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Sérgio das Neves

The extreme calligraphy of the world in the poetry of Herberto Helder

Abstract:

The poetry of Herberto Helder assumes the writing as an “extreme calligraphy of the world”, as he presents in *Photomaton & Vox*. On one hand, his poetry merges poem, body, and world, fabricating in the poem an original metaphor of the world and the body. On the other hand, this extreme calligraphy is also rooted in a Dionysian nature. This idiom destroys the conventional syntaxes, without losing the musical rhythm of the pulsation of the heart and the earth. His poetry is a body full of secrets and taboos working on the transmutations of substances, matters and sensations. Therefore, the presence of the alchemical thought and the Dionysian principle are strong lines in this investigation, which leads us to an innovative poetic form, and, consequently, to a new world. This article will aim to describe how the poetry of Herberto Helder builds an extreme calligraphy through the body, reinforcing the correspondence between it and the world and the transmutation of the poetic matter. Thinking about the alchemical process and the Dionysian power, the article demonstrates how the poet destabilises the limits of language, in a movement of destruction and reconstruction of poetic matter.

Biographical note:

Sérgio das Neves is a PhD student in Portuguese Studies, at FCSH-UNL, with an FCT grant, developing a research project on alchemy and metaphor in the poetics of Herberto Helder and Yvette Centeno. He attended a degree in Theater at the University of Évora, graduated in Art Studies from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon and a master’s degree in Comparative Studies from the same institution, with the dissertation: *Urfaust and Heinrich von Ofterdingen: a comparative study in the light of alchemical thinking*. Not escaping from his Dionysian roots, he is still an actor and fado singer.

Keywords:

Herberto Helder, Portuguese poetry, alchemy, Dionysus, metamorphosis

In extremis

Herberto Helder is considered one of the most significant figures in Portuguese literature of the 20th century. Throughout his career, Helder published numerous collections of poetry, including *A Colher na Boca* (The Spoon in the Mouth), *O Amor em Visita* (Love on a Visit), and *Servidões* (Servitudes), but also what we can call poetic prose and essayistic prose. Helder's literary works are known for their experimental style, characterised by a highly complex language, often using obscure metaphorical words and syntax, and a vivid, fulgurating imagination. Knowing Helder through his work is the deepest and clearest way to know the poet. This article aims to provide a glimpse on Herberto Helder's poetry, reflecting on some of his poetic conception. Starting first with the issue of calligraphy in his poetic work, I briefly introduce Manuel Frias Martins's theory of black matter in literary creation, to outline the metamorphosis of language as an alchemical process. Afterwards, this process will be identified as a way of observing the Dionysian-Nietzschean potency in Helder's writing. The article will intersperse the theoretical notions with the reading of the poems, observing how his calligraphy writes a style of perception of the world and the body.

To frame Herberto Helder's poetry within the scope of this special issue on poetry and extremity, we have an excerpt of a kind of self-interview, self-bibliography, "poetic art" as he calls it in a letter to a reader, friend and researcher of his work, Maria Lúcia Dal Farra (2015, p. 125) [1]. The text was first published in the magazine *Luzes da Galiza*, in 1987. In it we can read that a poem

is an object watered with magnificent, terrifying powers: ..., it promotes a disorder and an order that situates the world at an extreme point: the world begins and ends. ... A displacement of everything: the world becomes a new fact in the poem, by virtue of the poem – a new reality. ... It is unreal and it lives. ... [The emphatic tone of this conception] stresses on the one hand the extreme character of poetry and on the other the extremely dubious nature of destructive and creative practice, and the jubilant secret of this duplicity; it also stresses, outrageously, the non-intellectual, irrational, bodily sense of the power of the poetic imagination to animate the universe and identify everything with everything. ... It is necessary to go far away to the recondite of time, to go drinking in the hidden nights. (2001, pp. 191–3)

This excerpt is discussed throughout this article, to incite more questions and disorder. But for now we can see the notion of "extreme" in the abundant use of metaphors and strong adjectives; from the perspective of poetry as a singular force that modifies time, language and thought, reaching the status of a physical matter belonging to the nature of the world. As the quoted passage shows, poetry is exterminating, extreme, and extremely vitalist. By driving the world to an extreme point, it can destroy it and create it. The reality created by poetry, though unreal, lives. An unreality made alive by the power the "hidden nights", of imagination; the domain of the irrational and the unintelligible. As he writes, the world begins and ends through poetry. So, it is as genesic as it is apocalyptic. Life and death are contained within poetry, animating the universe, giving it the soul, the breath of the spirit of life. It is also capable of identifying everything with everything else, that is, it is capable of the most extraordinary and extreme

metamorphoses and metaphors. Such great power is barely contained and almost unstoppable, unless we go deep and into the first time, a mythological time.

