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**ESSAYS ON HILDA  
HILST**

Between Brazil and  
World Literature

Edited by  
**Adam Morris**  
**Bruno Carvalho**



# Literatures of the Americas

Series Editor  
Norma E. Cantú  
Trinity University  
San Antonio, TX, USA

*“Essays on Hilda Hilst is an excellent – and badly needed – book about one of modern Brazilian literature’s most brilliant and challenging writers. Provocative and enigmatic, Hilst has challenged readers in Brazil for a long time. Now, largely through translations of her work that have started to appear, she is fast gaining a global reputation. Yet she and her complex, multifaceted work have resisted explication. This book will help change all that. Edited and with an insightful introduction by two scholars eminently familiar with Hilst’s work, Adam Morris and Bruno Carvalho, Hilda Hilst and Brazilian Literature offers a series of essays that examine all aspects of the Brazilian writer’s art, her (in)famous poetry, her work in the theater, her explorations of obscenity as Art, the politics of human sexuality, the nature of her existence in translation, and her importance both as a Brazilian writer and as a rising star in world literature.”*

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Adam Morris · Bruno Carvalho  
Editors

# Essays on Hilda Hilst

Between Brazil and World Literature

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*Editors*

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Literatures of the Americas

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# Introduction: Who's Afraid of Hilda Hilst? An Author Between Brazil and "World Literature."

*Adam Morris and Bruno Carvalho*

**Abstract** Among Brazilian writers, scholars, and critics, Hilda Hilst (1930–2004) is certainly not a well-kept secret. Her work received numerous prizes, generated a significant critical bibliography, and inspired a legion of devoted readers. Although her reach outside Brazil does not match that of better-known authors such as Machado de Assis and Clarice Lispector, her versatility remains unparalleled. Not only do her dozens of works span poetry, fiction, and drama; they also encompass a variety of styles and registers from across classical, medieval, and early modern lyrical traditions, and prose styles associated with both high modernism and postmodern literature. Yet her writing is often unmistakable and seldom derivative. In spite of her growing prestige, Hilda Hilst remains controversial among readers of Portuguese. Frequently

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provocative and sometimes hermetic, her literature elicits a constant tension between a desire for recognition and communication, and an aversion to banality. Hilda Hilst's texts never fail to push the boundaries of readers' expectations.

**Keywords** Modernism · Theater · Brazil · Poetry · Obscene Avant-garde

Although Hilst's extraordinary erudition and uncommon devotion to literary craft made her a formidable presence in twentieth-century Brazilian letters, her work remained unavailable in English until recently. Since 2012, full-length translations have finally begun to appear in English, at last making her work available to Anglophone readers and critics, who have been quick to recognize what many in Brazil have long cherished: an astonishing and unique voice in the panorama of world literature. This volume of essays on Hilda Hilst, the first such collection to appear in English, offers insight from scholars with a wide range of critical perspectives. The volume includes contributions from scholars based in the United States, Brazil, and Europe; it also includes texts from three of Hilst's English translators. Collectively, they help us to demystify her occasionally intimidating appeal by situating her work within particular historical, political, or aesthetic contexts, while also recognizing the extent to which her work transcends the confines of national literature.

\*

Hilda Hilst was born on April 21, 1930 in Jaú, in the state of São Paulo. She was the daughter of Bedecilda Vaz Cardoso, whose parents were Portuguese immigrants, and Apolônio de Almeida Prado Hilst, a Brazilian coffee planter and occasional poet connected to a prominent family. Her mother separated from Apolônio two years after Hilda's birth, taking Hilda with her to Santos, São Paulo. Not long after, her father was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and committed to a sanatorium at the age of 35. The specter of madness would loom over Hilda's career for her entire life, inflecting her work and contributing to the perception of Hilst as an eccentric and somewhat unhinged writer.

