

# The (Other) Third Space: The Poetry of Hilda Hilst

CAIO YURGEL

*Duke Kunshan University*

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**Abstract:** It can be refreshing, at times, not to have to discuss one's own identity, especially if such notion of identity carries with it an idea of nation. This lack of interest in exploring—and placing herself within—national identities is one of Hilda Hilst's many gifts, one which made her stand out among her (more localized and, at times, self-exoticizing) Latin American peers. Towards Brazil Hilst was ambivalent at best, and there's scarcely a healthier posture towards one's own country than ambivalence. Situating her oeuvre against the backdrop of twentieth-century Brazilian history, this article does not seek to simply explore Hilst's anti-romantic refusal of the local color and of Brazilianness writ large, but to also show, through a close reading of her poetry, how her late work created a radical "third space" (*pace* Catherine Keller rather than Homi Bhabha) contesting the impositions of a redemptive *telos* by proposing scatology as an antidote to eschatology: failure and fallibility instead of messianism.

**Keywords:** Twentieth-century poetry and history, teleology, theology, queer theory

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"Desde sempre caminho entre dois mundos."

Hilda Hilst, *Sete cantos do poeta para o anjo* (1962)

## *São Paulo and the Early Works (1930–66)*

Hilda Hilst couldn't have picked a better year to be born: 1930, the symbolic year when Brazil put itself inside a box and waited for the verdict—was it dead or was it alive? Was it still a "new" country or was it already an "underdeveloped" one

(Candido 140)? Was it potency yet to be fulfilled or a misfit to be scolded on the international stage? Was its culture a byproduct of Western Europe or a tropical, autochthonous concoction? Were the tropics detrimental or beneficial to the nature of its population (Bosi, *História* 274)? Should the nation continue to be the breadbasket of the world, or should it strive to industrialize?

Waiting for Schrödinger to arrive, Brazil witnessed a group of artists, writers, architects, and composers boldly redefine (after a season in Europe) the meaning of “Brazilianness” in 1922, and saw its coffee-based economy burnt to a crisp following the Wall Street crash of 1929, sending not only its economy into a tailspin, but also its political system, which shifted its center of power further South (Prado Júnior 293). Meanwhile, the country continued to receive—and promote—wave upon wave of European (and, when Europeans became scarce Japanese) immigration, which, in turn, shaped the country’s own set of myths regarding its origins and traditions (Süssekind 23; Bosi, “Formações” 290; Guimarães 117).

Born in this euphoric context, Hilst nevertheless refused to be a daughter of Brazilian modernism, choosing instead to be a rebel—or a loyalist. She never subscribed to the one unifying trait behind the many modernisms that popped up in parts of the country: nationalism. She wasn’t too inclined to turn her back on the metric scheme and embrace the free verse of a young country rebelling against its parents, nor was she willing to let go of a certain belletrism just yet—quite on the contrary, her diction has always kept something of the other shore, an echo of her Portuguese mother’s accent left behind in her poetry. Her roots, after all, were in the Iberian Peninsula, she would claim (Diniz 161). If “Brazilian literature” was the branch modernists were trying to prune from a tree called “Portugal,” Hilst was not going to lend a hand. She wasn’t born post-colonial.

Hilst—who as a child had a taste for biographies of saints—received a traditional religious education before being accepted into the prestigious Law School at the Universidade de São Paulo in 1948 (Folgueira and Destri 31). It is unclear why exactly she chose this career—biographers Laura Folgueira and Luisa Destri speculate it was her mother’s doing, seeing in it a way for Hilst to keep her independence in a (then as now) markedly chauvinist society (Folgueira and Destri 39). The Law School at the Universidade de São Paulo was not, however, the most progressive of environments: its Latinate and Parnassian rhetoric did little to take Hilst out of her linguistic comfort zone, and it was in this environment that her first book of poetry, *Presságio*, came out in 1950. Some poets first appear on the scene

with a bang of such vitality never again to be matched; Hilda Hilst, on the other hand, surfaced with a sigh, and only got better from there.

Resorting to her elevated diction by way of the Iberian Peninsula and her elite legal education (with a touch of hagiography), Hilst structured the twenty-one poems of *Presságio* around the timeless relation between love and death. “The song of failed love”, as Alva Teixeira puts it, is a staple of Hilst’s poetry, but I would argue one should not take this “failure” at face value (Teixeiro 120). This “failed love” is not a byword for a marriage gone sour nor is it a tale of unrequited love. We are not failing here on a pragmatic or edifying level—this failure cannot be explained, nor can it be improved upon. It has no horizon to walk towards. It fails by default.

