



**CANADIAN POETRY AND THE BRAZILIAN STUDENTS:
WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?
Poesia Canadense e o Aluno Brasileiro: Quais São os Desafios?**

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Abstract

This article focuses on a Canadian poetry course that was offered in the undergraduate English language course at Universidade Federal de Goiás, pointing out the factors that were taken into consideration to formulate the course program. In the second part of the article, a reading produced by the students of a poem by the Modernist poet Margaret Avison (Avison, 2005) is presented and discussed showing the strong points and the difficulties they had in its construction. The students' opinions are analyzed using Gadamer's (2000) philosophical hermeneutics in terms of the cultural horizon in which the poem was written and the cultural horizon of the students reading the poem focusing on the familiar and the strange. The contrast between referential texts and representational texts suggested by Widdowson (1992) is also focused on.

Key-words: literature; teaching; foreign language; poetry.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como foco a disciplina de poesia canadense que foi oferecida no curso de Letras/Inglês na Universidade Federal de Goiás. A discussão inicial apresentada neste artigo destaca os pontos que foram levados em consideração para formular o programa da disciplina. Na segunda parte do artigo, apresenta-se e discute-se a leitura que sete alunos fizeram de um poema da poetisa modernista Margaret Avison (Avison, 2005), no final da disciplina, apontando os acertos e as dificuldades na leitura construída pelos alunos. As opiniões dos alunos são analisadas usando a filosofia hermenêutica de Gadamer (2000) em termos do horizonte cultural em que o poema foi escrito como também o horizonte cultural dos alunos ao lerem a obra literária, levando em consideração o familiar e o estranho. Focaliza-se, também, o contraste





sugerido por Widdowson (1992) de texto referencial e texto e leitura representacional.

Palavras-chave: *literatura; ensino; língua estrangeira; poesia.*

1. Introduction

The teaching of Canadian literature is a new experience at the *Curso de Graduação em Letras/Inglês* (undergraduate English language course) where I work and came about due to transformations in the curriculum in the past years. Amongst other changes, it went from an annual curriculum to a semester curriculum. The former lasted five years and resulted in a double teaching certificate, where the student completed the course as a certified teacher of Portuguese and English or any other of the foreign languages offered. The latter lasts eight semesters and results in a single teaching certificate of English or any one of the other languages offered at the *Curso de Graduação em Letras/Inglês*.

In the annual curriculum, the literature courses were divided between English Literature and American Literature and were begun in the third year of the course. At the present moment, the courses are designated as Literatures in the English Language and are distributed over four semesters with each semester dedicated to a literary genre – short narratives (fifth period), poetry (sixth period), novels (seventh period), and drama (eighth period).

As I was selected to offer literature in the sixth period and as a result of the possibilities that the new curriculum provided, I opted to teach Canadian poetry. I made this choice because of the coming together of various factors. At an institutional level, the university – Universidade Federal de Goiás - had set up a Canadian Studies Center (*Núcleo de Estudos Canadenses*) and was encouraging an interchange between Brazil and Canada. Thus a course focusing on poetry from Canada seemed appropriate.

On the other hand, I also taught pre-service teaching (*Estágio* I - fifth period - and *Estágio* II – sixth period) to the same students. A





theme which was discussed in these courses was the question of the appropriation of English as a language to express identities beyond the confines of England and the United States. Since I knew this was a topic that was relevant and interested the students, I felt the poetry course could offer a concrete example of how English was used to express the various identities and concerns in a country outside the polarity USA – England.

In addition, there is of course the personal element involved in any choice. As I am Canadian-Brazilian, I felt a great interest in teaching the poetry written in the country where my mother, grandparents, and great-grandparents were born.

After this brief introduction giving the setting of the Canadian Poetry Course that was offered, I will present the factors that were taken into consideration in organizing the course. In a second section, I will present the last poem studied by the students, discussing their reading of it and whether the organization of the course was on the right track or not.

