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**GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS: THE VANTAGE POINTS  
AND THE HORIZONS IN READERS' RESPONSES TO AN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE TEXT**

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**Abstract**

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This article presents how Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can be used to analyze readers' responses to an American literature text. The readers are Brazilian students at the university level reading a text by the American author, Amy Tan. The concepts of prejudice, vantage point, horizon, and fusion of horizons are used in the discussion. The students' readings are presented as emerging and shifting and as resulting from their cultural horizons. Elements of Brazilian culture are discussed to aid in understanding the students' responses. The intellectual work of the second language (L2) literature classroom is presented as being one that fosters a hermeneutical conversation in which the "I" experiences the other as the "Thou" of the dialogue.

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As a teacher of English in Brazil, I have struggled with the question of how to hear the students' voices as they express themselves in the classroom. This concern was present as a teacher of English language and continued as I migrated to being a teacher of literature. In escaping from a "meaning resides in the text" approach to a "reader response" approach to literature, I saw the need to explore the ways and means of allowing the students' voices to sound as they produced their readings of the literature texts. In this endeavour, it became increasingly clear to me that the cultural component of comprehension had to be dealt with. I found that Gadamer's (2000) philosophical hermeneutics was an aid in accomplishing the objectives of hearing the students' voices and understanding the cultural component that made itself present as they interpreted the texts in their American literature classes.

In this article I will present the basic concepts of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, followed by an analysis of the students' readings of an excerpt entitled, A

*Pair of Tickets*, taken from Amy Tan's book, *The Joy-Luck Club*. The students were part of an American Literature class at the university level.

### **1.0 Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics**

Gadamer uses the concept of horizon to speak of how comprehension takes place. The horizon is defined as, "...the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (2000, p.302). A horizon defined physically, such as in the phrase, "the horseman disappeared into the horizon", alludes to dimensions of time and distance that are apparent from a certain vantage point. But a vantage point can also be defined as the belief system, desires, and imaginings of an individual. Within this conceptual sphere the horizon is formed by history both personal and socio-cultural. This is the range of vision that an individual brings to comprehension.

Gadamer (2000) states that it is possible to speak of the "narrowness of horizon, or the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening of new horizons, and so forth" (p. 302). The horizon is "...something into which we move and moves with us" (Gadamer, 2000, p. 304). Thus to speak of a closed horizon or a fixed horizon is a mere abstraction, for as we live and participate in the hermeneutical conversation with the events that occur in our lives our horizons can be transformed.

But Gadamer (2000, p. 302) also speaks of those who have no horizon and overvalue that which is closest to them. Noel (1996) expands the concept and speaks of those who do not move but remain stationary. This individual does not see beyond his limited perspectives and does not understand that there are multiple perspectives about the same event. This situation can occur when an individual is isolated, associating only with people of his region, race, culture or social class.

Comprehension, therefore, is not awakened whilst the individual is surrounded only by the known and familiar. In order for there to be comprehension, it is necessary that there be an encounter with that which is strange. For philosophical hermeneutics these two terms – familiar and strange – describe how we situate ourselves in relation to the events that occur. The familiar is defined existentially as that which brings us feelings of comfort and security. The strange, on the other hand, is that which brings us feelings of loss and disorientation. Since we live within the polarity of the familiar and the strange, it is in this tension that the hermeneutic task is undertaken. As Gadamer (2000) says, “(u)nderstanding begins...when something addresses us” (p. 299). The hermeneutic task is not to ignore the strange or abolish the different, but to encounter and deal with the unfamiliar, and the rupture that it brings. Nevertheless, it is out of the familiar that comprehension takes place. In Gadamer’s (1977) words, “(o)nly the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening of our own experience of the world” (p. 15).