Hilst’s failure takes place on a cosmic level: the inherent failure of existing—or, rather, the inherent failure of *not* existing for billions of years, only to surge from nothingness for a decade or nine and then be once again swallowed by the shadows of time. If we had to give this failure a name, we could call it death—or we could call it poetry instead: “Ao invés de Morte / Te chamo Poesia” (Hilst, *Da Morte* 47). Hilst’s obsession with death was similar to a taxidermist’s: a desire to get as close as possible to the thing itself without actually becoming it. Death as an idea one contemplates not as a practitioner (in her own syncretic way, Hilst was too devout for suicide), but as an observer: a moment of respite from being, a moment of letting go of this incessant voice telling us to shape and bend the world and its things. A moment of failure, if you will:

Me mataria em março  
 se te assemelhasse  
 às cousas perecíveis.  
 .....  
 Me mataria em março  
 se o medo fosse amor.  
 Se março, junho. (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 19)

This, the second poem in Hilst’s début book, already hints at what her oeuvre would in time become: an attempt at naming death, at getting closer to it, at keeping stride with it. “Me mataria em março / se te assemelhasse / às cousas perecíveis”: the greatest irony of death—real, physical, irreversible death—is that it is the only

thing we all truly have in common, and yet we only get to experience it second-hand (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 19). What would our own death feel and taste like—as an experience rather than a moral and moralizing experiment *à la* Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? That is a question that seems to have plagued Hilst her entire life, and her tentative answer to it was twofold: firsthand experience of death was something that could be achieved through art, and, should that prove insufficient, by directly asking the dead themselves. What would it feel like to simply *not be*? And how can this be a knowledge we do not possess, considering we have spent, and will spend, billions of years in such state. How can we not know what 99.99% of our time in this cosmos feels like, and yet concern ourselves so terribly with the breadcrumbs of this point zero zero (and many more zeroes) one percent of our existence?

Hilst wanted answers, and she also wanted to extend that zero one percent of hers, stretch it wherever possible. She used to quote a verse by American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950): “Read me, do not let me die,” and, as she grew older, she also grew increasingly worried about her own posteriority. Writing, to Hilst, was a fear-inducing, cold, dark, and self-imposed form of suffering—a suffering from which she could not get away, since it might—perhaps—allow her to “existir fora de nós mesmos, nos outros” (Diniz 55). In a letter to longtime lover and friend José Luis Mora Fuentes, Hilst wrote: “O importante é isso, salvar-se através do texto. Continuar continuar continuar” (Hilst and Mora Fuentes 119). The thing we call death, she called it poetry.

We see Hilst further pushing this notion of death as an experience that can be achieved through ideation (rather than an inescapable, concrete event) in her second collection of poems, 1951’s *Balada de Alzira*. Hilst, as Adam Morris points out, was a stout Neoplatonic realist. “She believed in a higher Unity or Oneness that could explain, or at least incorporate, all the diverse fields of human knowledge,” Morris argues. (79). Such commitment to Neoplatonic metaphysics (an interest she shared with Albert Camus, whose notion of the “absurd” is another fold in the fabric of her poetry) was already abundantly clear in the sixteenth poem of the collection, which begins and ends as follows:

As coisas não existem.  
O que existe é a ideia  
melancólica e suave

que fazemos das coisas.

.....

As coisas não existem.

A ideia, sim.

A ideia é infinita

igual ao sonho das crianças. (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 62)

How could she not agree with Plato, since she had read “tudo o que existe de Platão,” that there is indeed something otherworldly about existence (Diniz 404)? Something that eludes us, something “impensável” perhaps, but not unimaginable; something which precedes us ontologically and thus is *realer* than us and the events that surround us (Diniz 77). The *idea* of death, hints Hilst in her poem, is realer than its manifestation in our flesh. How could Hilst not push for what Plato and the Neoplatonists had of most counterintuitive to offer, an alternative to Aristotle’s overly logical answer to the mystery of life.

In *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida speaks of the “revelatory power of true literary language as poetry” in order to conclude that “being has always already begun” (12–13). Born in the same year, Hilst and Derrida couldn’t be any more different: her infatuation with Plato, his criticism of Platonism. But in this one joyful sentence they did coincide, “being has always already begun,” this long lineage of temporal *jubilation*, the layers of time, the complexity of being, the messiness of continuing, the uncertainty of what’s to come. It is precisely in this sense that I am framing this reading of Hilst’s poetry within Catherine Keller’s concept of the third space: a space which both acknowledges—and even celebrates—*unknowing* (Nicholas de Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*) and remains alert to a *critical non-knowingness* (Trinh Minh-ha). Keller’s third space is “neither pure origin nor nihilist flux” but an interval “which eludes the simple dualism of oppressor/oppressed, of home/exile, of self/other” (12, 204). Keller, as we shall see later, is not interested in the long-standing power-discourse of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothingness), but rather in resisting the dualism of Creator/creature (“being has always already begun”) which hierarchizes transcendence by implying a telos, a goal, an end. If being has always already begun, if what exists is the idea we make of things, if our knowledge has limits, if existence is neither pure origin nor nihilist flux, then shouldn’t we rather accept that no single theory would ever fully encapsule the messiness of *being*? Shouldn’t we (constantly) look for a third

space—or João Guimarães Rosas’s third bank of the river? At the casino, Hilst is the one who places multiple bets. Winning matters less than being surprised by the outcome.

