

Between Writing and the Body

Performativity in Hilda Hilst's Fictional Prose

Hilda Hilst treats writing as a visceral performance that erases the traditional, stable author. Through works like *A Obscena Senhora D* (1982) and *The Pink Notebook of Lori Lamby* (1990), she uses fragmentation and obscenity to fuse narrative voice with the materiality of the body. Her prose suggests that identity is both created and dismantled within the act of enunciation itself. Ultimately, Hilst reframes authorship not as a fixed identity, but as an unstable, ephemeral trace in constant disappearance.

1. Introduction

Writing about Hilda Hilst is automatically writing about resistance. Hilst is one of the most audacious and unsettling voices in Brazilian literature, whose work occupies a singular and controversial space. As a Brazilian poet, fiction writer, and playwright, Hilst constructed a body of work that interacted with the Western literary tradition while subverting conventions through the voices of her female narrators.

The two books analysed in this article,¹ *The Obscene Madame D* (1982) and *The Pink Notebook of Lori Lamby* (1990), represent, in a sense, the beginning of a new phase in Hilst's production. Already established at the time, Hilst chose to turn toward genres considered marginal (pornography, parody, the grotesque). Her decision was not made in a vacuum. Instead, it was a direct response to how critics of the time received her; they fluctuated between states of intense fascination and deep misunderstanding. In the 1980s and 90s, the author engaged in tense dialogues with major Brazilian critics such as Leo Gilson Ribeiro and Anatol Rosenfeld,² who classified her as brilliant but difficult, distancing her from mainstream acceptance (cf. Coelho 1999).

Her creative shift, far from being reduced to mere extravagance or authorial whim, can be understood as a performance that questions the market logic of the literary field and the mechanisms of exclusion that regulate the circulation of female voices.³ She was reacting to a system that tried

¹ This article was written and translated into English by the author. This includes all translated excerpts and citations from the original Portuguese texts, unless otherwise noted.

² Leo Gilson Ribeiro (1927–2007) was an influential Brazilian critic and journalist who introduced experimental writers to the public. He championed Hilst as a genius, though his focus on her “difficulty” contributed to her marginalisation from the mainstream. Anatol Rosenfeld (1912–1973) was a German-born philosopher and a leading figure in Brazilian literary and theatre theory. His rigorous formal analyses helped establish Hilst's intellectual prestige while reinforcing her reputation as a hermetic author.

³ Although the writer maintained an ambivalent relationship with ideological labels and organised political movements throughout her career, often refusing the classification of ‘women's writing’ as reductive, her work offers fertile ground for contemporary feminist criticism. This analysis does not intend to impose a militant agenda upon the author that she did not fully subscribe to in life; rather, it seeks to identify how her practice of aesthetic insubmission and the deconstruction of patriarchal authorship dialogue with gender theories.

to frame her either as an untouchable erudite intellectual or as the eccentric figure of Casa do Sol.⁴ For the reader unaccustomed to Brazil's political history, it is important to situate Hilst's work within the context of the country's re-democratisation. Brazil lived under the control of a military dictatorship for 21 years (1964–1985). The works presented here were published in a moment of aesthetic and political inflection in national literature (cf. Dalcastagnè 2012). During this period, writers such as Lygia Fagundes Telles, Adélia Prado, and later Conceição Evaristo and Ana Cristina Cesar, vied for recognition within a canon of long-standing masculine tradition. All centred their work on female protagonists and addressed the daily realities with different writing styles.

Critiques of what was granted space in literature took on a particular role at the end of the twentieth century. The canon, conceived as a selection of the 'best' works, was exposed in its political and exclusionary nature. Ostensibly a "natural selection, in reality it served the hegemony of white, male authors from privileged social backgrounds" (Dalcastagnè 2012, 15). Works by women, Black and Indigenous authors, and writers from peripheral regions, were relegated to the margins.

