a manifesto of the close-minded orientation of Berlusconi's government. Art. 66 (comma 13) of the Law 133/2008 reduced of 20% the ordinary trust fund for the next five years, followed by a predictable increase of students' university fees.

[7] Many Italian universities were involved in the protest and occupied by both students and educators who even spent several nights sleeping on the roofs of their own institutions. Since the protest against the university reform was paired by the opposition to strategic financial cuts to cultural activities, also intellectuals, artists, film directors, and philosophers joined in to take up rectorships and major cities' landmarks, such as theatres, monuments, and squares. Assistant professors of the University of Torino have gathered their reflections and observations in an insightful volume: Bruno Maida (ed.), *Senti che bel rumore. Un anno di lotta per l'università pubblica*. Torino: aAccademia University Press, 2011.

going to be a real challenge. A first weakness of the Italian academia, in fact, consists in its complicated and strongly hierarchical recruitment system, so different from most European and American ones (Nazio). In order to be hired, one needs to win a national contest (*concorso pubblico*), which does not come out on a regular basis, but according to the needs of single discipline or study areas within departments or faculties, and their available financial coverage. The evaluation criteria and the candidates' profiles, however, vary each time and are at the discretion of the local Committee that, after the new reform, is composed of full professors only.

This selection method highlights three major risks: first, it prevents scholars and researchers to plan ahead their academic itineraries and careers. The long waits for a *concorso* (in my case, I ended up waiting for six years) and the lack of an *a priori* evaluation policy (in terms of publications, teaching load, organizational skills, fundraising efforts and, especially, specific expertise of each candidate) only perpetuate the researchers' precarious position and the widespread "dependence," when not real "loyalty and submission" (Nazio 10), to full professors also known as "*baroni*" (although, fortunately, this is not the rule). Second, it exacerbates the notorious phenomenon of academic ageing. In front of such a rigid vertical hierarchy, the average age of an Italian "young" assistant professor is 40. Law 133/2008, in fact, determines that the desired turnover of professors is limited to 20%, i.e. five retiring full professors are substituted with one new position only. Moreover, Law 203/2005 states that the retiring age for full professors is 70, but it also allows all state employees (university educators included) to extend their working period for another two years (Sylos and Zapperi, "Reverse Age Discrimination Act; Sylos and Zapperi, *I ricercatori*). Third, it concentrates enormous powers in the hands of an intellectual, isolated élite that indeed can promote relatives and friends - both biological and academic - without being contested as their final evaluation is indisputable (Carlucci and Castaldo; Gardini; Sylos Labini and Zapperi, *I ricercatori*).

Judging from this procedure, it is quite evident that in Italy reforms are not effective in bringing any substantial change and that these expensive normative exercises are just a reconfirmation of old privileges in disguise. As long as the new demands of our complex world are met by such a resilient mentality, our intellectual capital will continue to be wasted.

The second big challenge that I had to face as soon as I was finally hired, consisted in an effort of comprehension. I started wondering: what was the real meaning of the formal wording of my study area, "Anglo-American Language and Literatures"? How much could the hyphenation of the title affect the structure, the syllabus, and the critical readings of my American literature courses? How could I integrate the long-standing tradition of Italian

American studies with the new cultural patrimony that I had earned during my years in the United States?

Indeed, Italy boasts a long and well-established tradition in American literature scholarship. Moreover, as Michele Bottalico reminds us, "the interest in American literature [...] has never been separate from a wider concern with the whole American experience" (Bottalico 148) and Italian scholars, critics, and writers have always been "attracted to the cultural vitality of America" (149). The University of Torino, in particular, was a piloting centre for the diffusion of an American literary studies programme, thanks to the enormous contribution of its founder, the novelist and poet Cesare Pavese.

Typically, the relationships between the two countries have been of mutual friendship and esteem, although it was only during Fascism that America became the "antidote" against the stifling cultural atmosphere imposed by Benito Mussolini's regime. Working as a literary translator for the prestigious publishing house Einaudi, Pavese defined the years 1930s and 1940s as the "decades of translations" and also the "*ventennio americano*" for its new and deep interest towards America, a period that can actually be framed within two specific dates: 1930 (the date of Cesare Pavese's first translation of Sinclair Lewis' *Our Mr. Wrenn*) and 1950 (the date of Pavese's suicide). Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, another influential writer, while operating in the periphery of Italy (Piedmont and Sicily respectively), were the real "fathers" of a new myth of America, whose unsurpassed monument was the anthology *Americana* (1942). This was meant to be a collection of different authors' voices that not only represented their country and their literature, but also literary ideals as intertwined with political hopes and expectations.

