

# "The Poet Is Not a Faker": Herberto Helder and the Myth of Poetry

António Ladeira

**Abstract.** In this essay I primarily intend to provide the American public with an introduction to the poetry of Herberto Helder. I first comment on aspects of Helder's reception. My central task, however, will be a summarized description of the main "thematic" manifestations of *Poesia Toda*, in articulation with the myth of poetry as it is represented in Helder's work. My contention is that his literary universe operates as a particular mythicization of the poetic process (through representations of the "poetic subject," the figure of "the poet," the figure of the critic, the idea of inspiration, etc.) whose study is essential for the understanding of Helder's poetry. I will address the different dimensions of this mythicization—the most important of which is the quality of "sublimity." Finally, I will comparatively address aspects of the work of Helder and Pessoa, focusing on their respective constructions of the myth of poetry.

The poet is a faker  
He fakes so completely  
That he fakes the pain  
He is actually feeling.  
—Fernando Pessoa, *Autopsychography*<sup>1</sup>

Man is often vainglorious about his contempt of glory.  
—Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Love for poetry has always been found among us. It is one, or, rather, it is the only cult that we have been officiating for centuries, with passion and more or less guaranteed success [...]. All our modernity has lived until today off of this invention of Poetry as Myth.

—Eduardo Lourenço, “Da Poesia Como Mito”<sup>2</sup>

### **A country of poets?**

Many citizens of Portugal have a difficult relationship with a vastly popular, intriguing reputation: “Portugal is,” allegedly, “a country of poets.” What particularly concerns the Portuguese about this idea is the fact that poets are commonly regarded as daydreamers who lack a sense of pragmatism. A possible source for this reputation is the famous eighteenth-century “black legend,” which also attributes to the Portuguese a tendency to nostalgic meditation, melancholic reserve or masochistic self-commiseration.

In reality, more books of poetry are annually written, published and purchased in Portugal than in most European countries. Similar to Spaniards and Latin Americans, the Portuguese reward their favorite writers—particularly their poets—with considerable acclaim and public reverence. Poetry readings are popular social events. In sharp contrast with North American children, for instance, their Portuguese counterparts are raised in a significantly more “writer-friendly” environment. A popular representation of our most celebrated poet, Luís de Camões, shows him as a fierce street brawler and a passionate seducer of courtly ladies. A famous schoolbook’s illustration portrays him at the exact moment of a terrible shipwreck; he swims with one hand, away from the sinking ship, while clutching in his other hand—held up high and away from the waves’ reach—his most precious possession: the manuscript of *The Lusiads*. Highly romanticized, heroic legends such as these are part of our national folklore.

In Portugal, despite relatively high illiteracy rates (and even higher functional illiteracy rates) literature in general has a widespread, popular, democratic prestige—if an elitist readership—and poetry holds an even stronger appeal. In other words, the Portuguese are loyal admirers of their poets, even though they are not necessarily “actual” readers of their works. Members of the Portuguese middle class are commonly zealous buyers of books—particularly those that are recommended by a community of “official” critics. Yet these books—in what, sociologically, constitutes a very intriguing behavior—often remain unread, yet proudly on display in many a living room bookcase.

The most popular writers move about in their public lives—actively participating in media events—displaying an unusual combination of mass appeal and elitism. They are revered by a large segment of the public while often exhibiting a certain disdainful aloofness towards the applause of this same public. Frequently—either out of vanity or out of humbleness—they resent the insistent inquiries of literary supplements, the obligation to participate in book promotions and, particularly, what they interpret as the intrusiveness of literary journalists and of the public in general. In this inaccessibility lies part of their charm as “literary celebrities.” This strange love affair between author and public is as much a product of the authors’ concept of “literature” as of the nation’s notion of “author.”

In our Portuguese literary world a very romantic “aura,” suggestive of mysterious, powerful, literary powers, accompanies the “legend” of some of our most revered authors, such as Camões, Pessoa, or Camilo Pessanha. The average American—who, by far, does not have such a close relationship with his poets—may have difficulty understanding just how “mainstream” and/or “mundane” literary matters can be in Portugal. For example: *Jornal de Letras, Artes & Ideias*, a so called “cultural” or “literary” publication that often includes relevant scholarly articles, is as omnipresent in newspaper stands and kiosks around the country as any major national news periodical; writers are frequent guests on talk shows and other popular TV programs; and recently, in the Portuguese Parliament, a controversial national debate ensued following the exclusion of a popular poet from a literary anthology.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that there is a fascinating relationship—which I do not intend to explore in this essay—between this literary “star system” and what Ramalho Santos, referring to Pessoa, calls “poetic arrogance” (*Santos* 115). The contemporary idea of textual, literary “arrogance” and the concept of extra-textual, “literary,” “enigmatic,” “charismatic,” personality, appear to have been (though posthumously) inaugurated by Pessoa.<sup>4</sup> Santos says that Pessoa’s poetry is the expression of “this exceptionalist poetics, which singles out the poet as far superior to common humanity and so becomes a biting commentary on the status quo [...]” (*Santos* 148).

Who is Herberto Helder? Herberto Helder is widely considered one of the most important poets since Fernando Pessoa, if not the most important. Some critics have recently begun to include him among Europe’s best contemporary poets. He was born in 1930 in the Madeira Islands, Portugal. In 1958 he published his first book of poetry, *O Amor em Visita*. In 1973 he

published the first of four editions of his (practically) complete anthology of poetry—*Poesia Toda*.<sup>5</sup>

Herberto Helder is also an author virtually unknown to the American poetry reading public. No samples of the author's work are available, with the exception of a few poems and short stories, translated by Richard Zenith and Alexis Levitin, that very recently began circulating on the Internet.<sup>6</sup> There are only a few poems in print available to the English-speaking public; these were included in an anthology of Portuguese poetry published in England in 1978 (Macedo). In the rest of the world, with the exceptions of Brazil, Spain and France, Herberto Helder is either a completely ignored author or is relegated to the status of an exotic and harmless curiosity. In Portugal, Helder is still vastly unknown to the majority of our population, although his name recognition has been steadily growing among the most active members of the reading public. One may argue that, as things now stand, he is the most popular of our non-mainstream<sup>7</sup> writers and the least known of our quasi-canonical poets.

In this essay I primarily intend to provide the American public with an introduction to the poetry of Herberto Helder. I first comment on aspects of Helder's reception. My central task, however, will be a summarized description of the main "thematic" manifestations of *Poesia Toda*,<sup>8</sup> in articulation with the myth of poetry as it is represented in Helder's work. My contention is that his literary universe operates as a particular mythicization of the poetic process (through representations of the "poetic subject,"<sup>9</sup> the figure of "the poet," the figure of the critic, the idea of inspiration, etc.) whose study is essential for the understanding of Helder's poetry. I will address the different dimensions of this mythicization—the most important of which is the quality of "sublimity." Finally, I will comparatively address aspects of the work of Helder and Pessoa, focusing on their respective constructions of the myth of poetry.

### The reception

It is thus a [critical] move drenched in humility, although it is often performed with righteousness: those other fellows may be interested in displaying their ingenuity, but I am simply a servant of the text and wish only to make it more available to its readers (who happen also to be my readers).

