

The madness of the Search

The poetics of deconstruction in Hilda Hilst's *With my dog-eyes* and *The obscene Madame D*

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Popular scientific summary

There is a tradition in literature of writers that used fiction to address philosophical questions. The focus of this analysis lies on one such author, the Brazilian writer Hilda Hilst (1930-2004), who in her literary works blended the themes of God and death, eroticism and mysticism, science and madness, blurring the boundaries between literature and philosophy. Here, she is read through the philosophical glasses of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. In the two short novels analyzed here, *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes*, Hilst works with the question of how language affects us. The protagonists, Hillé and Amós Kéres, are engaged in a philosophical search for meaning that language is not sufficient to express. They are thus thrown into a state of anxiety that is interpreted by their surroundings as signs of madness: a need for isolation, inappropriate eroticism, and, by the end of the novel, a process of metamorphosis, where Hillé assumes the form of a sow, and Amós Kéres becomes a dog. However, the very idea of madness is put into question in these novels. The narrative makes use of a "poetics of deconstruction" that thematizes the way in which language allows us to perform deconstruction of the opposition between madness and reason, as well as those between body and soul, material and immaterial, speech and writing, and even that between literature and philosophy.

Abstract

The obscene Madame D [*A obscena Senhora D*, 1982] and *With my dog-eyes* [*Com os meus olhos de cão*, 1986] are two short novels by the Brazilian writer Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) where the protagonists engage in a philosophical search for meaning that lead them to a state that is publicly interpreted as madness. In this analysis, they are read in light of the philosopher's Jacques Derrida theory of deconstruction. The aim is to show how their search is mediated by language, in a manner that thematizes its deconstructive character, but concretized in the materiality of their bodies, in the form of obscenity and animality. Working with the theme of madness as a mediator between language and the body's materiality, this analysis aims to show, moreover, how the strategy of deconstruction can be not only uttered, but also performed. In such a manner, it is possible to track in these novels a strategy of deconstruction on hierarchical binary oppositions such as madness/reason, human/animal, God/Evil, speech/writing, body/soul. And, being literary works that thematize a philosophical question, even the opposition philosophy/literature.

Keywords: deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, metaphysics, metaphysics of presence, madness, animality, language

Sammanfattning

Den obscena Fru D [*A obscena Senhora D*, 1982] och *Med mina hundögon* [*Com os meus olhos de cão*, 1986] är två korta romaner av den brasilianska författaren Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) där huvudpersonerna ägnar sig åt ett filosofiskt sökande efter mening som leder dem till ett tillstånd som offentligt tolkas som galenskap. I den här analysen läses de i ljuset av filosofen Jacques Derridas dekonstruktionsteori. Syftet är att visa hur deras sökande förmedlas av språket, på ett sätt som tematiserar dess dekonstruktiva karaktär, men även konkretiseras i deras kroppars materialitet, i form av obscenitet och djuriskhet. Genom att arbeta med temat galenskap som en förmedlare mellan språket och kroppens materialitet syftar denna analys dessutom till att visa hur dekonstruktionsstrategin inte bara kan uttalas utan även uppföras. På så sätt är det möjligt att i dessa romaner spåra en strategi för dekonstruktion av hierarkiska binära oppositioner som galenskap/förnuft, människa/djur, Gud/Djävul, tal/skrift, kropp/själ. Och eftersom det handlar om ett litterärt verk som behandlar en filosofisk fråga, även oppositionen filosofi/litteratur dekonstrueras.

Nyckelord: dekonstruktion, Jacques Derrida, metafysik, närvarons metafysik, galenskap, djuriskhet, språk

Resumo

A obscena Senhora D (1982) e *Com os meus olhos de cão* (1986) são dois romances da escritora brasileira Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) nos quais os protagonistas se engajam numa busca filosófica por sentido que os leva a um estado que, publicamente, é interpretado como loucura. Nesta análise, eles são lidos à luz da teoria de desconstrução do filósofo Jacques Derrida. O objetivo é mostrar como sua busca é mediada pela linguagem de forma que tematiza seu caráter desconstrutivo, mas é concretizada na materialidade de seus corpos como obscenidade e animalidade. Trabalhando com o tema da loucura como mediador entre a linguagem e a materialidade do corpo, esta análise visa mostrar, além disso, como a estratégia de desconstrução não só é enunciada, mas também performada. Desta forma, é possível extrair destes romances uma estratégia de desconstrução de oposições binárias hierárquicas como loucura/razão, humano/animal, Deus/Mal, fala/escrita, corpo/alma. E, em se tratando de obras literárias que tematizam uma questão filosófica, mesmo a oposição filosofia/literatura é desconstruída.