Pavese's legacy was inherited by Fernanda Pivano, one the most authoritative americanists, whose inexhaustible work of criticism and translation has contributed to both introduce many young American writers' works and to counterbalance the numerous myths (sometimes mere stereotypes) about their culture that the media had in the meantime multiplied (Fargione). Academic programmes flourished in Italy during the Seventies and Eighties, together with different theoretical positions that reflected a similar multiplicity of discourses and an increasing interdisciplinary approach. Americanists started teaching films, plays, music, television, and all sorts of cultural materials that fell outside the conventional literary rubrics. But then the Nineties arrived, and with them the rhetoric of capitalism, privatization, and liberalism, which induced Italian universities to conform to the wider logic of the market.

In 1998, Minister of Education, Luigi Berlinguer, introduced a system of credits and the so-called "3+2 reform" (Ministerial Decree n. 509/99), i.e. a first 3-year-cycle

(corresponding to the American undergraduate level) followed by a 2-year-cycle (graduate level) which implemented the decisions taken by EU Ministers involved in the "Bologna Process," a movement towards internationalization and the promotion of both educator and student mobility. From a practical point of view, this meant a considerable reduction and simplification of our students' curricula, which were justified by the intention of reducing the enormous drop out rate and of making formative activities more professionally oriented than in the past. This triggered an increasing subordination of the most salient objective of the whole educational experience - the acquisition of a critical knowledge and its application in the wider world - to the production of a flexible and culturally weakened workforce (Petrini). This was clearly mirrored by the fragmentation of courses, by the impressive capacity of each class[8], or even by the paradoxical measure of counting the number of pages of our students' reading lists to determine the number of credits that they would earn accordingly.

Finally, multiple and often diverging agendas started to be gathered under the same discipline umbrella, so that the assumption that scholars in the same field coalesce around common interests and share methods of inquiry was no longer safe. Currently, the exponential growth of diversification within the same study area pairs the extraordinary variation of methods and contents. In this broadened context, the general crisis that has invested American studies in Italy and the decreasing enthusiasm towards American literature, have prompted different reactions and adjusting teaching strategies.

In the next section, I will provide the case study of an undergraduate course in American literature, which exemplifies my personal efforts to reduce the disadvantages of such a complex university system, while not excluding complex thought. Its underpinning objectives are at least twofold: on the one hand, to foster contamina(c)tion, incorporate students' creativity, and engage them in an active transformative learning process; on the other hand, to overcome the localism and self-referentiality of Italian universities, to pursue diversity appreciation, opinion making, and community involvement. The strategies here discussed are the result of my experience during the past six years of teaching in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Torino, Italy.

Course Format, Community Involvement, and Contamina(c)tion

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[8] With the exception of few laboratories and seminars, students' attendance in Italy is not compulsory. Yet, in my American literature courses generally sit more than 170 students each year, and another 30-50 non attendant students register for my final oral exam. Needless to say, that I have no teaching assistants to help me out with paper grading or final exams.

As seen in the previous sections, Italian university professors are currently confronted with many issues: some are shared by their peers all over the world and are the by-products of a highly complex moment in history, but many others are local phenomena, mostly caused by a long-standing dysfunctional governmental management. Among these last, one that affects my teaching at the undergraduate level is the increasingly scarce linguistic competence of most of my Italian students. This holds true for both their mother tongue[9] and for English as a foreign language. Among the many reasons for this deficiency, the absence of higher education vocational tracks (which, by contrast, the USA and other European countries have implemented) and the weak foreign language curricula of secondary schools seem to be the most convincing and persistent. As a result, less motivated students enroll in university courses and many of them are doomed to drop out.