At the moment when there is comprehension, Gadamer speaks of the fusion of horizons (2000, p. 397). This fusion is dynamic and self-transcendent, and creates new perspectives and rules that are used to make up a new horizon. Fusion is not the same as empathy for the other, nor is it synthesis with the other. It occurs as a result of the strange, for it is exactly what is different that causes a new comprehension. The different or, in other words, the voice of the other is respected in the fusion of horizons. In empathy, one speaks for the other; in fusion one speaks with the other. Synthesis is based on a one-voiced discourse; the fusion of horizons is based on a multi-voiced discourse. The fusion of horizon is continuous. It is not a progression through various steps to a complete

knowledge, but it is a state of being open to new experiences. In Blacker's (1993) words, "the deal is never to stop learning" (p. 4).

For the fusion of horizons to take place, it is necessary that our prejudices be challenged. The word prejudices in the gadamerian sense simply indicates the biases of our openness to the world. "They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 9). Some prejudices can be considered true and can lead us on to comprehension; others are false and lead to misunderstandings. As the prejudices are foregrounded, they are put at risk and can then be valued. As the prejudices are brought into full play, it is possible to experience the other's claim to truth and thus allow him to have full play as well. It is necessary to work with our prejudices interpretively, not to put them aside and ignore them. In this way, an integral part of comprehension is understanding oneself, one's culture, one's biases.

Since comprehension is a communicative event, it has as its basic characteristic the hermeneutical conversation. The central relationship of this event is the question and answer. For Gadamer (2000), "(a) person who thinks must ask himself questions" (p. 375). In this way, the format of the conversation applies to all the experiences of life, for it is the way in which human beings produce meaning. in relation to textual comprehension, Gadamer (2000) states,

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the texts with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning (p. 267).

Regarding the student in a second language (L2) literature class, as he reads projections will be made that are a result of the socio-cultural setting of which he is a part.

Expectations will be created as the reading progresses that are a result of values and mores that, at times, are different from those within which the text was written. It is at this point that a willingness to hear the student's voice as he creates the reading is important. As Kramersch (1995) puts it, the student's comprehension is "a shifting and emerging third place" (p. 90). As such, the classroom is best seen as a place which accepts and encourages the struggle to produce meaning. No one meaning, whether based on the voice of authority represented in the person of the teacher or the literary critic or not, should be set as the only correct reading. Rather, the readings within their particular projections should be heard and used as the base on which to build meaning that emerges as the hermeneutical conversation of question and answer takes place. The goal is the fusion of horizon in which the voice of the other is heard or, to express it in another way, when the "I" experiences the other as the "Thou" of the dialogue (Gadamer, 2000, p. 361).

## **2.0 The class observed**

The class I observed consisted of seventeen young adults in the five year teacher certificate course at the Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil. At the end of the course, the students graduate as licensed teachers of Portuguese and of English languages. The American Literature class that we did together concentrated on texts written in the twentieth century, and was a part of their fifth year class load.

Of the seventeen students, two (Ester and Rúbia<sup>1</sup>) had participated in exchange programs and had spent a school year in the USA when they were in high school. One other student (Magda) had been to the United States as a tourist visiting Disneyland etc. In their everyday lives, the students had basically no contact with any Americans, or any other English speaking foreigners. They were consumers of American pop culture, however,

going to American movies, listening to pop music and, in a more limited way, seeing American TV shows.

The classes were conducted in English though there were times when we switched to Portuguese. This occurred when I wanted to make sure I was making myself understood clearly or when a student, for the same reason, switched from English to Portuguese. The jokes and wisecracks were usually made in Portuguese. All the written exercises were done in English, as were all oral presentations.

### **3.0 The students' horizons**

It was within this setting that an excerpt from Amy Tan's book *The Joy-Luck Club* was used in class as a part of a section in which we studied authors that wrote about the immigrant experience in the United States. The authors wrote from the point of view of the Chinese, Filipino, Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Korean experience. The text by Amy Tan was the third text that was read in this unit.

