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Post-Essentialist Belonging in Portuguese: Herberto Helder (1930 – 2015)

Jewish history, art, and literatures on the Iberian Peninsula constituted for centuries one of the most profound chapters of Jewish history. When Portuguese Jews, however, had to face the prospect of being either baptized or expelled in the winter of 1496–1497, this chapter came to a sudden end. The Inquisition, established under the Portuguese Crown in 1536, continued to harass the recent Christian converts, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one can observe their continuous exodus to other countries. With his *A Consolação às Tribulações de Israel*, Samuel Usque wrote one of the most important pieces of Portuguese literature in the sixteenth century (Roani 2011). The book takes the form of a pastoral Renaissance dialogue concerning a concise examination of the history of forced baptism and expulsion in the Iberian Peninsula (Preto-Rodas 1990). The first edition, which was printed in Ferrara in 1553, was almost entirely destroyed by the Inquisition shortly after its release. The second edition, printed in Amsterdam in 1559, signaled the beginning of Sephardic literature in the Netherlands. Only after the abolition of the Inquisition in 1821 did some descendants of formerly expelled Portuguese families come back to the country. Michaël Studemund-Halévy has drawn attention to the fact that during the nineteenth century, Jews from Gibraltar and Morocco resettled on the Portuguese mainland and on the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Azores. Between 1850 and 1900, Jews also arrived in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, the Cape Verde Islands, and Madeira. Studemund-Halévy links the limited presence of Jewish remigrants after the abolition of the Inquisition not only to Portugal's peripheral geographical position, but above all else to the fact that the memory of expulsion and forced baptism is still very much alive in the Sephardic diaspora (Studemund-Halévy 1997). To this day, Portugal has one of the most compact Jewish communities in Europe.¹

So one might ask why students of Portuguese studies should even be concerned with Jewish facets of Portuguese literary history when practiced Judaism hardly determines everyday life in Portugal. One compelling answer to this ques-

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1 See also Mucznik (1995). A three-volume history was published in 2006 by Jorge Martins.

tion can be found in the writings of Herberto Helder, one of Portugal's most eminent poets of the twentieth century. Helder published more than 30 books, most of them poetry, but also books of short stories, essays, and fiction. When Herberto Helder died in March 2015, the Portuguese president Aníbal Cavaco Silva called Helder one of the greatest names in Portuguese culture as a whole. Born in Madeira in 1930, the poet's oeuvre was dedicated to the multiple and continuous processes of transformation of the self and its historical experience that provide modernity with its distinctive plurality.² In a groundbreaking essay on Helder's poetics, Helena Buescu listed the variety of references in a book by Herberto Helder in which he experimented with indirect translations of world poetry:

The 1966 volume collects materials from Ancient Egypt, the Old Testament, Maya and Nahuatl lore, Ireland, Scotland, Finland, Japan, Indochina, Indonesia, Greece, and Madagascar, together with Zen poems, Arab and Al-Andalus poems, "Eskimo" and Tartar poems, Haikus, and "Red-Skin" poems. [...] As may well be understood, one of the gestures underlined by the poet is the fact that no national or even regional boundaries make sense in his concept of literature: poetry is understood as a transversal phenomenon which no external boundary may contain or define, not even a language, a literature, or a nationality – there is no mention whatsoever of these categories as being relevant to the choice and the practice of translated poems. (Buescu 2016, 55–56)

Herberto Helder's longing for world culture is reminiscent of Osip Mandelstam's nostalgia, seen also in his attempt to open up Portugal and Portuguese literature and culture to the world. That this gesture is linked to its historical moment – the period in which Salazar's *Estado Novo* propagated the exact opposite, namely a separation from the rest of the world through the preservation of supposed "national values" and Portugal's self-sufficiency – is crucial for the understanding of Helder's writings.³

Even these few general remarks on the oeuvre of the Portuguese author reveal his importance in the context of teaching and research in Portuguese studies, as students can experience in his writings a language-based questioning of nationalistic ideologies that unfortunately also exist in our present moment. Helder's literary procedures sought to de-provincialize the Portuguese language and open it up to global experiences. This includes a resolute decolonization of the language because part of the *Estado Novo*'s character, to which Helder's work

² See also Buescu (2007).