This “extreme calligraphy of the world” (2015, p. 10) challenges both poetry – the poetic invention – and the world itself. One can think about Helder’s calligraphy as a metaphor for the power of language, its beauty and complexity, the way of exploring its own limits. The very reading of poetry is part of this extreme writing because, by reading, we also write the poem in the world: “one writes the world through a text-body, body-text, written and writing body, rhythm” (Eiras, 2015, p. 81). Pedro Eiras reflects on some apocalyptic passages in Herberto Helder’s work that demonstrate well an extreme calligraphy that relies on the “pleasure of spectacular destruction, but above all pleasure of the construction of a saying, by endless parataxis” (p. 82). While this article does not deal with the theme of the Apocalypse, it does emphasise that destruction leads to a reconstruction; precisely, the initially cited power of poetry. The destruction and creation of the world at the hand of poetry is unreal, but it lives on because the reader can feel the ecstasy before this “writing exercised as extreme calligraphy of the world, apocalyptically corporeal text” (Helder, 2015, p. 10).

The destruction of the world implies the destruction of the poem, as well as the body, perhaps to reach a particular kind of matter that exists in the whole universe that presides over creation itself. Or perhaps the way to that destruction is to go as far and back in time, to the most hidden and most primordial matter. Manuel Frias Martins develops the theory of literary dark matter, an indefinable and inapprehensible matter, analogous to the dark matter of the universe. The author considers that this dark matter has already had other names in literature, like “divine furore,” “sublime,” “je ne sais quoi,” etc., representing the core of literary creation, timeless, but mouldable to the context, provoking fascination and amazement, meanings, and interpretations (1995, p. 125).

Perhaps this dark matter is the power that constitutes poetry. Maybe it constitutes all literature, although it is in poetry that this power manifests itself most. It is even Frias Martins who considers that it is in the indecipherable side of poetry that resides “the original matter of hermeneutic effort” (1989, p. 37). Therefore, this theory, of a dark generating matter, irrational and original, is observed in the poetic conception of Herberto Helder, as the excerpt previously cited realises it. His language, in “endless parataxis,” creates a space that articulates images and matters that would be beyond words, thus destroying borders that expand the universe itself.

The tessitura and the weaving of matter live in metamorphosis, without losing their origin, even if mythical. The verb is the first to illuminate the world with the word, at that eternal *Fiat Lux*. It is this eternal and immanent quality of poetry that will be illuminated by the very verb that makes it. In *O corpo, o luxo, a obra*, Helder writes that “memory handles its light, its fingers, / matter” (1978, p. 13). Memory is a luminous matter that stirs the matter of the world, recreating it, making a film out of images, fragments, proposing to the owner of this memory a vision of the world of his own. Matter metamorphoses through a mnesic and archetypal image, a more essential quality, one and prime. The world comes to us as “memory [that] enters

through the eyes” (1977, p. 10), as he writes in *Cobra*. Which transformations does this matter evoke to undo and redo language and the world?

An extreme matter

Alchemy is the great science of transmutation. Here, too, one thinks of the first matter that originated everything, that makes all metals, substances, and forms one and the same essence. There would not be space to develop all the different possibilities conceived by alchemy; nor would this be interesting for the purpose of this study. In any case, it is important that the topic of *prima materia* was widely discussed, reaching the conclusion that “it was useless to attempt the production of the [Philosophical] Stone until the original Matter had been found, and that this in turn could not be discovered until the Stone had been made” (Gray, 2010, p. 19). The *prima materia* presents itself in an indefinable space, adopting different names and forms, and is considered as or even more complex than the philosopher’s stone itself, the most chimerical, most ambitious goal of the alchemical project.