(Fish 353)

The history of the reception of Herberto Helder is a very peculiar one, to say

the least. For the past fifteen years or so, a number of critics have expressed positions that are, at best, contradictory. On the one hand, Helder is regarded as one of the most important writers post-*Orpheu* (or Post-Pessoa)—Portuguese poetry, if not the most important. On the other hand, scholarly studies on Helder are perceived as scarce, timid, or insufficiently productive. Many critics have already referred to this contradiction. And the “contradiction” itself is one of the most frequent critical topics. As far back as 1983, the critic Frias Martins said that “it is not surprising that HH [*sic*] is recognized as one of the most important poets of the Portuguese language and, simultaneously, as one of the least studied” (19).

In 1995, in an article titled “Como Falar de Herberto Helder” [“How to Speak About Herberto Helder”], Eduardo do Prado Coelho wrote:

In part, of course, due to the very high quality of this poetry, but also due to the halo of silence with which the author surrounds it [...], the truth is that both readers and critics feel a kind of panic or terror in speaking or writing about Herberto Helder. Maybe the problem resides in this “about.” The poetry of Herberto Helder excludes us from any position of arrogance or haughtiness in relation to the text. The result of this confessed humiliation is a type of aphasia. Could we solve the question by saying that one writes “in departure from Herberto Helder,” or rather, “along with Herberto Helder,” by engaging in an uncertain shoulder-to-shoulder struggle with the author, in a collaborative writing effort that is necessarily asymmetrical? (12)

Six years later Manuel de Freitas said:

I wish to suggest that not only the author of *A Colher na Boca* is one of the greatest living poets, but I wish also to remind [the reader] that we are before a difficult poet—as much as for the surprising splendor of his verbal art, as for his cultural attitude or, still, for the castrating silence to which he seems to condemn the critics. (17)

Academically, the landscape is also relatively uneventful: as far as I know only four doctoral dissertations and six masters theses have been devoted predominantly to Helder.<sup>10</sup> Relevant studies, however, were conducted by Américo António Lindeza Diogo (*Texto, Metáfora, Metáfora do Texto*) and by Joaquim Manuel Magalhães (*Os Dois Crepúsculos, Um Pouco da Morte, Rima*

*Pobre*). Juliet Perkins adapted her doctoral dissertation and published it under the title *The Feminine in the Poetry of Herberto Helder*. Maria Lucia Dal Farra published a book version of her own doctoral dissertation, *A Alquimia da Linguagem*. More recently, Silvina Rodrigues Lopes, who had previously written articles about Helder, published a book exclusively devoted to the poetry of this author: *A Inocência do Devir*. Manuel de Freitas authored a stimulating study about a book that was “banned” from Helder’s bibliography by the author himself: *Uma Espécie de Crime*.<sup>11</sup>

The scholarship—with a few honorable exceptions—has always been either too timid or too encomiastic and, at times, too “a-critically” encomiastic. Criticism on Helder frequently appears to lack independence and to be exceedingly respectful of (and too “compliant with”) the author’s trademark position of open hostility and non-cooperation with the academic “establishment” and the community of critics. Many of the texts that proclaim themselves analyses of Helder’s poetry often turn out to be little more than tearful homages to the author. In other words, critics have contributed to rigidifying the myths, to thickening the mystifications and to cultivating the prejudices instead of dispelling them. Few critics have attempted to do what, in my opinion, needs to be attempted: a kind of reading that would contribute to the dismantling of the esoteric reputation that surrounds his works so that freer, less fearful, less apologetic—and ultimately, more consequential—studies may come forth.

Critics in general—and perhaps Portuguese critics in particular—are fascinated by “difficult” authors, especially by authors who proudly cultivate their own “difficulty.”<sup>12</sup> It is certainly tempting to say that, similar to Herberto Helder himself, his critics have openly valued an “unreadability” that, as critics, they were supposed to challenge:

No promise of happiness is offered by the poetry of Herberto Helder. No safety zone, no identifiable time, no participation in a sentimental community—or in a “sensus communis,” as Kant would say—assure us of the comfort of textual smoothness: in its place, only the inexpressible, the infinite of a language that creates the retraction of any representational dimension, the incessant dislocation towards an area of shade that makes us feel like expatriates. Poetry such as this speaks a demoniacal idiom—it is some kind of absolute force. (Guerreiro 48R)

Concerning Helder’s work, Silvina Rodrigues Lopes stated that:

Every time we read a poem we face the impossible: poetry is the most terrible of all arts, and the most innocent, since it offers us proximity to the state of fire.

To that which is close we cannot get closer without risk and, yet, without our approaching it the poem would not exist for us. Maybe our approximation should be a ritual in which the offerings are words drunk with meanings and danger. Maybe we should be silent and choose instead words whose rumor becomes the brief breath of the wind. (11)

Fernando Pinto do Amaral confessed that:

The initial shock, the feverish surprise, that happy terror that hits us as we are invaded by the words of Herberto Helder cause in us a paralysis perhaps similar to the one we feel before the sudden revelation of someone's unknown beauty: we believe that it is impossible, that a benevolent God must have invented that dream. Later, as we find out that it is true, we still do not know what to say or what to do [with the poems]—for the fear of jumping into the unknown is great [...]. We may call him difficult, hermetic, obscure, but that obscurity is the obscurity of someone who protects his mysteries to better illuminate them from the inside. As for us, before such an intense and different light, maybe we are simply blind. (134-137)

The American critic Stanley Fish has made some illuminating observations about what he calls the stance of “aggressive humility” that is characteristic of some contemporary reading strategies. Referring to these types of excessively “self-effacing” literary analyses, Fish suggests that they are a reflection of the crisis now affecting the discipline. I am not claiming that the type of criticism mentioned by Fish is necessarily illuminated by the perspectives displayed by the three important critics quoted above whose work I respect; yet their positions, in this particular case, are representative of a long-lived and stubborn trend that is particularly concerning as it appears to inhibit *other* kinds of scholarship, namely, less overly cautious, more revealing, more muscular perspectives on the author's work:

Indeed, by a logic peculiar to the institution [of criticism], one of the standard ways of practicing literary criticism is to announce that you are avoiding it. This is so because at the heart of the institution is the wish to deny that its activities have any consequences. The critic is taught to think of himself as a transmitter of the best that had been thought and said by others, and his greatest fear is that he

will stand charged of having substituted his own meanings for the meanings of which he is supposedly the guardian. (Fish 355)

António Guerreiro and others have spoken about the “retraction” or disappearance of the “representational function of language” (48R). This type of radical position—so common ten years ago—still has many followers among today’s critics. This is among other, popular, critical positions that defend the combination of the dissolution of a “referential project” in poetry with the diminishing presence of “meaning” or “legibility.” In turn, this crisis of “meaning” is associated with the melancholic disappearance, the dramatic dissolution or the fragmentation of the literary self or of the “subject in crisis” (Guimarães 6). This idea is in agreement with the generally accepted principles of Modernism and still appears to be among the most popular characteristics of the movement as it has been interpreted by many critics. This belief may have, in part, legitimated some positions of passive resignation toward what is perceived as the inscrutability of the literary text. Nevertheless, some recent works have led me to believe that some critics could be slowly moving towards facing the strong probability (as I see it) of this poetry being about a lot more—or a lot less—than the “absence of meaning” or the “dissolution of the poetic subject.”

