It is arguable that, if world literature is also *a mode of reading*, as David Damrosch states, there may be special cases in which the choice of works to be read and/or to be translated has to be accounted for as a poetic gesture towards a planetary literary awareness. In such instances, the sense of *literary estrangement* is part of the reading process, and the project of its *non-domestication* (perhaps a stronger way to draw on Lawrence Venuti’s notion of *foreignization*) is very much at the centre of the hermeneutical process. In what follows I will be dealing with an interesting case of translation (or something akin to it), from the point of view of a poet. It is not only that it is a poet who translates poems by others. It is also, as we shall see, that he translates them *as a poet*, that is, as part of his own poetic stance. What is (and what isn’t) a literary translation? That is the question that lies at the heart of this endeavour. As we shall see, it is also a case in which, through translation, cultural diversity and provenance are transformed into a clearly distinguished work: translating is a mode of reading, but it is also a mode of shifting socio-logical and aesthetic functions and procedures. This is why we may be able to say that world literature is not solely a mode of reading, but a mode that deals with the constant *invention of reading*—by reshaping the centre and the peripheries of literary systems, and by thus proposing ever-changing forms of actually reading texts that seemed to have been already read.

Not that world literature and translation do this in a totally different way than other approaches; yet they certainly render explicit the need of considering an *extraterritorial* approach in the way one reads each and every text, and therefore accounts for what the text does and how it comes to mean different things in different ways. This approach also brings another consequence, namely that world literature is, from my point of view, not conceivable apart from a comparatist approach. Of course one knows that, particularly in the United States, there has been a disciplinary need to distinguish between comparative and world literature (at least since the 1950s)—especially linked with a more pedagogical (world literature) or a more theoretical (comparative literature) emphasis. However, it is also obvious that the ever expanding approaches within the field of literary studies, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, make it incumbent upon us to reconsider these debates in our current time and from our current...
positions. Strangely or not, the notion of estrangement, with its formalist past and, as I argue in this essay, its very interesting future, has resurfaced in the discussions around translatables or untranslatables. The issue might not be an either/or question, meaning that it may be more interesting to consider these terms as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. My main argument in this essay is that the notion of estrangement introduces a more complex view of the relations between comparative and world literature, as one recognizes that comparative literature also deals with varied factors of estrangement, and that therefore what is translated is, very often, paradoxically untranslatable. It is also my contention that we may therefore try to find more complex cases where the play between world and comparative literature, as well as that between the familiar and the estranged, become two of the major factors in the dynamics of reading.

The case that I deal with in this essay is one of these complex cases. The essay presents an approach to and a practice of translation that not everyone would immediately accept as translation. It takes its cue from the notion of estrangement, as it argues that the substantial reason for this labour of translation, and the choices it manifests, is precisely the recognition of the diversification of the literary world, in both historical and geographical terms. And it insists upon the fact that what this poet does with his poetic translations belongs to a comparative approach, as he puts quite different literary traditions in dialogue with the Portuguese one and never loses sight of how they clash, mix or do not mix, and change each other. There is no peace in these translations: they are the site of conflicts that are never resolved, not even (or especially not) when a translation has supposedly been achieved. In a sense, then, the comparative approach of a world literature scope permanently deals with estrangements that are the very basis of any reading we may do and of every work of art we may confront.