Palavras-chave: desconstrução, Jacques Derrida, metafísica, metafísica da presença, loucura, animalidade, linguagem

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"your search has for its name madness. annihilation. scission".

– Hilda Hilst, *The obscene Madame D*

"The madness of the Search, which is made of concentric circles and never arrives at the center, the obscuring, incarnate illusion of finding and understanding".

– Hilda Hilst, *With my dog-eyes*

"Both states - imagination and hyperclarity - are more than human frailty can handle: they lead inexorably to madness and death".

— Hilda Hilst in an interview in 1980.

Introduction

"I write philosophy in all my books. Whether they have a narrative or not, they are pure philosophy".¹ These words were said by the Brazilian writer Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) in an interview in 1998 when asked about whether she should have become a philosopher instead of a writer. Her utterance can give an idea of the philosophical content of her books and of her views on the relationship between the two fields. The corpus of Hilst compiles dozens of works that include prose, poetry and drama. The themes combine God and death, eroticism and mysticism, science and madness, and engage in dialogue with figures whose work, like hers, have been placed at the boundary between literature and philosophy, including Ernest Becker, George Bataille, Nikos Kazantzakis, Vladimir Jankélévitch and Samuel Beckett. Having worked between the 1950s and 1990s, a time when the national literary scene had inherited the social realist theme of the "Geração de 30" (30's generation), she came to be considered a difficult writer. One of Hilst's main concerns was the poor reception of her books. She did not live to experience the emerging popularity that her work only now is beginning to enjoy, both in her homeland and internationally.

In this thesis, I will analyze two of Hilda Hilst's most popular short novels: *The Obscene Madame D* [A obscena Senhora D, 1982] and *With my dog-eyes* [Com os meus olhos de cão, 1986]. *The Obscene Madame D* is the story of Hillé, a woman going through a mourning process for her recently deceased husband Ehud. Her attempt to understand death becomes an inquisitive conversation with both her dead husband and with God – or a conversation with herself, as it seems from the perspective of her neighbors, in whose eyes Hillé goes mad. Seen as a mad woman, she is degradingly called by them a "sow" and becomes a sow herself at the end of the novel. *With My dog-eyes* tells the story of Amós Kéres, a professor of mathematics who, after experiencing a kind of epiphany while standing on a hilltop, begins to understand. What does he understand? The impossibility of expressing it in words entails a process of alienation from his surroundings, his family, and his work at the university. Similar to what happens to Hillé, his metaphysical quest is interpreted as madness, which also is portrayed as a process of metamorphosis. Amós Kéres becomes, as the title suggests, a dog.

These two short novels share thus a number of common points: in both, the protagonists depart from a life-changing experience (the husband's death for Hillé, the

¹ Diniz, Cristiano (org.), *Fico besta quando me entendem : entrevistas com Hilda Hilst* (São Paulo : Globo, 2013), p. 158.

epiphany for Amós) that is described as a "loss of center". It is this decentering that leads them to engage in a philosophical search that is marked above all by a frustration towards language, not sufficient to conceptualize the object of their search. In both novels, this frustration is experienced by the protagonists not only in language, but even in their relationship with the materiality of their bodies. The apparent incompatibility between this materiality and the philosophical desire leads to changes in behavior that are publicly interpreted as madness. In both novels, madness is portrayed parallelly with a process of animalization, which shows itself in alienation from social norms and culminates in an actual metamorphosis, followed by death.

In both novels, the protagonists' life-changing experiences that ignite the metaphysical search are described as an experience of a "loss of center". This decentering leads to an awareness of the failure of language, which in turn leads to what is interpreted as madness, which in turn allows the use of the failed language to build the novel's own poetics. Decentering and language are thus the two sides of the same coin, expressed in the bodies of the protagonists in the form of madness, and in the body of the text in the form of a poetics that deconstructs the very idea of madness in which it is built.