2. Initial considerations about the course

The course guidelines are as follows: “A synchronic or diachronic study of English and North American lyric production, canonical or non-canonical, as well as the post-colonial literatures of the 15th to the 21st Centuries”¹. The broadness of these guidelines means that the professor has the option of not only choosing from which country or countries the texts will be taken, but also which specific texts are to be studied. In my particular situation, I took into consideration the fact that the students were users of English as a Foreign Language (EFL users)².

1. EMENTA: Estudo sincrônico ou diacrônico da produção lírica inglesa e norte-americana, canônica e não canônica, assim como das literaturas pós-coloniais dos séculos XVI ao XXI.

2. Though, for the most part, no differentiation is made between EFL and ESL (English as a Second Language) students in language acquisition studies (cf. Ellis, 2001), I prefer the designation *EFL*, due to the sociological fact that the student is learning English in a classroom environment with few opportunities to engage in the active use of the language with other speakers in everyday contexts.





The students in the *Letras*/English course are young adults preparing to be teachers of the English language in public and private schools. In terms of language level, the students are usually a heterogeneous group ranging from lower-intermediate level to advanced level. This discrepancy is due not only to individual learning differences, but also due to several bureaucratic aspects of the course such as the fact that students can transfer in from other institutions where there are different language level requirements. Students can also finish their Teaching Certificate in another language, Portuguese, French, or Spanish, and return to complete the English language credits, thus not having had contact with English for a few semesters. In addition, a student can take a leave of absence from the course, and in this way lose regular contact with the English language for several semesters. In spite of these differences, the students tend to have one thing in common when they begin the poetry course: a fear of poetic texts. As a student once so succinctly stated on a questionnaire about literature, “I don’t like poetry in Portuguese, imagine in English. They are very boring texts” (Rees, 1997: 49).³

This fear of the poetic text is a result of several factors. Firstly, the students are not yet used to dealing with complex texts in the foreign language whether they be theoretical, narrative/fictional, or poetic texts. The language for students of this level is more orate and, as they pass to a more literate mode of speech, there are difficulties, a fact that has been discussed by Kramersch (1993: 130). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, they seem to be unfamiliar with the reading of *representational texts* in their day to day lives, whether in their first language (L1) or in the foreign language (FL). The students have, of course, encountered poetry in their literature classes in their L1, but rarely is there a student who reads poetry for enjoyment in her leisure time.

Widdowson (1992) in his discussion of poetry and EFL students, points out that in school as readers, students are familiarized with referential reading in which the text refers to actual objects, people, and emotions in the real, physical world. Poetry, on the other hand, frequently creates a representation in its language and form, of objects, people, and

3. “Não gosto de poesia em português, imagina em English. São obras muito massantes.”





emotions. The way of reading this type of text is necessarily different from the way of reading a referential text. Thus in teaching a course of poetry in the FL, in my opinion, problems arise that are not language problems, but reading problems. In this way, by taking the lack of familiarity with the representational text into consideration, it is possible to organize a course going from texts that are more referential to texts that are more representational. In other words, it is possible to organize the course starting with familiar texts in terms of text type (referential) and ending with unfamiliar texts in term of text type (representational).

In addition, the students are preparing to be teachers of the English language in the public and private schools of the region and literatures in the foreign language are not taught at the high school level. Thus the students are not being prepared to be literature teachers. This fact helps shape the structure of the course content. There would be a different emphasis if the students were being prepared to teach EFL literature in the schools with, perhaps, there being more emphasis on literary regions, schools, and so on.

I also decided that I did not want the students to depend on my voice *to discover*; that is un-cover, the meaning of the text. I wanted them to learn that by paying close attention to the lexicon and the verbal patterns of the poem, they could begin to produce a coherent reading for the poem on their own. I wanted them to be open to the strange both in the lexicon and in the syntactic structures and to learn how to deal with this phenomenon. My principal aim was for them to become independent readers of poetry in the FL and I planned to work on this independence through the means of exercises on the poems. On acquiring this independence, I felt that later on as English language teachers, they could perhaps explore the use of poetry in their classes. By working on this independence, I believed that I was planting the seed for them to progress as readers and as teachers of texts that were not just transactional, but that required a greater involvement from the reader. In addition, I hoped that at some point, the students would find the poems aesthetically pleasing and enjoy the experience of reading this type of text in the FL.