Yet, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) provides very specific parameters for setting standards of learning and evaluation processes conceived in the promotion of plurilingualism. It describes language use as "*action-oriented*" (my emphasis), and language users and learners primarily as "social agents," namely "members of a society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular set of action" (CERF 9). Among the "eight key competences for lifelong learning" established by the European Council, i.e. "a transferable, multifunctional package of knowledge, skills and attitudes" that all students should develop by the end of compulsory schooling, the first mentioned is "communication in the mother tongue" and the second "communication in a foreign language". In both cases, communication is defined as the ability to understand, express, and interpret thoughts, feelings, and facts in both oral and written form in a wide range of societal and cultural contexts in response to individual wants or needs. Mediation and intercultural understanding are also included among the skills of communication in a foreign language.[10]

Due to the linguistic weaknesses of my undergraduate students, my course is taught mostly (but not exclusively) in Italian, while readings are in the original language with the aim to foster foreign language awareness and appreciation, promote cultural and linguistic diversity, improve their communicative skills in English, and meet the expectations of foreign and Erasmus students. Moreover, the final oral exam can be taken in English, an

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[9] In this context, by "mother tongue" I mean Italian, although I am aware that this definition may raise further questions due to the increasing number of bilingual families migrated to and living in our country.
[10] The CERF's "Language education policy profile" can be accessed on line at: www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp . Last visit on 20 July 2012.

option that I strongly encourage by granting a higher final evaluation. As for my students' difficulties in the Italian writing skills, my efforts are mirrored by the course requirements, which contemplate a response paper (a very unusual and often unfamiliar test for Italian students, especially for such a populated course), where their critical sense should match their skills in style. Clearly, though, this is not enough. It is my contention, in fact, that if Italian universities wish to open up to real internationalization and transformative education, they should sustain the European standards of learning and evaluation processes that I mentioned above, where also language and literature are seen as "*action-oriented*" and learners as "social agents" rather than mere re-producers of knowledge. In this view, Elaine Showalter's argument seems very appropriate: "Literature instructors often define their courses by the texts on their syllabi [...] not acts that students will be expected to perform" (Showalter 24).

Performance and performativity have thus been included in my course in different ways, starting from the very format of the course. Every year, I choose a different theme to be explored with my students through literature, arts, and sciences,[11] and five or six writers are proposed and analyzed in class as epitomizers (either through their biographies or their characters or both) of the issues at stake for which we try to find solutions. This operation becomes particularly challenging when the writers under investigation are not contemporary. In this case, we also need to modernize their social and cultural contexts, sometimes by way of "translations" (a case in point is Emily Dickinson, for whom I will provide examples in my next section).

It is necessary to keep in mind that in Italy, with the exception of small seminars where a limited number of attending students are asked to actively participate in class discussion and opinion sharing, frontal lessons generally engage the professor in a lecture and the students in a note-taking session. In my course, despite the large audience and students' traditional resilience to public participation (especially when an intimidating microphone is required as in this case), lessons are conducted as seminars and students' questions, comments, and inquiries are incited. Frontal lessons are integrated with more

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[11] Just to give you two examples, this last academic year the course was titled "Beyond Borders" and aimed to discuss the challenges and opportunities created by migration and mobility across national, cultural, and geographical boundaries. It explored issues revolving around identity recognition and formation and how these processes function differently as they move across a variety of borders such as gender, ethnicity, age, and time. Next academic year, instead, my course "Thinking Green" intends to explore several issues in the field of ecocriticism, including how human relationships to natural landscapes and animals are represented in American literature; the interconnections between literary texts and (catastrophic) events of nature; the role of literature in an era of globalization and ecological crisis; and, especially, what roles Nature Writing has played within the environmental movement and within what might be described as an environmentally minded counterculture.

performative meetings with one or more guests, normally artists, musicians, film and theatre directors, photographers, and different social workers: from phychologists to journalists, from deaf-mute sign language educators to literary translators. Owing to the many financial cuts analyzed in this article, these guests do not receive any honorarium or reimbursement, thus demonstrating how their passion and their desire to share their artistic or social commitment are genuinely true.