The excerpt, *A Pair of Tickets*, can stand alone on its own as a short story. It is about Jing Mei Woo who visits China for the first time and comes to terms with her Chinese heritage. The story describes some of the conflicts that Jing Mei had with her mother, and how she felt Chinese only on the outside, but not on the inside. Jing Mei's mother, however, is of the opinion that "once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese" (Tan, 1989, p. 306).

For the students, the immigrant experience was something strange. They were not children nor grandchildren of immigrants. They had been Brazilians for so many generations that they were not sure what their countries of origin were. Many imagined they were a varying mixture of African, Amerindian, and Portuguese, but exactly how these

mixtures had come about was a mystery. They guessed at the mixture by what their last names were and by their physical traits.

Besides these personal factors, our city and our region are not centres for immigration. Goiânia does receive many people from other regions of Brazil, but not many from overseas. We have no China Town or Little Italy, for instance. Though it is possible to have Japanese or Lebanese neighbours who are recent immigrants, they are an exception and not the rule. Thus, the immigrant experience was unfamiliar to the students and was not a part of their cultural horizon.

The students initially found the concept of a multicultural/multiracial society confusing. As one student said after hearing a lecture by a Fulbright professor on multiculturalism in the USA, “How can a country so divided be so strong?” (Rees, 2002). In regards to Brazil, they were aware of the “fable of the three races” (“o mito das três raças”) which tells of the mixing of the Europeans, Africans and Amerindians to form the Brazilian people. This perspective on the roles of blacks, whites and Indians in the history of Brazil is one of racial intermingling. According to DaMatta (1995), within this fable the races “...relate via a logic of inclusion that is articulated on planes of complementary opposition” (p. 273). In this outlook, mediations between the races are fundamental, thus the importance of the “mestiço” (one of mixed race) in Brazilian culture as a symbol of the new race that has been created.

This fable is also founded on “forgetfulness”. It is necessary to “forget” , or “set aside” how the three races first encountered each other in actual historical fact, i.e., via conquest and slavery. As well, specificities, details, and localizations about the races are removed. Rather, the fable presents the meeting of the three races as being between prototypical figures, representatives of the basic characteristics of their races. Within an

ideological triangle, they come together occupying equivalent positions. That is, they are equivalent, not in actual social and historical fact, but within a narrative that re-tells the story of how the Brazilians came to be, and that explains the reasons for national characteristics.

#### **4.0 The students' readings**

The students, as Brazilians, read the Amy Tan excerpt, *A Pair of Tickets*, from this horizon. In the following examples, I will demonstrate how the students interpreted the strange, how they used the familiar to interpret the events of the story, and how there was, for some, a fusion of horizons.

##### **4.1 Paulo – encountering the strange**

*Paulo*, in his reading, concentrated on interpreting the aspects of heritage and origin which are dealt with in Amy Tan's story, as the main character Jing Mei comes to terms with her Chinese ancestry. In a classroom discussion, Paulo stated, *'She (Jing-Mei) is American, but her Chinese parents said no, you're Chinese. You were born of Chinese parents so you are too. It's very heavy, right? You have to be because your parents are?'*.<sup>2</sup>

To *Paulo* the conflict is not between rejection or acknowledgement of one's heritage. Rather, it becomes a conflict between a parental imposition and the rights a child has to be himself. *Paulo* goes further, and explains this occurrence as being directly related to the fact that the characters, Jing Mei and her parents, are oriental. To illustrate his argument *Paulo* refers to the Japanese community in Manaus, Brazil as an example. According to him, in this community *'you never see a 'mestiço' child, oriental and Indian'*.<sup>3</sup> This fact is interpreted as being very negative. Its occurrence is attributed to the fact that the parents are very strict, and control their children not letting them associate with non-Japanese. To Paulo, the absence of the "mestiço" is unnatural. In this view, the parents

by insisting on the importance of their own cultural heritage impose “heavy” restrictions, as he states about Jing Mei, “*It ‘s very heavy, right?*”. He then asks a rhetorical question, “*You have to be because your parents are?*”. The expected answer to this questions is “*No, you don’t*”. For *Paulo*, to insist on heritage and origin is to impede the natural process of the new emerging, for the new can emerge only from the melding of the old, and in exercising “forgetfulness”.