These then were some of the points that I considered while preparing the course and trying to meet the needs of my specific student group.





3. A description of the course

To begin the course I used some classes to give background information about the history, the population, the geography, and the languages spoken in Canada. I took maps and pictures to class and, also encouraged the students to use internet sites to get more information on their own. Throughout the course, I would give background information to help comprehend certain topics brought up in the poems. For example in the poem, *Driving* by the Canadian prairie poet John Newlove (1938-2003) [2000a]⁴, there is a description of driving a car at night in winter:

You never say anything in your letters. You say,
I drove all night long through the snow
in someone else's car
and the heater wouldn't work and I nearly froze.
But I know that. I live in this country too.
I know how beautiful it is at night
with the white snow banked in the moonlight.

To help the students comprehend certain aspects that have to do with living in a country with harsh winters, I explained about the extreme cold and cars with heaters. I also brought pictures of moonlight on snow to show the beauty of this type of landscape.

On the other hand, for a poem such as *Ride off any horizon*, also by Newlove [2000b], a small history class had to be given in order to better understand the focus of the poem.

Ride off any horizon
and let the measure fall
where it may-

and damn the troops, the horsemen
are wheeling in the sunshine,
the cree, practising

4. Newlove's (2000a/b) poems were taken from the online anthology *Canadian Poets* found at the University of Toronto.





for their deaths: mr poundmaker,
gentle sweet mr big bear...⁵

When this type of intervention was necessary, I always tried to relate the discussion to the colonial events that happened in Brazil. In the case of this specific poem, the treatment of the indigenous people of Brazil was brought up for discussion.

4. The structure of the course

Taking into consideration the factors that were mentioned above, I organized the course accordingly. For example, I did not focus on one poet or group of poets, nor on one region of Canada as perhaps a literature course for future literature teachers might do. As stated previously, I attempted to structure the course beginning with poems that could be characterized as more referential and ending with poems that could be characterized as more representational. In this way, in the four months of the semester I intended to help the students hone their skills as readers of a more complex text genre going from textually easier poems to textually more difficult poems.

In this way, toward the beginning of the course, I worked on several poems by Confederation poet Archibald Lampman (1862-1899) (1994)⁶ that describe the Canadian landscape. When reading his poems, if one is a painter it is possible to create visually what he has described verbally. There is, therefore, a reference to actual objects, scenes in the external world. Many of Lampman's poems are, thus, referential.

In this initial phase, I had the students work in pairs and look carefully at the vocabulary used in terms of the five senses and try to create paraphrases of the images of the Canadian landscape being verbally painted. At other times, I made up exercises to also be done in

5. Big Bear and Poundmaker were leaders of the indigenous peoples in the Northwest Rebellion which occurred in 1885 in Western Canada and the U.S.A.

6. Lampman's poems were taken from the anthology organized by Gerson and Davies (1994), as well as the online anthology at the University of Toronto.





pairs. For example, I used questions such as the following on the poem *Heat* by Archibald Lampman (1994):

Exercise on Heat by Archibald Lampman

Stanza I

From plains that reel to southward dim
The road turns by me white and bare,
Up the steep hill it seems to swim
Beyond, and melt into the glare...

1) In lines 1 and 3, what do the verbs *reel* and *swim* indicate in terms of the sense of sight?

Stanza IV

...I lift my eyes sometimes to gaze:
The burning sky-line that blinds my sight;
The woods far off are blue with haze:
The hills are drenched in light.

1) Line 40 – How does the verb *drench*, which is related to the sense of touch, become related to the sense of sight?

Wrap-up

Draw a map of the scenes in the poem.

I ended the course with poems by modernist poet Margaret Avison (2005). For these poems, I worked with exercises that the students did together in groups or pairs. The exercises were done for the most part in class. The students could freely move around the group and consult each other and discuss the answers with each other. I was always present and the students could discuss their readings with me as well. The idea behind this was that the exercises served as a scaffold helping the students focus on aspects of the poem that might have gone unnoticed in their reading. By being encouraged to discuss their readings with each other and with me, I aimed at creating a collaborative reading of the poem. There was always a final moment when the poem and the exercise was gone over with the entire group.