The alchemical *prima materia* is seen both as the one that will endure the transmutations until the stone is made or found, and as a womb, where the philosopher’s stone is generated and conserved. As Ronald Gray assumes, it is thus an “alchemical return to the first matter and to the mother” (2010, p. 42). Therefore, the alchemical *prima materia* is the beginning, the middle, and the end of itself, just like literary dark matter, just like poetry itself. This not only captures the ineffable but is composed of ineffable matter: the ineffable seeking more ineffable; an unreal experience brought to life by the imagination.

Herberto Helder explores to the limit the galvanising power of *prima materia*. A matter that perceives itself as body, poetry and world, origin and end, becomes also a taboo matter. Taboo because it is forbidden, forbidden because it is sacred. Taboo because it is interdicted, interdicted because it cannot be spoken about or because it is ineffable. However, this taboo matter is also an erotic matter, which seeks the fatal attraction for something indefinite, obscure, always unnameable. In an extreme way, Helder identifies everything with everything: “the hands in the poem, the penis / gravitating / swinging the lead as a marble horn” (1977, p. 27). The hands in a penis-poem (here is the synthesis of the *parataxis*). The penis-poem gravitating, swinging the lead, that is, plumb, in vertically way, that is, still, erect. In Portuguese, *a prumo*, in nautical context, is used when something heavy comes down vertically from the boat to measure the depth of the sea. It means then “swinging the lead”. This poem-penis gravitates in his hands like a horn, and that horn is marble. A high voltage metaphorical and metamorphic process, making everything collide so that in the end something new is born. The hands are making a poem, or the hands are masturbating. It matters little what the action is; they identify themselves. It is the same instinctive process, of sexual pleasure, irrational and voracious. The desire for pleasure, for writing, is such that penis-poem is as hard as a marble horn.

The alchemy of the verb and the alchemical verb could not exclude the sexual members as poem makers, whereby “through the nocturnal channels the honey, white poison, enters and

goes out” (Helder, 1977, p. 28), which makes “the whole poem blackened by [its] veins” (p. 26). Working the poem as one works the penis results in honey, white poison, i.e., sperm. Honey can be white and colourless. Is it necessarily sperm? Further on, it appears: “the penis shines like carved crystal ... in the voracity between anus and mouth I touch / the knot of the combs – and the honey boils at the top of the / vertebral rod” (p. 49). With this, there seems to be less doubt. Nevertheless, it is important never to forget the image of the poem covered with veins, like a penis. From all the throbbing pleasure of writing results a nutritious food, produced by digestive enzymes. In alchemy, honey is a symbol of immortality, of the life giving and life preserving. Etymologically, poison is medicine, but it can be also related to Venus (in Portuguese, poison is *veneno*). A poison can therefore be a venereal remedy. Is honey an aphrodisiac? And the poem? Everything indicates that they are.

The ability to evoke the taboo image of the ejaculating penis, while provoking an alchemical image, makes poetry the most absolute real. In *Photomaton & vox*, Helder rescues Novalis and the “authentic absolute real” (2000, p. 69) of poetry, pointing out that the poem is “a real absolute, ... is the reality of that absolute” (Helder, 2015, p. 135). The potential that the alchemist must work on is that of a demiurge god, who creates and recreates the real through discourse. This is how we approach a possible alchemical reading of Herberto Helder, for whom it is possible to change “the architecture of a word. / To expand the descended heart”, as in *Poemacto IV* (2016, p. 111). The alteration of the structure of the word, like the expansion of a vital centre, is an extreme gesture of poetry and of the body itself, during the period of cardiac muscular relaxation, of diastole. Poetry, instead of God the creator, is the creative force of everything. It is thus synonymous with the dark and chaotic matter of which the universe and the poet are made.

Everything is poetry and everything is body, everything is real. In this sense, Helder further describes: “I stare through where all matter contemplates / the decentred space. And a gush unleashes itself down the / column with a mental rose dragged / upwards” (1977, p. 31). It seems to describe an inspiration, the birth of a word, a verse, a poem, a world. However, it does not leave out the gush, like an ejaculatory act. In Robert Fludd’s alchemical treatise, it is written “*Dat Rosa Mel Apibus*” (Roob, 2006, p. 556), “the rose gives the honey to the bees”. The bees are the initiated workers in the alchemical, Masonic and Rosicrucian traditions, who are given the gift of speech and immortality by the honey coming from the rose. Helder seems to know this alchemical saying, when he speaks further of a “swarm of roses” (1977, p. 45).

