

# THE LITERATURES OF THE WORLD IN HERBERTO HELDER

Sérgio das Neves

---

*Abstract:* The essay reflects on the translations crafted by the Portuguese poet Herberto Helder, exploring potential relations and reconfigurations of the Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur*. The study will primarily focus on the preface of the book *O bebedor nocturno*, the poet's first book devoted to translating texts from various times, spaces, and cultures into Portuguese. The poet, unfamiliar with the original languages of these texts, modifies his mother tongue in order to translate the essence of the poem, in a gesture of love towards it. By examining his creation of a poetic language through translation and his somewhat unsystematized idea of translation, we aim to contrast the image of the polyglot translator with that of the poet translator, akin to a circus acrobat. In this way, we advance that Helder's approach to altering poems enhances the Goethean concept, extracting vitality from the ancestral literatures of the world. Thus, he reveals the unity of everything, erasing space-time and linguistic boundaries, and dissolves the limits between world, being, and language.

*Keywords:* *Weltliteratur*, translation studies, metamorphosis, contemporary Portuguese poetry, Herberto Helder.

---

The path traversed by *Weltliteratur* has assumed a metamorphosis akin to that of water: while retaining its primal matter, it alters its state, adapting to the context. Since its structural inception with Goethe, although previously employed by August Schlöder in 1773, its reality has sought to give voice to the contemporary world. The recognition of this transformation is notably emphasized by Erich Auerbach in 1952 in his essay "Philologie der Weltliteratur". More recently, we encounter the same question, for instance, reading Dieter Lamping. Here, we find some responses to Auerbach, particularly those concerning the future of the Goethean concept, which Lamping envisions within the scope of comparative literature as an "inter-textually comprehensible literary

---

\* Institute for the Study of Traditional Literature (IELT), School of Social and Human Sciences of the NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal, [sergioneves@campus.ul.pt](mailto:sergioneves@campus.ul.pt)

internationality”<sup>1</sup>. We also highlight the work of Ottmar Ette, *WeltFraktale: Wege durch die Literaturen der Welt*, from 2017, which, navigating through the fractality of literatures, demonstrates, beyond their plurality, a plurality of worlds. The author conceives of *Weltliteratur* as a “science of literature as a science of life”<sup>2</sup>, where one explores “the phenomena of the globalization process, which has been occurring for centuries and through various impulses, with a poly-perspectivist complexity”<sup>3</sup>.

The Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur* has evolved into World Literatures or, to maintain the logic of the German language, *Literaturen der Welt*, representing a more globalized and standardized idea of literature. Naturally, with necessary exceptions and studies that counter this trend. Several examples could be cited, but we highlight the work of David Damrosch, who also continues to deserve recognition in his extensive work, such as the recent *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (2020). His research has evolved in line with the forces of globalization, as seen in his question: “if theories developed in Paris or Frankfurt are applied by Chinese and American scholars to Brazilian novels or Sanskrit poetry, how much will be distorted or lost altogether?”<sup>4</sup>. It is also important to consider Damrosch’s advice to comparatists, emphasizing that they should pay closer attention to “theoretical perspectives embedded in literature itself”<sup>5</sup>. Through this, literature reveals its own system of thought about itself, not relying solely on philosophy. The list of relevant scholars on the topic would not end here. In any case, the very translation of the concept from German to English also contributes to the deformation and reformulation of its scope, objectives, and methodologies.

This essay will endeavour to follow Lamping’s intertextual path, seeking to understand, in the process of translating Herberto Helder as presented in *O bebedor nocturno*, but not exclusively, the breath that infuses life into the texts he resurrects, and the force that transforms them into another existence, extracting them from where they emerged. Thus, we may also comprehend the vitality of the science of literature, as Ette understands *Weltliteratur*.

<sup>1</sup> Dieter Lamping, *Die Idee der Weltliteratur. Ein Konzept Goethes und seine Karriere*, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2010, p. 113. All quotations from German are translated into English by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Ottmar Ette, *WeltFraktale: Wege durch die Literaturen der Welt*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p. 151.