For the remainder of this article, I will present the poem *The Crux* by Avison (2005), the questions that I made up for the exercise on the poem and how some of the students answered them to show in what way the students dealt with the complexities of a representational poem at the end of the semester.

5. Margaret Avison

Margaret Avison was born in 1918 in Ontario, but spent her formative years in Western Canada. She returned to Ontario where she did her undergraduate and Masters studies at the University of Toronto. In 1963, she converted to Christianity and her devout faith defined her life and her work. She did her writing in the evenings as she believed that she should be gainfully employed. As such, she worked as a librarian, secretary, and social worker (Avison, 2005).

Avison won The Governor General's Award for Poetry twice, in 1960 for the volume *The Winter Sun* and in 1990, for *No Time*. She also won The Griffin Poetry Prize in 2003 for *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. In 1985 she was inducted as an Officer of the Order of Canada (cf. Canadian Poets, University of Toronto).

Her poetry is dense, replete with images and perceptions of the world that go against a rationalistic manner of viewing the world. Her poems resist fixities and require a personal understanding, an illumination, of the themes of the poem. In reading her poems, all the senses are employed, as the images flow past. In her Christian poems, she uses the metaphors, the images, and the language of Christianity throughout, to create a thematic whole that is not a sermon, a homiletic or a tract. Rather, the search to be touched by the power of God in everyday life comes vividly through as can be seen in the poem which is the focus of this article:

The Crux

1. Ever see somebody hit bedrock
2. too messed up to
3. say so too





4. hopeless a mess to get his chin
5. far enough off the ground to
6. even give in?
7. deadbeat?

8. Know what that's like yourself?

9. Now can you credit
10. anyone figuring he had to
11. steer his fair steady days and nights
12. deliberately
13. to some as yet (I'm guessing)
14. point of light beyond that
15. abysmal (other people's) living
16. end?
17. right down, past, the dead end
18. to the worst? There wasn't
19. a 'Lamb of God' for the
20. then lamb the wolf had torn.
21. But there gleamed
22. the point.

23. Ever see a child in his
24. highchair twisting with the
25. urgency of now, not knowing how
26. or what, only the
27. pangs, the poignancy
28. *of Don't you see*
29. *that I need everything*
30. *right now?*
31. He hears help coming.
32. Hope stills the moment.
33. Eagerness drums with heels and spoon
34. in a blissful lurch
35. towards all tomorrow.

36. The one the radiance touched



37. does see
38. and smile there, in that kitchen.
39. The point. (Avison, 2005: 131)⁷

6. Comments on reading *The Crux*

According to the German philosopher, Gadamer (2000),

Nothing is so strange, and at the same time so demanding, as the written word. Not even meeting speakers of a foreign language can be compared with this strangeness, since the language of gesture and of sound is always in part immediately tangible. The written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Gadamer (2000: 163)

In this way, when students read, they create meaning from within their relationship of belonging, moving along the polarity of the familiar and the strange. Within philosophical hermeneutics, the strange is that which brings feelings of disorientation, whereas the familiar is that which brings feelings of comfort and safety (Kerdeman, 1998). Thus, as the student deals with the literary text she/he must deal with the unfamiliar and transform it into something that she/he can comprehend. In Gadamer's (2000: 163) words, "In deciphering and interpreting it (the literary text), a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity". In other words, the student that reads a literary text and especially a poetic text, "...must be prepared to encounter this otherness, the non-communication of the poetic word" (Risser, 1997: 16) and transform the otherness into that which is comprehensible.

Thus the student reads from within her/his own horizon, defined by Gadamer (2000: 302) as "...the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point". That is to say, every reader is situated and takes to her/his readings her/his pre-conceptions whether they are about life, knowledge or text style and

7. I numbered the lines to aid in the analysis.





grammar. As I pointed out earlier, the students come to the class as EFL students with certain attitudes towards the poetic text, expectations about how to read texts, as well as not knowing certain specific cultural details with which the poetic texts deal.