³ For a detailed account of how ideology translated into cultural politics under Salazar, see the first chapter in Diana Gomes Ascenso's book *Poetischer Widerstand im Estado Novo* (Gomes Ascenso 2018, 19–90).

was diametrically opposed, was the claim to consolidate the colonies as Portuguese property in political and ideological terms.

Nevertheless, Herberto Helder's oeuvre also contains texts that transcend essentialist notions of belonging by addressing the question of historical experience. Therefore, discussing his writing in the context of this volume on the diversity of Jewish literatures is by no means an attempt to explain his oeuvre on the backdrop of his own Jewish history. Rather, his writing attempts to resolve essentialist notions of identity. In Salazar's decidedly anti-modern *Estado Novo*, Herberto Helder has created a distinctly modern, if not post-modern, body of work in which symbols of collective identity dissolve – as a universal phenomenon, not as an exclusively Jewish one. For Helder, polyphonic discourse of and about belonging is a universal expression of modernity. In his oeuvre, this also includes – also and not exclusively – Jewish belonging. In addition, in Helder's writings, history in its various languages and cultures provides a path to knowledge, and the engagement with history thus appears as a powerful tool for sharpening one's judgement.

These different aspects can be demonstrated by an exemplary close reading of one of Herberto Helder's short stories. The story is part of the volume *Os passos em volta*, published in 1963. Portugal's history in the sixties is marked by the colonial wars that began in 1961 and continued until 1974. The title of Helder's 1963 story is "Holanda", meaning "Holland" in English, and this title is already striking: Holland is a region and former province on the western coast of the Netherlands. Although today, the term "Holland" is frequently used informally to refer to the whole country of the Netherlands, this is not a correct designation. From the tenth to the sixteenth century, Holland proper was a unified political region within the Holy Roman Empire as a county ruled by the Counts of Holland. By the seventeenth century, the province of Holland had risen to become a maritime and economic power, dominating the other provinces of the newly independent Dutch Republic. The area of the former County of Holland roughly coincides with the two current Dutch provinces of North Holland and South Holland in which it was divided, that together include the three largest cities in the Netherlands: the *de facto* capital city of Amsterdam; Rotterdam, home of Europe's largest port; and the seat of government in The Hague.

The title of Herberto Helder's short story thus evokes a historical landscape that was crucial in the history of early modern Portuguese Jewry. In the late sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth centuries, many families from Portugal established their homes in Amsterdam. Among them was the prominent writer Menasseh Ben Israel, who was born according to legend on Madeira Island in 1604, with the name Manoel Dias Soeiro, a year after his parents had left mainland Portugal to flee the Inquisition. The family came to Amsterdam in 1610,

where Menasseh rose to eminence not only as a rabbi and an author, but also as a printer. He established the first Hebrew press in Holland.⁴ Menasseh Ben Israel's and the migrations of many more were made possible by the creation of the Union of Utrecht in 1579. Article 13 stipulated that, "everyone shall remain free in religion and that no one may be persecuted or investigated because of religion."⁵ Thus, the Dutch Republic became a haven for men and women, especially of Jewish origin from the Iberian Peninsula, fleeing religious persecution. What they encountered in the Dutch Republic was not absolute religious tolerance, though often local authorities within Amsterdam were rather liberal when it came to the activities of the growing Portuguese Jewish population. However, despite their relative 'freedom' in comparison to their experience in Spain and Portugal, the Portuguese Jewish community acted for over a century in a way that avoided bringing unwanted attention to it. There was a desire to conform more or less to the expectations of the Dutch authorities so that what happened to the Jews in Spain and Portugal would not be repeated in Holland. Often, this meant self-regulation by applying punishments upon those not conforming to the Portuguese congregation, even sometimes resulting in excommunication (Kaplan 1999).