The challenge was not limited to broadening what was recognised as canonical work, but involved destabilising the canon itself. Flora Süssekind (2004, 42) states that literature of this period veered away from grand narratives to concentrate on everyday tensions, modifying the construction of main characters and their arcs. Thus, according to researcher Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (1992), a new emergence of women's literature surfaced in Brazil that, through writing, displaced or tried to displace gender conventions. In this environment, rather than seeking recognition solely as a 'serious' author in the traditional mold (adapting to what was expected), Hilst chose to confound the expectations of both critics and the market. Her literature became deeply experimental.

To trace this change, this paper utilizes Butler's (1990; 1993) idea of gender performativity, where identity does not correspond to a natural essence, much less a fixed origin, but to a social and historical construction realized through the repetition of acts, gestures, and discourses (Butler 1990, 48–55). Gender, in this sense, should not be understood as a reflection of a biological or psychological truth, but as the effect of the ritualized repetition of codes that end up naturalizing the categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Butler 1993, 11–20). Thus, gender performativity is the process by which social outcomes are inscribed upon bodies, producing identities that appear stable when they are, in fact, fragile and continually changing (Butler 1990, 242).

In the books analysed below, we can observe a similar pattern. Hilst denounces the constant attempt to infer 'something' from these female characters and female authors. She demonstrates a movement of destabilising identity categories by not restricting herself to merely narrating or representing marginal characters. On the contrary, she enacts language itself as a space of fragmentation and negation. The surroundings almost imprison the characters; yet, they possess a private space within themselves, named by Hillé, the protagonist of *The Obscene Madame D*, as the 'being-woman,' the 'I-nothing,' the 'I-no-one.' The author, the narrator, and the character merge, alternating between presence and absence, affirmation and erasure.

Similarly, this performance can be understood through the concept of Peggy Phelan (1993). In thinking about performance, the researcher maintains that its essence lies in disappearance. Unlike

⁴ Casa do Sol was the country house in Campinas where Hilda Hilst lived from 1966 until her death in 2004. The place was more than just a home, it was a stage where she built her public image. In the isolation of the house, Hilda acted as a kind of high priestess of literature, surrounded by her dogs and books. From this refuge, she wrote her most radical works to provoke the publishing market, as the books analysed in this paper. The house was her laboratory, where her life and her writing were constantly blurred.

a painting or a novel, which remain as material objects, performance leaves no lasting traces. It happens in the body, in time, and then ends. The body of the performer, according to Phelan (1993, 148), disappears and represents something else, whether that something is movement, voice, breath, or lived experience. Transposed to Hilst's literature, this conception highlights how the author transforms the body into a kind of metonymy of being, but one always in dissolution. Her characters, by exploring the grotesque, the obscene, and even autofiction, expose the fragility of the link between subjectivity and corporeality. The body, far from guaranteeing identity, reveals its instability and its transitory character.

Performativity here is not limited to the human body; it manifests in the material of the typographic stain. Syntactic fragmentation, the absence of conventional punctuation, the uninterrupted stream of consciousness, and the chapters that never end or begin are not mere stylistic devices, but the staging of the textual body in a state of urgency. The text ceases to be a passive collection of ideas and instead becomes a physical event. By reviewing the following books, we will explore how the bodies of Hillé and Lamby unravel in time through various social events such as isolation, abuse and grief.

The application of Phelan's concept of disappearance to Hilstian work resolves the paradox between the ephemerality of performance and the permanence of the book-object. If, for Phelan, performance only becomes real at the instant it is extinguished, then, in the case of Hilst, the book ceases to be a static record and becomes the trace of a body consumed in the act of writing. Fragmentation and graphic interruptions function as the record of a presence that refuses to be fixed. The book, therefore, is not the record of the performance, but its own ruin, the vestige of a gesture that aimed for the ineffable, and which, upon being read, reactivates the ephemeral nature of the narrative voice.