This belief that the world is more mysterious than what meets the eye informs Hilst’s third book, 1955’s *Balada do Festival*, in which she writes, “Os versos são prodígios escondidos / da minha fantasia” (Hilst, *Da Poesia*, 82). This belief would become only more pronounced as she dove deeper into the implausible waters of Neoplatonic metaphysics and continued to seek an overarching Oneness that was neither God nor Reason, but a third space in between that was somehow both and none, a path “às vezes, para o nada, às vezes em direção a Deus” (Diniz 220).

It is interesting to notice the contempt that some scholars of religion and philosophy have for Neoplatonism. Lin Yutang, for instance, who made a career between the East and the West advocating for the reasonability of a Confucian (and middle-class) middle ground, regrets that, “instead of being tempered with more insight,” Neoplatonism is but one of these intellectual enterprises that “is depriving us of the watertight compartments of ‘reason’” (Lin 918). The belief that reason can at all be watertight is what has gotten us into this mess. Reason does its best, it keeps our heads above water, but water can never truly be tight.

In a novel published in 1980, *Tu não te moves de ti*, Hilst puts onstage a character, Tadeu, whom she explicitly deems the embodiment of “Reason”: he is “um homem em deterioração. Seu comportamento social e diante de si mesmo, seu sentir, sua afetividade, está tudo em decomposição, até sua maneira de ver o mundo tem cheiro de apodrecimento,” as well as a businessman constrained by bourgeois rules who suddenly dares to move away from himself, as the novel’s title seems to tease *ex negativo* (Diniz 105). Creating this character, says Hilst, led to a radical shift in her own way of being and writing. She moved away from what Carl Jung calls—according to Hilst herself—“*morbus animi*” (the morbidity of the soul that weighs upon all human beings) and towards a compromise of sorts. Hilst posited that survival means putting up with some aspects of the *status quo* (the teleology of daily life—a horizon that forever recedes so that everything can stay the same), while at the same time realizing that one’s deepest “I” is at odds with—and constrained by—a schizophrenic and chaotic world. In other words, Hilst was not all that convinced in the supremacy of capital-R Reason. Tatiana Zanirato argues that “in Hilst’s work, reason, like faith, is insufficient for contemplating the world: what remain are the perplexities . . . . The [recurring] image of God . . . is her

metaphor for thinking through the emptiness of human desire and the loss of critical sensibility that nourishes the fascism to which humankind falls prey” (34–35). The central, inexorable failure of Hilst’s poetry (of which we only get glimpses in her early output) surfaces when her oeuvre starts asking the question that follows this anguished and hesitant compromise: “é lícito dar ao outro um tal nível de intensidade, vivendo todos nós nesse mundo dissociado, caótico, absurdo, esquizofrênico em que vivemos” (Diniz 106)?”

Hilst was no philosopher—and the vitriol often directed towards Neoplatonism only made it more enticing to her eyes: it swept Neoplatonism to the margins of philosophy, where it kept company to the other marginalized figures she adored and identified with: Camus, Bataille, Kierkegaard, Merton, Nietzsche, Sartre—writers, as Morris points out, “whose work intentionally blurred the line between philosophy and literature,” writers who, *pace* Camus, have shown a preference “for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments” (Morris 80). Hilst’s question could be rephrased from this marginal space she was writing from (“neither pure origin nor nihilist flux”) as such: is it morally allowed to drag people into our own revelations and rabbit holes? And this question (which carries with it not only a hint of narcissism, as Hilst believed her texts capable of doing just that, but also of defiance in the face of a deeply patriarchal society) can perhaps help us understand why she kept Brazilian modernism at arm’s length: as a movement, it was too sure of itself, too convinced of its own arguments. She did, however, do something that was very dear to the modernists: in 1957, she traveled to Europe (Folgueira and Destri 53).

“I am a part of the landscape,” sings Hilst upon returning to Brazil in her fourth collection of poems, 1959’s *Roteiro do silêncio*, a recurring desire in her poetry of the late fifties and early sixties: to become landscape, flower, cattle, so as to offset those who insist—“at all costs”—on being orators, erudites, and scholars (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 92). She seeks not to become an authority figure adorned with reasoned arguments, but an image that *is* rather than one that *describes*: she seeks not to portray and transmute the landscape but rather, like a new-age Neoplatonist, *be* it. Hence her *Roteiro de silêncio*: “Não há silêncio bastante / Para o meu silêncio,” a silence that stretches from “Platão a Plutão,” for silence, as Derrida would say in reference to Michel Foucault, is the defense against “madness,” or what Hilst calls the “schizophrenic” and “chaotic world” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 86, 91; Derrida 41).