Here, translation does not operate solely under the auspices of globalization, but, akin to all Helder's poetic discourse, "a discourse open to the world, to the discourses of the world, through words, making [...] of the poetic word the sole secure space from which the world makes sense and, indeed, becomes real"<sup>6</sup>. The process of versioning, of poems changed into Portuguese, as he himself titles them, may aim for another idiom, an idiom of its own, yet one that remains of the world and springs from the world. One of the most fruitful studies on Helder's changed poems was conducted by Helena Buescu, who states that Helder's poetry is the "demiurgic place where, like salt, these unexpected transformations occur, arising from the encounter between impossibilities that poetry makes collide with each other"<sup>7</sup>. She considers it is not just about "a poet who translates poems by others. It is also, [...], that he translates them as a poet, that is, as part of his own poetic stance"<sup>8</sup>. In this way, we will attempt to reflect on *Weltliteratur* within this dynamic of translation as incomprehensibility and creation, emphasizing the theoretical perspectives that the literary text itself presents, following Damrosch's advice.

Herberto Helder's work is notable for its experience of a living, autonomous language that exists, moves, and is always in a state of world-making. His writing enters the flow of metamorphoses, the force of metaphors, and the power of myths, encompassing different traditions, crossing lineages, and deconstructing space-time laws and principles of causality. One of the fields cultivated by Helder was that of translation, but in his unique process of versioning or changing poems into Portuguese, he speaks more about his writing than about the original source material used for its creation. The works *O bebedor nocturno* [The Night Drinker] (1968), *As magias* [Spells] (1987), *Ouolof* (1997)<sup>9</sup>, *Poemas ameríndios* [Amerindian Poems] (1997), and *Doze nós numa corda* [Twelve Knots on a Rope] (1997) reflect this process

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Frias Martins, *Herberto Helder. Um silêncio de bronze* [*Herberto Helder. A Bronze Silence*], Lisboa, Nova Vega e Autor, 2019, p. 43: "um discurso aberto ao mundo, aos discursos do mundo, através das palavras, fazendo [...] da palavra poética o único espaço seguro a partir do qual o mundo toma sentido e, mesmo, se torna real". (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Helena Buescu, "Herberto Helder: uma ideia de poesia omnívora" ["Herberto Helder: an idea of omnivorous poetry"], in *Diacrítica, Ciências da literatura*, no. 23/3, 2009, p. 51: "lugar demiúrgico em que salinamente ocorrem essas transformações inesperadas, vindas do encontro entre impossíveis que a poesia faz colidir entre si". (my translation)

<sup>8</sup> Helena Buescu, "World Literature in a Poem. The Case of Herberto Helder", in Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (eds.), *Institutions of World Literature. Writing, Translation, Markets*, London, Routledge, 2015, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Wolof, uólofe, uolofe, or jalofo is a language spoken in West Africa.

of constructing a “Portuguese poem through his emotional, mental, linguistic sense”<sup>10</sup>.

Regarding *O bebedor nocturno*, the featured work, as presented on the book cover, includes Ancient Egyptian poems; Psalms; The *Song of Songs*; Mayan poetry; Aztec riddles; Mexican poetry from the Nahuatl cycle; Orphic hymn to the night; three Epirotic songs; Zen poems; the mystery of Ameigen; Finnish magical prayer; Scottish song; four Arabic poems; Arabic-Andalusian poems; Japanese peasant songs; fifteen Japanese haikais; Indochinese poems; Indonesian songs; Kabyle song; Malagasy songs; Tartar song; five Eskimo poems; poems of Native Americans. In this comprehensive list, the reader perceives that the selection of texts is based on the principle of heterogeneity, as well as marginality. The diversity of times, spaces, cultures, and languages is not drawn to the centres of power of the literary canon. The attraction lies elsewhere: in what is yet to be discovered, in what is forgotten, in what is to be recreated. The choice is not random; it has to do with its poetic affinities; elective affinities, rescuing from the Goethean work what is not reduced to direct causality, but to a combinatory relation, to a reciprocal attraction, which makes the poet contemporaneous to different texts. We also know, from the studies of Jorge Souza Braga, cited by Claudio Alexandre de Barros Teixeira (2014), that much of *O Bebedor Nocturno* is based on the anthology *Trésor de la poésie universelle*, organized by Roger Caillois and Jean-Clarence Lambert, published in 1958 in Paris. In fact, the very title of this work helps us consider it in connection to world literature.