After primary and secondary schooling in São Paulo, Hilst began studying law at the University of São Paulo in 1948. Her first book of

poems, *Presságio* (Presage), was published in 1950. Another volume of poetry, *Balada de Alzira* (Alzira's Ballad), followed the next year. After graduating in 1952, Hilda practiced law for only a few months in 1953–1954. Following a trip to Chile and Argentina, she returned to São Paulo and published another book of poems, *Balada do festival* (Festival Ballad), in 1955. Hilst went to Europe in 1957, living for six months in Paris and traveling to Rome, Athens, and Crete during her time abroad. In Europe she briefly dated Dean Martin and impersonated a journalist to gain access, unsuccessfully, to Marlon Brando.<sup>1</sup>

Four books of poems followed Hilst's return from Europe: *Roteiro do silêncio* (Script for Silence, 1959), *Trovas de muito amor para um amado senhor* (Ballads of Much Love for a Beloved Gentleman, 1960), *Ode fragmentária* (Fragmentary Ode, 1961), and *Sete cantos do poeta para o anjo* (Seven Songs from the Poet to the Angel, 1962), the last of which won the PEN Club of São Paulo Prize. During this period, Hilst resided in the Sumaré neighborhood of São Paulo and was frequently in the company of artists and intellectuals. She lived unconventionally as a single woman in "high society," conducting affairs with various businessmen and artists.

At age 30 she read *Report from Greco* by Nikos Kazantzakis, a writer she would always hold in the highest esteem. She attributed to this book the decision to remove herself from the hustle and bustle of the São Paulo scene in 1963 to devote her life more fully to literary creation. Hilst went to live at the Fazenda São José, an estate owned by her mother on the outskirts of Campinas (about 60 miles from São Paulo). In 1965, the year after a coup installed a military dictatorship in Brazil, Hilst began construction on the Casa do Sol (House of the Sun), on the grounds of the estate. She took up residence there a year later. The Casa do Sol had neither telephone nor electricity during the initial years of Hilst's residence, circumstances that emphasized the radical nature of her relative seclusion—a decision that was remarked on by peers and in the press.<sup>2</sup>

At the Casa do Sol, Hilst began writing theater, completing *A empresa* (*A possessa*) (The Business (the Possessed)) and *O rato no muro* (Rat in the Wall) in 1967, along with another volume of poetry, *Poesia* (1959–1967). In 1968, Hilst was prolific as a dramaturge, finishing *O visitante* (The Visitor), *Auto da barca de Camiri* (Act for Camiri's Ship), *O novo sistema* (The New System), and *As aves da noite* (Nightbirds) in the span of a year. She married sculptor Dante Casarini the same year; the couple would later divorce in 1985. In 1969, she built a second home on

the coast, the Casa da Lua (House of the Moon). With the exception of invited artists and intellectuals, who visited or lived periodically at her estate, Hilst maintained her distance from São Paulo's social spheres for the rest of her life.

Hilst's theater was first performed in São Paulo in 1968, with productions of *O visitante* and *O rato no muro* at the Teatro Anchieta. Periodic stagings of Hilst's drama continued, albeit infrequently, throughout her career; several of her prose fictions would also be adapted to the theater. She completed *A morte do patriarca* (Death of the Patriarch) and *O verdugo* (The Executioner), her final plays, in 1969. The latter was published after being awarded that year's Anchieta Prize. Like the majority of Hilst's theater, her other plays remained unpublished until they were collected into a single volume published as part of her collected works, almost 40 years later.

Hilst resumed her work with poetry in 1969 with *Ode descontinua e remota para flauta e oboé* (Discontinuous Ode for Flute and Oboe), published later in *Júbilo, memória, noviciado da paixão* (Jubilation, Memory, an Apprenticeship in Passion, 1974). The year 1969 also marked a key development in Hilst's career: a turn to prose fiction. She published the short fiction *O unicórnio* (The Unicorn), which was later included in the collection *Fluxo-floema* (Phloem Flux), Hilst's first book of fiction, published in 1970. Her second book of prose fiction, *Qadós* (in later editions, *Kadosh*), was published in 1973. These two volumes, together with new work, were republished as *Ficções* (Fictions) in 1977, a volume that was awarded a prize for Best Book of the Year from the São Paulo Association of Art Critics (APCA). Her fourth book of fiction, *Tu não moves de ti* (You Move Not From Yourself), and two volumes of poetry, *Poesia (1959/1979)* and *Da morte: Odes mínimas* (On Death: Minimal Odes), were published in 1980.