All of these historical contexts are evoked by the title of Herberto Helder's story, with the basic Portuguese word "Holanda". Form and content of the story are extremely condensed: while the protagonist, an unnamed poet, is situated in the spatial context of the historical region of "Holanda", it becomes apparent that the narrative uses almost no time deictics – we find neither adverbs such as "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow," nor time adverbials such as "last Sunday," "this afternoon," or "next year." An exception is the alternation of day and night, which however cannot be defined more precisely. The narrative is without an event, a traditional plot, and focuses exclusively on the consciousness of a poet without a name who no longer writes poems, but who thinks about (an equally unspecified) tradition, mediated through various narrative procedures. Nor does the poet ask anyone else for their names, but the longer he stays in the country, the story continues, the greater the danger that he will lose his own name. Apart from being located in the historical region of "Holanda", the narrative is otherwise characterized by a great deal of uncertainty as to the time, place, and characters of the storyline. However, the poet's characteri-

⁴ For a detailed analysis of Menasseh Ben Israel's impact on seventeenth-century European cultural history, see Rauschenbach 2019.

⁵ Union of Utrecht, 1579, Article 13; A. Th. Van Deursen (1981). The text of the Union of Utrecht is in Kossman and Mellink 1974, 165–173. See also: Boogman (1979).

zation of himself consists almost entirely of time; he describes himself as being nourished by centuries, suffocated by the history of other people:

Um poeta está sentado na Holanda. Pensa na tradição. Diz para si mesmo: eu sou alimentado pelos séculos, vivo afogado na história de outros homens. E a sua alma é atravessada pelo sopro primordial. Mas tem a alma perdida: é um inocente que maneja o fogo dos infernos. [...] Já não escreve poemas, nem pergunta às pessoas o seu nome. Ele próprio, visto estar destinado à inteira perdição, vai perdendo o nome pelo país adiante. Agora vigia a paz devoradora dos animais, as coisas, a imobilidade. Vou partir – imagina.⁶ (Helder 1997 [1963], 15–16)

This aspect of the characterization of the poet is striking: he is made out of time and the history of other human beings, and is thus described as an individual who holds within himself collective history. The primordial breath, it is said, pierces his soul, but he is lost, for he is an innocent man who knows how to deal with the fire of all hells. The poet who carries collective history within himself is also experienced in spiritual matters, here represented through the plural of hell, the otherworldly place of punishment in numerous religions for deeds committed in this world that are considered forbidden by the respective faith. He himself is permeated by a “sopro primordial”. This could refer to the breath of life that God breathed into the nose of Adam, his earth-formed creation, thus transforming him into a living being (Genesis 10).

The spatial, temporal and personal deictics of the narrative are consistently indeterminate, even though a lake, cows, and fields are mentioned in the course of the narrative as elements of the region evoked in the title. However, the natural landscape is described in contrast to burning cities; the poet’s aimless departure is marked as an imagination of the poet. Just because the poet is a poet, he has to leave, spread out over several places, disperse, divide, and yet, precisely because he is a poet, still be one – even though he sometimes feels like he has been wandering through the desert:

⁶ In Holland there is a poet. He thinks about tradition. He says to himself: I am being nourished by centuries, living suffocated in the history of other people. And his soul is pierced by a primordial breath. But his soul is lost: he is an innocent man handling the infernal fires. [...] He does not write poetry anymore, nor does he ask people their names. He himself, since he is abandoned to complete doom, will lose his name to the country ahead. Now he watches the devouring peace of the animals, the things, the motionlessness. I am leaving – he thinks. My translation.

As cidades ardem. Os campos enlouquecem. Um poeta tem de partir, repartir, repartir-se. Um poeta deve ser uno. O inferno não o deixa. Às vezes, lamenta-se: Sinto-me como se tivesse percorrido o deserto; não sei nada.⁷ (Helder 1997 [1963], 16)

The close reading of these first few paragraphs of the story reveals the fundamental procedures of the text. The procedures establish and repeat semantic features that might – also, but not exclusively – refer to Jewish history: the title of the historical region of Holland, the theologically versed protagonist who is familiar with all forms of hell, who has wandered the desert, who is permeated by the breath of life fleeing from burning cities. If we just consider the phrase “pelo sopro primordial”, for instance, we are reminded not only of the breath of life, but also of the Hebrew “ruach ha-kodesh” that refers to God’s power over the universe. Is the desert in which the poet has been wandering the mythical desert of Judaic textual tradition, evoking exodus, divine presence, and sanctity? Is the poet Menasseh Ben Israel, Samuel Usque, or Jacob van Maerlant? All these are possibilities, but it is impossible to determine any of the connotations in this short story as unambiguous. The semantic network in Helder’s short story consists exclusively of ambiguous lexemes that do not represent one single story. Different levels of meaning overlap and cannot be separated into binaries. The entire story blends in and out the poet’s inner dilemma of experiencing and trying to find words for his experience that appears as particular and universal at the same time.