We are all bees, receiving the honey from the rose. So, we receive what results from the poem, the honey, the white poison, which comes from the rose, which nourishes and inseminates. The rose organises the centred space, it is the centre that guides the movement of the bees, of all of us. The rose is the gravitational centre of the poem or is the poem itself as a centre. It is interesting that there is a tension between “the decentred space” contemplated by the matter and the vortex of the rose calling to its centre. A tension between forces of expansion and contraction, or between centrifugal and centripetal forces. The search for a centre of matter, since the world is a “concentric shiver” (p. 31), involves extracting the honey from these words, these roses. In *Última Ciência*, Helder also writes that he opened the words “up to where the

heart was black / in the capsules. From the deep roses, from the depth in the words / I transfigured them” (1990, p. 394). Poetry is the transfiguration of roses into honey, of words into poems, from the centre, the heart, the darkest matter of the universe.

It is in the dense, vile, ordinary matter that the work of transmutation and metamorphosis takes place. As opposed to the paradise of unpretentious contemplation, of the fullness of not-knowing, before the Adamic Fall, there is the underworld, a place of initiation, the furnace of Hephaestus. Hermes, father of alchemy, is himself also a mystagogic and psychopomp god, who leads future initiates and adepts into the womb of the earth, retort of alchemists. As Helder writes, in *O corpo, o luxo, a obra*, “inside the earth / gold grows / into a candle” (1978, p. 7). Helder’s poetry is a metallurgical, volcanic poetry that relies on the most chthonic forces for its metamorphoses. Indeed, as the alchemist monk Basil Valentine is said to have written, it is within the earth that one finds the hidden stone, the philosopher’s stone (2016, p. 270). In *Húmus*, the poet reveals that “the stone opens the tail of unceasing gold, / we are words” (2016, p. 226). The stone is the subject itself in the alchemical tradition, and this is, with Helder, poetry. The body-poem opens the tail of gold, that is, the poem is an initiation into the body and vice versa. The journey to the centre of the earth, where the gold grows, is a journey to our own centre and to the centre of literary creation.

In *O corpo, o luxo, a obra*, Helder describes: “I saw / the sweaty flanks of the houses / writhing / in the background / of the light, where the day makes a rebound where / the night turns with its body of planets” (1978, pp. 7–8). The houses are sweaty bodies, the night is the backdrop of the cosmos, with its log/stem/body/torso (in Portuguese, they all can be translated by the word *tronco*), like any other body or tree, watching the transmutation of day into night, and participating in this operation, in the contortion made by the force of light. This Luciferian force is poetry, which allows one to see the burns of the “whole / gold” (p. 9) and the “secret / matrix / of gold sunk between the vulva and the heart” (pp. 11–12). Both gold and *prima materia* reside within the earth and the body, either in the vulva, or in the heart, or between both, between the lines of the text. With Helder, poetry, body and world are transformed up to the space of the original time of language, in a romantic way, a primordial matter from which everything emanates, present in everything and in nothing, therefore, easily found and easily lost. But also in a less romantic way, because his poetry dives into the strangeness of others and not only into his own strangeness, whose original matter is located at an interlinear point, between lines or between the body of the author and the body of the poem, or between the body of the poem and the body of the world. This original matter will always remain unreachable, but at least we know that, because it is between these lines, it can be read and interpreted, like a process of mystical exegesis. After this short but intense alchemical excursion, we can search for this unreachable matter in Dionysian intuitions.