Hilst's work garnered further critical acclaim in the 1980s. She was awarded the Critics' Grand Prize in 1981 by the APCA, an honor that recognizes a writer's career achievements. The following year her novella *A obscena senhora D* (The Obscene Madame D) was published, and Hilst began participating as an artistic resident at Unicamp, the University of Campinas, a prestigious public institution. Two more volumes of poetry followed, *Cantares de perda e predileção* (Songs of Loss and Predilection, 1983) and *Poemas malditos, gozosos e devotos* (Damned, Joyful, and Devout Poems, 1984). The former was awarded what is arguably Brazil's most prestigious literary honor in 1984, the Prêmio Jabuti, as well as the Prêmio Cassiano Ricardo from the São Paulo Poetry Club.

In 1986 Hilst published a book of poems, *Sobre tua grande face* (Upon Your Great Visage), and another of prose fiction, *Com os meus olhos de cão e outras novelas* (With My Dog-Eyes and Other Novellas). She continued her steady output of poetry with *Amavisse* (To Have Loved) in 1989 and *Alcoólicas* (Alcoholic) in 1990. The latter year also marked the release of *O caderno rosa de Lori Lamby* (Lori Lamby's Pink Notebook) and *Contos d'escárnio: Textos grotescos* (Tales of Derision: Grotesque Texts), part of a tetralogy of what she deemed "brilliant pornography," or "porno chic." The tetralogy was completed with *Cartas de um sedutor* (Letters from a Seducer), in 1991, and *Bufólicas* (*Bufoolics*) in 1993. Hilst published her 18th volume of poetry that year, *Do desejo* (On Desire). In 1994 she received a second Prêmio Jabuti for *Rútilo nada* (Glittering Nothing), a book of fiction published in 1993. Several other books appeared in the late 1990s: *Cantares do sem nome e de partidas* (Songs for the Nameless and Departed, poetry, 1995), *Estar sendo, ter sido* (To Be Being, to Have Been, fiction, 1997), *Cascos e carícias* (*Shells and Caresses*, chronicles compiled from newspaper columns, 1998), *Do amor* (On Love, poetry, 1999), and *Teatro reunido* (Collected Theater, 2000).

In 2001 the high-profile Editora Globo took responsibility for reissues of Hilst's publications, beginning a series of her complete works. In 2002 Hilst won the Moinho Santista Prize from the Bunge Foundation and another Critics' Grand Prize from the APCA, in recognition of her collected works.

Hilst died in Campinas on February 4, 2004, at the age of 73.

\* \*

Notwithstanding her remarkable literary achievement, Hilst remained an outsider of sorts within her native country and language: she was a writer's writer, a formidable master that few, it seemed, took the trouble to read. Unlike other Latin American poets of her generation, Hilst was not identified with collective yearnings, or with the exploration of national identities. This stemmed in part from her self-inscription in a largely European modernist tradition that averted the more localized imaginary of her contemporaries. It was also due to the enigmatic and arcane voice in which she wrote much of her verse. The perceived inaccessibility of her work vexed Hilst—or so she claimed—and restricted her readership to a small community of enthusiasts.

Hilst's numerous awards testify to the fact that she was not ignored. In interviews, however, she almost never failed to suggest that even the editors or critics who praised her did not understand her work. Over

time, financial troubles, which her modest sales did little to alleviate, compounded her mounting frustration over this incomprehension. This compelled Hilst to take a different tack in her later prose. The tetralogy of “pornographic” publications from the 1990s putatively aimed to reach a wider public. Hilst said she wanted to create something “absolutely repugnant” that would finally capture the attention of Brazilian readers. *Lori Lamby*, she quipped, was intended as “pornography for children,” while *Contos d’escárnio: Textos grotescos*, the second book in the series, was for adults. “I hope,” she added, “to become an excellent pornographer.”<sup>3</sup> Satirizing the disconnect between her work and readers in Brazil, she joked that her porno chic projects had been only a partial success, as “they said my pornography was extremely difficult.”<sup>4</sup>