Hilst writes, “E sendo assim continuo / Meu roteiro de silêncio / Minha vida de poesia” (*Da Poesia*, 92). But this is, of course, a strange kind of silence: a silence that can be written and sung, a radical (and performative) form of impotence. Who is on the other end of this equation if not the “orators, erudites, and scholars” with their pretension of a “Reason” that will subjugate everything on its way, starting with language. What would Hilst think of this article if not a colossal waste of time, or, at best, a gross misuse of language: “Não me interessa ficar falando, senão seria senadora ou política. Quero escrever e só pude escrever tudo isso porque não falei, fiquei em casa escrevendo” (Diniz 188).

The impotence of discourse turned into discourse. But before we can accuse Hilst of some premature French deconstruction, we should know that in 1966, after a handful of volumes published to some critical acclaim but of little widespread repercussion—volumes in which she continued to yearn to be landscape, flower and cattle (and sometimes a horse)—Hilst packed her bags and, inspired by Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Report to Greco* (1961), left the bourgeois safety net of São Paulo’s institutions and moved—earthly and silent—to the countryside: “Nesta manhã sou e não sou minha paisagem” (Folgueira and Destri 76; Hilst, *Da Poesia* 191).

Hilst famously—and repeatedly—attributed this move to Kazantzakis’s autobiographical novel, and there is something to this statement that goes beyond the mere poetic embellishment of one’s own biography. In his book, Kazantzakis repeatedly denounces what I would call teleology: the incessant escapism of messianic wishful thinking, of saviors to come, of hopes to be fulfilled, of heavens to be reached. He identifies in this constant creation and deferral of a hope yet to come (which is also a form of fear) the source of a debilitating polarization of the mind that ignores what is and focuses instead on fanatical extremes, almost as if he were talking about twenty-first century politics (Kazantzakis 332). Kazantzakis book left Hilda feeling “perturbed”—she who both wanted to accept this world as such and to imagine what lay beyond it— and gave her the courage to renounce the institutional court of reason of São Paulo in order to start writing “exatamente como eu tinha vontade de dizer. Eu sabia que as coisas que eu ia dizer não estavam dentro das normas” (Diniz 140). And so, in order to better become silence, Hilst went out into the landscape.



*The Casa do Sol (1967–84)*

It was not only Hilst who was at a crossroads in the sixties—so was Brazil. A military regime had seized power from a weakened and left-leaning João Goulart in 1964. But, as Roberto Schwarz points out, “Apesar da ditadura da direita há relativa hegemonia cultural da esquerda no país” (62). However, this hegemony of the left, which was circumscribed to the country’s intellectual elite and not reflected in the country’s mass media, led to an orthodox understanding of what art should be and do (i.e. socially and politically committed rather than “subjective” and alienated), which frustrated some artists who, despite identifying with the left, felt that this understanding of art and culture was too restrictive, *Tropicália* being arguably the most prominent example (Schwarz 62; Coelho 161). On top of that, censorship and self-censorship, as Claudia Calirman emphasizes, came to play a major role “as artists began to decipher and define the boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden. Fearing persecution, which was often exercised arbitrarily and without warning, they took pains to avoid leaving traces of authorship in their works,” leading these artists to develop a metaphorical language that was “more anarchic than dogmatic” (3). In this state of ubiquitous tension, Brazil experienced its artistic zenith and political nadir—the two things connected by the perverse way repression and constraints have of engendering great art.

Hilst’s withdrawal to the countryside wasn’t a politically engaged act of protest against the military regime—it was a subjective decision, eccentric even, according to some, and only political in the sense (not yet recognized by the Brazilian left orthodoxy of the time) that the personal is political. The move was “existentialist” before it was ideological, and Alfredo Bosi remarks on how such dissociation “das vanguardas e do seu esquema de sustentação ideológica” led to a poetics of “fragilidade extrema”—which, I would argue, is at the root of Hilst’s work (Bosi, *História* 486–87). Hilst isolated herself from this intellectual elite at the appropriately named Casa do Sol, bar the few artists, critics, and friends who would sometimes visit her for a meal or stay for a month (or two).

In the midst of all this, Hilst starts (and soon thereafter stops) writing theater. She writes eight plays in quick succession between 1967–69 out of a need to do the opposite of what conceptually had brought her there: instead of immersing herself in this newfound silence, she wrote, “Eu tinha muita vontade de me

comunicar com o outro imediatamente” (Diniz 229). Hilst had always felt frustrated about how little-known her work was outside the intellectual circles she was now leaving behind, and it is no wonder—in a country whose culture skews heavily towards the oral tradition—that she would turn towards theater in order to overcome the logistic limitations of poetry: the print runs, which, “além de serem pequenas, vendem pouco” (Diniz 48). From the point of view of “communicating immediately with others,” Hilst’s foray into the world of theater “didn’t work”: “As pessoas vão ao teatro para se divertir; ninguém vai ao teatro para pensar,” she claimed, enveloped in the bitterness of her lackluster public acclaim (Diniz 229). Most of her plays remained unpublished for almost forty years.