The extreme *prima materia*

The potency of Helder’s discourse is sometimes more dreamlike and symbolic, with the power of myths and rituals. The symbol is “a creative activity of human language ... that knows its most powerful intensities in poetry” (Molder, 2022, p. 150). Here, signifier does not signify the

real, but corresponds to an imaginary, an imaginary of dismemberment: to separate and dissolve. However, it is also an imaginary of remembrance: coagulate and sublimate. These two imaginaries, these four actions, are part of the most elementary processes of alchemy which feed the poet's imagination. In the tension between dismembering and remembering, verbal representation is born. On the one hand, we have the myth of Dionysus, whose dismemberment allows the birth of humanity. On the other, Hermes who granted humans writing and remembering. Both contributed to the creation of human life. One with blood, mixed with the ashes of the Titans, gave form, body, and spirit. It seems, then, that the two gods, come together so that language is "the spiritual essence of a being," of which Walter Benjamin speaks from *Genesis* (Molder, 2022, p. 121). Although we are not dealing here with the biblical text of creation, the same essence seems to be there.

The role of Dionysus and Hermes for the development of the creative activity that is language was also noted by the first documented alchemist, Zosimus of Pannopolis (3rd century BCE) who names the first man Thoth – the Egyptian Hermes – and primordial Adam (Berthelot, 1888, pp. 223–4) – son of the blood of Dionysus. Thus, the first human is the first naming alchemist. Grasping the matter apprehended from the real, he submits it to processes of intellectual transmutation, giving rise to a new element, sound, word. Language as raw material found and worked alchemically. Hermes, "found luck" [*hermaion*] and "interpretation" [*hermeneia*], is the messenger of the gods, the mediator between their language and that of humans (Liedtke, 1996, p. 33–7), creates the lyre and bequeaths it to poets and musicians. Hermes may also be mercury, the main substance of alchemical work, responsible for the dissolution of the elements and their consequent reunification. The god transmutes metals or ideas into gold, transmutes sensations into lyre sounds, and transmutes matter into language. Therefore, alchemy and language, children of the same father, are one and the same potency working the matter of the real in different ways. Perhaps we can consider that, when alchemy and language meet, we are in the presence of poetry. The matter of the sound of the lyre slowly transmuting into writing.

But what about the Dionysian potency? Not all poetry corresponds with Dionysus, much of it corresponds with Apollo, as Nietzsche considers (1999, p. 49) in his *Origin of Tragedy*. In fact, when one thinks of poetry, the Olympus that stands out is the Apollonian domain. However, Dionysus connects to poetry as the word that does not control its impact on the world, the first and last, the wild word that intoxicates, that seduces, that masques. Poetic art is reflected in Dionysus, when "in his intoxication of new language, ... the poet leaves ... the community of the explanatory language" (Bachelard, 1988, p. 52); even knowing that "the lyric intoxication appears no more than a parody of the Dionysian intoxication" (1948, p. 80). Poetry, as "transfiguration," "as authentic self-presentation and the authentic self-knowledge of art" (Branco, 2010, p. 42), leads the artist to be "subject and object ... poet, actor and spectator" (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 48); to be a Dionysian dissolution.

We come, thus, to the passion that leads to the metamorphosis and dissolution between poem-world. The Dionysian principle in relation to the erotic principle. In *A colher na boca*, Helder rescues the intuition of the epic Portuguese poet Camões and writes that "The lover is

transformed into the loved thing' / ... / And the lover and the loved thing are a single / previous cry of love / ... / Then the world is transformed into this harsh noise / of love" (2016, pp. 12–13). Here is the greatest of metamorphoses, the poet made poem through passion. Love seen as the power of creation through language. This Dionysian potency, the transformation of the poet into poem, the lover into the thing loved, is an intoxicated passion: "the lyric poet is defined as a Dionysian artist, who begins by uniting with the primordial One, and reproducing that One as music" (Branco, 2010, p. 52), agreeing with Helder, in *A faca não corta o fogo*: "the world is a sumptuous chaos-this / is the secret: music, and I am drunk" (2016, p. 551). If Dionysus is poetry, and in humanity flows the blood of the god, then our body is voracity and poetry. Our body is the most extreme and most alive poetic matter, which reassembles the fragments of Dionysus, through the process of transmutation, remembrance and writing.