Hilst explained that *Lori Lamby* was “an act of aggression” toward the literary market. “For forty years I worked seriously,” she recalled, “I was excessively serious and lucid—and nothing came of it.” Her provocation was an attempt, she warned, to “awaken” Brazilian readers lulled into complacency by a mass-market literary culture. The tetralogy, in fact, followed a period of intense experimentation in Brazilian literature, after the country emerged from a military dictatorship (1964–1985) and writers no longer had to contend with strict government censorship. As a project, it juxtaposes Hilst’s seriousness of purpose as a writer with her irreverent public persona. With these forays into the aesthetics of the “obscene,” Hilst’s lifelong experiments with alterity break new ground. She pushes the limits of what Susan Sontag called “pornographic imagination,” and amplifies the fringes of human sexual desire.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in her writing, even amid pornography, we always find poetry. And among clamors of the flesh, there are palpitations of spirituality.

Although she claimed to be making concessions to market demands in the pornographic works, Hilst’s writing remained as ambitious as ever. Brazil, she complained, was a country where, “You can think in German or English, and people accept it. In Portuguese, thinking is considered something awful, and the editors hate it, they spit in your face. That’s what they did to me for forty years.” Editors, she maintained, prefer trash.<sup>6</sup> One of the few editors who appreciated her work over the decades, Hilst believed, was Massao Ohno. An advantage of publishing with his independent press was that it enabled Hilst to include her own drawings as illustrations, as well as artwork by her friend José Luis Mora Fuentes. But although she considered Massao Ohno a great designer, she joked that he liked the artisanal editions he produced of her work so much that he kept them all to himself.<sup>7</sup>

In Hilst's own estimation, she belonged in the company of other outcasts of modernity who nevertheless came to represent its highest cultural expression. Jean Genet, Georges Bataille, and Henry Miller were among those she considered as forebears. Asked to account for the "wall" or "disconnect" between her work and a wider public, Hilst simply replied:

I can't explain it. What I do know, for example, is that even Joyce's own wife, Nora Barnacle, didn't read his work. [...] Interest in that kind of work can delay by some 50 years. When you create a revolution, it takes time; acceptance can be delayed by half a century or more.<sup>8</sup>

Hilst might have judged herself comparable to James Joyce or Samuel Beckett in terms of literary invention, but her relative obscurity among contemporaries, she was keenly aware, resulted from the additional marginalization brought about by the language in which she wrote. In a late interview, Hilst offered the following advice to aspiring writers: "To the young, it's what I always say: 'Write in English. Nobody knows Portuguese'."<sup>9</sup> Whether facetious or embittered, Hilst's assertion contradicts an enduring devotion to craft that should lead her readers to take more seriously an earlier declaration: "I have great love for language, for my own language, which I find very beautiful."<sup>10</sup>

Hilst's references to Brazil, especially in later life, tended to be antagonistic or even agonized. She would refer, for instance, to her poetry as having "made a revolution within Brazilian literature," which despite years of labor to create it, "received no response."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, her literary production did not often engage directly in debates around "Brazilianness," Brazilian literature, or national identity. Some of the essays in this book will suggest ways in which Brazil is in fact a crucial—if latent—presence in her work. More frequently, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the critical approaches in this book highlight her literature's ability to travel, forging dialogues with authors far and wide, and reflecting on shared or "universal" aspects of the human condition.

Hilst can be understood as having possessed what Mariano Siskind calls a "desire for the world," and in her work, one might read "the differential affirmation of a cosmopolitan and disruptive aesthetic identity not in terms of a particularistic cultural politics but as a strategic literary practice that forces its way into the realm of universality, denouncing both the hegemonic structures of Eurocentric forms of exclusion and nationalistic patterns of self-marginalization."<sup>12</sup> A prosaic example reveals how in

Hilst, a differential desire supersedes a deferential attitude. In 1986 she boasted that the French editor of Gallimard came all the way to Brazil only to meet her, and that when *A obscena senhora D* was published in France, reviews compared her to Bataille, a comparison she found favorable. But Hilst complained that even French critics, who referred to her as “the hysteric pig,” did not really understand her work.<sup>13</sup> Following Siskind’s argument, her cosmopolitan desires, resistance to national debates, and assertions of radical subjectivities should be understood as part of an effort “to undo the antagonistic structures of a world literary field organized around the notions of cultural difference that Latin American cosmopolitan writers perceive to be the source of their marginality, in order to stake a claim on Literature with a capital L.”<sup>14</sup>