Considering this understanding that reading is situated, and produced by the reader, it is possible to examine the poem, *The Crux*, and detect certain characteristics that could conceivably cause problems for the EFL reader. These difficulties range from vocabulary considerations to the religious images.

As far as the vocabulary is concerned there are two words that have double meanings which are *crux* and *point*. The first meaning that comes to mind is the dictionary meaning of “the decisive point”. The second meaning is from the Latin, and literally means “a cross”. It is important to point out a simple practical question which is that in many students’ dictionaries, the original meanings are not given, thus more complete dictionaries were always taken to class to help the students when dealing with situations such as this.

The second word with a double meaning is *point* which in line 14, “a point of light”, refers to a dot of light, in lines 21 and 22, “but there gleamed the point” two meanings resonate, “dot of light” and “the significant or essential thing”, as the essential thing gleams, shines as a dot of light. Finally, in line 39, the conclusion “the point”, referring now to the meaning “the significant or essential thing” of the argumentation of the poem.

These resonances are not easy for EFL students to capture. The language is not yet as rich in images, semantic fields as it will become after a greater length of time. It is important to remember that the students working on these poems were in their sixth semester of the University course, and many were learning English at the university itself. Thus the teacher needs to help point out paths of investigation and thought.

There are of course syntactic difficulties for the student as well, who in her/his language classes has been learning standard S-V-O constructions. Now, in a poetic text she/he is up against a syntax that





breaks the familiar rules. For example, lines 9 through 16 contain a sentence with parentheses that broach other subjects and verbs. Taking the lines out of their poetic form and putting them into a linear form, we read: “Now can you credit anyone figuring he had to steer his fair steady days and nights deliberately to some as yet (I’m guessing) point of light beyond *that abysmal (other people’s) living end?*”. The main problem is in the italicized noun phrase in which the reader has to follow the lines of reasoning in the vocabulary used to create a meaning for the phrase. “Abysmal end” is easily understood, but “abysmal living end” and then “abysmal (other people’s) living end” create barriers that the EFL student has to work on to produce an interpretation. She/he has to be willing to encounter this otherness and transform it into that which is familiar.

There are also the difficulties in the images used, the themes of the poem. For example, who is the “he” of line 10? Reading the text referentially, there is no clear reference for the pronoun “he”. The student has always been taught not to use pronouns without a clear antecedent reference. To understand this line, she/he must leave the familiar rules behind of referential reading, and enter the strange/unfamiliar world of representational reading, in which the whole poem represents the purpose of life of this ‘he’ that is mentioned.

In line 36 who is “the one radiance touched”? Once again, there is no clear antecedent referent. The student must go beyond her/his EFL cultural horizons, that is the culture of a language learner with clearly defined standard language rules, and venture into the world of individualistic uses of language. She/he must produce a reading for this “one”. Moreover, there is a need to know religious phrases such as “the Lamb of God”. By understanding the religious phrases, the reader will then possibly make the connection with the “he” of line 10. However, this comprehension depends on how much contact the student has had with the Christian religion and its phrases. As Brazil is a country with a Christian religious background many students know the phrases and this leads to the danger of familiarizing the poem to fit into religious discourses that the student already knows.





7. The students and the poem

An exercise was given to the students on the poem that asked the following questions:

1. What does the verb ‘steer’ and the adverb ‘deliberately’ show about the decision taken by the second character?
2. How is this second character’s death described? (Several images are used in the second stanza. Refer to them using your own words).
3. The third character is the little boy in a highchair. Look at his characteristics. What do they represent?
4. Why does the character who has been touched by radiance smile in the kitchen?
5. What is the relation between the last line, “the point” and the title, “the crux”?

By this time, the students had already studied several of Avison’s poems and were aware of the strangeness or defamiliarization that could be found in the syntax and lexicon of her poems. I hoped the students would be able to spot these moments in the poem and analyze them. Of the twenty students, seven gave their consent for their exercises to be used in this article. The names that will be used for the participants are all fictitious.

