

Book Review

Morris, Adam, and Bruno Carvalho, editors. *Essays on Hilda Hilst: Between Brazil and World Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

The Brazilian writer Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) despaired at the reception of her work. Hilst was erudite and a hermetic stylist, which did not win her a broad readership. She had various explanations for the fate of her work, one of which was that she was ahead of her time. The fact that Hilst's work has been garnering more attention could signal that we are finally catching up with her. The edited volume *Essays on Hilda Hilst: Between Brazil and World Literature* is one more sign of a belated recognition. The volume, edited by Adam Morris and Bruno Carvalho, is the first collection of critical work on the author in English. Its arrival is timely, as the number of English translations of Hilst's work grows. The editors have played an integral role in this endeavor. Morris translated Hilst's novel *Com meus olhos de cão* (1986), and Carvalho contributed an introduction to one of the translations. The volume begins with an informative overview of Hilst's life and career. It proceeds with eight critical essays and concludes with excerpts from interviews that Hilst gave throughout her life.

Hilst was a poet, playwright, and novelist, who published an impressive forty-one volumes during her life. It seems fitting to begin with Hilst's poetry, since she began her career with a collection of poems and continued to publish her verse until 1999. It is also in her poetry that the reader finds some of Hilst's enduring preoccupations, as Alva Martínez Teixeira argues in her essay on Hilst's love poems. In particular, her poems express a tragic vision of love in which the ideal and reality of love clash (121). Additionally, these poems work on an allegorical level to convey a tragic notion of life as well (122).

Tatiana Franca Rodrigues Zanirato finds similar concerns when Hilst turns to theater. Hilst wrote eight plays between 1967 and 1969 as a response to the military dictatorship. For Hilst, the dictatorship is a manifestation of a crisis of metaphysical assumptions that exposes a lack of correspondence between language and the world (36). Her plays seek to jolt viewers out of their

metaphysical slumber, principally through the interpolation of lyric poetry into theater (40). Her work also makes use of silence, the gaze of the spectator, and affect to emphasize this condition (43-45). For the late David William Foster, Hilst's theater denounced the dictatorship through a parody of Judeo-Christian morality, specifically related to queer sexuality (28). Foster also perceives a feminist current in the play that is critical of the patriarchal character of the nuclear family (26). Though Foster thinks that Hilst's theater is minor, he views it as a part of the evolution of Hilst's singular "literary expression" that will culminate in her fiction (20).

Eliane Robert Moraes agrees with this idea of a trajectory in Hilst's oeuvre (61). If Hilst's earlier work is concerned with eros as a sublime ideal, one finds in her later prose work a descent into the "corporeal lowliness" of lived experience (65). Hilst coupled this exploration of the carnal with philosophical reflection, producing novel combinations of the high and the low. These two intermingle, as Hilst contemplates, among other things, human finitude and a sense of a void in the face of abandonment by God (65-66). Adam Morris, however, argues that Hilst never stopped believing in a divine figure that ordered the world, and with whom humans were able to commune (77). This belief, along with Hilst's syncretic thought, places her in the tradition of gnostic mysticism (76). Morris variously describes Hilst as a Neoplatonic realist, a vitalist, and an antiphilosopher, associating her with, among others, Friedrich Nietzsche, without much explanation of these schools of thought (79-80). How, for example, any sort of Platonist could be kindred spirits with a declared anti-Platonist like Nietzsche is unclear.

The editors of the volume indicate that Hilst differed from many of her contemporaries in that she was not interested in nationalist discourse (8-9). Deneval Siqueira de Azevedo Filho disagrees with this characterization. Hilst is part of a tradition of "autoras malditas" that reveal "the very truths of our Latinity and Brazilianness" (99). What sort of truths does the critic encounter in Hilst's work? A nation that is beleaguered by authoritarian government from within and imperialism from abroad. He focuses primarily on Hilst's short story "Axelrod" (1986), in which the protagonist, a history professor named Axelrod Silva, is "a synecdoche for Brazil, Brazilian nationality, and Latin American civilization" (103).

The volume includes essays written by two of the translators who brought Hilst's fiction to English. John Keene, who translated Hilst's novel *Cartas de um sedutor* (1991), provides insightful commentary about Hilst's work. He also describes how he negotiated Hilst's prose into English. The writer and translator Nathanaël offers a short, elliptical account of translating Hilst's novel *A obscena senhora D* (1982) with Rachel Gotijo Araujo. It includes what appear to be journal entries written by Nathanaël, which are interspersed with reflections on translation.

The excerpts from interviews that Hilst gave between 1952 and 2003 in the last chapter give readers a well-rounded sense of the author. In these selections, Hilst expounds on a variety of topics with candor, passion, and humor.

Overall, the volume provides a comprehensive view of the secondary literature on Hilst's work. It is part of a well-deserved recognition and is thus a reason for applause. At the same time, readers who are accustomed to academic criticism from the English-speaking world may find some of the essays desultory at times. Whatever one's preference for writing style, *Essays on Hilda Hilst* is suited for those who have read Hilst. Though there are parts of the volume that serve as introductions to her work, the essays assume a familiarity with the primary texts. Let us hope that more translations of this important writer are on the way.

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