As an author in Brazil, peripheral in the order of global modernity, Hilst renders the world from a perspective in which the blind spots of knowledge, the impossibilities of literary pursuits, and the limits of development seem more central. Limits are more legible, as they tend to be at the margins. There is no explicit “local color” in her lament that “man today is capable of destroying the entire planet,” to which she adds a plea for a “science of limits”<sup>15</sup>— it evokes a planetary consciousness rather than deforestation in the Amazon. In a different interview, in a passage reproduced in full on the “Hilst on Hilst” section of this book, she draws a comparison between her own detached attitude toward others “throwing away” her literature, and “the power of loss” among Amerindians. This is followed by a cosmopolitan reference to G.K. Chesterton, quoting a phrase from his book *Orthodoxy* (1908): “A man might be too fat in one place and too thin in another.” The original alludes to disparities within the same body. Hilst misreads the line, perhaps deliberately, and interprets it as implying that an individual might be perceived differently in one place versus another. She takes this as a metaphor for the singularity of her own literature, “thin for some, but fat for others.” It is not clear in what language Hilst read Chesterton; this minor slippage could be attributed to a poor translation, or brushed aside as a distorted reading of an English original by a marginal Brazilian writer. But more interestingly, by turning Chesterton’s image into a metaphor about the relativity of norms, it is Hilst who emerges as the more worldly (in both senses) and cosmopolitan author.

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Despite Hilst’s constant remonstrations, her talents would indeed be recognized in her lifetime and since, earning comparisons to more

unanimously acclaimed Brazilian contemporaries such as Clarice Lispector and João Guimarães Rosa. Her books have been beloved among artists and poets at least since the 1960s, and have fueled her reputation as a hermit-master of both poetry and prose. As a bohemian retreat, the Casa do Sol became a site of literary pilgrimage for aspiring young poets and acclaimed writers from across Brazil, including Caio Fernando Abreu, who resided there during a period of literary apprenticeship with Hilst. Gathered with her dozens of dogs, a rotating cadre of friends and lovers kept Hilst company, fortified her self-assurance, studied in her personal library, and shared in the artistic patronage of her semiaristocratic inheritance.

Critics began to catch up. By the end of the twentieth century, seven masters or doctoral theses had been written on her work, and numerous articles had appeared in scholarly books and journals. But more ample and sustained critical attention was to come. In 2000, when Hilst was nearing death and had ceased writing after nearly 50 years of constant production, the Editora Globo began to reissue her collected works. These were accompanied by a critical introduction by the prestigious literary critic Alcir Pécora, and shortly thereafter, by a trio of essays titled *Por que ler Hilda Hilst* (Why Read Hilda Hilst, 2010). With these reissues by a major publisher, Hilst's body of work at last appeared in bookstores across Brazil, in its entirety. Her plays, which were seldom if ever performed during her life, began to be restaged.<sup>16</sup> When she died in 2004, numerous additional theses and dissertations on her work were underway in Portugal, Brazil, and beyond.<sup>17</sup>

Although a handful of Hilst's texts had appeared in German, French, and Italian, her literature was mostly untranslated at the time of her death, which is unsurprising given the relatively minor place of Brazilian literature in the global translation market. Her breakthrough into English translation began in 2012 with the publication of *The Obscene Madame D* (Nightboat Books, trans. Nathanaël and Rachel Gontijo Araújo), which was greeted with enthusiastic praise in the Anglophone literary community. *Madame D* was followed by *Letters from a Seducer* (Nightboat 2014; trans. John Keene). A third novel in translation, *With My Dog-Eyes* (Melville House 2014; trans. Adam Morris), appeared in 2014, and more translations of Hilst's work are forthcoming, including her seminal prose collection *Fluxo-floema* (Phloem Flux, Nightboat), translated by Alexandra Forman.