In *Os passos em volta*, Helder describes that, "in the darkness of the room, the depths of the mirror shone. I was naked, there inside" (Helder, 2005, p. 66). The body is poetry that, in the mirror, sees itself naked, original and pure as in a womb, a *prima materia*. The real becomes secondary, giving primacy to something more absolute, the poetic real. The tension between what we consider real and what we consider seeing reflected is a symptom that this dismemberment, this fragmentation will always accompany us. On the other hand, it is this mismatch that leads the imagination to "animate the universe" and to "identify everything as everything else," as I quoted from Helder at the beginning. The alchemical transmutations that may be impossible to achieve with metals can be explored and recombined in literary matter itself, for "the text is the pretext of deeper significations" (Centeno, 1986, p. 58). The naked poetry in the mirror is a Dionysian intoxication that "makes one see life as it is, excessive, simultaneously cruel and full of sweetness" (Molder, 2022, p. 165).

In the same work we can read about the process of emptying words, to achieve style: "sometimes I use the process of emptying words. ... I take a fundamental word ...: Love, Sickness, Fear, Death, Metamorphosis. I say it in a hushed tone twenty times. It no longer has meaning" (Helder, 2005, p. 13). Helder empties the word, removing that divine meaning, as an immutable and eternal meaning, so that from this infinite emerges creation. Once again, an extreme act of Dionysian potency, making writing an affirmation of life, a liberation, and a manifestation of poetic matter. Style is "a subtle way of transferring the confusion and violence of life to the mental plane of a unity of signification" (2005, p. 11). This very Novalisian conception, of the poet as a descendant of Orpheus, who organises chaos through poetry, to realise this process of sublimation and reorganisation of matter, is also an alchemical conception. For Paracelsus, alchemy is the art of finishing a never realised, never complete, always chaotic, nature, which provides the tools to the alchemist to perfect it (2008, p. 210). This alchemist is poet and poetry, subject and object, in full "vital machine state," as in *Photomaton & vox* (Helder, 2015, p. 133).

So much so that dark matter exists in all matter, from the universe to literature, as it is it that makes death, the necessary destruction, possible for literary creation and for alchemical gold. As Helder considers, "I am going to die. / The gold is near" (1977, p. 27). Dying is also an erotic act, a fatal attraction, and the most extreme event of life and poetry: "it is in the death of

a poet that one begins to see that the world is eternal” (Helder, 2005, p. 119). Alchemical gold is a state of perfection. But it is known that no one ever reaches that state. So how does dying bring us closer to gold? Herberto Helder’s alchemy is a poetry of the body’s matter; it is a process that is not transcendentalist, but immanentist, that seeks its gold in the metamorphoses of life. The poetic alchemy of Helder’s writing agrees with Filomena Molder’s thought that

the senses, the bodies ..., the flesh, the acts, learning, death, are an integral part of ... living ..., dying. The degradation of the body is a sign that it is not a fantasy, that it is real, that only this allows the joy of love. (2022, p. 175)

In this sense, Helder’s writing and reading are acts of transmutation, of life and death, but also of love, of a Dionysian *pathos*, as an act of creation.

“No one knows where corruption completes innocence” (Helder, 2005, p. 17). In the light of alchemy, there is no perfect metal to the point of being all pure gold. Corruption is a *sine qua non* condition for innocence. Again, this is also a Dionysian conception of matter. The baby Dionysus, innocent, suffers corruption at the hands of the titans. “Corruption” means etymologically to be broken into pieces. That which causes no harm, innocence, becomes fragmented. Helder develops the Romantic thought that each fragment is complete. Contrary to the alchemists who wanted to expel all density and vileness from matter, Helder inquires if the metamorphosis and the ephemeral in art complete the real. The poet concludes there is “only one law encompassing both the world of things and the world of imagination The law of metamorphosis” (Helder, 2005, p. 22); and “at every instant the earth still manages to be complete: it is the only one, and this itself renews it” (p. 25). Everything in motion, everything in destruction and renewal, but not less complete at each instant. This is a Dionysian–Nietzschean lesson, which the poet later rescues when he synthesises that “everything is eternally begun again” (p. 71).

Thinking of exploring the limits of language and representation, we also have the thoughts of Maurice Blanchot, who constantly challenges the meanings and the power of literature. For example, he equates that art is the “destruction of oneself, infinite disintegration, and another name: bliss and eternity” (1997, p. 33). These are again Dionysian teachings, on the path developed by Nietzsche: the idea of fragmentation as a device for unity and completeness. “A poet must break, divide, split himself. A poet must be one” (Helder, 2005, p. 16). This unity is also alchemical, trusting that fragmented matter is always one, as indicated by the axiom of the alchemist, Mary the Prophetess, in which: “one becomes two, and two become three, and by means of the third, the fourth accomplishes unity; thus two become one” (Berthelot, 1888, p. 389). As Blanchot further notes, “to write, [the writer] must destroy language as it is and realize it in another form” (1997, p. 303). The destruction, the corruption of matter, to renew it, to restart everything, to recreate the real.