*Paulo* does not have the immigrant experience close at hand to refer to. It is not a part of his cultural horizons, but “the fable of the three races” is. He uses his prejudices to interpret Jing Mei’s process of identifying with her Chinese heritage and he questions of heritage and of origin raised in the story become a question of parents restricting their children.

#### **4.2 Tina, Eneida, and Marli - Using the familiar “American” as a vantage point**

In contrast to *Paulo*, other students interpreted Jing Mei principally as an American. *Tina*, in a log she wrote about the excerpt, described Jing Mei as an “arrogant and snobbish” American. Her justification for this description was that Jing Mei “*finds similarities between...Guangzhou and San Francisco. She knows China has been changing, but it seems that she refuses to believe it. She has this kind of stereotype about Chinese people and cities*”.

It is implicit that in *Tina*’s estimation China is being compared negatively to the United States. She states that Jing Mei finds “*similarities*” between two cities, one in China, one in the USA. They are both big, westernized cities. The problem arises, in *Tina*’s opinion because Jing Mei will not accept this fact, “*she refuses to believe it*” and insists on using “*stereotypes*” to understand the Chinese. This reading of Jing Mei, which cannot be

justified by the story, seems to result from a familiar expectation regarding American behavior.

Along this same line, *Eneida* states in her log about the story, “ (*Jing Mei*) thought about China as a bad and communist place with not as important values as the ‘great USA’ which she considered a developed and technological modern country”. *Eneida* singles out the phrase, “great USA”, by using quotation marks in her original exercise. She puts words into Jing Mei’s mouth. She interprets Jing Mei’s attitudes as being one in which the United States is seen as ‘great’, and as a standard to which other countries are compared. And yet, by using the quotation marks, she also ironizes the phrase “great USA” bringing doubts to mind about whether the USA is, or not.

*Eneida* also makes a link between the words “values”, “great” , “developed”, “technological” and “modern”. The values espoused by Jing Mei are those of modernity and development. Thus, *Eneida* interprets Jing Mei as creating a contrast between China and the United States:

CHINA	THE UNITED STATES
bad	great
communist	not communist
not developed	developed
not technological	technological
not modern	modern

In this way, Jing Mei is interpreted as saying that the United States is better than China. To *Eneida*, this occurs because Jing Mei is American. *Eneida*’s prejudices (in the gadamerian sense) lead her to read Jing Mei’s opinions as being those of an American who

is criticizing another country and its way of life, even though this reading cannot be justified in the story..

*Marli* goes even further. She states in her log, *‘Jing Mei was born in California, USA and as all the Americans she believed that only her nation was powerful and rich. When she arrived in China she made comparisons between America and China’*. *Marli* makes a generalization in the phrase *‘all the Americans’*, and as *Jing Mei* is an American, she is included in this generalization. *Marli* shows her expectations for American behaviour and interprets *Jing Mei* from this vantage point.

Just as *Tina* and *Eneida*, *Marli* understands that *Jing Mei* is comparing China negatively to the United States. *Marli* states that Americans think only their nation is *‘powerful and rich’*. No other country is as great. Thus, *Jing Mei*, in her comments about China and the USA, can only be making negative comparisons.

*Tina*, *Eneida*, and *Marli* do not see *Jing Mei* as Chinese. In their interpretation, her ethnicity is removed as an important element and her *‘Americanness’* is foregrounded. In other words, they focus on what is close to them in their horizon which is the fact that *Jing Mei* is American. It is from this vantage point that they interpret *Jing Mei’s* words and actions. In this way, they use the familiar to interpret the story. This familiarity does not result from personal contact with Americans, but from the students’ contact with American pop culture and from general opinions about Americans that exist within Brazilian society. Thus they use the taken-for-granted opinions of their everyday world to interpret the strange. The strange in the story (*Jing Mei’s* being Chinese) is ignored and the familiar (*Jing Mei’s* being American) is focused on.