The students were allowed to use their dictionaries to answer the first question, which refers to lines 9 through 18 of the poem. Thus dictionary meanings appeared in the answers, as we can see in the following extract.

Rachel – *The verb “steer” (direct or control the course of something) and the adverb “deliberately” (done on purpose, intentional) are words that describe the decision taken by this second character.*

And **Rachel** goes on to say:

This second character is Jesus. He steered his passage to the Earth with the intention to save people. Jesus was conscious



of his decision. He changed his consistent way (his fair steady days and nights) to an extremely and profound suffering place, an abysmal, a hell. He knew he would suffer, even though, he did not give up. He achieved his mission and accomplished his intentional purpose.

In this passage, we see Rachel relying on a Christian cultural horizon to speak of the second character of the poem. Her interpretation is not clearly based on the lines of the poem which talk about the second character steering “his fair steady days and nights deliberately” and from which we can deduce the passage of time and therefore, that the character makes a decision in a mortal life. Rachel, however, makes a reference to a decision made prior to an earthly life, a decision to come to earth, which she goes on to describe as a “suffering place, an abysmal, a hell”. She also refers to this second character specifically as Jesus and as having a mission. In this way, the cultural horizon of a Christian viewpoint blocks a more consistent interpretation of the syntax and the lexicon of the poem when describing the second character. The student’s interpretation falls into generalized religious statements about Christ which is not what the poem offers.

Other students do the same as we see in the lines taken from **Roberta**’s answer:

Through the meanings of these words we can say that Jesus, the second character, decided to face all difficulties, even knowing He was going to face hell and its consequences. He did it for us and He had no doubts about His decision. He was guided by faith and love through His martyrdom.

In this answer, the student capitalizes the pronouns when referring to Christ, showing that she writes from within a Christian cultural horizon of respect and acknowledgement of Christ as God. As well, she refers to “martyrdom” to refer to Christ’s death. For the student, Christ is guided by “faith and love”. In the poem, however, there is no reference to Christ being a martyr, nor to the words faith and love. The poem defamiliarizes, and makes strange the description of Christ’s choices to head towards death. It shows amazement at these choices, lines 9 and 10, “now can you credit anyone figuring he had to” and his





death is seen, lines 17 and 18, “right down, past, the dead end to the worst”. There is no explanation as to why this death is worse than other deaths, and though Roberta uses the word, “martyrdom”, she does not explain why Christ’s death is so. There is no clear analysis of line 15, “abysmal (other people’s) living end?”.

Thus, the Christian cultural horizon familiarizes the strange in the poem, turning the text into a Christian tract expressing expected ideas about Christ. The strangeness in the syntax that represents the strangeness of a character deliberately courting danger and death, as Avison describes Christ doing, is ignored and the path becomes one of faith and love.

Alfred answers the second question simply by ignoring the lines of the poem and falling into a generalized Christian interpretation of death:

The second character’s death is described as passage from people’s world to heaven.

Rebecca, on the other hand, wrestles with the concept of defamiliarization, of something being made strange in her analysis:

He passed to the worst end, we (human beings) killed Him in the worst way, but His light stayed, and we can have this “point” of gleaming anytime we need it. The poet defamiliarizes the picture we have of Jesus; a leader who suffered so much, who is sad. She shows a strong Christ who knew where He was going and the people He was going to face.

The student sees strangeness in Christ being depicted as strong, decision-making, whereas the poem seems to show that the strangeness is in the decision that was made, considering the horrible death that would ensue. Rebecca speaks from within her relationship of belonging, her particular Christian cultural horizon when she says that Christ is generally shown as “sad”. Perhaps, she is thinking of certain religious pictures that have a pallid and wan Christ, or perhaps she is remembering crucifixes which show Christ hanging on the cross. The poem defamiliarizes her own particular view of Christ, a reading which is possible because of





the lexical items, “steer” and “deliberately”. However, to have a more detailed reading of the poem, more attention would have to be paid to the lexical items and the syntax of the second stanza.