In 1974, having tried her hand at dramaturgy and prose, Hilst returned to poetry with *Júbilo, memória, noviciado da paixão*, and clearly something had shifted within her. Already in the first poem of her new collection we witness a poet reinventing herself, her craft, her way of writing poetry, her position in the world. Here’s Hilda Hilst openly beckoning her reader to look at her again—at this woman who for so long has understood that she is earth and who for so long has waited for a fraternal body of water to wash over her—and reassess her, not from the same position as before, but from a lesser height, and more attentively: “Olha-me de novo. Com menos altivez. / E mais atento” (*Da Poesia* 263). This invitation (which soon turns into coercion) marks the moment in which Hilst starts producing some of her best poetry: love turned into eroticism; bitterness turned into revolt:

Sorrio quando penso  
Em que lugar da sala  
Guardarás o meu verso.  
Distanciado  
Dos teus livros políticos? (*Da Poesia* 267)

Here’s a poet smiling as she sets down a trap—smiling because she knows she is playing a game she cannot win, but she is playing it anyway. In her return to poetry, in her self-imposed disconnection from the centers of power (or perhaps the creation of her own eccentric center), Hilst is naming her revolt, “Ouro, conquista, lucro, logro,” and reaffirming (in capital letters) her commitment to “a IDEIA”—which, as we know from her early poetry, is infinite (but also, as we find out now, “ambitious and holy” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 332, 331). Teleology gives way to an open-

endedness that is as combative (“ambitious”) as it is mystical (“holy”), which, in turn, leads to one of Hilst’s most compelling pieces of poetry, the penultimate in the 1974 collection, as she is driving her point home:

Enquanto faço o verso, tu decerto vives.  
Trabalhas tua riqueza, e eu trabalho o sangue.  
Dirás que sangue é o não teres teu ouro  
E o poeta te diz: compra o teu tempo  
.....  
Contempla o teu viver que corre, escuta  
O teu ouro de dentro. É outro o amarelo que te falo.  
(*Da Poesia*, 251)

The project of Reason that lurks behind “Ouro, conquista, lucro, logro” might have been sufficient to explain the world (to some) in previous centuries, but it becomes insufficient the more historical hindsight we gain, the more we force ourselves away from the centers of (discursive and geographical) power and take another look at things from a lesser height, and more attentively (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 332). Hilst is guiding our gaze elsewhere, to a place that could be called mysticism, or silence, or death, but which, most importantly, is not just a binary placeholder for a dogmatic view: Hilst is not exchanging the light of civilization for the light of spirituality, but mixing (and mistaking) both in this other third space that we speak of, *pace* Keller: “neither pure origin nor nihilist flux.”

Adam Morris points out that, to Hilst, “all that mattered was her own judgment and whether or not an idea expressed any truth about human nature or existence. She was not the sort of thinker who doubted so-called pseudoscience any more than she would the claims of scientific reason” (Morris 76). Not because she considered all knowledge to be at the same level, but because, for her (her and the bitterness she ate her from the inside, the bitterness of not being duly recognized as the poet she believed herself to be), the true metric of knowledge ought to be oneself. Science had nothing on pseudoscience, religion had nothing on mysticism, mathematical angles had nothing on the lonely angles of the corners of her living room (Hilst and Mora Fuentes 95–96). What all this knowledge has in common are its digestive properties: they must go through Hilst’s own stomach, marinate in her gastric juices, be transformed into uppercase *IDEIA*. Anthropophagy? Perhaps,

but let us call it a *potlatch* instead, as pointed out by Luciana Borges *pace* Georges Bataille: “Como em um *potlatch* . . . , Hilda pretende fazer uma grande fogueira simbólica de seus escritos, para ver se, desse modo, adquirem o valor – inapreensível para o público – que deveria ter sido neles percebido sem que fosse necessário esse expediente radical” (Borges 39). Let us call it a *potlatch* not to deny the modernists, not to unnecessarily Europeanize Hilst, but rather to emphasize that if she finally came around to modernism in the seventies, it was on her own terms.