The first poem from Ancient Egypt, “The Breaking of Day”, opens space for us to reflect on the selection of texts, within a cycle that merges past and future into a single point in the present, where the text is always situated, in an alchemical operation of rebirth:

Eu sou ontem e conheço amanhã. Posso renascer – mistério da alma criadora dos deuses, alimentando os que aportam a oeste do céu, [...] senhor da ressurreição irrompendo das trevas.<sup>11</sup>

The text is the past and knows the future, being reborn with each reading and each version. It is mummified to be preserved and to be reborn in a new body. The

<sup>10</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno* [*The Night Drinker*], Lisboa, Portugália Editora, 1968, p. 11: “o sentido emocional, mental, linguístico”. (my translation)

<sup>11</sup> Herberto Helder, *op. cit.*, p. 15: “I am yesterday and I know tomorrow. I can be reborn — mystery of the soul / creator of gods, nourishing those who reach the western sky, [...] lord of resurrection emerging from dark”. (my translation)

first poem of *O Bebedor Nocturno* heralds the dawn of these texts, a new return of them to the body of reading. Moreover, the power of rebirth, as a mystery of the soul, is tied to the creation of gods, with Gnostic features, and this is a driving force of the poem, one that Helder pursues: “I can change the architecture of a word / [...] / I can place a name in the intimacy of a thing”<sup>12</sup>, we read in *Poemacto*. This demiurgic operation sculpts language and the world in the same movement of transfiguration, both fabricating new gods and transforming the word, as well as breathing a name into something to give it life.

His poetic work underscores the vitality of languages as they are open to a translation exercise understood more as a creative gesture, suggesting that all language is metaphorical, flexible, and not a monolithic structure. Even the idea of structure is shaken. Helder reveals the destruction and regeneration of language structure. As he himself reflects in *Ouolof*, from error and chaos, “speech is animated with a jubilant material energy”<sup>13</sup>. Still in this work, Helder advances with this intention to translate: “we want to make this speech our own. We have before us a powerful mythical, magical, lyrical diction, transgressing on all fronts the norm of the Portuguese word.”<sup>14</sup>

The poet-translator creates his own language. Similarly, this vitality suggests a language without owners, yet with properties. Language like water, essential to all, from all, but belonging to no one, and which, according to necessity and desire, exists in different states of matter. This language in a liquid state is deep, pure, and purifying, precisely as we can read in the second poem of Ancient Egypt from *O bebedor*, “The Mansion of Osiris”<sup>15</sup>, where the poet purifies himself in the same water the gods get purified. Thus, he makes his own word the divine and creative word, also the “terrible word”<sup>16</sup>.

Translation can be seen as an act of destruction and recreation of matter, whose existence, grounded in metamorphosis, emphasizes transfiguration. The poet who purifies himself in the water of the gods, “transforms himself [I transform myself]

<sup>12</sup> Herberto Helder, *Poemas completos [Complete Poems]*, Porto, Porto Editora, 2015, p. 119: “Posso mudar a arquitectura de uma palavra / [...] / posso meter um nome na intimidade de uma coisa”. (my translation)

<sup>13</sup> Herberto Helder, *Ouolof. Poemas mudados para português [Ouolof. Poems changed to Portuguese.]* Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1997, p. 44: “a fala anima-se com uma energia material jubilante.” (my translation)

<sup>14</sup> Idem, p. 44: “essa fala, queremos fazê-la nossa. Temos diante de nós uma poderosa dicção mítica, mágica, lírica, transgredindo em todas as frentes a norma da palavra portuguesa”. (my translation)

<sup>15</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno*, pp. 21–32: “A mansão de Osíris”. (my translation)