This of course is also a way of responding to the historical debate that oscillates between an optimistic view of world literature—in the sense that it might be a project of literature to come—and the more pessimistic view that sees in it the probable loss of the “world” in its non-neutralized diversity. We have different scenarios in which these opposing views have been the object of discussion, and some still quite recent (I would just like to mention the cases of Pascale Casanova and Gayatri Spivak). My position, which I revisit in the present essay, assumes that there is actually no way in which we would be able to reach a final description of world literature—either because of the historically diverse vantage points it subsumes, or because of the theoretically diverse points of entry that are used in its practice and discussion, be they sociological, hermeneutical, or through the history of translation and, therefore, comparative. If we view world literature as an epistemologically engaged practice, and therefore a structurally changeable one (comparative literature has also taught us that), we may indeed accept that Damrosch’s definition of it as a mode of reading still stands as a viable description of how it works. And if to this we still add, as Helgesson’s and
Vermeulen’s introductory remarks to the present volume point out, the complementary questions posed by Damrosch, on the “what” and “where” of world literature, we will have to accept that perhaps what world literature offers is still another way of making clear that literary studies always deal with a matter which is never completed, and even less closed. They will always be “too human” for that. It may be interesting to read approaches that try to make “order” out of such a contradictory matter, but I doubt that this “order” will one day be able to positively (and positivistically) describe what we do when we do comparative world literature. We must also be prepared for such an estranged reading as this if we want to navigate between distant and close readings and between familiar and unfamiliar texts and literary systems, as I do indeed believe we must.

In 1966, the Portuguese poet Herberto Helder (born 1930), arguably the most important poet in the second half of the twentieth century in Portugal, began an intriguing experiment with poetry written by others and with its relation to his own poetry. In that year, he published *O Bebedor nocturno* (The Night Drinkard), a collection of what he called “versions,” that is, a series of mostly indirect translations coming from disparate geographical regions, historical periods, and cultural affiliations. Twenty-one years after this collection, he published *As Magias* (1987), presented once more as “versions” of other texts and poems. And in 1997, he published three titles in three months: *Ouolof* (October), *Poemas ameríndios* (Amerindian Poems; November), and *Doze nós numa corda* (Twelve Knots in a Rope; December). These three volumes are no longer presented as “versions.” Instead, Helder uses for each of them the subtitle “Poemas mudados para Português por Herberto Helder” (“Poems changed into Portuguese by Herberto Helder”). Until 1990, in his constant revisions of his own poetry, he had also included the pre-existing “versions” in his complete poems, stating that in so doing, he “boldly dare[d] to turn it [the poem] not only into a Portuguese poem but also into a poem by [him]” (Helder, Poesia toda 209; my translation). In the case of the 1997 volumes, the notion of a “changed poem” is underlined, with different connotations than the previous concept of “versions.” This is at the core of this essay’s reflections. Is world literature about translations that may not even be translations (at least literally), as I will demonstrate? How estranged must a poem be to be recognized as a poem translated (or changed) into another culture and language? As we shall see, there are no simple answers to these and related questions.

Let me begin by describing in more detail the structure and the contents of the five volumes mentioned above. This is already an important point to underline, as it makes the degree of estrangement explicit, and leads us to recognize how distant literary traditions may be from the vantage point from which they are read and, in this case, translated and reworked. Standing out for the even casual reader is undoubtedly the extraordinary range and diversity of cultural sources from which these texts are selected. 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-Andaluz poems, “Eskimo” and Tartar poems, Haikus, and “Red-Skin poems.” As *magias*, in turn, offers poems from the Belgian poet Henri Michaux, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Duncan, Blaise Cendrars, and Stephen Crane, among others, lined up with native materials from Central Asia, Equatorial Africa, Sudan, Gabon, British Columbia, India, Panama, Australia, Colombia, Ancient Greece, Mexico, and Mongolia. As for the 1997 trilogy, *Ouolof* collects texts from Mayan and Amazonian sources, as well as poetry by Zbigniew Herbert, Jean Cocteau, Emilio Villa, Marina Tsvetaieva, and Malcom Lowry. *Poemas ameríndios* starts out with a long poem by Ernesto Cardenal (he himself working with several sources of sixteenth-century Nahuatl texts, as well as the Florentine Codex) and goes on to gather texts culled from Aztec and Quichua cultures, as well as texts from an array of native North and South American sources. Finally, *Doze nós numa corda* seems to move away from the logic governing the previous volumes by privileging Western sources: Antonin Artaud, Carlos Edmundo de Ory, Henri Michaux (whose poetry takes up almost two-thirds of the book), and a short poem by Hermann Hesse which closes the collection. In these volumes, poems by fairly canonical twentieth-century Western writers are set side by side with anonymous texts stemming from orally produced and transmitted cultures worldwide, covering “genres” as diverse as riddles, hymns, songs, prayers, incantations, exorcisms, mythical narratives, and invocations, rooted in highly ritualized contexts animated by a belief in the magic and propitiatory power of words.