Figure 1 E.A. Poe and madness. D. Bestonzo (piano) and D. Chiazzolino (guitar)

Another peculiarity of public university courses in Italy consists in its openness to the general public: any citizen, in fact, can audit lessons, although it is quite a rare occurrence. In order to foster a more active involvement of the local population in the academic life (too frequently accused of being self-referential and elitist) *and viceversa*, different articles on the topic and the guest/s of the week are published on the university webpage and on newspapers. Normally, the university web radio (110 Web Radio) interviews me every week to announce the issues that will be discussed with the students and sometimes invites me and my guests to offer a sample of the many contamina(c)tions that will take place in the classroom and, hopefully, beyond it.

Figure 2 Giovanni Battaglino and Walter Matacena (Malecorde) at 110 Web Radio

Earlier in this paper, I have highlighted the importance of students' creativity and imagination as two crucial elements of Transformative Education. Students have vocations and passions that academic life seems to ignore. In this course, by contrast, I invite my students to be creative and draw on their artistic skills: many of them are musicians, others are dancers, some love to draw, some others to write fiction. Accordingly, their final work may be an artistic project of any genre and format provided that it is supported by an academic response paper, written either in Italian or in English, in which they are supposed to discuss the issues raised in the course and engage themselves in ethical contamina(c)tion and complex thinking. This is a way of considering the patterns, textures, and structures underneath events, rather than just events themselves and to entice self-reflective analysis in order to shake stabilized perspectives and impact actions in the world beyond the classroom.

Teaching Emily Dickinson's Poetry Through Sculpture and Music

"Poetry, silence, solitude". These are the first three words that I would mention if I were asked to synthesize (and simplify) Emily Dickinson's art. But if I were asked the same question to express my students' reaction at the utterance of these three words, I would probably reply: "dread, discomfort, puzzlement". As Showalter illustrates, "Teachers lament that students find it [poetry] difficult and intimidating" (62), and much of their disorientation probably derives from their lack of familiarity with its concise language, up to the point that poetry "has been dislodged from the center of the literary curriculum by fiction, drama, cultural studies, and even literary theory" (62).

Yet, poetry has a transgressive and transformative power that other genres cannot grant. In order to both demonstrate my argument and to make my students more at ease

with the whole poetic experience, I structured my lessons with one major objective in mind: to deconstruct and reconstruct old and new myths, the first one being the ability of university professors to teach poetry. Poetry, in fact, is unteachable. So, how could I transform my students' painful experience of reading verses in a foreign language and make it enjoyable? How could I "translate" the agony and ecstasy of a tormented young woman living in a Puritan New England little town in the nineteenth century and hope that they could relate to them, eventually appreciate them? How transgressive and trasformative was my teaching supposed to be in order to be successful? Now, *I* was the intimidated one, until I realized that Emily Dickinson herself offered a solution to my riddles.

In a letter to his wife dated 16 August 1870, Thomas Higginson writes of his encounter with the poet and includes her definition of poetry:

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" (Johnson, Letter 342a.)[12]

Poetry, for Emily Dickinson, is - first and foremost - something to experience (and recognize) physically, a domain where to make the abstract tangible, despite her use of a distinctively elliptical language. After all, *this* is the Poet: "It is That / Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings - " (Johnson, Poem 448, 1862).

A second hint came from my privileged observation post. Over these last years of teaching to wide crowds of students, I have gathered the sharp impression that also silence is conceived as something dreadful, rarely as an opportunity. We are, in fact, constantly bombarded with noise: frequencies and sounds surround us and accumulate, contributing to our environmental noise pollution, eventually becoming - Don DeLillo *docet* - "white". In order to make my students aware of that imperceptible, elusive whiteness, I introduced Raymond Murray Schafer's World Soundscape Project and his concept of acoustic ecology, warning against "the dangers of an indiscriminate and imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds into every corner of man's life" (Schafer 4). But if "noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore," music, among the arts, is the territory where we create "ideal

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[12] For a very informative reasearch on the source of the quotation, see Peter Y. Chou, "Emily Dickinson's Definition of Poetry. Finding the Source of the Quotation".
www.wisdomportal.com/Poems/DickinsonDefinitionPoetry.html last visited on 27 July 2012.

soundscapes for our imagination and psychic reflection" (4). It is, in short, "sound that matters" (12).