#### In defense of themes

One of the ways by which we may attempt to gain “access” to this poetry (as much as one can ever be granted entry into as dense a universe as this) is by analyzing certain recurring motifs. I prefer the unpopular word “theme,”<sup>13</sup> whereas others have used the terms “patterns of recurrence,” “repetitions”, or “main thematic” obsessions. To my knowledge, the fact that Helder *himself* makes reference to his “lexical” obsessions has never been discussed by critics. Commenting on *Apresentação do Rosto*, Helder said that “certain obsessions (even lexical ones) became clear to me during the writing of this book” (“Os Jovens Escritores” 11). In this book—which he calls a novelized autobiography—he mentions, for example, the importance of his “central themes” (44).

Joaquim Manuel Magalhães took note of these lexical recurrences and went so far as to call them “themes.”



These themes—of the “mother,” “childhood,” the “feminine,” “woman,” “love,” “God,” “language,” “poetry”—are always a *leit motiv*. They are the ground from which variations depart, the repetitions, the conceptually baroque formalization of his style. (*Um Pouco da Morte* 127)

Nevertheless, some critics have expressed disagreement about the use of the word “theme” and, implicitly in my opinion, have manifested their disapproval of thematic readings:

[C]ertain motifs like the “child,” “the mother,” and the “body” are emptied of all “thematic” density—as Américo António Lindeza Diogo attests, in Helder “the correlation with the real is confessedly of a non-metonymical kind—incribing instead the self-referential, and in all respects ‘sublime,’ of Poetry and of the Poet.” (Silvestre 617)

In her 2003 book, *A Inocência do Devir*, Silvina Rodrigues Lopes seems to have changed—in important ways—her previous position. In her 1990 article entitled “A Imagem Ardente”—Lopes did not place any major emphasis on thematic recurrences, her essay being, in a sense, mostly a dissertation on the difficulties of interpreting Helder’s book *Última Ciência*. It was a description of Helder’s poetry based on its inapproachability. She asserted that, in the face of his poetry, as many have claimed before and since, “perhaps we should remain silent” (11). However, in her 2003 book—whose back cover announces the intention to “emphasize certain thematic nodes”—one may say that Lopes engages in a “thematic” reading of Helder’s poetry without fully assuming the “philosophical” implications of her new approach. Apparently, she now believes that some attention should be paid to patterns, repetitions and to the constitution of a “very concentrated vocabulary,” some “hallucinating” and “contagious” semantic *nuclei* such as “corporeity,” “terror,” “power,” and “action” (*A Inocência* 64). Yet, just as she did in 1990, she still defends the incomprehensibility of texts:

[T]he poem shuts itself to the devastating curiosity, to the way it is cryptic, and its key does not open, rather, it closes—[the poem] closes itself [to scrutiny, to curiosity] as a tomb, sealed, absolutely non-desecratable, a memory stone, an epitaph. (*A Inocência* 91)

This is one of the instances where I believe Lopes's reading is least interesting. One cannot read into things while simultaneously lecturing the reader about the unreadability of things. After studying, analyzing, and moving toward deciphering Helder's patterns and recurrences she warns the reader that (true? good?) poems are immune to the "devastating curiosity" of those who interpret them—a statement that clearly excludes her own critical curiosity from the company of the *other*, "harmful," "devastating," curiosities. (But who decides which curiosities are "devastating" and which are "edifying"? Which are "legitimate" and which are "illicit"?)

This particular reading by Lopes exemplifies one of the most disappointing aspects of some contemporary styles of criticism. She appears to be playing a double game of "non-committal commitment" concerning her job of reading texts. The subtitle of Lopes's book reads "essay *from / departing from* the work of Herberto Helder" instead of, more conventionally, "essay *about / toward* the work of Herberto Helder" (5). She claims to attempt "approximations" ("A Imagem Ardente" 11) to a particular text instead of "interpretations." Hence, to critically read a text in this way is the safest act one may engage in since the critic did not really commit to any particular position to begin with; the critic removes himself / herself from all forms of liability. When faced with an objection, the critic can always go back to the original statement, take shelter in its ambivalence, and negate that he / she ever said what he / she, in fact, did say. To read a text is simultaneously "consequential" and "inconsequential," "meaningful" and "meaningless," "possible" and "impossible." Fish concludes his argument by saying that regardless of what critics claim to be doing, to interpret texts is all they can do since "interpretation is the only game in town" (355).

### "Children," "the dead," "God"

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic  
orders? And even if one of them suddenly  
pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence.  
For Beauty's nothing  
but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear,  
and why we adore it so is because it serenely  
disdains to destroy us.  
(Rilke 21)

Openly opposing a type of reading that professes to “reveal”—by claiming an affiliation with a different mode of criticism—Lopes says, for example, that in a poem that mentions the word “childhoodhouse”<sup>14</sup> one should not attempt to see the “simple memory of an individual’s childhood” (*A Inocência* 87). The original poem by Helder reads:

I play, I swear.  
 It was a childhoodhouse.  
 I know how it was an insane house.  
 I would stick my hands in the water: I would fall asleep,  
 I would re-remember.  
 Mirrors would crack against our youth. (*Poesia Toda* 99)

I obviously agree with Lopes when she claims that one cannot—by decree—declare the reading of such verses to be valid *exclusively* when made to signify someone’s memory of his or her childhood; nevertheless, conversely, I vehemently protest against the prohibition of reading the reference to “childhood” or “childhoodhouse” *in this way*. The reader’s evocation of a semantic “family” that includes “child,” “children” or “childhood”—triggered by the word “childhoodhouse”—should authorize the interpretation of that moment in the poem as “someone’s fond memories of childhood,” despite the fact that we are dealing with Helder’s fiercely “self-referential” poetry—as critics have been reminding us for over forty years.

Since the highly suggestive passage containing the word “childhoodhouse” also contains elements—as often happens in the case of Helder—that connote “emotion,” “freedom”, and “nostalgia” for a lost state of purity or “innocence,” which may cause the reader to experience the flashing remembrance of moments of his or her own childhood, then why should the reader not be allowed to interpret the passage as, precisely, “an individual’s fond memories of childhood”? Obviously, one’s interpretation cannot go beyond these very succinct, abstract, and rarefied *vignettes* of life (and by “life” I simply mean the textual “life” that *mimics* aspects of our human, general, extra-textual, “life”). In this type of reading—which I am proposing and to which Lopes objects—the images of the poem may constitute the memories of a very vaguely and sparsely characterized literary entity—a “quasi-character” who is disappointingly anonymous, who did not merit physical descriptions, whose place of residence is not known, etc.—but who, nevertheless, “exists” literarily and can be

recognized as, to say the least, the representation of a (although problematically) “human individual.” Critics lack legitimacy to go farther than this; yet one has already gone far enough: as a consequence of this reading, it now appears to be less “blasphemous” to associate these *flashes* of familiarity with the referential world. Conversely, it seems to me that it is only fair that the critics who so desire be given the prerogative *not* to interpret the passage that contains the word “childhoodhouse” in a thematic manner. (Nevertheless, I honestly do not know what one may say about “childhoodhouse” if this word—or the semantic series to which it belongs: “child,” “childhood,” “house,” “childhood’s house”—is considered to be beyond the category “theme.” I also do not know what to call the act of producing comments about a poem that is believed to be beyond “interpretation”).