By straining the boundary between the literary and the performative, Hilst challenges the notion of representation understood as mere imitation. Performative writing overflows the world of representation and classical mimesis, establishing a field in which language is not tethered to a fixed reference but shows itself in its own act of signifying, within a woman's body. For a Brazilian in the process of re-democratisation, with its military, colonial, and patriarchal past, this is a radical stance. It is also in this direction that Renato Cohen (1989, 37) proposes the notion of "boundary art"⁵, revisited by Leal (2018) in her reading of Hilst's work: a hybrid space where the artistic and non-artistic, the conventional and the marginal, the literary and the extra-literary overlap.

By transforming writing into a liminal experience, between presence and disappearance, body and language, norm and transgression, the author not only problematises the hierarchies of the literary field, but also intervenes critically in broader debates on identity. Performativity, in this context, moves beyond a formal device and becomes a critical gesture that transforms the very idea of literature into a space of resistance.

⁵ In Portuguese *arte de fronteira*, referring to works that inhabit the intersection of different artistic languages.

2. *The Pink Notebook of Lori Lamby*

Published in 1990, *The Pink Notebook of Lori Lamby* is a scandal. In short, the book is about a young girl who embraces prostitution and writes about her sexual adventures. One must constantly pause to overcome the revulsion of reading about pedophilia. The narrative, led by the voice of an eight-year-old girl, takes the form of an intimate diary. However, what is found within is not the desire to provoke fascination or pleasure, but precisely the opposite. It seeks to provoke disgust, forcing the reader to face their ethical and aesthetic limits regarding language. The child, Lori Lamby, says at the beginning of the book:

I stayed very quiet because it's a delight and I wanted him to keep licking the whole time, but he took out that big thing of his, the pee-pee [...]. Mommy said it couldn't be that big, but she didn't see it, and maybe Daddy's pee-pee is smaller, the size of a smaller corn cob [...]. I don't know either, because I've never seen Daddy's pee-pee properly. (Hilst 1990, 19)

The book can be read as a (deliberately) cruel parody of patriarchal voyeurism and the abuse of the publishing market, evidencing how society, under the guise of morality, consumes, commodifies, and fetishises female bodies and intellect, transforming them into symbolic merchandise. This critique, highlighted by scholars such as Maria do Rosário Alves Pereira (2019) and Aline Leal (2018), makes evident the provocative nature of Hilst's literary gesture by exposing deep contradictions in the very culture in which her own work lives.

This form of obscenity can be understood as a political category, rather than merely transgressive. By bringing to the centre of the scene what literary tradition usually keeps in the ob-scene (off-stage), the author operates a critique of the 'sanitization of desire' (cf. Moraes 2010, 193–194). Obscenity functions as a 'magnifying glass' (cf. Pécora 2001, 11–14) that exposes the pornography of market relations and the voyeurism of the literary system. Therefore, the shock caused by the narrative is not an end in itself, but a critical gesture that forces the reader to recognize the structural violence regulating both the female body and women's intellectual production.

The central tension of the novel emerges precisely from the contrast between the innocence of the child's voice and the rawness of the sexually explicit language. This mismatch shatters the reader's expectations about childhood innocence. As Nelly Novaes Coelho (1999) observes, Hilst's writing denounces the persistence of a voyeuristic patriarchal imaginary which, while condemning obscenity, feeds on it as a spectacle. In this game, Lori Lamby's prostitution should not be read in its literal dimension, but also as a metaphor. It is the child's body that exposes the body of the writer herself, prostituted before the publishing market.

The plot makes this metalinguistic dimension explicit by presenting the figure of Lori's father, a 'serious' writer unable to sell his books, who finds himself pressured by an editor named Laulau (a name which, in Brazilian Portuguese, evokes the idea of a 'thief') to venture down the path of commercial 'filth'⁶. Regarding her father, Lori writes:

I want to talk a bit about Daddy. He's also a writer, poor thing. [...] Daddy is very good but he has what Mommy calls a crse⁷, I mean crisis [...]. That's why I'm writing my story now, because he keeps writing his story too. I've seen Daddy sad because no one buys what he writes. (Hilst 1990, 24)

⁶ The word *bandalheira* is translated here as 'filth' or 'skulduggery' to capture the sense of both moral corruption and shady dealings.