Returning a moment to Frias Martins, his idea of dark matter at the core of literary creation did not forget Blanchot, for whom the “essence of literature is to escape all essential determination, all the affirmation that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never given, it is always to be found

or reinvented” (1959, p. 273). And this movement is presented in Helder as a matter in expansion, which destroys to grow and recreate itself: “The creative ferocity of the earth is terrible. The earth inexorably generates. Everywhere, in the extension of all time” (Helder, 2005, p. 57). However, for this expansion to occur, contraction itself is essential: diastole and systole; poetry is the heart of Dionysus rescued and protected by Hermes until it could have a new womb to be generated and new way to be nursed. Helder follows along this path: “every creature subtly combines itself with the impulses of destruction. A fabric of inscrutable forces that suddenly becomes animated” (p. 73). Alchemically it is the same formulaic keynote: dying – purifying – reborn – perfecting – creating. The poet can translate what exists with the naming words, but he can do even more. He can annul an entire creation and create another creation, a super-creation, using and ordering words that, together, become another matter, different from that which, in isolation, or in the order agreed upon, only names.

The destruction, the corruption, and the contraction of poetic matter leads it to create a different, more absolute real. The bodies (human, poetry and world) are united without annulling each other, metamorphosed, and intertwined like small threads forming the great thread of destiny. It is poetry-body-world spinning and being spun by other poetry-bodies-worlds, from which diverse senses emanate. It is as Helder writes: the “man [who] leaves the house from which he leaves very seldom and goes through the deserted paths radiated from the house” (2005, p. 74). The house is the centre, it is the subject’s own consciousness, it is the body-self that, for the sake of the emanations of meanings, makes a journey out of itself, which is at the same time an inner journey. This journey is made by will, by daring: “cunning incites the imagination” (p. 74). In this way, the process of going outside the house, as an expansion and separation from the self, promotes the return to the house, the contraction and reunion, the basic formula of alchemy: *solve et coagula*;

the house stands back there – closed, fixed – for a man to lie down and feel the blood run in his flesh. It serves to ... bring together again the pieces of a pain, or a force, or a very old experience in the heart. (p. 74)

This experience is the Dionysian experience, the one of the first realisation of fragmentation as a gesture of completeness and renewal: “our perception does not work, does not remain active, without imagination” (Molder, 2022, p. 179).

The idea of destruction and renewal can also be evoked in the relationship that Aby Warburg considered between the temporality of the serpent, eradicated in the ouroboros symbol, and Chronos-Saturn, master of time (Schüttpelz, 2007, p. 210). Saturn represents, in alchemy, the *prima materia*, as does the ouroboros, the snake that bites its own tail. Saturn, as ruler of the process of destruction and renewal, is also the patron of alchemists (Roob, 2006, p. 171). The temporal, and creative, movement is from Saturn-lead to sun-gold, i.e., to the centre. And as Helder writes, thinking of Apollinaire, to be multiple is “to have the centre everywhere” (1977, p. 11). But to find that centre, one must “destroy everything ... from extreme to extreme” (p. 21). Various images, from different areas of thinking, feeling, and knowing, that promote

perception, this extreme ability to create and undo knots, taboos, through poetry, in a society that perhaps imagines less and less poetically.