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. Herder is in fact quite distant from Helder’s notion of literature, which therefore appears, at least potentially, as a planetary phenomenon, oscillating between and combining a vital process of inventiveness (*energeia*) and the heritage of historical works of art (*ergon*). One further question relates to the concept of authorship, which is also implicitly invoked to dissolve the idea that the authority of authors is of greater importance than that of texts themselves. This text-centric practice defies our basically author-centred literary system (at least in the West, mainly since the eighteenth century, as both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have underlined); we may consider it a further instance of estrangement in the reception of an already previously estranged set of texts.

How do we cope with such a “mess”? We cannot avoid such a question—and the word “mess” is indeed a conscious choice, as it relates to the vitalist conception of poetry that Helder explicitly endorses. Finally, and although this is not my main argument here, the concept of translation, as well as that of adaptation, is also under scrutiny. If, again according to Damrosch, one
of the characteristics of world literature lies in the fact that it is about texts that gain in translation, then what we also have in Helder’s case is a most convincing argument in support of this view. There are also different kinds of gain in all this: the fact that some untranslatables are objects of change and translation; the fact that they become part of the literary capital of another language and literary system(s); finally, the fact that they are withdrawn from a certain context and “violently” placed in an altogether different one, as is the case of the published volumes by Helder. Their meaning can never be the same again—and this becomes part of their estrangement too. We must however acknowledge that this is a polemical view of translation, which boldly submits notions such as fidelity, proximity, and domestication to ideas and practices such as transformation and foreignization. A way of reading becomes a statement about poetry itself—the poet’s own poetry as well as the poetry of others.

I am mainly concerned here with the notions of “change” and of a “changed poem,” and with the fact that poems not only are subject to change but also seem to actively invite change. The act of “changing” (in the etymological sense of “mutation,” expressed in the Portuguese word “mudado”) a work from one language to another and the act of incorporating dissonant codes and conventions into a personal poetics gain, I think, from being considered as specific cases of intercultural or transcultural intertextuality—a specific mode, I would argue, through which world literature may be considered and appreciated. In fact, from a certain point of view these acts also contribute to a different concept of world literature, in which both personal and distant poetic choices are able to collide (rather than be solved, as we have seen). In reality, I argue that these acts also stress the awareness that world literature is as much about what travels outside its original system of production as it is about what travels from the outside to the inside while maintaining a blatant quality of strangeness. If we follow Apter’s lead, this interiorized strangeness also becomes a way of making what does not travel (yet) travel in a different (and blatant) way (Apter). It does not “travel well”—but this is also an integral part of any process of change and of any process of translation. From my point of view, therefore, the notion that a poem is changeable, and that one of the forms it can take is through an act of translation (or something related to it, as Helder never accepted that these published texts should be called “translations”) also addresses the problem of originality, as it explicitly undermines it. Helder is closer instead to the “anthropophagic” attitude that Oswald de Andrade, the Brazilian modernist, proclaimed in the “Anthropophagic Manifesto” in 1928:

Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The unique law of the world. Masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivisms. Of all religions. Of all peace treaties. Tupi, or not Tupi, that is the question.
Against all catechizations. And against the mother of the Gracchi.
I am only interested in what is not mine. Law of human.
Law of the anthropophagus.

...  
OSWALD DE ANDRADE
In Piratininga.
Year 374 of the Swallowing of Bishop Sardinha.