⁷ Many words were intentionally misspelled to mimic the writing of a child.

Lori, in turn, embodies this survival logic with a perversely lucid clarity. The child-author shows herself more capable than her father of understanding the gears of a literary system founded on spectacularisation and rapid consumption. As Hilst herself suggested in one interview in 1990 to *TV Cultura*, her intention was to “to wake them up the reader,”⁸ transforming scandal into literature. This is evident in the following passage:

He studied a lot [...], and the other day he fought with Lalau, who is the one who makes his book on the machine, [...] these men who make our books on the machine are called editors, but when Lalau isn't here, Daddy calls Lalau every name I can't say. Lalau said to Daddy: why don't you start writing some *bananeiras* for a change? I don't think it's *bananeira*⁹ (banana tree), it's *skulduggery/filth*, now I know. (Hilst 1990, 24)

The performance unfolds in layers. Lori continues: “Then they said there needed to be more talk, more dialogue, as they say. But how am I going to have dialogue if the men don't talk much and just keep licking?” (Hilst 1990, 24) Even the exploitation of Lori's sexuality is justified: “Then they said that *Lorinha*¹⁰ likes doing sex, she's not a victim, she thinks it's very good” (Hilst 1990, 24). The rape culture, in both the literal sense and the sense of authorial freedom, is almost explicit:

Then he took off my little clothes, carried me in his arms, I stayed in his lap, and he told me to pretend I was scared. I said I wasn't scared, that it was very yummy. [...] I curled all up in his lap and said: Oh, don't do that, I'm very scared. [...] I really liked playing scared. (Hilst 1990, 18)

I kept playing in the lagoon always with my legs open like Uncle Abel likes and like everyone likes, I don't even know why they didn't build us with our legs open and then we wouldn't always have to keep thinking if it was time to open our legs. (Hilst 1990, 21)

At the end of the plot, Lori's parents are supposedly arrested or go to a “rest home” (Hilst 1990, 40). In a letter Lori writes to them, she ends by saying: “Oh Daddy and Mommy, everyone there at school, and you too, talk about this thing called creativity, but when we have this thing, everyone gets mad at us” (Hilst 1990, 41).

All of this serves to illustrate that Hilst's book is a trap-text. The text does not deliver what it initially promises, functioning as a game of seduction that ends in a philosophical clash. Lori Lamby is configured as both a character and an allegory of the market itself. She is the daughter of a failed writer, but also the bastard daughter of a literary tradition that both consumes and discards female bodies and female writing in equal measure. The scandal the work provokes is not restricted to the content of the narrative. It projects onto the very structure of the literary system, a system that demands from the author and, by extension, her characters, a kind of symbolic prostitution necessary for survival within this regulated space.

The child, thus, is not just a narrator; she converts into an author, and the narrative passes through the abuse of her own innocent body. This inversion demonstrates Hilst's gesture, disturbing and revealing at once, of exposing the paradoxes of a literary field that insists on building itself upon exclusion and violence. The child became an author. Language became performance. Authorship became scandal.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yeFhO4G2OQ> (28.07.2026).

⁹ The original text uses the word *bananeira* (‘banana tree’) as a phonetic pun on *bandalheira* (‘skulduggery/filth’). This wordplay highlights the editor's demand for ‘trashy’ content through a mocking, rhythmic similarity in Portuguese.

¹⁰ The name *Lorinha* is a diminutive form of Lori.

3. *The Obscene Madame D*

If Lori Lamby writes through excess, Hillé writes through absence. In *The Obscene Madame D*, published in 1982, the female narrative voice does not remain stable. The novella centres on Hillé, a woman who withdraws after the death of her husband, Ehud, and begins compulsively writing a fragmented and feverish text. She isolates herself in a void or gap¹¹, a place between the world and nothingness, between the stairs and the hallway. The text that emerges is a chaotic flow that unravels even as it is described. The body becomes both the site of writing and a metaphor for language itself, laden with fluids, interruptions, and repetitions that never cease.