The third character in the poem is the little boy in a highchair charmingly described in lines 23 through 35. In my opinion, in the reading of these lines we can see innocence – the fact that the character is a child; trust – the fact he hears someone coming and believes he is going to get the food he wants; happiness at the fact that he is going to be fed. Thus, in my reading, this third character is representational of the beauty of human life, the eager, impatient, young child wanting to go forward blissfully into tomorrow, having his needs met.

The students for the most part interpreted the child in a negative way, as representational of an imperfect human race. Thus they interpreted from within a fixed Christian paradigm, not analyzing the words and syntax of the poem itself.

For example, **Leah** states:

His characteristics represent the humans immaturity. The child refers to us (humans) who are always waiting, desiring and demanding things with urgency. We are often impatient and never stop asking things from God.

In this reading the negative aspects receive emphasis, not the innocence, or happiness.

Ralph says:

The third character, a little boy, represents, maybe, ourselves with a self-centered behavior...This character also does not know what he wants. Thus the innocence of this character may be explains that inspite of our sins we can be forgiven.

Here we notice the Christian paradigm of sin and forgiveness being imposed on the picture of the child in the highchair. This notion is not in these lines of the poem, but the student uses what he knows of Christianity.





Deborah, in her reading, focuses on the helplessness and the needs the little boy has, as representative of the human race:

He doesn't know anything about his hunger...he only suffered pangs and poignancy. He represents our limited situation of humans, we have difficulties and we don't know how to solve and why they happen. We are always needing and asking for immediate attention or help from God when we suffer.

This reading is possible, but the beauty of the little child, the drumming “with heels and spoon”, which constitutes a charming picture of a little child, so dependent but so trustful and happy, the “blissful lurch” toward tomorrow is lost.

It is natural that the answers to question number 4, “Why does the character who has been touched by radiance smile in the kitchen?”, be related to the students’ understanding of the child. They also tended to be made from a cultural horizon of a religious view of Christ and of the discourse of the church. For example, **Rebecca** states:

Jesus smiles in the kitchen because He understands human apprehension, He knows human pain and He sees that men are suffering, but He wants to show them that He is there for them, watching and giving His love, His serene love.

Human beings are thus depicted as suffering and Christ as being serene which is linked with a certain religious interpretation that those who are holy are not troubled, but seem to be beyond the feelings related to human suffering. Rebecca is also the student who found a decisive Christ, as depicted in the poem, different from her cultural horizon. She does not explain why this purposeful Christ of the poem is now smiling. In other words, one of the themes of the poem is overlooked.

Ralph interprets the poem strictly from his own religious cultural horizon and ignores the manner in which the poem shows Christ. He says:

Maybe he is smiling because he reached out his purpose, now as God he is omnipresent. The kitchen also make us recalling ‘The Holy Family’ and the kitchen represents the core of the house.





Being omnipresent is a characteristic of God, it comes from a religious, theological discourse. The reference to 'The Holy Family' is reminiscent of the manger scenes and paintings that show Christ, Mary and Joseph in the humble scene of the stable. However, the student does not explain how this is related to the child in the highchair, nor does he explain why the omnipresence of Christ is a reason for smiling. The religious cultural horizon, the ready made understandings of Christ, seem to block any new readings that the poem might offer.

Some students, **Rachel** being one of them, see the kitchen as a symbol of simple places.

We can infer that Jesus smiles in the kitchen, because kitchen can be analyzed as an ordinary and simple place. So Jesus is present everywhere, looking and watching us, even in those simple place, in simple situations...he also can transmit his light, love, peace and radiance to us, independent of religious or churchness.

Thus Rachel from the point she makes about the simplicity of the kitchen falls into a religious discourse about Christ bringing his characteristics to people. In this discourse the poem itself is ignored and no explanation is given for the child in the highchair and the corresponding smile. If Rachel had gone on to point out that simple, homely situations cause joy, that is the smile, a link between the religious discourse and the poem could be construed.