How can such a difficult mode of representing consciousness help to make students aware of the complexity of Jewish history? Firstly, by reminding them that the meaning of literary texts is greater than the sum of the significations of their components. This short story by Herberto Helder offers numerous interpretations for a process of understanding that leads from the individual textual elements towards a cognitive conception of the meaning of the text as a whole. Depending on the quality of their literature classes at school, university students still need to learn to accept the fact that meanings do not lie waiting in the texts, but are instead generated by the reader. In other words: through the example of Helder’s short story, they can experience that linguistic constituents of a text serve as mental impulses for the generation of meaning by the reader. The effortful contextualization of the individual elements of Herberto Helder’s text, as exemplified above, opens a multitude of cultural and historical contexts. However, the inherent value of the narrative extends further: the story embodies a pivotal

7 The cities burn, the fields madden. A poet has to leave, to disperse, to split himself up. A poet must be one. Hell will not leave him. He complains now and then: I feel like I have been wandering in the desert. I know nothing. My translation.

insight that can be understood through Jewish history, but reaches far beyond it. Jewish belonging was traditionally negotiated on the basis of religious law and its sacred texts. However, on the path to modernity, traditional characteristics of belonging dissolved. This also holds true for other religious histories faced with secularization. Herberto Helder's story lets its protagonist, the poet, reflect on precisely these questions – which again involves multiple connotations of general and specific contexts of belonging:

Ou estarei eu marcado por alguma culpa insondável? De onde descendo, que não sou amado dos holandeses nem me acalmo e participo nas tarefas? Mas uma noite recebeu a visitação. O seu espírito iluminou-se: Tu és um homem. Sim, sou um homem – disse – mas não sou holandês. Aliás, não se compreendia bem o que fosse aquilo de ser um homem. – Para onde pensam que vou ou de onde venho? – perguntaria. – Eu aspiro ao amor.⁸ (Helder 1997 [1963], 16–17)

The longing for universal belonging expressed here, while at the same time experiencing non-belonging (“Where did I come from, the Hollanders don’t like me”), echoes the tension that the historian Dan Diner has identified as inherent to modern diasporic Jewish experience: the tension to transform as individuals into modernity while at the same time exhibiting visible residual features of pre-modernity.⁹

In Herberto Helder's short story, tradition is repeatedly mentioned. However, tradition is not represented as a particular religious or cultural tradition, but rather as a memory, as something that no longer provides any stability:

8 Or am I in the end tainted by an indeterminable guilt? Where do I come from, because the Dutch don't like me, nor do I become calm and participate in the work of others. One night, however, he had a vision. His mind was enlightened: You are a human being. Yes, a human being, he said – but not a Hollander. Moreover, it was not quite clear what it meant to be a human being. – What do you think, where am I going or where am I coming from? – he would ask. – I long for love.

9 “Der diasporischen jüdischen Existenz war bereits in der Hochmoderne – wesentlich in der Zeit des ausgehenden langen 19. Jahrhunderts bis weit in das sich als katastrophisch erweisende kurze 20. Jahrhundert – eine Spannung inhärent: die in den jüdischen Individuen angelegte Spannung, sich als Einzelne zu Pionieren der Moderne zu verwandeln und zugleich als Angehörige des jüdischen Kollektivs sichtbar residuelle Merkmale der Vormoderne aufzuweisen. Ein solches Zusammentreffen ungleichzeitiger lebensweltlicher Modi, vielfach in ein und derselben Person, entspricht durchaus den sich durchsetzenden nachmodernen Lagen der Gegenwart. Zugehörigkeit erstreckt sich damit auf verschiedene Lebenswelten, Kulturen und Sprachgemeinschaften. Dabei verweisen die Embleme der Zugehörigkeit auf unterschiedliche Zeitschichten der Erinnerung – eine Konstellation, wie sie von Juden in der Moderne vorweggenommen wurde.” (Diner 2011, VIII).