Purpose and questions

The aim of this analysis is to examine how *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* explore the idea of decentering through the portrayal of madness, and in what ways language is used to convey this portrayal. An underlying question will regard the treatment of a philosophical question in literary form, and what outcomes such a dialogue can provide, for both literature and philosophy. The questions that lead my analysis are, thus:

- How do decentering and language function as mediators to the protagonists' metaphysical searches?
- How does madness express this process of decentering?
- What outcomes does Hilda Hilst's literary treatment of philosophical questions have, for both literature and philosophy?

Previous research and material

Even though Hilda Hilst has been translated into several languages and started to receive international recognition, academic research on her literary work is mainly limited to the context of her homeland. There are two anthologies that compile texts of Hilst researchers from Brazil and abroad. One in Portuguese, *Em torno de Hilda Hilst* [Around Hilda Hilst]

(2015), and one in English, *Essays on Hilda Hilst* (2018). Interestingly enough, both anthologies follow a similar structure, starting with analyses of Hilst's dramatic texts, moving on to texts that focus mainly on the subject of obscenity and eroticism, and finishing with accounts of the challenges of translating her work. The latter has as one of the editors Adam Morris, the translator of *With my dog-eyes*, and includes texts by Nathanaël and John Keene, respectively translator and author of the introduction to *The obscene Madame D*. These are the English versions used in this analysis.

The scholars Eliane Robert Moraes and Alva Martínez Teixeira take part in both projects, and their essays will be used in this analysis. In "Figurations of Eros in Hilda Hilst", Moraes examines the way in which "Hilst deploys the category of the *obscene* to mediate the ambivalent aspects of both language and human existence".² Studies on the question of eroticism and obscenity, in general, are relevant for my analysis, especially those regarding *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes*. Both novels are included in this essay of Moraes, illustrating her premise that the "obscene" is proposed by Hilst as a "third space" between the mystical and the pornographic. The essay also includes large part of Hilst's work that relates to this theme, and this is a common feature in Hilstian studies: most researchers choose to look at her body of work in its entirety, departing from a specific thematic, usually regarding either the mystical or the erotic, or the relationship between them both.

Also relevant for my analysis is Teixeira's "Refulgência, dor e maravilha. Os conceitos de tempo, deterioração, finitude e morte na obra de Hilda Hilst" [Refulgence, pain and wonder. The concepts of time, deterioration, finitude and death in the work of Hilda Hilst]. Similarly to Moraes, this essay explores a connection between the mystical and the bodily. Even here, the two novels analyzed in my thesis figure among other of Hilt's literary works. The metaphysical experiences of the characters are ignited, the essay argues, by "a feeling of anguish and abandonment on the part of a God who, after allowing them to intuit the transcendent, interdicts it with death".³ Death and eroticism are related, as I will argue for in this analysis, not only to each other and with the mystical experience, but also with the experience of language, even this one an aspect of the materiality of the body, and with the philosophical experience entailed by it.

² Eliane Robert Moraes, "Figurations of Eros in Hilda Hilst", in *Essays on Hilda Hilst: between Brazil and world literature*, red. Adam Morris & Bruno Carvalho (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 59.

³ Alva Martínez Teixeira, "Refulgência, dor e maravilha. Os conceitos de tempo, deterioração, finitude e morte na obra de Hilda Hilst", in *Em torno de Hilda Hilst*, red. Nilze Maria de Azeredo Reguera & Susanna Busato (São Paulo: UNESP, 2015), p. 79. My translation.

Philosophy has also been a common basis for analyses of Hilst's literature, and a number of academic papers propose a dialogue between her work and philosophical theories. Examples are Cinara Leite Guimarães' master thesis "*A Obscena Senhora D, de Hilda Hilst, e as relações entre Eros, Tânatos e Logos*" [*The obscene Madame D, by Hilda Hilst, and the relations between Eros, Tanathos and Logos*], Willian André's master thesis "*Kierkegaard. Camus. Hilst : no labirinto da angústia*" [*Kierkegaard. Camus. Hilst : in the labyrinth of anguish*], and Aline Leal Fernandes Barbosa's research article "*O sol ofuscante de Hilda Hilst e Georges Bataille*" [*The burning sun of Hilda Hilst and Georges Bataille*].⁴⁵⁶ One of the chapters in Davi Andrade Pimentel's master thesis "*A literatura de Hilda Hilst na perspectiva de Maurice Blanchot*" [*Hilda Hilst's literature from Maurice Blanchot's perspective*], brings a parallel analysis of *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes*, where the author examines the question of the presence and absence of God in these two particular works.⁷ This chapter is especially relevant for my analysis, where the "search's madness", as the title suggests, is materialized mainly in the figure of God. The search is conceptualized through Blanchot's terms of "the profound question" and has common elements with the analysis that I will carry out in this thesis.