<sup>16</sup> Idem, p. 21: “terrível palavra”. (my translation)

into the sun of the wise [...] to set in motion the shadows of the manes”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the poet, and here, the translator as well, transforms in order to give life to the spirits of the dead. In effect, *O bebedor nocturno*, the night drinker, drinks from this nocturnal zone of silence, shadow, and death. Translating entails “lying with the dead and closed in silence”<sup>18</sup>, as revealed in his “Psalter”, staging a shamanic trance, incorporating a memory that is not his own. The Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade warns in his work *Serafim Ponte Grande* of “the right to be translated, reproduced, and distorted in all languages”<sup>19</sup>. More than a right, we would say, it is the inevitable condition of the act of reading itself. Reading, even in one’s own language, requires translation, reproduction, and deformation. As Helder understands in *O bebedor nocturno*, not knowing languages is his advantage<sup>20</sup>. The more aware of this, the greater the freedom in translation. Typically, we think that we can only translate languages that we master, precisely because we consider that they somehow belong to us. However, it might be important to consider the opposite: when we do not know the language; or, as Derrida teaches us, when “the language does not belong”<sup>21</sup>. The movement of metamorphosis in his versions, mutations, stems from silence and estrangement. In fact, it’s about drinking the night of the world, the grand archive of world literatures.

Helder laboriously breaks down the boundaries of languages, allowing the soulful and toxic liquid of each to pour forth, mingling, transmuting, and contaminating all space, creating a new other. It’s about seizing the stage of “mondialité”, proposed by Pascale Casanova, which reformulates the notion of world literature as a “world literary space”<sup>22</sup>, and making this worldliness equally individuality: the world that transforms and is reborn in its translation. Translating keeps language in an inaugural state. Helder feels the need to change the poems “to Portuguese and for myself – and this «myself» is an idiom”<sup>23</sup>. Also, in *O bebedor nocturno*, Helder states that he not only dares to make a Portuguese poem but a poem of

<sup>17</sup> Idem, pp. 17–18: “transmudo-me em sol dos inteligentes [...] para dar movimento às sombras dos manes”. (my translation)

<sup>18</sup> Idem, p. 40: “deitado junto aos mortos e fechado no silêncio”. (my translation)

<sup>19</sup> Oswald Andrade, *Memórias sentimentais de João Miramar. Serafim Ponte Grande* [*Sentimental Memories of João Miramar. Serafim Ponte Grande*], Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1972, p. 97: “direito de ser traduzido, reproduzido e deformado em todas as línguas”. (my translation)

<sup>20</sup> Herberto Helder, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La langue n’appartient pas”, in *Europe*, no. 861/862, January-February, 2001, pp. 85–86: « la langue n’appartient pas ». (my translation)

<sup>22</sup> Pascale Casanova, *La republique mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1999, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Herberto Helder, *Ouolof*, p. 77: “para português e para mim – e este «mim» e um idioma”. (my translation)

his own<sup>24</sup>. The poem comes from his own idiom, the Herberto Helder idiom; an idiom, as he asserts, of pleasure and freedom<sup>25</sup>. This freedom and pleasure alleviate the translator's burden, endowing him with the lightness of a poet and of a circus acrobat. It is about wandering, and nomadism; its extreme malleability and adaptability resemble the moist quality: the translator pervades the air around, his creation contaminates everything. If this idiom owes itself to a mother tongue, it's not denied; it's also due to how he knows the world. The act of translating is found in the tension between the mother tongue and the world the poet reads. This tension is a play that deals, as Buescu explored, with the notion of estrangement, and "therefore what is translated is, very often, paradoxically untranslatable"<sup>26</sup>. Which further leads the essayist to a terrible conclusion: "there is no peace in these translations"<sup>27</sup>.

In *O bebedor nocturno*, Helder begins by imagining the psychic life substance of a polyglot. It's described as "acrobatic" and "centrifugal"<sup>28</sup>. The ability to know multiple languages makes the polyglot's life a stage, spectacular, in which they appear flexible, agile, endowed with strength and coordination. The polyglot is the world of multiple languages within the unity of one body. He is a circus artist, not only because he is acrobatic, but also because he is nomadic, as his life is centrifugal. Always moving away from the centre, from the sedentary nature of a mother tongue, the polyglot moves from language to language, "animated by an uninterrupted movement of displacements, transmutations, exchanges, and exhilarating hunts for equivalence, under the sign of affinity"<sup>29</sup>. It's not just language that undergoes these metamorphoses, but also the psychic substance of the polyglot itself transmutes, sharing the same skill as a metaphor-maker, seeking equivalences between languages.