“Self-referentiality” is, without a doubt, an overwhelming presence in the poetry of Herberto Helder; nevertheless, I am persuaded that in his work (as in other self-referential works) “self-referentiality” is necessarily a relative term, particularly from a reader’s perspective. “Reference” is the reader’s only key to open up texts or, at least, his only way to look for glimpses of what the text may “hold.” (Or still—if we prefer to believe that texts do not “hold” meanings—‘reference’ is the only basis through which texts trigger—in the reader’s mind—some of those elusive, mysterious, ‘meaningful’ moments of literary ‘recognition’ or *deja vu*: where did I ‘live’ this before?) The reader is more than entitled to read “actual, real, extra-literary, referential child” when she reads the word “child”; in fact, readers cannot avoid reading “actual child” in the word “child.” Readers of self-referential texts do not read “self-referentially.” Readers only know how to read “referentially” (and, ultimately, even writers can only write “referentially”). When asked about the autobiographical overtones in his book of short stories, *Os Passos em Volta*, Helder stated: “No work of art of some seriousness can stop referring to life, as it cannot avoid being an invention” (“Não Há Verdadeira Honestidade Sem Alguma Originalidade” 11).

In *Poesia Toda*, the theme “children” shares many obvious traits with conventional, empirical, palpable, “cultural,” children and with the image that, in our culturally shaped, Western “experiences,” we have of children: e.g., the close relationship with “innocence,” with “purity,” with the “mystery” of a developing rationality, the freshness of “non-rational” and “non-moral” perspectives, etc. Besides yielding to these and other possible associations, Helder’s “children” appear to be open doors to the supernatural. They display connections with the world of the “dead,” with which these “children” com-

municate as if they were their peers and as if they spoke their language. From these relationships these “children” draw their strength. Many years ago, Helder offered a journalist the following rhetorical advice:

Talk to a child. S/he will tell you amazing, mysterious, simple things. Some time ago, a child told me: “you are green, I am orange.” What do you say about this? S/he was a normal child, without any theories about reality or language. Is it unintelligible myself being green and the child being orange? It is. But I comprehend it. Those who do not please go away. (“Os Jovens Escritores Vão Sabendo” 10)

Quite autobiographically, Helder appears to have transformed some of his real life experiences into literature and the proof is in these verses: “If it is a child, she says: I am orange. / Children of thought. / I am yellow” (*Poesia Toda* 590). This powerful and terrifying kind of “child” is a constitutive part of this poetic universe:

Looking at themselves in mirrors,  
as night moves further, children appear with the horror  
of their candor, children that are fundamental, big,  
watchful children—  
singing, thinking, madly sleeping. (*Poesia Toda* 65)

“The dead” is one theme associated with supernatural terror and enigmatic knowledge. The poetic subject often mentions how the dead bring “salvation” and “redemption” to the living. The suspicion that the dead—a theme that in Helder has comforting, positive, connotations—interfere and collaborate in the lives of the living is more than just curiously common in *Poesia Toda*—it is a defining recurrence in this poetic universe:

I try... to look straight ahead  
with all the inspiration of my past, and try to stay  
at the level of the dead, in the vast and splendid  
territory of their nobility—to receive that kind of indestructible  
strength [...]. (*Poesia Toda* 53)

It can be argued that the living—as much as living “humans” can be “presented,” represented in this “inhuman” poetry—are portrayed in the anthol-

ogy as sharing many traits with the dead. Conversely, “the dead” display undeniable characteristics of the living. The conventional gap between the world of the dead and the world of the living is eliminated. Both worlds share a strong magical dimension. The dead are commonly represented as “allies,” as “helpers” of the living:

I have heard that the dead breathe with transformed lights  
 their eyes are as blind as blood.  
 this one ran away from me, terrified.  
 the dead must be pure.  
 I have heard that they breathe.  
 they run across the dew, and then  
 they lay down. They help the living.  
 They are sweet equivalencies, lights, pure ideas. (*Poesia Toda* 58)

In a sense, and understandably so, God is the most important theme in *Poesia Toda*. The presence of God is seen as a threat to the poet both in *Poesia Toda* and in Helder’s other books: “God hunts me with his radiant spear” (*Poesia Toda* 361); “God attacks me...” (*Poesia Toda* 378). Scenes of confrontation between the poetic subject and God are far from being occasional. This cosmic rivalry is, nevertheless, not a balanced one. The poet does not see himself as God’s equal—since he secretly knows that God cannot be defeated—but he appoints himself God’s permanent challenger.<sup>15</sup> The poetic subject manifests here—as in many of his other books—significant Satanic traits that recall to us the visionary writing as practiced by Lautreamont, Rimbaud, Milton or Blake.

Basic children turn me into a raging rose  
 and they throw it  
 against the mouth of God. (*Poesia Toda* 133)

In a sense—just like in some representations of Satan, Prometheus, or some of the other Titans—the poet is a damned creature, a monster who masochistically basks in the power of his own impotence and despair: “sadness, sadness—the youngest power of all” (*Poesia Toda* 35); “I only know that it was the strength of sadness or the strength of my life’s joy” (*Poesia Toda* 35). The poet goes so far as announcing: “I speak the demonic idiom” (*Poesia*

*Toda* 549). The world in which the poet lives is an alternate version of God's world, a world of the poet's own creation; it is a fantastic territory where the poet is the shepherd and the provider of his fantastic creatures—"children," "mother," "the dead," etc. The power of the poet derives, in part, from the power of his creatures and of his creations. These "powers" are to be used against God through the utterance of the poetic word; or rather, these "powers" *are* the poetic word. Poetry is, therefore, the fittest weapon to be used against the greatest possible enemy—the one that cannot be defeated:

It is necessary that God free himself from my fabulous gifts [as a poet].  
 [It is necessary] that he does not lose himself in my fabulous  
 Irony [of my poetic word]. (*Poesia Toda* 135)

In these "scenes of poetic battle" the subject has moments in which he explicitly fantasizes about God's elimination. (God has a double identity in *Poesia Toda*: at times he / she also appears as an ally of the poet, a silent accomplice of the world and of the word). Once again, the extreme power of the poetic word (here referred to as "beauty") is shown to be capable of defeating God:

And he dies and passes from one day to the other.  
 he inspires the days, he transports the days  
 to the middle of eternity, and God enhances  
 the bitter beauty of those days  
 until God is destroyed by the extreme exercise  
 of beauty. (*Poesia Toda* 123)

Another passage seems to present a similar scenario. We are before another scene in which a jubilant poet defeats a vulnerable God: "I knock at the door with my furious jubilation [...] / God does not know [it] and he smiles, crushed / against the human wall [...]" (*Poesia Toda* 107).