All matter is body, and the body is a “snake / that wakes up in the depths / of itself” (p. 34). The ouroboros returns as a snake that devours itself, tail entering into the hole of its mouth: the autophagy that leads to auto fecundation, which leads to annulment that, in turn, leads to creation: “here is a kind of thing that interests us: to destroy / texts” (p. 65). At its core, the poem “puts / everything closer to the centre” (pp. 68–69), it is an erotic force that gathers, merges, and transmutes chaos: “blind whirlwind: / sex” (p. 69). Dionysus eternally dead, fragmented, and reborn. The obscure part of poetic matter connects “the night to the day, the hidden to the revealed, the presentiment to the event” (p. 15), or as Hermes Trismegistus teaches in the main alchemical treatise, the *Tabula Smaragdina*, “what is below resembles what is above” (Roob, 2006, p. 9). Macro and microcosm correspond, or, as Helder concludes, in *Cobra*, “I am welded by every bond of flesh / to the bonds / of the constellations” (1977, p. 53). On the one hand, the conjunction of opposites, another alchemical formula, and, on the other hand, the correspondence between poem–body–world.

The poet has the proposition that poems are animals because they are not intended for the reader, and are houses, through which we move, with which we interact (p. 9). But the poet also avers that the poem is organised by the same rules as nature because it “vitalizes life ...[and] generates a life” (p. 10). However, the poem is not made up of the same elements, placing the poet as a rival to the world (p. 9). The poem claims for itself this “personal destiny ..., in the effort to create worlds, the ultimate fable of a kind of planetary assembly” (Helder, 1977, p. 13). Here, perhaps the great difference between the elements of nature and the elements of the poem. The former is made of a matter resistant to transmutations between species: an animal will never be a house, and vice versa. On the other hand, the elements of the poem admit all the possibility of metamorphosis, from one species to another. Here, the house can be an animal, and vice versa.

A less extreme conclusion

Poetry, which in the words of Pedro Lyra is a “complex immaterial substance, prior to the poet and independent of the poem and of language” (1986, p. 6), is equivalent to the philosopher’s stone, found somewhere and nowhere, which is given body by the human hand, which retrieves the matter of life, which operates nature. Thus, poetry is in the original driving forces of the world, which make us consider a certain phenomenon, landscape, or event as poetic. The original and poetic event is the Dionysian event, as the essence of the world. Helder’s poetic matter manufactures a primordial Dionysian matter, which wants to use life to create, wants to consume it and spend it in passion: “perhaps I believe ... that life and death open to each other, feed each other” (Helder, 2005, p. 111).

Poetry and the body are the same burning, dying alchemical matter. As Helder points out, “life is useless, a night cut by quick spaces of light. ... What [the being] feels is that it feeds on itself, ... as if ... the whole of life had its beginning, and its end” (p. 83). The immanentist vein pulsing

in Helder's matter seeks its matrix, the *prima materia*, from which it nurses itself, as if "some surprising experience, a path to knowledge" (p. 89). The *prima materia* is the philosopher's stone, the creative, nourishing, expanding, and fertilising centre, which is found in those "darkest places [from which] sperm-coloured roses erupt" (1977, p. 72). This matter feeds on the poet, "as his food between his teeth and anus" (p. 72), that is, where the penis, the gold, and the centre are found, "where alive fruit pulses / like people" (p. 73).

In this article, I have presented Helder's poetry as a world of images and symbols conjugated in such a way that it recreates and transforms the same world of images and symbols. Through the destruction of a conceptual stability, in the renewal of metaphors, violently performing metamorphosis on the language and the real, Helder succeeds in accomplishing the ineffable, articulating the world and language. As demonstrated, throughout this article, the unpredictable use of words outside their expected meaning, in union with others, in the same sentence, leads to the destruction and re-creation of language and the world. When we dive into the issues of matter in Helder's poetry, we become aware of a world of references, among Dionysian myths, alchemical processes, philosophy, and literary theory, that are taken to their extreme by poetry, precisely because his poetry is an "extreme calligraphy of the world". His writing provokes an ever-new perception of the world, which, on the one hand, belongs to an imaginative dimension, and, on the other hand, is aligned with a contemporary look that converses with academic and creative work. The extreme poetry questioned here is also poetry as seen by Maria Takolander, "an intimate praxis" (2014, p. 8), that considers what Ronald Schleifer calls "the phenomenal materiality of language" (2009, p. 85), or even the need exposed by Andrea Holland's poem, "Coven," found in the literary periodical *New Writing*: "velocity, guitar, the instinct for self-extinction, / the relentless and urgent need for a spell". One can conclude that Herberto Helder puts a spell on the reader with his extreme calligraphy of the world.

Notes

[1] All passages in other languages are translated into English by the author.

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