Starting from these very premises, I designed my next lessons to funnel my students' appreciation of music into an appreciation of poetry's musicality. Similarly to music, poetry uses a physical language: a song and a poem are both performative, and they both require to be performed aloud. Moreover, Emily Dickinson's verses are excellent examples of the interconnections of sound and silence: their wrenched grammar and syntax often create a condensed, almost aphoristic poetry, where omissions and deletions - frequently represented by dashes - denote an absence in presence, an unfulfilled dream, an unutterable desire, an unexpressed pain. Being even visible on the page, silence is a sound unit itself that deserves contemplation and breath, finally reflecting Emily Dickinson's condition of quiet - and yet never empty - solitude.

The clash between the poet's stultifying status of "evanescence" and my students' cacophonous existence was at the center of a lively discussion that tackled our current use of social networks and prompted a comparison between Emily Dickinson's letter and poetry writing and our virtual ways of connecting to the world. In the meantime, a quotation was shown: "How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question." These words, projected on our screen, not only presented a problem for which we were asked to imagine solutions, but they also led the way to poetry appreciation. The quotation, in fact, comes from Virginia Woolf's "Crafttsmanship," the only known surviving recording of the writer,[13] where she expresses her concern about the inefficiency of the teaching of words, and wonders:

Where then are we to lay the blame? Not on our professors; not on our reviewers; not on our writers; but on words. It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. [...] words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. [...] it is because of this complexity that they survive. Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing to-day is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful

[13] On April 29, 1937 BBC broadcasted a series of conversations by the title "Words Fail Me". Woolf's text was later published as an essay in "The Death of the Moth and Other Essays" (1942). www.atthisnow.blogspot.it/2009/06/craftsmanship-virginia-woolf.html . Last visited on 1 August 2012.

meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which

makes us pass the examination. (Woolf)

Virginia Woolf's implicit suggestion to explore the multifold semantic values of words motivated an investigation on the construction of Emily Dickinson's myths. Words, the poet teaches us, have indeed an extraordinary power to transmit the truth, but manipulated words preserve falsifications. After explaining the process of mutilation that some of Dickinson's poems and letters underwent by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, editors of her first publications, my students and I inquired the contradictory nature of myth making.[14] Living a cloistered life, the virgin of Amherst emerged as a shy, well-educated, pious, fragile tiny woman. This image, however, collides with the portrait of an ironic, passionate, unorthodox, transgressive and profound woman that only a few intrepid biographers and translators have had the strength to restore.[15] Together with one Italian sculptor...

I stumbled into the work of Matilde Domestico several years ago, when I met the artist at an exhibition in Torino, where she lives and works. The originality of her poetics consists in a unique plastic language that revolves around one formal obsession, namely the eclectic and multiform use of one single domestic object: the cup. In her sculptures, installations, and performances, the cup "serves as both substance and language to humorously communicate what lies beyond mere functionalism" (Mulatero), but also, when combined with other china fragments, broken crockery, chipped spouts and saucers, as the reminder of our fragile and defective existence.

In 2008, Matilde Domestico was invited to offer a personal exhibition at CioccolaTò, a yearly fair devoted to the celebration of chocolate, one of our city's most renown products.[16] It was on that occasion that Matilde and I started collaborating on the reconstruction of Emily Dickinson's room, with the intention to evoke the same personal dilemmas and complexities that emerged from the reading of her poems and letters.

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[14] For a very detailed analysis of the excisions of Dickinson's works, see Martha Nell Smith's article "Omissions Are Not Accidents: Erasures & Cancellations in Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts". Dickinson Electronic Archives. www.emilydickinson.org/mutilation/mintro.html . Last visited on 1 August 2012.

[15] In Italy, Barbara Lanati's scholarly work has been pivotal in the re-construction of a more accurate version of Dickinson's life. See, for instance, her biography, *Vita di Emily Dickinson. L'alfabeto dell'estasi.* Milano: Feltrinelli,1998.