These three Helderian themes—three among many more that are possible in *Poesia Toda*—have one thing in common. They possess an undeniable dimension of sublimity—which, historically, has been in close association with supernatural representations (Voller 17). These three themes—which, in this particular case, may also be seen as three "characters" inside a very special "narrative" or "story:" "children," "the dead," and "God"—are essential elements in Helder's project of attaining the sublime, precisely through fantastic *scenes* such

as the ones conveyed by the excerpts that I have commented on above. From Longinus's and Burke's classical interpretations of the literary sublime (respectively, *On the Sublime* and *Philosophical Enquiry*) we have learned that "terror" is a key element in causing the reader to "experience" the sublime, to the extent that the sublime can be expressed or experienced in literature:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (Burke, qtd. in Voller 15)

This cultivation of the sublime was clearly illustrated, during the nineteenth century, by the Romantic Anglo-American Gothic novel. Helder's relationship with God reminds one of a Burkean terror based on threat and domination. The intense, paralyzing emotion—experienced by the subject and, differently, by the reader (or, differently still, by the critic)—is attained through the representation of a power so vastly overwhelming and unmatched by our own that it appears to be life threatening: "nothing is so terrible as the wrath of infinite Power" (Dennis, in Voller 18):

We love what is beautiful for submitting to us, for being less than we are; we react with dread and awe to what is sublime because of its appearing greater than we are, for being *more*, and making us acknowledge its power. (Ferguson 8-9)

The tremendous appeal of Helder's images—which resides in their sublimity—may also be due to the indefiniteness, ambiguity or shapelessness of the objects presented. According to Burke, the sublime nature of an object may be caused by "the terrible uncertainty of the thing described" (in Letzring 21). In a sense, in my thematic readings I have tried to describe UFO-like, shape-changing, moving objects that I have called "themes" (which are like "static" pictures), and which I have presented in the context of what I would like to call "scenes" or "key scenes" (which are "dynamic," suggestive of movement, like very short films). This does not mean—and here lies the crux of my disagreement with the critical views that I have described earlier—that these objects are "unknowable" and that these "scenes" are beyond description. I believe that we, as critics, should "be allowed" to set limits to their obscurity and indefiniteness; and, more impor-



tantly, the setting of these limits appears to me to be not only legitimate ethically but also—theoretically, critically—quite *legitimate* within the boundaries of a fair, respectful, healthy relationship with the text at hand. My contention is that these supernatural objects are absolutely (surprisingly) consistent and, particularly, “recognizable,” “readable” (sometimes even “relatable,” as in the case of “childhoodhouse” and its semantic family) despite their complex elusiveness and fleetingness or, rather, in their complex elusiveness and fleetingness.

### On poetry

A particular mythicization of poetry is at work in *Poesia Toda*. Helder’s idea of poetry has a strong affiliation with Romanticism’s own insofar as it implies, for instance, the concept of the poet as the privileged recipient of mysterious words dictated by inspiration. Such an understanding of poetry is inseparable from the—Modernist—myth of the critic as intruder, the critic as enemy of the poet, the critic as exploiter of the poet’s work. The critic who envies the poet’s relationship with the transcendental. (A myth that is, nowadays, strangely cultivated by critics themselves, as noted earlier by Fish.) Helder delegitimizes the critical act, which is, to him, incorrigibly illicit or, at least, inherently suspect. Critical commentary is always an act of violence committed upon the literary work:

The poem is centered in itself, monstrously solitary?

It is not in a hurry, it can wait to be taken out of its isolation, it possesses enough expansive forces, take it out of there. Yet, either you take it whole, with its center in its center, and harnessed all around as a living body or you do not take a thing from it, not even a fragment. And what one often does do is smuggle pieces of it: we remove the wrong part of it, we transfer it to the wrong part of ourselves, towards some wrong place: Philosophy, Morals, Politics, Psychoanalysis, Linguistics, Symbology, Literature. Where is its body and where is its life and its integrity? Where is the solitude of its voice? Because it is mandatory to say this: few people [few readers, few critics] possess pure ears. Or clean hands. To read a poem is to be capable of making it, of re-making it. (“As Turvações da Inocência” 30)

Helder’s poetry has very explicit metapoetic and intra-textual dimensions. For example, an entire volume of the anthology constitutes a response to Helder’s own reception in a somewhat codified manner—though recogniz-

ably against the backdrop of the “evil” world of critics (“Antropofagias”). Writing elsewhere about “Antropofagias,” the author states that the text was written with the intention of “confusing” the reader/critic. Some texts have an “untamed intention of denying” (*Photomaton & Vox* 134) and of “de-studying” (*Photomaton & Vox* 135). This affirmation could very well mean that, since critics abusively claim to be able to interpret (or “study”) his works, he will undo (“resist,” “destroy,” “destroy by resisting”) what they do or threaten to do. By “de-studying” (what today we, loosely, call “deconstructing”) their studies, he will neutralize the dangers of their interpretation.

The author has repeatedly claimed that he is not “modern”—evidently confirming his modernity by the radicalism of his provocative affirmation. In the following passage he is showing an obvious nostalgia for Romantic, pre-modern times. As he denounces the enemies of the poet—which are also, naturally, his own enemies—the excerpt provides us with a Poetics. Helder places himself in opposition to the world we live in, one in which “God,” “Poetry,” and “Inspiration” are dead or made irrelevant; a world in which poets have been, for all practical purposes, expelled from the Republic, as Plato advocated:

Meanwhile they all turned to: the death of God;  
 the sovereignty of culture, of history and the daily life;  
*inspiration* is over, that fulminating alliance between experience and consciousness.  
 That which is not searched but found is over, that which is magically and arduously and profoundly found, that is over.  
 This is not the time to praise poets that declare: we are not modern,  
 [.....]  
 What a bunch! They don't even know where and when they live. Expel them from the Republic. (“A Propósito de *Photomaton & Vox*” 94, my italics)

The author's notion of “the poet” is acutely ethical, moral, religious. The poet is someone who has a momentous mission to follow, or, as he suggests, someone who is assigned a “literary adventure” from which he should not deviate regardless of the hardships he may face. A poet's duty is to be impervious to praise or disapproval—while keeping his mind set on his all-important mission. Success, in particular, can be dangerous. These ideas (very frequent in this poetry) are extremely important for a characterization of Helder's mythicization of poetry. There are very strict codes of conduct by which “true poets” need to abide:

A conscious artist should know that prestige is harmful. One should be available to disappoint those who trusted us. Disappointing them is guaranteeing the movement. The confidence that others have in us is entirely theirs. What concerns us is another kind of confidence. The fact that we are irreplaceable in our adventure and that no one will pursue it for us. (“Os Cinco Livros que Até Hoje Publiquei” 14)

An extremely clear and consistent panel of principles rises to the surface as we read the preface to a book of poetry by António José Forte; in it Helder implies that the Romantic tradition is the only “legitimate” literary tradition, once again confirming his problematic (and, as I mentioned earlier, very “modern”) relationship with the concept of Modernism: “Like all true poetry, it possesses only its own tradition, [which is] the Romantic tradition [...]. All true poetry is founded in its own difficulty, and success resides, not in the dissolution of the difficulty, but in making it efficiently manifest” (“Nota Inútil” n.p.). Writing about another Portuguese poet, Edmundo de Bettencourt, Helder praises the fact that, at some point in his life, Bettencourt stopped writing when he felt that Portuguese society—then under the New State dictatorship—no longer offered him conditions to preserve his integrity as a poet. Helder praises the fact that Bettencourt was being faithful to his own mission. He lived “untouched, inside his own adventure” (“Relance Sobre a Poesia de Edmundo de Bettencourt” 15). Elsewhere he mentioned that writing is “a struggle against the world, in defense of a *purity* that the world does not recognize [...]” (“Não Há Verdadeira Honestidade” 12, my italics).

He views his own poetic mission as a moral responsibility, yet he claims that the radical nature of the act of writing poetry is such that it goes beyond “moral responsibility” (*Apresentação do Rosto* 44). Writing is “an act of cruel religiosity, a kind of extremely intelligent expiation of the obscure crime of not having died” (*Apresentação do Rosto* 44). Precisely like religious language, poetry is the only language capable of rescuing the poet from a condemnation to “death”:

Humbly I weave my grateful words  
 Over the beautiful ferocity  
 of your flesh, I raise my cup,  
 I listen to the hidden rumor of the fountain.  
 Humbly I dissipate the solitude, I accept your calling of sperm,

I deserve poetry.