One way of dealing with a tepid popularity is to deny the importance of being popular in the first place (in words if not in spirit), and we see Hilst at this stage of her career slowly (or further) turning her back to the public opinion and doubling down on her commitment to pseudoscience and all that does *not* meet the eye. She starts to make recordings of paranormal voices and embraces the task with abandon; she tries to make others see the “visitor” that lives in her bathroom and gets disappointed when they don’t; she tries to communicate with her mother and with Kafka (and hears, clear as day, her mother’s voice saying “Yes”—but no such luck with Kafka); and she has a Faraday cage built (an enclosure used to block electromagnetic fields) to better capture the voices of the dead. She gives interviews on national television and gets ridiculed for it (Folgueira and Destri 115–23). She claims to have been visited by the recently departed writer and close friend Caio Fernando Abreu following an agreement they had made: knowing AIDS would take him sooner or later, Hilst asked him to visit her after his passing and to wear a red scarf around his neck to signal all was well in the great beyond, which he did. But no one would believe her: “Mas ninguém acredita. Falam: ‘A Hilda é uma bêbada, uma alcoólatra, está sempre louca’. É assim que falam” (Diniz 100).

It can be refreshing, at times, not to have to worry about one’s own popularity, to be able to exist away from and unperturbed by the centers of things. The main (and perhaps only substantial) difference between the dead and the living is that the dead no longer believe to be at center of things (despite the living’s insistence otherwise). Hilst’s choice for the countryside and for the dead was part of her quest for knowledge, of inquiring about what lies beneath or above or around what our eyes can see, what our hands can touch, what our discourses can digest. The true challenge of art is to articulate something that can never be truly articulated. It is this impossibility that keeps art and the need for art alive. It is this “extreme

frailty”—which is only frail in its propensity towards failure, not in its strength—that lies at the core of Hilst’s oeuvre. It is this question she was asking over and over again in her texts: why this? How can we be satisfied with the little that we know, how can we be satisfied with this Aristotelian gesture of reducing things to their terrestrial existence and then trying to catalogue them as if that would say anything about their essence? Essence without difference is but mass, and Hilst was about to start questioning her own weight.

What does it mean for an artist to deliberately forgo popularity, to stop second-guessing its whims at every turn of the road, to pursue a vision rather than the market? For some, it can lead to elitism, that most ambiguous of sins (Booth 391–92). For others, it can lead to freedom, that most ambiguous of virtues (Ahearn 207–08). Popularity was one of the things Immanuel Kant got right: reflecting on religion’s reigning popularity vis-à-vis philosophy, the philosopher mused—without a hint of resentment—that “there is no art in being commonly understandable if one relinquishes all well-grounded insight” (Kant 26). Hilst, not a Kantian herself, likewise refused to accept gently her lack of popularity—and why should she—but she nevertheless retreated into a world of her own, scheming (*pace* perhaps the Tropicália movement) to one day achieve some sort of recognition without having to let go of all “well-grounded insight” (de Campos 64). The music of Tropicália trumped Hilst’s writing in at least one important element: its more evident oral diffusion. Hilst, bound not only to writing but to the Portuguese language—“eu aprecio a sonoridade do português. Acho que falar muitos idiomas é para maître de hotel”—had to accept the fundamental frailty of this equation, the failure of writing poetry in the Portuguese language (Borges 224). If Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit Kafka as a minor writer in a major language, Hilst did them all one better and became a minor writer in a minor language.

In trying to articulate frailty, in trying to accept her (provisional, tactical) role as a pariah or trying to probe beneath or above or around the mysteries of our “commonly understandable” discourses, Hilst stumbles upon God and her own aging body and asks: “Doem-te as veias? . . . / E agora dói-te a Razão?” (*Da Poesia* 474). This burning question—posed in 1984’s *Poemas malditos, gozosos e devotos*—had been brewing inside her since her return to poetry, the culmination of musings on death and loss formulated throughout 1980’s *Da morte. Odes mínimas* and 1983’s *Cantares de perda e predileção*, two collections of poems in

which we find Hilst staging her own death, inching towards annihilation, trying out effigies and eulogies, only to—like an unrepenting phoenix—reaffirm life in the very last poem of the latter collection: “VIDA é o meu nome. E poeta / Sem morte no sobrenome” (*Da Poesia* 467).

No death but an aging, desiring body and an ambiguous yet omnipresent God. This is what Hilst sees reflected in the mirror that is her poetry: the loss and the disintegration of power. This re-evaluation of the body in Hilst’s later work is, arguably, the most studied and written about facet of her oeuvre, this female, aging, desiring, defying, scatological body. I will, however, avoid the more usual and straightforward narratives of female empowerment prompted by some of these studies and propose, instead, the opposite: not *empowering* but *depowering*—the disintegration of power as an alternative away from dualistic conceptions of the world. This is, as we have already seen, what Hilst sees reflected in the mirror that is her poetry: a third space.