Theory

As we have discussed above, Hilst's interest in philosophical questions has encouraged analysis that makes use of philosophical theory. In this thesis, the main theoretical framework will be deconstruction theory, more specifically the philosopher Jacques Derrida's texts that introduce and discuss the concept of deconstruction. This choice is motivated by the fact that these novels problematize the question of madness, as I aim to show, in a deconstructive manner. Also, the description of the experiences of the protagonists as a "decentering" connects to a central term of deconstruction theory. As we shall see, the vocabularies used in the literary and in the theoretical texts present similarities that can be used to the advantage of this analysis. Moreover, the choice is motivated by Hilst's and Derrida's mutual interest in, respectively, philosophy and literature.

⁴ C. L. Guimarães, *A Obscena Senhora D, de Hilda Hilst, e as relações entre Eros, Tânatos e Logos*, MA diss., João Pessoa, Universidade Federal da Paraíba, 2007.

⁵ W. André, *Kierkegaard. Camus. Hilst : no labirinto da angústia*, MA diss., Londrina, Universidade Estadual de Londrina, 2012.

⁶ A. L. F. Barbosa, *O sol ofuscante de Hilda Hilst e Georges Bataille, Estudos De Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, (52), 2017, pp. 197–217.

⁷ D. A. Pimentel, *A literatura de Hilda Hilst na perspectiva de Maurice Blanchot*, MA diss., Fortaleza, UFCE, 2019.

To call deconstruction a "theory" is indeed a simplification – the term, as Jonathan Culler explains, "has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy, and a mode of reading".⁸ This analysis, as I will develop later in a discussion on method, does not aim to make use of a deconstructive mode of reading. Nor does it depart from a deconstructive position or strategy toward the analyzed literary works. Rather, deconstruction is regarded here taking this variety of definitions into consideration, yet focusing on Derrida's body of work on deconstruction to form a consistent theory that can cast light on Hilda Hilst's mode of relating to language.

In order to explain what deconstruction does, in the way the term is to be used in this analysis, a short regression on the context in which it was proposed by Derrida is appropriate. As Culler summarizes, deconstruction

arises in philosophy as reading of philosophical texts against the grain of the philosophical tradition, contesting its hierarchical binary oppositions (meaning/form, soul/body, inside/outside, speech/writing, and so on) by exploring how they are already deconstructed – shown to be constructions – by the texts that assert or depend on them.⁹

Another way by which Derrida refers to this philosophical tradition is as a "metaphysics of presence". Metaphysics is a relevant term here for two reasons: firstly because, as we will see next, it is a crucial philosophical concept that forms the very basis of what deconstruction aims at. Secondly, because it is a recurrent concept in Hilda Hilst's own literary vocabulary. More on how the term is used in the novels, and how it relates to Derrida's concept of metaphysics of presence will be found in the first part of this thesis.

In any case, the problematization of metaphysics of presence by Derrida appears in the context of structuralism, more specifically in "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences", the text (originally a speech) of Derrida that marks the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism. This is the most relevant text for my analysis, since the terminology used by Derrida to define Western philosophy's search for meaning in terms of "metaphysics of presence" makes a useful tool for my understanding of how the protagonists of *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* engage in their search for meaning. Because it appears in the context of structuralism, Derrida takes on the idea of structure to describe the history of Western philosophy as a tradition of structures to which have been attributed

⁸ Jonathan Culler, *On deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism*, 25th anniversary ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 85.

⁹ Culler 2008, p. 2.

various centers, which in turn always point to something outside the structure itself, "to a point of presence, a fixed origin":

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. [...] It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—*eidōs*, *arché*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth.¹⁰

The designation of such "invariable presence" means a moment of decision: one term is chosen *instead* of another, establishing hierarchical binary oppositions (such as essence/existence, man/animal, God/Evil, madness/reason, and so forth), which is the task of deconstruction to unveil – that is, de-construct.