Helder doesn't know the original languages of the texts he translates into Portuguese; he works on English and French translations. He loves the decentralization and wandering of his imagined polyglot. It's also about a return to creative and original poetry. That polyglot moves away from the centre, radiating outwards to return to the centre with a language of his own. He invents an origin of his own from his equivalences of peripheral languages: "in the disunity of languages

<sup>24</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Idem, pp. 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> Helena Buescu, "World Literature in a Poem. The Case of Herberto Helder", p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Herberto Helder, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid: "animado de um ininterrupto movimento de deslocações, transmutações, permutas e exaltantes caçadas de equivalência, sob o signo da afinidade". (my translation)

he seeks the unlikely unity”<sup>30</sup>. A polyglot, as a circus artist, is nomadic but always at home. The circus, its tent as versatile as it is, is his home. In other words, he is always at the centre, he doesn’t lose it, he just extends and spreads out: “multiplying the operations of bringing about unity, he radiantly moves towards dispersion. He decentralizes”<sup>31</sup>. He allows himself to move away from himself, from his centre, towards the other, towards another language. The new poetry he creates multiplies, decentralizes, and disperses, repeating the entire process of fabrication within itself, fabricating itself and the world. Reading the world of the other, transforming it into his own reading, and with it, writing another world.

The translator, akin to a circus acrobat, enters and exits from himself, always on the run, in and out of their centre, tracing on the Deleuzian line of flight, a Dionysian kind of delirium, with undeniable demonic (or even diabolic) share<sup>32</sup>. Etymologically related to ploughing, *delirium* or going off the furrow is made up of the “linguistic malice”<sup>33</sup> inherent in any translator’s craft. Malice allows one to go away from the path furrowed by conventional translation and to don as many masks as possible, reclaiming the Dionysian capacity for metamorphosis. This malicious masquerade may also be present in Helder’s translations. They call for another poetic condition; they do not belong anymore to an authorial voice; instead, they are the voice of a continuous poem: “there is no other protagonist anymore, because the poet who writes is already, or is only, the written poem, which, therefore, is necessarily biography, the writing of a life in its inaccessibility”<sup>34</sup>.

The linguistic mischief of the poet-translator, the one who is everything and nothing at the same time, is to poetically pretend to know the languages in order to create with them an idiomatic world: “the language, the joyful science”<sup>35</sup> as affirmed in Helder’s *A faca não corta o fogo* [*The knife does not cut the fire*] recalls *The Joyous Science* of Nietzsche. Translation involves dying and being reborn, a reconfiguration of one’s thought and a shift into another paradigm of thinking. These remakes are poetic and alchemical operations which transmute and create

<sup>30</sup> Ibid: “na desunião dos idiomas busca a unidade improvável”. (my translation)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: “multiplicando as operações de propiciação da unidade, ele caminha irradiantemente para a dispersão. Descentraliza-se”. (my translation)

<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, & Claire Parnet, *Diálogos* [Dialogues], translated by José Gabriel Cunha, Lisboa, Relógio D’Água, 2004, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno*, p. 9: “malícias linguísticas”. (my translation)

<sup>34</sup> Silvína Rodrigues Lopes, *A inocência do devir. Ensaio a partir de Herberto Helder*, Viseu, Edições Vendaval, 2003, p. 19: “não há já outro protagonista, porque o poeta que escreve é já, ou é apenas, o poema escrito, o qual, por conseguinte, é necessariamente biografia, escrita de uma vida na sua inacessibilidade”. (my translation)

<sup>35</sup> Herberto Helder, *Poemas completos*, p. 597 (my translation).