In fact, Helder himself talks about his own poetic activity as a case of textual “anthropophagy” (he also published a book with this telling title), in which not only the more canonical traditions are assimilated (the Bible, Camões, the epic poet, and of course Fernando Pessoa, whose oeuvre resonates on many levels with Herberto Helder’s) but also the more distant ones are confronted and “eaten up” by the poet. The fact remains that Helder seems to privilege, in his choice of other texts, what we might call non-traditions, at least insofar as Portuguese and Western poetry in general are concerned. What I mean by this is that he clearly tries to look beyond “expected” texts, authors, and national literatures, and that in so doing he is also addressing what has been silenced—what precisely has not travelled. Yet, this choice is therefore also about the proposal of a radically different and changeable canon, which might work as a background noise and prevent the unawareness of different cultures, literatures, and traditions, as well as invite their collision, expected or not. These texts produce a noise, within Helderian poetics, that the biblical or Camonean intertextuality alone would not be able to generate. They are dissonant.

Returning to my opening remarks, I argue that world literature is perhaps mainly constituted by the awareness and the practice of dissonance and non-conformity as these are played out within a given literary system. Let us read, in this light, the way Herberto Helder highlights this non-conformity himself, in an introductory note to his O bebedor nocturno:

I have sometimes imagined the acrobatic and centrifugal life of the polyglot. I suppose his daily life to be vibrant with an unceasing movement of displacements, transmutations, exchanges, and exhilarating hunts for equivalences under the sign of affinity. He lives off suspended significations and a fascination with sounds that converge and diverge—and there is no doubt a mute desperation in him, for in the disjunction of languages he searches for an improbable unity. By multiplying the operations that favour unity, he walks radiantly towards dispersion. He decentralizes himself. He exists in a state of Babel ...

As for myself, I don’t know languages. This is to my advantage. It allows me to render poetry from Ancient Egypt into Portuguese without knowing the language. I take the Song of Songs in English or French as if it were an English or French poem, and boldly dare to
turn it not only into a Portuguese poem but also into a poem by me. An indirect version, someone will say. Personal recreation or idle dilet-tantism, someone else will say. I say nothing. If I were to say anything, I would say pleasure. My pleasure is this: wandering aimlessly, emerging through sudden love, projective. I have no right to claim that the texts in this book are translations. I would say they are swift, laborious explosions …

Someone asks: what about fidelity? I don’t feel unfaithful. What I’m trying to do is to build the Portuguese poem in tune with the emotional, mental, and linguistic meaning which I stealthily got when I read it in English, French, Italian, or Spanish. It is an oddly personal notion of fidelity, I know, but then all fidelity is personal.

(Poesia toda 209–10; my translation)

This idea of poetry is therefore not about straightforward similarities or even equivalences, but about dissonances and their outcome. This is why Herberto Helder refers to these changed poems as “swift, laborious explosions” (Poesia toda 210). And he adds, in the volume Ouolof, regarding a poem by the Caxinauá Indians:

We are facing a powerfully mythical, magical, lyrical diction, which transgresses in every way the norm of the Portuguese word. This disturbance itself immediately turns into poetic substance and action … The decentring structure between the two languages—captured as poetic legitimacy—becomes an instantaneous expressive force in Portuguese, an untidy, wrong, liberated, regenerated, recreated Portuguese. The act of speaking becomes animated with a jubilant material energy. It is totally new. (44; my translation)

The word “mess,” which I previously used, may now appear under its full light: poetry and literature are “messy” matters for Herberto Helder. They cannot be constrained in one given system. Instead, they derange (and rearrange) it continuously, for instance, by means of translation. And what he calls “poetic legitimacy” depends on the fact that one is able to capture the “decentring structure” that happens between two different languages, cultures, and literatures. The question is therefore not one of merely including or excluding texts, authors, or institutions—instead, there are always a number of mixed procedures through which literature precisely escapes the either/or logic of inclusion and exclusion. It is not hard to understand how these principles relate to an idea of world literature that does not shape itself around a strict “commerce” of texts. And it is not hard to understand that what we have here is an idea of poetry able to bring into itself and into its tradition that which Helder will call, further down, the “happy mistake” (45). In this sense, what the poet proposes is also a different concept of tradition, transversal to different historical moments and geographical
contexts, shifting within them in a potentially chaotic movement, partially
governed by chance (or what academics refer to as a very real serendipity).
For instance, when the poet publishes Emilio Villa’s text, he acknowledges
that it is a literal reproduction of what Villa has himself written. But he also
describes how he came across that poem by mere chance, and this chance is
part of the poetic agency as he conceives it. But of course we already knew,
since Borges’s Pierre Menard, that a literally reproduced text is never a liter-
ally reproduced text. Literature (and therefore world literature) lives out of
this paradox.