As I aim to show through the writing of Hilda Hilst, deconstruction deals above all with the question of language. The construction of hierarchical binary oppositions throughout the history of Western philosophy is undertaken through the assignment of certain meanings (signifieds) to certain terms (signifiers). In the context of structuralism, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had already pointed out the arbitrariness between the sign and what it refers to. As Judith Butler explains in an introduction to *Of grammarology*,

Saussure proposed that the "sign" name the "signifier," or "the sound-image," that represents the "signified," or the concept. The linguistic signifier does not bear any resemblance to that which it signifies: that difference conditions the very possibility of signification. That signifier works (or signifies) precisely because of the specific ways it is distinguished from other signifiers. Structuralism thus initiated a break with those linguistic theories that presumed that signs maintained a necessary relation to their referents. The signifier gains its distinctiveness and its very capacity to signify by a necessary relation not to the referent (an external reality) but to the signified (a linguistically formulated notion of external reality), and both signifier and signified now have to be understood as part of the general operation of the sign. As a result, every sign refers laterally, as it were, to other signs, gaining specificity through differentiation.¹¹

Derrida, and as a consequence post-structuralism, takes Saussure's theory on language a step further:

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, sign and play", in *Modern criticism and theory: a reader*, red. David Lodge & Nigel Wood, 3rd ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2008), p. 213.

¹¹ Judith Butler, "Introduction", *Of grammarology*, Fortieth anniversary ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 13.

If the structuralists had argued for the inescapable separation of the word from its referent, the post-structuralists saw an additional and equally inescapable division: between the two components of the sign itself, between the signifier and the signified. The startling result of this line of thought was that language suddenly revealed itself to be a much more unstable and fluid system of signification than even the structuralists, with their belief in neatly balanced structures and oppositions, had envisioned.¹²

This instability, fluidity of signification of language is the condition of deconstruction. But deconstruction can also be seen as this very aspect of language, its inherent capacity to be deconstructed. "There is always already deconstruction, at work in works, especially in literary works", Derrida wrote.¹³ As mentioned above, there is an ambivalence around the term, largely because of Derrida's negative, apophatic descriptions of it. "Deconstruction is indeed contradictory. (It is also impossible, Derrida likes to say – and it doesn't exist)".¹⁴

This is perhaps the reason why deconstruction has acquired a controversial status in the academy – and, by mutual influence, Derrida himself. The term deconstruction, Culler writes, "which Derrida introduced somewhat casually [...], takes on a life of its own, escaping the control of the author and coming to refer to a broad intellectual process or movement that the end of the twentieth century by no means exhausted".¹⁵ The critique against deconstruction often involves an accusation of anti-philosophical abstraction that ultimately leads to nihilism and passivity. Post-structuralism, in general, became shaped by this critique as well, as Derrida's biographer Peter Salmon writes:

More recently Derrida has been lumped in with postmodernists in a discourse where 'postmodernist' means those who argue that there is no such thing as truth and who, in the more extreme versions, are responsible for the collapse of society, owing to their espousal of radical indeterminism (a word that does not exist in Derrida's corpus, except where he rejects accusations of it), which has led either to a liberalism that cannot accept any grand narratives or an authoritarianism that feels no obligation towards any fundamental truths, and which therefore can appeal, straight-faced, to alternative facts. In this post-truth world, thinkers such as Derrida are seen as anticipating this dangerous relativism or even actually causing it.¹⁶

¹² Earl E. Fitz, *Sexuality and being in the poststructuralist universe of Clarice Lispector* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 17.

¹³ Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁴ Derek Attridge, *Acts of literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 26.

¹⁵ Culler 2008, p. 2.

¹⁶ Peter Salmon, *An event, Perhaps : A biography of Jacques Derrida* (Verso Books, 2021), 8f.

This analysis is an attempt to offer a different picture of deconstruction. In the poetics of Hilda Hilst, as I will argue, the question of language as dealt with by deconstruction is not a contradiction to, but the very expression of reality's material conditions.

We have already discussed how Hilda Hilst problematizes the division between literature and philosophy, from the perspective of literature. Derrida does the same movement, from the perspective of philosophy. In deconstruction theory, the binary opposition philosophy/literature is, naturally, regarded as a metaphysical construction. Derek Attridge's *Acts of literature* gives a very thorough account of Derrida's relationship to so-called literary texts, shaped by the notion

that *no* text is wholly governed by the concepts and oppositions of philosophy, *every* text can be read (though not necessarily without some tough and extended intellectual labor) as "literary". Equally, no text could be *wholly* "literary": all acts of language and interpretation depend on philosophical categories and presuppositions.¹⁷