new materials through metamorphoses. To quote Gilles Deleuze, such actions are part of

création syntaxique, style, tel est ce devenir de la langue: il n'y a pas de création de mots, il n'y a pas de néologismes qui vaillent en dehors des effets de syntaxe. dans lesquels ils se développent. Si bien que la littérature présente déjà deux aspects, dans la mesure où elle opère une décomposition ou une destruction de la langue maternelle, mais aussi l'invention d'une nouvelle langue dans la langue, par création de syntaxe.<sup>36</sup>

Helder produces such a destruction and invention produces. His version of “Criação da lua” [The Creation of the Moon], a poem from the volume *Ouolof*, begins like this:

do caxinauá seu nome seu feiticeiro é. / Caxinauás muitos pelejarem para suas gentes  
ajuntaram, / aqueles com pelejaram. / Da vespa as gentes, muito corajosas muito, / ali  
do sol do rio à beira, / da vespa as gentes moram. Caxinauás de capivara rio / com  
moram, os / caxinauás do sol do rio ciosos / são. / Os binanuás noite dentro dormem  
todos, deitados / estava, os caxinauás / escuro dentro cacete com espancaram-nos, /  
acabaram. Um só, sono com / acordou, o terçado tirou, de feiticeiro nauá, Iobonauá,  
/ a cabeça degolou.<sup>37</sup>

Within the tongue mother, the poet destroys the original syntax and proposes another that, on the one hand, is his translated version; on the other hand, it is not even that, but rather something else that attempts to account for both external and inner worlds. Ultimately, it is an understanding of language as a

<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1993, pp. 15–16: “syntactic creation, style, such is the becoming of language: there is no creation of words, neologisms that matter outside of the syntactic effects in which they develop. Thus, literature already presents two aspects, when it operates a decomposition or a destruction of the mother tongue, but also when it operates the invention of a new language within the language through the creation of syntax”. (my translation)

<sup>37</sup> Herberto Helder, *Ouolof*, p. 47: “from the caxinauá his name his sorcerer is. / Caxinauás many would fight for their people they gathered, / those with they fight. / From the wasp the people, very braves very, / there from the sun from the river’s edge, / from the wasp the people live. Caxinauás of capybara river / with they live, the / caxinauás of the sun of the river jealous / are. / The binanuás night inside sleep all, lying down / was, the caxinauás / dark inside club with beat them, / they finished. Only one, sleep with / woke up, took out the machete, from sorcerer nauá, Iobonauá, / the head beheaded”. (my translation) I attempted to adhere to the same type of syntactic creations as the poet made in Portuguese, turning this exercise itself into a practice of translation embedded within *Weltliteratur*.

structural and essential element of thought, its very movement: acrobatic and centrifugal.

Translating the word “cravo” (“carnation”) into “fifteen languages” makes carnation “cada vez menos cravo”, i.e. “increasingly less carnation”<sup>38</sup>. It causes an ontological uprooting, dissolves the form, and displaces the essence into something that is no longer “carnation”, yet it still is. However, the metamorphosis also triggers the translating metaphor of “carnation” thus exercising an “extreme calligraphy of the world”, as we read in another work, *Photomaton & vox* [*Photobooth & Voice*]<sup>39</sup>. The word “cravo” (“carnation”) or another gains multiple lives, constantly mutating because:

a forma lida renasce continuamente após cada leitura e permanece em equilíbrio no perigo de uma multiplicação de legibilidade. Implantado no meio das leituras, o poema funciona em estado de máquina vital.<sup>40</sup>

In *O bebedor nocturno*, poetry assumes the value of an idiom, reinforcing its absolute worth. It not only utilizes language but also transforms it, serving as an agent of metamorphosis and revitalization. In Helder’s changed poems, the value also resides in the power to resurrect a text that, as quoted in the first poem, “The Breaking of Day,” contains the past and have the knowledge of the future. A poetic idiom, or an idiomatic and absolute poetry, asserts itself in *Photomaton & vox*, where Helder redeems Novalis and poetry as the “echt absolut Reelle [...] Je poetischer, je wahrer” (“authentic absolute reality [...]. The more poetic, the truer”)<sup>41</sup>. This allows words to destabilize and, like fungus, bacteria, or virus, propagate and multiply, revealing their organicity and vitality: as Novalis teaches, “the truly poetic language must be organic, alive”<sup>42</sup>. Helder understands Novalis’ assertion that words are so poor that they cannot convey the plural idea all at once. Several times his versions strike at this “plural idea”, teemed with perspectives to be revealed by each version and reading. As depicted in “The Mystery