—Humbly I say no to death. (*Poesia Toda* 18)<sup>16</sup>

I believe that this Modernist / late-Romantic religious view of poetry (and of the poet's mission) is, in its brilliant excess, not just unique in post-*Orpheu* poetry but in Portuguese literature. Helder's originality lies in the conciliation of these two, apparently incompatible, affiliations: Romanticism and Modernism; the meeting of both movements, this in-between point, is exactly the place—or the non-place—where some of the great visionaries have thrived.

### Beyond Pessoa

Few times have Fernando Pessoa and Herberto Helder appeared in the same sentence in a critical text. Very few comparative observations on the two authors were ever published. Yet such a comparative approach may help illuminate Helder's contribution to contemporary poetry. A text by the late poet and critic Luis Miguel Nava is among the few that compare the two authors. Nava once said that, similarly to what Pessoa had represented in the time of *Orpheu*, both Ruy Belo and Herberto Helder constituted important landmarks beyond which the landscape radically changed. In different ways, both Ruy Belo and Herberto Helder represented the convergence and the maturation of a host of different tendencies that originated in previous generations (Nava 180). Joaquim Manuel Magalhães considers that, in the sixties, Helder's poetry marked a moment of renewal, just as neo-realism was failing, "with the exception of Carlos de Oliveira," and just as Surrealism was quickly becoming irrelevant, "with the exception of Cesariny" (*Um Pouco da Morte* 125). Magalhães considers that the revitalization of Portuguese poetry accomplished by Helder is comparable to that of Cesário Verde in relation to the ultra-Romantics and to the overly didactic and political tendencies of Junqueiro (*Um Pouco da Morte* 125). Among Helder's most significant "contributions" are: the use of bold, highly abstract and dense imagery; his very particular and problematic brand of self-referentiality; a lyrical perspective that is non-narrative, non-confessional, non-discursive and, apparently, divorced from traditional *pathos*. These Helderian "lessons"—whether they were applied or avoided by subsequent generations—have shaped the way people write and the way people read poetry in Portugal. Thanks in great part to Helder (but also to Pessoa) our poets of the second half of the twentieth century display much less conventional Romantic and Symbolist "residue"

than they otherwise would have, while their writing feels less “traditional” than the literatures of other languages (Nava 182).

Both Helder and Pessoa lived during periods that were later considered crossroads in Portuguese letters. Both authors—in various ways, and to varying degrees—have influenced all of the generations that followed their own. In the seventies, Eduardo Prado Coelho said that, “just like previous generations wrote with/against Fernando Pessoa, this generation of the seventies writes with/against Herberto Helder” (*A Noite do Mundo* 128).

There are enormous differences between Helder’s and Pessoa’s views on poetry. One of Pessoa’s most important achievements was the de-mythicization and de-mystification of the act of writing poetry. He proved that one could use colloquialisms “literarily,” resorting to the humble materials of everyday life, without losing lyrical intensity: “It’s not a dish that can be eaten cold. / I didn’t make a fuss, but it was cold. / It can never be eaten cold, but it came cold” (“Oporto-Style Tripe” 180). He even invented a poet who, wrote as one of our most unlikely bards—the unsophisticated, barely literate, Alberto Caeiro, the shepherd. Pessoa granted literary dignity to the exceedingly human, to the embarrassingly human: “I have never met anyone who had gotten a licking [...] and I, many times despicable, many times vile [...] inexcusably dirty [...] I, who many times have not had the patience to bathe” (“Poema em Linha Recta” 332).

Pessoa’s poetic subject (especially in the cases of Campos and Soares) laments his thin connection with his fellow humans, his incommunicability, his existential isolation: “Make me human, oh night, make me fraternal and solicitous” (“Passagem das Horas” 279). Helder’s subject is of a radically different order. His poetry pursues and celebrates the de-humanization of the poet, the isolation of the poetic subject, his incommunicability. Incomprehensibility is a triumph to poets who wish to forever remain “obscure”: “My God, make me always an obscure poet” (*Os Passos em Volta* 167).

Pessoa caused Portuguese poetry to be less absolute, less Olympian, and less “literary” than ever before. Pessoa wished to implement, in a sense, literary democracy. Although he did not necessarily expect to be read and “understood” by the masses—he attempted to dismantle the myth of elitist, inspired poetry by stating that poets were artisans whose job was comparable to that of a humble and meticulous carpenter. Helder is exactly at the opposite end of the spectrum. Helder is an elitist, an aristocrat as far as his poetic materials are concerned: his images (due in part to their “readable self-referential-

ity”) are the least likely to take part in a regular, real-life conversation and the least likely to show kinship with Pessoa’s (apparently) unpretentious, non-literary, everyman sensibility.

What appears as subjective emptiness in Pessoa is equivalent to excessive, celebratory, defiant identity in Helder. Pessoa confesses: “They invoke spirits, I invoke myself and I find nothing” (“Tabacaria” 305). Helder announces: “I know / everything, everything. [...] I am of the age now—and I know everything. I say: my joy is tenebrous” (*Poesia Toda* 138). Or: “I can transform my self. / I can be higher than corruption” (*Poesia Toda* 106). Like Pessoa’s, Helder’s “poet” is self-obsessed. Yet Pessoa’s “poetic self” appears disseminated, unsure of himself and of his place in the world. Helder’s “poetic subject” proclaims—with a despair that is never “human,” unlike Pessoa’s, which is always “human”—his wholeness, his self-sufficiency, his grandiosity. A super-assertive, highly self-centered personality contrasts with a fragmented, multiplied or emptied subjectivity.

Eduardo Lourenço claims that Teixeira de Pascoaes (1877-1952) was our last “innocent” poet. According to Lourenço, Pascoaes was the last writer to believe in a transcendental “inspiration” that would signal an affiliation with the divine. Pessoa then marks the death of this (late Romantic) “innocence” as he sets a boundary beyond which no “innocence” is possible (“Cem Anos de Poesia Portuguesa” 203).

Helder not only “believes” in inspiration but obsessively uses the word “innocent” to refer to his condition as an “inspired” poet: “I am innocent [...] powerful / tumefied” (*Poesia Toda* 519); “I shivered as I realized how innocent I was [...] with my burned fingers and tongue” (*Poesia Toda* 554); “If you look the serpent in the eye, you feel how innocence is unfathomable and [how] terror is a lyrical shiver” (*Poesia Toda* 542). In no way am I claiming that Helder *truly* believes that “innocent” poets are possible in today’s world. As an intelligent man, Herberto Helder, the citizen, knows very well—extra-literarily—that Pessoa’s discovery may not be reversed. Yet, literarily, within the world of *Poesia Toda*, Helder writes *before*, or *beyond*, Pessoa’s revolution.