We aren't told how long ago the husband died, nor how long the character has been in situ. It could be days or hours. This is a continuous stream of moments, and since the chapters do not end, there is no narrative arc. There is only Hillé and her body. Hilst writes as if she were losing control, letting the writing dominate the subject, letting language escape like excretion. It is the ultimate expression of a boundless stream of consciousness. While in mourning for her father and husband, and with constant references to nudity, Hillé throws us into the control of the text, asking us to understand her as a 'being-woman,'¹² and says:

yes, life was this thing of feeling the body, outline, viscera, breathing, seeing, but never understanding. that is why I refused many times. I wanted the thread from above, the tense one that the OTHER holds, the OTHER, do you understand? what OTHER mamma mia? GOD GOD, so you still don't understand? (Hilst 1982, 22)

Language, in this context, is not an instrument of rationalisation or memory, but something connected to the human body that escapes all control. Hillé says: "I howl, I throb, I writhe in the filth, I write from the hole" (Hilst 1982, 15).

By attributing to Hillé a discourse marked by fragmentation and delirium, Hilst subverts the notion of a unified authorial subject. What is presented is an unstable stream of consciousness, in which the protagonist blurs the boundaries between life and writing, body and language, lucidity and delirium. "Everything enters inside me, everything leaves" (Hilst 1982, 17), says Hillé. The name "Madame D" is directly linked to 'dereliction,'¹³ as the character herself states in the book's introduction:

I Nothing, I Name of No-one, I in search of light in a silent blindness, sixty years in search of the meaning of things. Dereliction Ehud used to tell me, Dereliction, for the last time Hillé, Dereliction means helplessness, abandonment, and because you ask me every day and do not retain it, from now on I shall call you The Lady D. D for Dereliction, do you hear? Helplessness, Abandonment, the soul always in emptiness, seeking names, fumbling at corners, creases, caressing folds, who knows if in the friezes, the threads, the twists, in the bottom of pants, in knots, in visible everyday things, in the infinitesimal absurd, in the minimums, one day the light, the understanding of us all, our destiny, one day I will understand (Hilst 1982, 28)

She claims for herself not a proper name, but "Nothing" or the "Name of No-one." Body and language here are inseparable. Hillé does not express herself, but rather is expression. Her writing is the dissolution of the subject, a performance of the unmaking of the self. The narrative voice

¹¹ The word *vão* is translated as 'gap' or 'void.' While it literally refers to the physical space beneath a staircase where the character isolates herself, it figuratively represents a liminal state of being between the world and nothingness.

¹² The term 'being-woman' translates the Portuguese *ser-mulher* to emphasize womanhood as a continuous performative state rather than a fixed biological essence.

¹³ The term 'dereliction' translates the Portuguese *derelição* to describe a profound state of abandonment and existential isolation before the divine or the world.

is reduced to moans, screams, and repetitions like a body in pain: “I am a great animal, moist, lucid, I seek you still, now I do not articulate, nor am I mute, some bellows, some thin strong sounds escape the throat, now I buffalo dive, some darks Madame D, the living understanding of life is holding the heart” (Hilst 1982, 18).

Hillé resists the gazes and judgments of the neighborhood: “the lady could also cooperate with the neighborhood, right, those faces you’ve been making when you decide to open the window scare my children, [...] that’s the thing of a shameless woman” (Hilst 1982, 25). And she replies that she also gets scared when looking out the window and asks: “If you know I am like this, why do you seek me out expecting someone different?” (Hilst 1982, 26). She further retorts:

And now let us see the correct phrases for when I open the window to the society of the village: your rotten ass your unimaginable pestilences fetid mouths of phlegm and stupidity fat butts waiting for their turn. for what? [...] look at death eating her eye, [...] look, there in the depth look at the abyss and see I see the man. (Hilst 1982, 26)