Pensa furiosamente na tradição, e toda a sua memória está corrompida por uma ardente e desordenada tristeza. O sangue é negro desde a raiz. Porque ninguém sabe onde a corrupção completa a inocência. [...] Tradição, compreende uma: ama-a. Perdeu o nome, essa sabedoria. Beleza, é pouco. Verdade, é muito. Trata-se de um termo subtil que participa de uma e-outra, que se tornou inútil, insensato.¹⁰ (Helder 1997 [1963], 17–18)

The short story's focus on the modes of the inner effects that the transformation of tradition can have for a person allows the reader a glimpse of what it can mean to let go of religious self-understanding and find yourself faced with belonging in post-traditional times. Belonging in Helder's short story occurs only as fractions, fragments, and particles of a unity that no longer exists. The story-telling offers an aesthetic experience of belonging and non-belonging as tense, painful processes of the modern self.

The objective of teaching literature at universities is to enable students to interpret complex linguistic manifestations in terms of their semantic and conceptual contexts: We strive to integrate textual language competence with the students' cognitive ability to mobilize their knowledge of the world and to integrate this into their processes of text comprehension. Herberto Helder's short story represents the search for the self, in particular, the absence of collective belonging, when it traces the disintegration of an essentialist conception of identity. This is not a playful, uncomplicated experience – it can also be potentially disturbing. This is illustrated by the disorientation that the protagonist of the story experiences. Yet essentialist notions of identity present no alternative in Helder's oeuvre.

Our example is not intended to imply that there are no Portuguese literatures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that focus explicitly on Jewish history and their environments. There are. Michaël Studemund-Halévy provides numerous examples (Studemund-Halévy 1997, 307),¹¹ and the oeuvre of Ilse Losa deserves special consideration.¹² The decision to consider Herberto Helder's opus

10 He furiously thinks about the tradition, and all his memory is corrupted by an ardent and disorderly sadness. The blood is black from its roots. For no one knows where the corruption completes the innocence. [...] Tradition, one he understands: he loves it. He has lost the name, this wisdom. Beauty, it is not enough. Truth, it is too much. It is a subtle concept, which is part of both the one and the other and which has become useless, senseless.

11 See also Garzón (1996).

12 The Berlin-born Portuguese writer, Ilse Losa (1913–2006), is an eminent figure in twentieth-century history of Portuguese literatures. Ilse Lieblisch (as was her maiden name) had fled to Portugal in the 30s, was married in Oporto, and published her first works in the late 1940s. The translingual aesthetics of Losa, a non-native speaker of Portuguese who wrote in Portuguese, negotiate multiple belongings and historical experiences. Losa also made outstanding transla-

as an example in the context of the broader epistemic interest of this volume is not only out of respect for the diversity that characterizes the extensive fields of Jewish literature. It also provides evidence of the theoretical impetus that can be drawn from dealing with diasporic Jewish literatures, as Herberto Helder's oeuvre is dedicated to the entanglements, the spheres in which the particular and the universal interact in human experience. His literary texts and poems are dedicated to the complex mental fabric of an experience of existence that does not dissolve in tradition, be it national or religious. Herberto Helder's work opposed the identitarian ideology of the Salazar regime with a language that did not absorb the national, but into which the most diverse cultural and artistic currents had been integrated. As in the example of his short story, the crass contrast between city and country is a recurring theme throughout his writings. Helder's oeuvre is concerned with historical experiences that are to be understood beyond the national, with inner transformations of belonging that were diametrically opposed to Salazar's essentialist understanding of the Portuguese collective as an *ethnos*. Therefore, it is one of the most important masterpieces in the field of Portuguese studies. At the same time, it allows students to experience aesthetically how vital a reflection of historical experience and belonging can be for present concerns as well. Herbert Helder's texts are not easily comprehensible; they display complex intertextual and historical references that readers first have to grasp in order to access the semantic horizons of his writing. However, this is not a shortcoming, but an important asset. Thus, the post-essentialist impulse of Helder's writing can become a key resource for reflecting on our present – in Portuguese studies and beyond.

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tions – she translated Bertolt Brecht and Anna Seghers into Portuguese, for example. None of her texts are translated into English. Including her texts in the modern Jewish literary canon is a necessary, but still pending, step.

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