

The Obscene Hilda Hilst

"If everyone were to remember what comes out of their butt, everyone would be more generous, show more solidarity," says Tui, in *Letters from a Seducer*, concluding one of literature's greatest discourses on farting during sex. Shocking, exquisite, mesmerizing, metaphysical, and, above all, obscene considerations abound in three recently, masterfully translated novels, *With My Dog-Eyes* (Melville House), *The Obscene Madame D*, and *Letters from a Seducer* (Nightboat & A Bolha) by Hilda Hilst (1930-2004). Recognized in Brazil as one of the most significant and controversial voices in contemporary literature, Hilst is virtually unknown outside her native country.

Born into a wealthy family of coffee growers, Hilst's childhood was thrown into upheaval when her father was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and eventually institutionalized. She moved with her mother (later committed to the same institution for dementia) to São Paulo, where she earned a law degree and built a successful career as a lawyer. Beautiful and glamorous, she ran with the city's socialites. While still a law student, she began to publish poetry and between 1950 and 1962, produced seven poetry collections. She also wrote plays and in 1970 published her first novel.

In the 1960s, she abandoned her law career, rejected her bourgeois existence, and moved to Casa do Sol, a country house she had built on inherited land. It became a bohemian commune for Hilst's friends, lovers, and aspiring artists and writers, along with her dozens of dogs. In her extensive library she immersed herself in the works of Bataille, Camus, Foucault, Madame de Staël, Bertrand Russell, Ernesto Sábato, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and William James. Her literary inspirations included Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Jean Genet, D.H. Lawrence, Samuel Beckett, and James Joyce, especially the latter two. "If I wrote in English," she once claimed, "I would *be* Joyce."

Toward the end of her life she began to drink heavily, cheap whiskey, provoking nasty, belligerent encounters with fellow dwellers at the Casa do Sol. She said, "I drink because it's the only way I can tolerate reality." However, she only hit the bottle after seven p.m. and was up the next morning bright and early tapping away at her Olivetti.

In addition to pornographic, Hilst's work has been described as experimental, unconventional, impenetrable, hermetic, metaphysical, and metalinguistic. Her multi-genre prose overflows with references to world literature, science, philosophy, and religion. As Bruno Carvalho describes in his excellent introduction to *Letters from a Seducer*, her writing "straddles the lines between seriousness of purpose and irreverence, erudition and kitsch, grotesque and black humor, sublime and sordid." Without taking themselves too seriously, her novels are, as the translator

John Keene points out in his introduction to *The Obscene Madame D*, "anti-novels, de- and re-constructions..." representing "a Foucauldian ethics in fictional form, of becoming and un-becoming, of instability and destabilization; it is an ethics of the mutability of process."

Above all, Hilst is a practitioner of the obscene as a literary aesthetic. Adam Morris, translator of *With My Dog-Eyes*, says, "In Hilst's formulation, the obscene is differentiated from the erotic and the pornographic by its philosophical and spiritual elements, and also through its act of social provocation."

Like her friend, admirer, and compatriot Clarice Lispector, Hilst rigorously examined the limits of language and the literary pursuit itself. Though their prose styles are equally *bouleversant*, Lispector uses language like a fine-bladed knife to explore the space between ecstasy and mundanity, while Hilst uses language like a rod, ramming it every which way in order to collapse the space between orgasm and insanity. Lispector's biographer Benjamin Moser says, "they were both passionate explorers of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the obscene."

Letters from a Seducer, originally published in 1991, is the third in Hilst's self-proclaimed "porno-chic" tetralogy. It begins with a series of letters written by Karl, a rich, erudite, sex-crazed writer, to his estranged sister Cordélia about his debauched proclivities, including his wish to rekindle their incestuous relationship. These twenty letters are found in the trash by another writer Stamatius, called Tui, Karl's despised alter ego. Both men are fixated on sex, heterosexual and homosexual, incest, pedophilia, homosexuality, cannibalism, murder, and so on.

As Carvalho specifies, "most of the sex revolves around male-centric ideas of female phallic fixation, and certain passages even verge on parodies of Henry Miller's literature." Hilst's spoof could also be applied to the work of Updike, Roth, Franzen, et al. Karl writes, "A woman's ass should serve as good steaks in case of an avalanche." Realizing his extraordinarily accommodating consort Eulália is unreal, his own invention, Tui writes sadly, "I really did construct my squealing-woman-in-life in a poignant and delicate, submissive and patient way."

Hilst's often spot-on hilarious parody is successful because her male narrators are not only utterly convincing but sympathetic even in their utter depravity. And of course, their self-aggrandizement is equal to their self-serving self-loathing:

Somehow I have been transformed into a scribe or better, into a scribbler, and just knowing that you think me a writer upsets me to the point of nausea. What petulant types. What disgusting people! They rifle through groins, backside cracks, they rummage in sordid hearts, in shrivelled little souls, and then sate themselves with belches when they finish the texts.

With My Dog Eyes, first published in 1986, is a fifty-six-page-long story of the descent into madness of mathematics professor Amós Kéres. In the novella, Hilst investigates the nexus "between genius and madness, poetry and mathematics." At the novel's beginning, Kéres is

searching for God; by mid-book he has become detached from himself; and by the end he perceives the world entirely from a dog's perspective. Finally, he's reduced to a mathematical equation.

Hilst's novel, *The Obscene Madame D*, first published in 1982, is narrated by Hillé, "incestuous theophagite, also known by Ehud as Madame D, I, Nothingness, Name of No One, I in search of light, sixty years in silent blindness, spent seeking the sense of things." When the novel begins Hillé is living in a recess under the stairs, and her husband Ehud has just died -- "causa mortis? The accumulation of questions from his wife Hillé." Chronologically non-linear, the novel frequently shifts perspectives and is an entanglement of death, loss, and oblivion. But it is also a satire of the culturally entrenched dichotomy opposing the chaotic, perennially dissatisfied female with the rational, sex-obsessed male.

Despite her renown in Brazil -- she received many major literary prizes over the course of her career, including Brazil's highest honor, the Premio Jabuti -- Hilst became increasingly scorned and marginalized by the cultural establishment. Ultimately, she was infuriated that the radical tradition of avant-garde expression had been subsumed into modernism.

Your metaphysical obsessions are of no interest to us, Madame D, let's speak of man here and now, how intelligent these people are, how modern, obscene, their big excited asses in front of their television sets, avid for fresh news, two or three modernists controlling the world, gold pouring out through deodorized holes, a vibrant modernist logorrhea...

Nietzsche wrote, "We have art so that we shall not die of reality." Hilda Hilst might have argued for cheap whiskey over art. Her work makes a bludgeoning, beautiful argument for obscenity as a means of surviving our reality.

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