<sup>38</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno*, p. 9. (my translation)

<sup>39</sup> Herberto Helder, *Photomaton & Vox*, Porto, Porto Editora, 2015, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, p. 133: “the form read continuously rebirths after each reading and remains in balance amidst the danger of a multiplication of legibility. Implanted amid readings, the poem operates in a state of vital machinery”. (my translation)

<sup>41</sup> Novalis, *Fragmente des Jahres 1798, Gesammelte Werke* [Fragments of the Year 1798, Collected Works], III, ed. Carl Seelig, Bühl-Verlag, Zurich, 1946, p. 141 (my translation).

<sup>42</sup> Novalis, *Blütenstaub, Gesammelte Werke* [Pollen, Collected Works], II, ed. Carl Seelig, Bühl-Verlag, Zurich, 1945, p. 25: “die echt poetische Sprache soll aber organisch, lebendig sein” (my translation).

of Ameigen (Ireland)”: “sou palavra de ciência. / Espada viva abrindo a noz das armaduras”<sup>43</sup>. To be a “word of action” is to be an agent of transformation. To translate the world, to penetrate words as a sword opening the “armour” alludes to transformation and reshaping, to the need to annihilate in order to revitalize.

In conclusion, my question is: how can we approach Herberto Helder’s writing, a writing that undergoes transformations into his own Portuguese, to reflect on the concept of *Weltliteratur*? He revitalizes the old Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur* extracting literatures from around the world – ancient, marginal, mystical, distant – to include them within his own creative process. On the one hand, he contemplates the depth of words without cultural and linguistic constraints, and on the other hand, he discovers and enables the reader to discover how words reveal themselves as a vital source for various perspectives through translation. However, more than a rereading, world literature “deals with the constant invention of reading – by reshaping the centre and the peripheries of literary systems, and by thus proposing ever-changing forms of actually reading texts that seemed to have been already read”<sup>44</sup>.

We could venture now to say that Helder’s path, in his relationship to *Weltliteratur*, would also lead to another less-known Goethean concept, the *Urpflanz* from his 1790 *Metamorphosis of Plants*: the archetypal plant, symbolizing the restoration of a lost unity. For Herberto Helder reading, translating, and creating entail the mission of rescuing from the world what is most profound and vital, most pure and pristine in language. It is what remains unaltered, irrespective of spatial-temporal and cultural coordinates. In agreement with Manuel Frias Martins, *O bebedor nocturno* manipulates language in ways that reveal “the splendid unity of everything with everything else, and with it the recognition that the world rearranges itself in the infinite chain of meanings of each word in discovery”<sup>45</sup>.

The centre of the universe and universal understanding of all literatures shift to the margins. Encountering one’s own idiom occurs when moving away from the native language to encounter other languages. Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* is renewed by capturing the singularities of each language and delving into the common root the poet apprehends. Therefore, the origin of this language is already different, it

<sup>43</sup> Herberto Helder, *O bebedor nocturno*, p. 113: “I am a word of science. / A living sword opening the nut of the armours”.

<sup>44</sup> Helena Buescu, “World Literature in a Poem. The Case of Herberto Helder”, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Manuel Frias Martins, *Herberto Helder. Um silêncio de bronze* [A bronze silence], Lisboa, Nova Vega e Autor, 2019, p. 44: “a esplêndida unidade de tudo com tudo, e com ela o reconhecimento de que o mundo se reordena na cadeia infinita dos sentidos de cada palavra em descoberta”. (my translation)

no longer belongs to any particular language. Since there is no way “in which we would be able to reach a final description of world literature”<sup>46</sup>, we believe in its fluidity, comparable to that of water, the analogy we started from the beginning to point to a practice of continuous transformation and creation. *Weltliteratur* brings to us anonymous texts, voiceless texts, texts strange to the place and time in which we live, but above all, texts with an inexhaustible power to produce their own language. From this convergence other voices arise, each with its own idiom. Voices coming from other places, emerging spaces of tension, produced from the dissolution of different other voices, languages, and places. A third voice [terceira voz], as proposed by João Barrento<sup>47</sup>, emerges as the result of the contamination of the target language with the translated language. In this transfer of “literary and cultural idiosyncrasies”<sup>48</sup> a “new textual reality”<sup>49</sup> is born. Helder experiments in his poetical translations with a possibility of world literature, experienced as rhizomatic, viral, metamorphic, but most of all creative and vital.