As is well known, Pessoa once prophesized the advent of a poet who would surpass Camões in cultural (and national) importance. This poet would appear one hazy morning in the Portuguese Republic of Letters and rescue its literature from the threat of insignificance. He called this “savior” “Super-Camões,” and critics have unanimously understood that Pessoa was

referring to himself. One may argue that Helder is here building his own Super-Pessoa prophecy. Quite competitively—exactly according to Bloom’s model—Helder writes about poetry’s vocation of the “absolute” while denouncing the shortcomings of Pessoa and of some of the main poets of our modernity. He stops short of nominating himself, not necessarily Pessoa’s successor, but Pessoa’s “corrector”:

Names like Camilo Pessanha, Angelo de Lima, Sá-Carneiro and Fernando Pessoa will be used to indicate what degree of modernity had already been achieved among us. Yet none of them discovered in time, or did not discover correctly, or discovered so many things that he could not have discovered all things—not only that “poetry is the absolute real” but also that it is a *real absolute* and that the poem is the reality of *that absolute*. (“Relance Sobre a Poesia de Edmundo de Bettencourt” 20)

Helder’s “poet” speaks beyond sincerity and insincerity. In a sense, his work constitutes a successor’s—who sounds like a precursor—authoritative answer to “Autopsychography.” I am not in any way claiming that Helder, the author, has *knowingly* created an answer to “Autopsychography”; yet his poetry seems to provide just such an answer. He rejects the premises behind Pessoa’s poem in the sense that he does not recognize a double nature in the poet. Pessoa’s poet finds himself divided between his human self (from which his “sincerity” originates) and his literary self (which summons his “insincerity”). Helder’s poet lacks a “human self.” He does not “lie” (or “fake”) because (to him) nowhere is there a verifiable truth or empirical world that could be betrayed by his actions or from which he could deviate. One needs to be between two moral worlds in order to transgress the rules of one of them; in order to be accused of the sin of insincerity. Helder’s subject does not possess this second dimension, this “real world” dimension, which frequently weighs on Pessoa’s words like a nagging conscience. In Pessoa’s extreme vocation towards confessionalism he sets out to reveal the deepest recesses of his “true” self—to the point of feeling the need to confess to the reader his own struggle with his own project of sincerity. Ultimately, Pessoa is so “sincere” that he confesses *even* the impossibility of attaining complete sincerity within the literary game. Obviously, this (paradoxical) game and its impossibilities are fascinating to him, and he shares his fascination with his reader in the poem “I Don’t Know How to be Truly Sad”:

I don't know how to be truly sad  
 Or how to be really happy.  
 No, I don't know how to be.  
 Might sincere souls be  
 Like me, without knowing it?

Before the lie of emotion  
 And the fiction of the soul,  
 I cherish the calm it gives me  
 To see flowers without reason  
 Flowers without a heart. (248)

The humanity of Helder's subject is unambiguously hybrid, subterranean, extraneous in ways that are inconceivable in Pessoa. Helder's poet displays the haughty humanity of a demigod in the same way that angels and demons share human traits with humans without being human. Either a proud super-humanity or an intensely desperate, supernatural humanity—like that of ghosts, monsters or of “the living dead.” Helder's poet—though unavoidably displaying many obvious “human” characteristics—permanently operates outside the realm of real life, beyond nature and culture. His domain—the magical—is that of the non-human and that of the non-real. Helder's “poetic self” could not be more “sincere” in his coherence, in his consistency, in his self-assurance, in his divorce from the extra-literary world, in his radical fictionality.

There are no tobacco shops in these otherworldly landscapes and, if there were, their owners would certainly—frighteningly—not be smiling by the door.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Trans. Richard Zenith, *Fernando Pessoa & Co.* 247.

<sup>2</sup> My translation. Except where otherwise noted, I have translated from the Portuguese all subsequent quotes, including all excerpts from Helder's poetry, prose, and interviews, and from critical works available only in Portuguese. The following quotes either conform to the English original or to the English translation that I consulted and identified in the “List of Works Cited”: Ramalho Santos, Stanley Fish, Rilke, Burke, Voller, Ferguson, Letzring.

<sup>3</sup> In 2002, an anthology of critical texts and poems was published under the title *O Século de Ouro*. The anthology was immediately heralded as a representative sample of the main poems and poets of the twentieth century in Portugal. The book—due to the ambitious nature of the project—had an unusually important impact beyond the community of critics and academics. Controversy surrounded it for many months, particularly because of the exclusion of some



poets that had been “considered” canonical and therefore non-excludable from anthologies of the kind. Curiously, most of the debate was not initiated by professionals of the so-called Portuguese “Republic of Letters” but by journalists and social and political commentators. A protest over the exclusion of one poet—Manuel Alegre—was made by one parliamentary group; the entire event drew considerable national media coverage and lively debate in different national venues.

<sup>4</sup> I have no doubt that the reception of Pessoa’s contemporaries contributed enormously to the shaping of the image that the poet holds for us today, affecting both his “literary” and “non-literary” personas; the critical reception, in a sense, always “creates” the author, and this is particularly true in the case of this poet. Pessoa wrote famous letters to some of the most prominent critics of his time—the letter to Casais Monteiro being the most famous example—in which he engages in extremely fantastic, radically “literary”—and rather megalomaniacal—explanations of what he describes as his heteronimical de-personalization. Thanks to the very generous reception that these letters had, and the reputation that their recipients enjoyed at the time—Pessoa’s supposedly extra-literary or para-literary “explanation” of his work appears to have “haunted” every critical text that has been produced since.

<sup>5</sup> The second, third and fourth editions of *Poesia Toda* were published, respectively, in 1981, 1990, and 1996. Assirio & Alvim was the publisher of the last three of the four editions. In each new edition, major revisions and changes were introduced by the author—to the point of causing dilemmas in the critical community as to which edition should be used when analyzing a particular poem. Since many poems were the object of considerable authorial editing, it appeared as if a “new” book was created with each new edition. The critic Maria de Fátima Marinho called this peculiar editorial habit the “aesthetics of modification” (“Uma Estética da Modificação”). In 2001, Herberto Helder further shocked his readers by announcing (or, rather, by “provocatively suggesting,” as is his style) that he was replacing his 436-page *Poesia Toda* by a 126-page super-condensed version of the anthology. This radical “summary” of his work was titled *Ou o Poema Contínuo*. Nevertheless, ignoring the (perceived) suggestions of the author, most critics (myself included) have continued to utilize the previous editions of the book as the scholarship on the author slowly evolves and proliferates. Ironically, an author’s note in the first edition of *Poesia Toda* reads: “this edition is complete and final” (1:5).

<sup>6</sup> During 2003, Alexis Levitin benefited from a grant from the “Arts Endowment for Poetry Translations” that allowed him to translate texts by Sophia de Mello Breyner and Herberto Helder. In the US, Levitin conducted some readings of Helder’s translated poetry, namely in New York on May 22, 2003. Currently, two of Helder’s short stories from *Os Passos Em Volta*—in a Richard Zenith translation—can be found in the Internet journal “The Literary Review” ([www.theliteraryreview.org](http://www.theliteraryreview.org)).

<sup>7</sup> By “mainstream” poets I mean those who enjoy a high degree of name recognition among non-professionals (i.e., beyond the university, the community of literary critics, etc.). Among these are, for example: Camões, Fernando Pessoa, Bocage, Florbela Espanca, Sophia de Mello Breyner, Eugénio de Andrade. Herberto Helder is, in my opinion, a borderline case. Yet, very soon, as I anticipate it, he may become a full-fledged “household name.”