Through this apparently disordered and untidy process, therefore, the
poem is conceived of as able to integrate a personal poetics in the exact
measure that it also manifests itself as other, somehow combining the
tension between domestication and foreignization that Lawrence Venuti
described concerning the act of translation. In a sense, it is a foreign poem
in its personal or even domestic form, conceived as an “explosion” of the
unfamiliar in the context of a personal oeuvre and trajectory. Herberto
Helder plays with the notions of contiguity and discontinuity, as he groups
together and gives an order to what still appears as disordered. In As mag-
ias, for instance, Stephen Crane’s “Heart” is preceded by a chant used in
the cannibalistic ceremonies of a British Columbian tribe and succeeded by
an invocation to prevent snake bites from African Pygmies; we have to read
Crane in such a context, and this certainly changes our reading of Crane’s
poem, as it conversely changes the chant of the British Columbian tribe.
Another intriguing aspect, particularly in the Portuguese and Lusophone
contexts, is that the African languages that he translates from are not the
local languages of the African Lusophone countries—as though Helder was
deliberately rejecting our most immediate and obvious choices. A similar
situation is indicated by the title Ouolof (the name of a language spoken in
the region of Senegal, quoted by Michaux), opening a volume in which no
African oral pre-colonial text appears. Perhaps it just signals the following
volumes? There is no way of knowing.

The poet puts together fragments from extremely diverse works, com-
ing from different literatures and cultures, as he juxtaposes high and low
culture, erudite sources and popular ones. In so doing, Herberto Helder
subscribes to an idea of world poetry akin to his idea of personal poetry: he
publishes “his own” poetry and “his own” books (by now we know that we
have to use quotation marks for these expressions) next to these volumes,
and in a way, even when, after 1990, he excludes these volumes from his
“poesia toda,” he turns them into his own. Indeed, let me also point out that
Herberto Helder is engaged in a similar process as far as his own poetry is
concerned. He integrates, eliminates, rewrites, puts in a different order, in
a course of action for which his metaphor of “continuous poem” (“poema
continuo”) is used, as yet another name for the “complete poems” that are
never really complete. The image of cannibalism again comes to mind—and
it may be worth to recall that Jean Klucinkas and Walter Moser use that
precise image to refer to the process of “cultural recycling” (Klucinkas and Moser). The case of Helder is, from this point of view, extremely significant, both in his personal poetry and in his poetry-by-others. And if we take into account that Portuguese poetry, in the twentieth century, is haunted by the poetry-by-others that Fernando Pessoa coined as heteronymia, an interesting way to look at these changed poems by Herberto Helder might be to consider them as a response (with a vengeance) to Pessoan heteronymia. Helder also faces the conflicts between languages and between different traditions to which Pessoa found an answer through his multiple heteronyms. Helder finds a different answer to a similar problem. For him, there is no need to create new voices and new poets, that is, new heteronyms. Poetry is always about such messy voices coming into collision with one’s own, and this makes it always a new voice, changes it.

One last question would make me underline the way this reveals and performs a specific awareness of literary history. The fortuitous event (the chance) that seems to be part of the whole process does not erase the historicity of the texts that are changed or the alterity of the cultures and literatures that they represent or signal. On the contrary, this historicity becomes more complex and multilayered: these texts do gain in translation, in historical terms too. History is also made from these facts, encounters as well as ignorance, conversations as well as silences. Poetry is mainly about the non-conformity of historical awareness and about anachronisms (one of the fullest ways of being historical, from my point of view). Herberto Helder’s family of poets is not the coherent, simultaneous tradition of T. S. Eliot’s reflection; in fact, he belongs to various vast and contradictory families of poets, and no effort whatsoever of reaching a synthesis between them is made. They stand out as different families, between which clash and dissonance are perhaps more important than consonance and equanimity.