Amidst philosophical flows, the character emerges as a woman, a real person. Is it Hilst? Is it women in general? Is it a piece of all of us? Hillé’s body deteriorates and her language fragments: syntax collapses, phrases repeat, logic gives way to sensation. The character speaks to herself, to the reader, to someone, to her dead husband:

what are legs, what is going and coming, where to Ehud, what are these old ladies, the whines of childhood, the curved men, what do the fools, the children, think of themselves, what is thinking [...] I file my nails in the dark, I listen, I am leaning against the wall in the gap of the stairs, I listen to myself, there are some living ones in there beyond the word, they express themselves but I do not understand, they pulse, they breathe, there is a code in the center, a great navel, it dilates, it tries to talk to me, I spy on myself hunched over, winds flowers astonished birds, my name is Hillé. (Hilst 1982, 15)

Thus, Hilst confronts the literary tradition that insists on sanitizing the body, reducing the force of thought, and, in a way, restricting female horizons, transforming this body (porous, aged, obscene) into the basis of authorship itself. There is no rigid boundary between author, narrator, and character. What exists is a fusion, a certain autofictional delirium in which identity begins to be treated almost as a philosophical problem.

The narrative even directly challenges the reader: “close your eyes and try to think of your body in there. Blood, movement. Get the microscope. Ah, not me. What a thing we are, flesh, nail and hair, what colors in here, violet red. Look at yourself. Where are you now?” (Hilst 1982, 19) The answer, or something close to it, is always the body, somewhere inside it.

As Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (1992) observes, women’s literature in Brazil in the 1980s is characterized by giving voice to experiences that strain the patriarchal tradition of literary rationality, transforming the body, lacerated by pain, eroticism, violence, or marginality, into a space of aesthetic and political creation. Hillé, in this context, embodies a female subjectivity that refuses decorum and linearity. Her pain becomes a gesture of affront. Instead of falling silent before loss, she ‘writes from the hole,’ a space that is simultaneously abjection and creative power (cf. Kristeva 1982, 7–15).

This performative literature, according to author Renato Cohen (1989), operates in this ‘boundary space’ where language is converted into act, into event, and realized in the time and space of the text. Hillé’s ‘gap/void’ is, in this reading, the stage where dissolution is enacted. This view of authorship in Hilst does not mean that the figure of the author disappears, but that it gains a new meaning. Instead of a total erasure, what emerges instead is an implied author.

The text ceases to be just a set of references and instead becomes the place where a body is inscribed and dismantled, reaffirming its presence with the refusal of a fixed identity. Writing thus becomes a space of ‘dis-identification,’ where the biographical is traversed by the aesthetic to denounce the precariousness of the subject in the face of finitude and the expected.

4. Writing is an Act of Resistance

The work of Hilda Hilst destabilises concepts deeply rooted in the Brazilian literary tradition of the 1980s and 90s. Her writing, marked by obscenity, the grotesque, and fragmentation, is not merely a collection of shocking gestures or gratuitous provocations (Leal 2017). Above all, it opens a space for critical reflection and the ways in which subjects, especially women, are historically produced and controlled by discourse.

In *The Pink Notebook of Lori Lamby*, Hilst mobilizes a form of trap-writing that denounces both social hypocrisy and the mechanisms of symbolic prostitution that structure the publishing market. In *The Obscene Madame D*, the author works with grief and marginality in a way that inscribes the body into language itself. Hille is everything except what is expected of her. In these two roles, the excess of the child and the absence of the woman, Hilst enacts the precariousness of the authorial subject and transforms writing into a performative space, where body and language merge, cross, and eventually dissolve into one another.

Hilst’s work provokes us to rethink authorship as a movement of self-inscription and displacement, in which the subject makes and unmakes themselves in the act of enunciation. This movement speaks to contemporary feminist debates that reject essentialist conceptions of identity and claim writing as a space of resistance. Reading Hilst cannot be passive. It’s an invitation to face literature not as a ready-made or finished object, but as a performance in a disputed space, where the word becomes body and the body, in turn, is transformed into language.

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