Katherine Keller opens her mesmerizing *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* by inquiring about beginnings—which, in theological terms, means she is inquiring about creation. Not, however, the long-standing power-discourse of *creatio ex nihilo*, but the rather more fluid *creatio ex profundis*: “creation out of the watery depths” (xviii). One of the intellectual charms of Keller’s book is her quest for less conventionally unilateral and masculinizing understandings of what God, or theology, can be(come). She is, in many ways, queering God by freeing them from the constraints of forever being a pure top (“the merely active Lord”) and allowing them to explore a more versatile position—a “feminizing signal,” if we will, but one which does not reinscribe “stereotypes of masculine creation vs. the feminine passivity. Men create, women procreate” (Keller 17). In other words, a discursive position that precludes the easy binary solution (or impasse) of men vs. women, transcendence vs. immanence, and posits, instead, a more disruptive and fruitful third space born out of contradiction: “However justly gendered, theology does not come down to ‘boys vs. girls.’ Or girls vs. boys, more recently. The question is whether the theology of creation keeps the future wide and *opening*” (Keller 19). Cue Hilst:

Desenho um touro na seda.  
Olhos de um ocre espelhado  
O pelo negro, faustoso

Seduzo meu Deus montado  
Sobre este touro.

.....  
Desenhas Deus? Desenho o Nada  
Sobre este grande costado. (*Da Poesia* 484–85)

In this poem, the fifteenth in her 1984 collection, we see Hilst probing her own watery depths: both a woman and a bull, a poet and a painter, she seduces God but also watches it, her hands wet, a voyeur of creation, an unquenchable thirst for the great beyond. The reinvention and the failure of Hilda Hilst lie precisely in not trading six of one for half a dozen of the other: her religiosity or spirituality do not give way to science or finance or whatever it is we nowadays falsely construe as being the antipode of religion (by turning it into a religion itself). It builds upon it, it thrives in contradiction, in a continued *opening* that was somehow already present in her taste, as a child, for biographies of saints, and which now, inhabiting her aging, desiring body, she turns into something sensual: a God riding a bull, passive (“*let there be light*”) and yet undrawn (the “wide flanks” of a future kept “wide and *opening*”). And what Hilst will do, moving forward into the eighties and nineties, is to turn that opening future into a gaping one.

***The Final Years (1985–2004)***

After the end of the civil-military dictatorship in 1985—which fell in name if not in spirit—Brazil embarked on a process of re-opening, for lack of a better word (Avelar 48; Gaspari 444). Inflation, unemployment, and a struggling economy (the trifecta of Latin America’s so-called “Lost Decade”) prompted widespread civil mobilization for direct presidential elections (*Diretas Já*). Despite its many contradictions, despite careening the country into the long arms of neoliberalism, the end of the military regime marked an opening, a moment of “liberation” which was seized by a group of young artists (the so-called *Geração 80*) who promoted a truly radical break with tradition—for better or for worse.

Favoring pleasure over concept, powering through distinctions of high and low, and more interested in personal identities than in defining broad ideas of Brazilianness, the *Geração 80* was seen by critics like Luiza Interlenghi as a betrayal of the legacy of the 20s and the 60s, and what they were betraying was

reflexivity in the name of the market (Duarte 145). Colorful canvases (painting was making a comeback), urban life, technology, sex and sexuality—the country was collectively looking outwards, to the rest of the world, as if asking: what have *you* been up to in these last decades? The atomizing was inevitable, the self was taking precedence over the country (overriding the previous slogan touted by the military dictatorship: “Brazil, love it or leave it”), and there was some liberation in that, as it can be refreshing, at times, not to have to discuss one’s own nationality—the catch, of course, being that the long arms of the market are quick to fill any voids left open in the discourse.

Jorge Guinle, one of the leading figures (in *vox* and *praxis*) behind the *Geração 80*, was quick to point out the absence of a quest for national identity in the art that was being produced in the country at the time: “os brasileiros preferem o cosmopolitismo barato do shopping center. Estão ausentes a representação da sexualidade amiúde amorfa e anônima das grandes cidades” (Guinle). The very act of painting in Brazil and the sheer privilege it presupposes “indica por si só um feito orgástico” (Guinle). Writing from a more analytical (and less self-congratulatory) perspective, Ricardo Basbaum, another important artist active in the 80s, notes how the sensibility of the new artist shifted from a program of collective action to the immediate present, with the artist’s own interiority dictating action: “agora o ‘tempo da vida do artista’ reduz-se quase a um ritmo biológico/fisiológico, no sentido de que a dimensão virtual de futuro é comprimida no rigor dos ritmos cotidianos” (43). Basbaum brings the discussion back to painting, concluding that the pictorial images brought to light by this biological/physiological/corporal experience impose a similar “bio-fisiológico” rhythm which seeks to “atingir o espectador em seus sintomas de carência e desejo vitais (43).

This is where we reencounter Hilst, this is where she has been waiting for us—in the rhythm of this bio-physiological drive with orgiastic undertones which finds the spectator at their frailest hour: somewhere between desire and defecation. There is a shift in Hilst’s poetics which happens first in her prose and theater before it fully reaches the pages of her poetry, a reappropriation of recurring themes under a new light which opens her work up to the comical and the scatological, truly beckoning a reevaluation from “a lesser height.”