#### **4.3 Cássia - Using the familiar “family unit” as a vantage point**

*Cássia*, on the other hand, interpreted the story within the framework of family unity. Prior to this class, the students had made statements in which they expressed the idea that the American family was not united, whereas the Brazilian family was. Their example of family unity was the Brazilian “Sunday lunch” in which the whole family gets together once a week. If someone does not come, there is a sense of incompleteness, something is missing from the get together. In contrast to this view of the Brazilian family, some of the students stated that they thought the American family is too individualistic and that the family members do not care about each other (Rees, 2002).

The concept of family unity expressed by the students is closely linked to their perception of the relation between the individual and the group. If we examine the word “individualism” and its counterpart in Portuguese “individualismo”, we can perceive the different understanding of how the individual relates to the larger group. In English, individualism is “the habit or principle of being self-reliant” (*Illustrated Oxford Dictionary*). Thus, individualism is a positive characteristic, for to be “self-reliant” in the Anglo-Saxon world is a good thing. It is even considered a principle to live by. “Individualismo”, on the other hand, is defined as “the theory that undergirds the right of the individual as opposed to the collectivity; egocentric feelings, conduct, etc.”<sup>4</sup> (*Pequeno Dicionário Brasileiro da Língua Portuguesa*). In Portuguese the term “individualismo” has a negative connotation as seen in the use of the word “egocentric”. It opposes the individual to the group, and this is conceived as something undesirable. In this view, the individual ought not to be opposed to the family group.

*Cássia* interprets the story as a narrative that deals with how a family gets back together and how a daughter recognizes the value of her mother’s words and actions. *Cássia* states in her log:, ‘*how she (Jing Mei) recognized that all her mother did was to*

*teach her daughter the values of optimism and determination. Her intention was that of most mothers: not to make her daughter's life miserable, but to help her. She didn't want Jing to suffer as she did'.*

By stating “*her intention was that of most mothers*”, the place of the mother in the Brazilian family group comes through. The mother is generally a strong figure as certain popular Brazilian sayings attest: “*Mãe é mãe*” (“Your mother is your mother, no matter what”) and “*Mãe é uma só*” (“You have only one mother”). According to *Cássia*, mothers want to help and protect their children. These are their basic intentions. Following this line of reasoning, in the story *Jing Mei* finally comes to recognize the value of her own mother's words.

*Cássia* concludes her log by saying, “*The moral I could see in this story is that whatever your parents say, you have to listen and keep it, because they have good intentions. Their advice is important in our lives*”. In her conclusion, she asserts the importance of family unity and the respect due to parents, “*whatever your parents say, you have to listen and keep it*”. Thus the story is interpreted completely from the vantage point of family unity.

### **3.4 Comprehension - the fusion of horizons**

*João* is a student who also had no immediate contact with the immigrant experience. His family has been “*goiana*” (from the state of Goiás) for generations. He begins his log by stating that the story is “*beautiful*”. He then describes *Jing Mei*, “*As a kind of “hybrid” person (being a daughter of Chinese people who lived all her life in America), she has a lot of conflicts, that are probably the experience of all people who live in America, but have behind them another nationality*”. The fusion of horizon is self-transcendent in that it establishes new rules and perspectives that make up a new horizon. *João's* horizon does not

include Jing Mei's experience of being a daughter of immigrants, yet *João* demonstrates that he is able to comprehend her experience. By using the word '*hybrid*' he recognizes the possibility of someone being from more than one place at once for Jing Mei is American and Chinese at one and the same time.