[16] The exhibition was held at Il Circolo dei Lettori, Palazzo Graneri della Rocca, from February 23 to March 1.
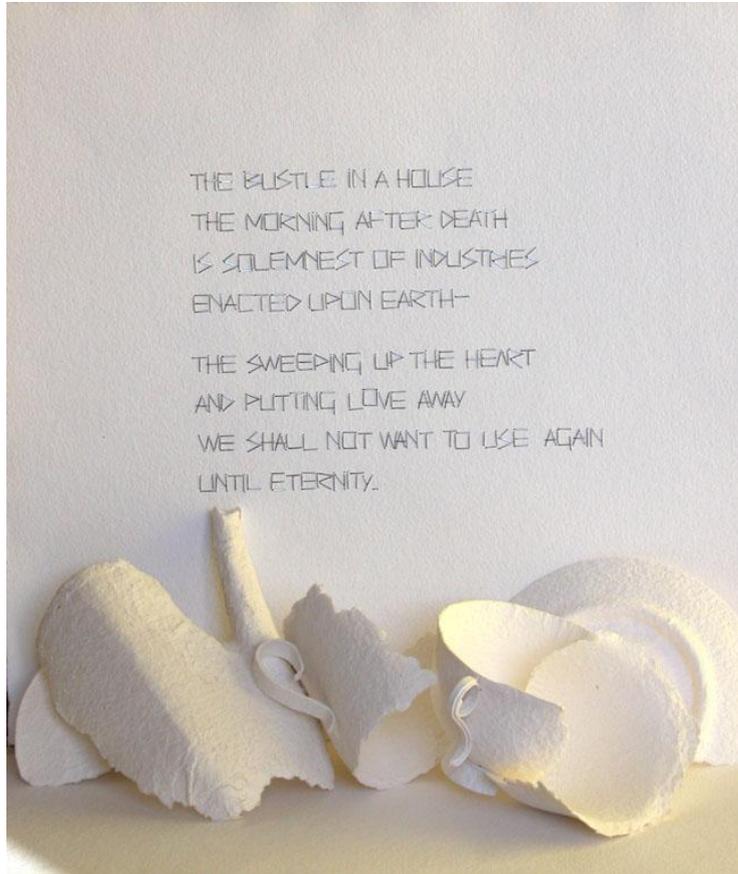
Figure 3 .Matilde Domestico, "The bustle in a house" (2011). Courtesy of the artist.

One artifact, in particular, seems to epitomize some of the most daunting issues that pervade Emily Dickinson's existential quest: Domestico's cup "Portami il tramonto in una tazza". The line, of course, is the Italian translation of the first verse of the poem "Bring me the sunset in a cup," composed in 1860.

Figure 4 "Portami il tramonto in una tazza" (2008) by Matilde Domestico. Photo by Tommaso Mattina. Courtesy of Ermanno Tedeschi Gallery.

In the poem, the speaker confirms an attraction to what is inaccessible, and using a fanciful language demands that nature's wonders be brought to her to be possessed through containment. The sunset metaphor, moreover, taps into the reader's visual memory, summoning the nostalgic declining phase of the day and possibly evoking more sombre thoughts on the stifling circumscription of the poet's fatherly domestic space and of the poet's surrounding parochial geography. Deviating from her usual material - white china - Matilde Domestico creates her cup with handmade paper and writes Dickinson's verse with metallic staples, so cold and cruel in their adamantine precision. This, indeed, is the transcription of Emily Dickinson's eloquent silence and of her *pure* words. Lastly, the artist surrounds her cup with a glass ball to remind us that the poet's "Business is Circumference," as she announced in her fourth letter to Thomas W. Higginson. The interconnections of all these different themes provide an engaging platform for the exploration and assessment of multiple individual issues, which may lead to a deeper understanding of the human experience, so that Domestico's cup finally serves as both the exemplifier and narrator of our "porcelain life".[17]

Structural and evocative image similarities were found in the songs of a folk group, Malecorde, that was also invited to university. The last lesson of the course, in fact, was a

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[17] "In such a porcelain life, one likes to be *sure* that all is well, lest one stumble upon one's hopes in a pile of broken crockery." Letter to Samuel Bowles (late August 1858).

real performance, where I read a script that I wrote including poems, letters, literary criticism, and biographical notes on the "myth" of Amherst. Words alternated with notes, while Matilde Domestico's cup stood out on the desk, giving proof that a strategic discipline contamina(c)tion may trigger change within the classroom, the universities ecosystem, and beyond.[18]

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[18] On June 12, 2009, we were invited to participate in the XV International Poetry Festival in Genoa with "Dickin*song."* www.palazzoducale.genova.it/naviga.asp?pagina=9085 . Last visited on 4 August 2012.

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