In answering, the last question, What is the relation between the last line, "the point" and the title, "the crux"?, Roberta made a summary of her reading of the poem, which is an example of how the students read the poem strictly from within a religious discourse. Her answer is similar to all those of the other students. She states:

When the poet gives the poem this title, The Crux, followed by the presence of character one in stanza one who is in a hopeless condition, I, as reader, did had a bad impression of the situation. I felt like it was going to be a depressing reading. However, as I kept reading, I changed my mood through the stanzas. In the second, Avison reminds us of how Jesus fought for us. Then, on the third, she pictures us an eagerness child seeking for the





future to end up at fourth stanza, putting Jesus in a very simple place in the kitchen. The poet does all this strategies in a circular way to get to the point: Jesus is in everything and everywhere. Without him, we are hopeless. Whichever the problem is Jesus is “the point”, the solution for it.

It is possible to see how Roberta familiarized the content of the poem by putting it within a traditional religious discourse. All that is strange within the poem is removed and interpreted as part of the religious discourse.

8. Concluding remarks

The exercise on *The Crux* was the last one of the semester. The students handled the questions on the poem with aplomb and confidence, but were way-laid by their familiar, religious discourse. “Nothing is so strange, and at the same time so demanding as the written word” (Gadamer, 2000: 163) and, as such, it is possible to see how the students dealt with the strangeness of the poem and used ways of familiarizing it.

In the case of syntactic strangeness, such as “abysmal (other people’s) living end?”, they ignored the phrase, jumping over the lines and interpreting them as part of Christ’s mission on earth. They did not specifically explain the line, though they do say that Christ had to suffer (Rachel) and be a martyr (Roberta).

In this way, at the end of the four month course, the students dealt with a poem without hesitation and fear, but still needed help to focus on the language used and find the points of defamiliarization. It is precisely at these points that the reader should pause and focus her/his attention for it is in these moments of rupture that the poetic message leaves the commonplace. Thus, the role of the teacher, the other voice, in constructing a more attentive reading is essential. The teacher can lead the discussion by asking questions, pointing out inconsistencies in the students’ interpretations, in short aiding the students in their growth as readers of complex texts in the FL.





Focusing on how the course was structured, it is possible to say that the students progressed from readers who were very dependant and fearful of handling a poetic text to readers who dealt with the text in an independent fashion. However, they still needed opportunities to grow as readers of representational texts paying attention to the moments of rupture and defamiliarization. As the course is a semester long and is no longer annual, the focus on aiding the student in becoming a competent reader of complex texts in the FL would have to be continued in the other semesters, while working with the other genres. As was mentioned at the beginning of the article, the literature courses are now divided into four semesters comprising short narratives, poetic texts, novels and drama.

Working on the poem in pairs that interacted with each other to create readings helped overcome the view that there was only one possible reading for the poem, and that the teacher or the literary critic was the one who possessed this reading. The students became confident in defending their own readings basing their arguments on the lexicon and the syntax of the text. For the poem *The Crux*, the students even met after class hours to discuss the poem, coming downstairs to my office to ask me to mediate some of the questions that were appearing in the discussion. As a teacher of literature in the FL, I found this involvement in the reading of the poem very encouraging for it showed that the organization of the course was on the right track. The students were appropriating the poem into their own cultural horizons. The miracle of which Gadamer (2000:163) speaks, “the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity” was taking place.⁸

In conclusion, the students grew as readers throughout the course, progressing from readers who were fearful of dealing with the poetic text, to readers who were willing to read a complex text with aplomb. However, as has been pointed out, they needed further guidance in dealing with ruptures and defamiliarizations in the text, for they still had the tendency to overlook these ruptures and to familiarize the strangeness of the text. In other words, they still tried to change the text from being representational to being referential. In the case of

8. In a later semester, I used blogs. The students blogged regularly about the poems given. An article about this experience is in the making.





The Crux, they created readings in which the poetic text referred to and reproduced their own familiar religious horizon. Thus, it is possible to say that a semester does not offer enough time to work with the students so that they can become readers that are more aware of the nuances of a complex text. Hence, the need to continue this type of work in other semesters, even with other genres, so that the student can graduate as a more competent reader of complex texts in the FL.

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