The idea of poetry that underlies this choice implies therefore an ongoing conversation between differences in time, space, and culture, which Helder also recognizes in his anthology of contemporary Portuguese poetry (1985), when he refers to it as “Vozes comunicantes” (communicating voices), a word play on “vasos comunicantes” (communicating vessels) (Edoi lelia doura). The metaphor of these “vozes comunicantes” applies to whatever poetry there is, independently from national or regional or historical dissonances. The poet’s role, therefore, is to “change” something into something else. But is not the alchemical tradition intimately connected with the search for the philosopher’s stone? In Herberto Helder’s context, poetry is at least one of the shapes the philosopher’s stone may take. And sometimes poems are even changed without being changed at all: a Comanche transcript is merely transliterated, but this still changes a poem into Portuguese.

Djá i dju nibá u
i dju nibá i dju nibá u
djá i dju nibá i ná ê nê ná
The prosody, the rhythm, and the ritual repetition of this Comanche text have thus been integrated in Portuguese poetry, and that is what change is about, even if, or perhaps because, we are not able to recognize its verbal meaning, much less to traditionally engage in its translation. The poet is the “communicating voice” through which the different “vessels” are always in contact. And as one discovers that this is a poem that must also be spoken, not only read, we have to be able to integrate an imaginary (or imagined) prosody into our everyday Portuguese language, therefore again changing it into something that was not there before—even if it was always there. A world literature that does not include such paradoxical and “messy” practices misses part of what happens in a truly comparative view of literatures in the world. Different modes of reading are precisely this. Do some of these practices (which are by no means exclusive to Helder) raise ethical dilemmas? This is of course a debatable point. In a strict sense, and in a very literal concept of a supposed “poetical ethics,” there would seem to be a problem in making one’s own what was originally others’. But the history of poetry provides us with abundant examples of imitatio and emulatio being considered an intrinsic part of the hommage that a poet pays another poet, whom by so doing he or she recognizes as his or her predecessor. We should be careful when engaging in such a discussion, especially as we understand that, historically, ethical questions have had very distinctive cultural answers. If poetry is the locus of “communicating voices” (and vessels), then one possible answer would also be that it would be unethical to erase such indebtedness.

A final remark on the whole process will underline something I have alluded to previously. The idea of originality and the idea of nationality have the same historical roots, and are intimately bound together, as we know. Once one is questioned, the other also comes under scrutiny. As the poet puts together in a real, virtual, or imaginary place bits of material (that is, textual) evidence that were never “meant” to be together, he subscribes to an alternative mode of writing, as well as to an alternative mode of reading: neither of them may be subsumed by traditional ideas of originality or nationality. And this practice certainly represents yet another form of that “musée imaginaire” that Malraux talked about: a confrontation with differences in art, and a presence, in our life, of that which seemed to be destined to disappear but which, through transformation and change, lingers on, albeit in different forms. One of these is what we call translation, even under the “messy” form that Helder uses to read his own poetry as world poetry.
NOTES

1. This paper is part of a wider research project on Herberto Helder’s poetry. Although with distinctively different objectives in mind, it points to two previously published papers. See Buescu and Buescu and Duarte.

2. An earlier version of this paragraph was published in Buescu and Duarte, 175–76.

3. “MANIFESTO ANTROPÓFAGO / Só a ANTROPOFAGIA nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente. / Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os coletivismos. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratados de paz. / Tupi, or not tupi that is the question. / Contra todas as catequeses. E contra a mãe dos Gracos. / Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropófago. / … / Oswald de Andrade / Em Piratininga / Ano 374 da Deglutição do Bispo Sardinha” (Andrade 1).

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