<sup>8</sup> The anthology *Poesia Toda* will be referred to in this essay as *PT*. *PT* designates the 1996 edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> By “poetic subject” I mean the textual manifestations of “lyrical subjectivity”; in other words, the instances in which “something” in the poem says “I.” I consider these “instances” or “moments” to possess a particular consistency and regularity, and use the term “poetic self” to describe an “entity” that I imagine as having produced these “moments” of subjective manifestation. In the field of literary studies this category is also known as “poetic self,” “lyrical self,” “lyrical subject,” “lyrical ‘I,’” etc. Obviously, I do (as one should) acknowledge a technical difference between this literary “self” or “subject” and Herberto Helder, the man. Yet, since—pub-

lily—all the manifestations of Herberto Helder, the “extra-textual man,” are still, to us the public, *textual* (in the form of interviews, notes to editors of newspapers or journals, short texts presenting a new edition of a book, etc.), I question the relevance and applicability of this distinction given the particular nature of Helder’s public *persona* (which is always, for instance, distinctly “literary”) and the characteristics of my own project. Therefore, at times, I do not distinguish between “author,” “the poet,” “poetic subject” or other “textual manifestations of subjectivity,” such as the narrator in the short story “Vida e Obra de Um Poeta” in *Os Passos em Volta*. In the course of my essay, whenever a distinction between these “personas” needs to be made, I do try to clearly indicate to which “persona” I am referring.

Even though my main focus is Helder’s “poetic subject” in *Poesia Toda*, I often complement my arguments by resorting to quotes by “subjects” who are not, technically, the “poetic subject” in *Poesia Toda*. These are: “Herberto Helder,” the author, in interviews to newspapers; the narrator in some of Helder’s short stories; or narrators in other books, such as, for example, *Photomaton & Vox*. My justification for using these different “voices” interchangeably is simple: the “voice” of the “poetic subject” in *Poesia Toda* is distinctly *present* and *recognizable* in all of these “personas”—his style, his values, his views on poetry and on the poet. Part of what I intend to accomplish in this essay is precisely to provide evidence for the relative equivalency and interchangeability of these Helderian “voices.”

<sup>10</sup> As far as I could verify, the following is a thorough list of the academic theses produced in Portugal, Brazil, and the United Kingdom that predominantly concern Herberto Helder.

Doctoral dissertations:

- Dal Farra, Maria Lúcia. *A Alquimia da Linguagem: Leitura da Cosmogonia Poética de Herberto Helder*. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1985);
- da Silva, João Amadeu de Oliveira Carvalho. “A Poesia de Herberto Helder—Do contexto ao texto: uma palavra sagrada na noite do mundo” (U Católica Portuguesa, 2002);
- Perkins, Juliet. *The Feminine in the Poetry of Herberto Helder* (London: Tamesis, 1991);
- Ladeira, António. “Uma Obscura Soberania: a questão da subjectividade em *Poesia Toda* de Herberto Helder” (U of California, Santa Barbara, 1999).

Masters theses:

- da Silva, João Amadeu de Oliveira Carvalho. *Os Selos de Herberto Helder* (Braga: Publicações da Faculdade de Filosofia da UCP, 1995);
- Torres, Rui Manuel. “Herberto Helder, leitor de Raul Brandão: Uma leitura de Húmus, poema-montagem” (U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999);
- Barbeitos, Diana Pimentel Penberthy de Araújo. “Estudo sobre o conceito de Reescrita em *Photomaton & Vox*” (U of Lisbon, 1999);
- Daud, Roberto. “A Máquina de Letras: Um Estudo da Linguagem Poética de Herberto Helder.” (U of São Paulo, 1979);
- Bittencourt, Sylvia Maria C. R. “O Processo Criador de *Os Passos em Volta*: A Lei da Metamorfose” (U of São Paulo, 1978);
- Silva, Nilza Maria Leal. “O Coelacanto: Uma Parábola do Homem” (Rio de Janeiro: Pontifícia Universidade Católica, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> The book in question is *Apresentação do Rosto*, whose only (small) edition came out in 1968 (Lisbon: Contraponto). Unexplainably, it was never republished and only very short sections of it were “recycled” and included in *Poesia Toda*. Personally, I believe that *Apresentação do Rosto* is Helder’s best achievement outside of *Poesia Toda*.

<sup>12</sup> I am here referring to the socially perceived, “reclusive” *persona* of the writer. Helder is known for refusing to grant interviews to any Portuguese publications since the 1960s. He has rejected important literary awards and monetary prizes. In his own writings and on the few occasions when he has publicly commented on the reception of his works—he has displayed an attitude of general hostility toward the work of the critics, the publishing establishment, and the marketing of literature.

<sup>13</sup> I believe that I was the first critic to call attention to the importance of systematically identifying, cataloging, and studying Helderian “themes” and “recurrences.” My articles of 1990, and 1997, as well as my 1999 dissertation and my 2002 analysis of “Fonte” in *O Século de Ouro* attest to this fact. Other critics had remarked upon these recurrences but had not referred to them as important “keys” for the understanding of Helder’s poetic universe. I was also the first (and the only one so far, I believe) to propose the idea that, despite the diversity of the books included in *Poesia Toda* and the time span that the anthology encompasses (1958-1996), Helder’s poetic subject manifests “unity,” “visibility,” and “consistency” instead of “fragmentation,” “dissolution,” “invisibility,” and “inconsistency”—as most critics still assert today. I believe that a (problematically “pseudo-human”) “face” visibly unfolds as one advances in the anthology. *Poesia Toda* can be seen as an “introduction to the face” or an “Apresentação do Rosto” (to evoke one of Helder’s titles) of one individualized “poetic subject.” I first made public reference to the consistency and self-obsession of Helder’s subjectivity in my 1990 article, titled “Herberto Helder: Graça e Danação.”

One of the pioneers of “thematic” perspectives seems to be Joaquim Manuel Magalhães who wrote about themes and recurrences as far back as 1989 (*Um Pouco da Morte* 125).

<sup>14</sup> The word in Portuguese is “casinfância.”

<sup>15</sup> The poet’s relationship with God assumes multiple forms in *Poesia Toda*. On many occasions Helder presents his own translated excerpts of Biblical texts. In the book “A Máquina de Emaranhar Paisagens,” he creates a montage out of excerpts from Genesis, Revelation, as well as his own and other poets’ texts.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from the 1973 edition (vol. 1).

<sup>17</sup> “The Tobacco Shop” is the title of one of Pessoa’s (viz., Álvaro de Campos’s) most famous poems. The last verses read as follows:

The man has come out of the Tobacco Shop (putting change in his pocket?)  
 Ah, I know him: it’s unmetaphysical Esteves.  
 (The Tobacco Shop Owner has come to the door.)  
 As if by divine instinct, Esteves turns around and sees me.  
 He waves hello, I shout back “Hello, Esteves!” and the universe  
 Falls back into place without ideals or hopes, and the Owner of the Tobacco Shop smiles.  
 (Trans. Richard Zenith, *Fernando Pessoa & Co.*, 173-79.)

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António Ladeira is currently Associate Professor of Portuguese and Spanish at Texas Tech University, where he serves as the Coordinator of the Portuguese Program. He was a lecturer in Portuguese and Lusophone literatures at Yale University (1997-2002). He holds a Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from the University of California at Santa Barbara (1999). His dissertation is on poetic subjectivity in Herberto Helder. He has a "Licenciatura" in Portuguese Studies from Universidade Nova de Lisboa (1992). He has published articles on twentieth-century Lusophone literature in *Século de Ouro: Antologia Crítica da Poesia Portuguesa do Século XX* (Cotovia/Angelus Novus), *Crossroads* (UCLA) and *Colóquio/Letras* (Fundação Gulbenkian). His current research interests include contemporary Luso-Brazilian poetry and fiction and Portuguese-American literature. He has also published two books of his own poetry. Email: antonio.ladeira@ttu.edu