Let us then reevaluate things from a lesser height, from below, from the bottom, from a position of failure, and go back to the early, elegiac Hilst mourning



over love and considering (but not really) taking her own life. Let us consider those fingers tethering her to life, “Vida viva nos teus dedos,” fingers in need of protection, a hand, a ring, a brotherly touch (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 39). These same fingers would become, in 1992’s *Bufólicas*, a probing instrument of unabashed desire:

Metia o dedo  
 Em todas as xerecas: loiras, pretas  
 .....  
 Bulia, beliscava  
 Como quem sabia  
 O que um dedo faz  
 Desde que nascia. (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 581–82)

But what does a finger do since the day of its birth? Is it fodder for undergrowth or purveyor of flesh? Hilst’s late work seems to suggest that it is both and none. It is both death and desire, and thus it is none: desire implies a futurity which death cancels out (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 54, 471). It becomes a third thing—an idea (to covet it is more seductive than to finally have it), or, as Bataille would say, *knowledge*. A non-dialectic type of knowledge, to be sure; a knowledge with no end in sight, with nothing to return to (and thus a non-knowledge, to go back to Keller’s initial formulation). A knowledge fueled by desire—thus allowing for communication, engagement, prayer—but deprived of *telos*: it stretches into an infinity which cannot be reached (much like desire itself), it pulls the rug out from under itself. “And so what,” writes a defiant Bataille: “I’m free, powerless, and I will perish: I ignore the limits of obligation *in every way*” (Bataille, *The Unfinished System* 108).

Bataille’s philosophy is one which slides into ruin, face-first and unapologetically (Bataille, *Madame Edwarda* 48). If there is a *telos* implied, this *telos* “would serve no purpose”: it would fail and perish (Bataille, *The Bataille Reader* 238). Ben Brewer situates Bataille within the Kantian tradition but notes that “[w]hereas Kant reasserts the power of human reason, Bataille leaps without abandon into this moment of the death of reason” (Brewer 124). I would argue that it is precisely this “moment of the death of reason” which a more mature Hilst captured in her reading of Bataille, and which led her to define her ravishing and controversial novel *Lori Lamby’s Pink Notebook* (1990) as “the leftovers of a

*Potlatch*. / And today, echoing Bataille: / ‘I feel free to fail’” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 612).

“I’m free, powerless, and I will perish”—the body and all of its (dis)contents dictate this (bio-physiological) shift in Hilst’s oeuvre by turning symbolism and abstraction into anatomy and matter, “bones, blood, flesh, the now” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 557). “Gozo” (*jouissance*) stops rhyming with “dor” and “nojo” and starts rhyming with “pescoço” and “osso” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 217, 414, 530, 595). “Defecar,” “foder,” and “visgo e suor” function as a cornucopia of words to describe penises and vaginas in 1992’s *Bufôlicas*—Hilst is out for blood. She, who since her early work claimed for herself the title of *poeta* now adds to that title a caveat: she becomes a “Porco-poeta que me sei, na cegueira, no charco” (Hilst, *Da Poesia* 506). And she does it not only out of maturity of thought, in the name of going against the grain of Western philosophy and its enlightened tendency to pretend a body does not exist nor smells or secretes. She does it also out of spite, to get a rise out of the people—the critics, the public—who ignore her or belittle her, who call her out both on her supposed hermeticism (too serious) and pseudoscience (not serious enough). She will show them by carving out of her body of work (and flesh) a third space: she will wallow in the swamp of her poetry.

“In today’s society,” writes Silviano Santiago, “whether it is capitalist or communist, the only way to rebel against regimes of work, against the praise of work at any cost, against competitiveness or meritocracy is to create an art based on the waste of energy” (56). If there is a *telos*, it serves no purpose. Art wastes energy or it is not art. It wastes: the leftovers, the secretions, the excrements. Art offers scatology against eschatology: failure and fallibility in lieu of messianism. A *porco-poeta* at last—or rather a *sow-poet*, a female pig daring to use the eschatological vocabulary which had long been deemed the domain of male writers—Hilst’s later oeuvre has a political dimension which is absent from her early writings: it bleeds, it stinks, it opens up a space for the very powerlessness which a teleological (or, as Leo Bersani would put it, phallogocentric) discourse denies, and, by doing so, promotes “a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (Bersani 24).

It is perhaps only humiliated, shattered and perishable that the self will be able to bypass the deceiving lure of redemption and, in the words of Idelber Avelar,

“take the form of a radical *outside* beyond all salvational or apocalyptic certainties: a future that remains a pure open promise” (180).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Escapar a esa neurosis sería vislumbrar un futuro que pudiera representar un afuera radical, más allá de toda certeza redentora o apocalíptica: un futuro que permaneciera como una pura promesa abierta.”

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