### Bibliography

- ANDRADE, Oswald, *Memórias sentimentais de João Miramar*. Serafim Ponte Grande, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1972.
- AUERBACH, Erich, “Philologie der Weltliteratur”, in Matthias Bormuth and Martin Vialon (eds.), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*, Tübingen, Francke Verlag, 2018, pp. 291–300.
- BARRENTO, João, “Ensaio sobre a terceira voz (quem fala no texto traduzido?)”, in *Revista Colóquio/Letras*, no. 155/156, Jan. 2000, pp. 275–289.
- , *O poço de Babel: para uma poética da tradução literária*, Lisboa, Relógio d’Água, 2002.
- BUESCU, Helena, “Herberto Helder: uma ideia de poesia omnívora”, in *Diacrítica, Ciências da literatura*, no. 23/3, 2009, pp. 49–63.

<sup>46</sup> Helena Buescu, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> João Barrento, “Ensaio sobre a terceira voz (quem fala no texto traduzido?)” [Essay on the third voice (who is speaking in the translated text?)], in *Revista Colóquio /Letras*, no. 155–156, January 2000, pp. 275–289.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, *O poço de Babel: para uma poética da tradução literária* [The Well of Babel: Towards a Poetics of Literary Translation], Lisboa, Relógio d’Água, 2002, p. 80: “idiosincrasias literárias e culturais”. (my translation)

<sup>49</sup> Idem, p. 110: “nova realidade textual”. (my translation)

- , “World Literature in a Poem. The Case of Herberto Helder”, in Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (eds.), *Institutions of World Literature. Writing, Translation, Markets*, London, Routledge, 2015, p. 67–78.
- CAILLOIS, Roger, LAMBERT, Jean-Clarence, *Trésor de la poésie universelle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958.
- CASANOVA, Pascale, *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1999.
- DAMROSCH, David, *Comparing the Literatures: literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020.
- DELEUZE, Gilles, *Critique et clinique*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1993.
- , Gilles and Claire Parnet, *Diálogos*, translated by José Gabriel Cunha, Lisboa, Relógio D’Água, 2004.
- DERRIDA, Jacques, “La langue n’appartient pas”, in *Europe*, no. 861/862, janvier-fevrier, 2001, pp. 81–91.
- ETTE, Ottmar, *WeltFraktale: Wege durch die Literaturen der Welt*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017.
- HELDER, Herberto, *O bebedor nocturno*, Lisboa, Portugália Editora, 1968.
- *Ouolof. Poemas mudados para português*, Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1997.
- , *Photomaton & Vox*, Porto, Porto Editora, 2015.
- , *Poemas completos*, Porto, Porto Editora, 2015.
- LAMPING, Dieter, *Die Idee der Weltliteratur. Ein Konzept Goethes und seine Karriere*, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2010.
- LOPES, Silvina Rodrigues, *A inocência do devir. Ensaio a partir de Herberto Helder*, Viseu, Edições Vendaval, 2003.
- MARTINS, Manuel Frias, *Herberto Helder. Um silêncio de bronze*, Lisboa, Nova Vega e Autor, 2019.
- NOVALIS, *Blütenstaub, Gesammelte Werke*, II, ed. Carl Seelig, Zürich, Bühl-Verlag, 1945.
- , *Fragmente des Jahres 1798, Gesammelte Werke*, III, ed. Carl Seelig, Zürich, Bühl-Verlag, 1946.
- TEIXEIRA, Claudio Alexandre de Barros, *A recepção da poesia japonesa em Portugal*, PhD thesis, São Paulo, USP, 2014.