*João* speaks of Jing Mei having conflicts as a result of being '*hybrid*'. These conflicts are resolved in the story and *João* ends his log by stating that at the end of the story "*Jing Mei recognizes her Chinese side*". Thus *João* is able to understand an event that is unfamiliar through the perspective of a '*hybrid*' person. This person is different from the '*mestiço*' that is found in "the fable of the three races". The '*mestiço*' of the fable is a result of the mixing of the races and has aspects of all three, yet is a new unity, the Brazilian. In the foreground is the one voice of the "new" race founded in the Americas and with roots in three continents – Europe, Africa, America. The '*hybrid*' person, on the other hand, is not one-voiced but multi-voiced for this person is simultaneously from more than one place at a time.

*João* is able to go beyond the vantage point of the familiar and bring that which is strange into his horizon. In other words, *João* is able to enter a hermeneutical conversation in which the "I" views the other as the "Thou" of the dialogue.

#### **4.0 Encouraging the movement of horizons**

By listening to the voice of the students and trying to comprehend from what vantage point they are speaking, it is possible to instigate movement in the horizons. In accordance with this view, a class based on a text is not a place in which a series of activities is given with the purpose of enforcing the correct reading, but rather it is a place in which to participate in a hermeneutical conversation.

I have my students write logs about the story in which they discuss what they have understood, what they have not understood, and why. These logs are handed in before the classroom discussion on the story. They serve as a guide to the difficulties the students encounter in the text and as a guide to the prejudices existent within the students' horizons. These elements are used to foreground questions for the classroom discussion.

Exemplifying this, in *Paulo's* reading, his view of the immigrant experience can be discussed touching on "the fable of the three races" and what it reveals and what it hides about certain facts of Brazilian society (i.e., racism, linguicism, etc.). This in turn can lead back into a discussion of the story and of Jing Mei's experience as she seeks to understand her heritage.

Regarding *Tina*, *Eneida* and *Marli's* reading of the story which viewed Jing Mei as an American above all else, the stereotypes about Americans can be discussed questioning the reason for their existence and their validity. Berger (1997) states that the use of stereotypes "...is a part of our everyday illogical and uncritical way of thinking" (p.54). From a critical analysis of the stereotypes, it is possible to examine the story and see if these stereotypes are pertinent: Is Jing Mei really acting like the "ugly American"? Is the story a critique of American behaviour?

*Cássia* can be helped to see the other aspects of the story by examining the elements she valued and which led to her reading the story as one solely of family unity. By focusing on the other elements that discuss the question of heritage and the immigrant experience she can broaden her reading.

*João* can be encouraged to contribute to the classroom discussion with his view of Jing Mei as being an example of a hybrid person. His reading can enrich the discussion and can question the readings that the other students produced.

## Conclusion

Thus, philosophical hermeneutics provided the means of examining the readings that were produced by my students. It gave invaluable insights into the reason for their readings, aiding me in understanding that the opinions the students expressed about the story did not come out of nowhere, but were an integral part of their horizons.

It also provided a way of viewing the class as a place in which the students' readings are emerging as the hermeneutical conversation occurs. In other words, the students are under no obligation to arrive in class with a fixed reading. Nor are they under the obligation to acquire the "correct" "authoritative" reading in the course of the class. Rather, the class is a place to question not only the text that is being studied, but their own readings and prejudices as well as the readings produced by others. The class becomes a place of movement and growth as a result of a probing of the text and of the readings produced.

In conclusion, philosophical hermeneutics provided not only the means of hearing and understanding the cultural component that presented itself in the students' interpretations of the text, but also meaningful goals for class in terms that were relevant to the particular socio-cultural situation of the L2 literature classroom in Brazil.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All the students names have been changed to preserve their identity.

<sup>2</sup> "Ela é Americana mas os pais chineses falaram não, você é chinesa. Você nasceu de pais chineses então você é também. É muito pesado isto, né? Tem que ser porque o pai é?". (I am the one that has done the translations.)

<sup>3</sup> "você não vê nenhuma criança mestiça, oriental e um índio".

<sup>4</sup> "teoria que sustenta a preferência do direito individual ao coletivo; sentimento, conduta etc. egocêntricos" (*Pequeno Dicionário Brasileiro da Língua Portuguesa*)

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