There is, however, an institutional division between (the construction of the opposition) philosophy and literature. In the academy, the field of literary theory has established itself independently of philosophy. Reed Way Dasenbrock writes about how deconstruction has become a factor of approximation between these two disciplines (at the same time, due to its controversial character, a factor of distancing from the tradition of analytic philosophy): "Paradoxically, the space separating literary theorists and philosophers seemed smaller than that separating different species of philosophers."¹⁸

Method

If Derrida's approach to literary texts were to be described as a method, it could be, for instance, "a reading that does not primarily understand but rather experiences what it reads - and goes to its encounter".¹⁹ In practice, this means "to allow the text he is reading to proffer a temporary reference mark, not susceptible of generalization - 'writing' (from Plato, Saussure, Husserl, and several others), 'the supplement' (from Rousseau), the 'hymen' (from Mallarmé), the 'trace' (from Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas), and so on".²⁰ Culler described Derrida's method as a "close reading that (1) was not subservient to the ideological notion of organic form that

¹⁷ Attridge, p. 7.

¹⁸ Reed Way Dasenbrock, *Redrawing the lines: analytic philosophy, deconstruction, and literary theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 8.

¹⁹ Hans Ruin, "Introduktion", in Derrida, Jacques, *Schibboleth* (Stockholm: Symposion, 1990), p. 21.

²⁰ Attridge, p. 9.

underlay the most widespread practice of close reading, that of New Criticism, and (2) showed that texts are playing for important stakes: the oppositions that they engage structure thinking about fundamental questions".²¹

In other words, Derrida engaged with a deconstructive reading. According to Derrida himself, however, deconstruction "is not a method and cannot be transformed into one".²² Still, he offered "a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*", where the practice of deconstruction is undertaken through a "double gesture": firstly, "a phase of overturning", that implies the inversion of a constructed binary opposition, and secondly, a phase of suspension of this inversion, where one ought to "mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept' – not a new concept that means "a resolution of contradiction into a third term", but a new concept that allows the contradiction to exist because it can "inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics".²³

In this sense, the strategy of deconstruction has been regarded as a method. If deconstruction is to be considered as a method of literary analysis, it can be said to be, "in Barbara Johnson's phrase, 'a teasing out of warring forces of signification within a text', an investigation of the tension between different modes of signification, as between the performative and constative dimensions of language".²⁴ Nevertheless, this is not a method that I will engage with in my analysis. A deconstructive reading of *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* would imply some kind of active intervention in the text, an application of the "double gesture", in order to suggest new possibilities of interpretation. What I aim to do is, rather, to look at how Hilda Hilst herself engages with this strategy in her reading of the world, thus originating a unique poetics. Deconstruction, therefore, will function in my analysis not as a method, but rather as a theoretical background that can throw new light upon Hilst's writing. Deconstruction theory will thus function in such a manner as to offer concepts through which my reading can be operated, rather than defining my mode of reading itself.

Anyhow, a definition of my own method for this analysis is necessary. In a sense, my method is interpretative: by regarding the narratives of the novels as an expression and thematization of language's inherent deconstruction, I am previously assigning a specific

²¹ Culler 2008, p. 2.

²² Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese friend", in Derrida, Jacques, *A Derrida reader: between the blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 273.

²³ Derrida, Jacques & Bass, Alan, *Positions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago P., 1982b), p. 41-43.

²⁴ Jonathan Culler, *Literary theory: a very short introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000[1997]), p. 140.

meaning to them. It is not, however, a symptomatic interpretation, which considers "meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter".²⁵ I will not approach the narratives of *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* as, ultimately, a philosophical allegory of the *theory* of deconstruction, but still, as a representation of the functioning of language, that Derrida described as its inherent capacity of deconstruction and conceptualized in a theory. In this sense, the novels are not regarded as illustrations of a philosophical theory, but as a literary representation of a phenomenon – that of how we approach language and how it affects us – that can take advantage of being read through philosophical concepts and offer new insights to the reader, who may or may not be aware of those concepts. By provoking a dialogue between Hilst's literature and Derrida's theory, two paths never crossed previously, I am proposing an exchange where the literary and the philosophical can, in my perspective, enhance one another.

My method is tangent to that of close reading insofar as close reading is seen as a method that gives "especially attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve what the reader takes to be the effects of the work or passage".²⁶ It is above all a "co-reading", in the sense of reading-with or reading-along, since not only the theory's vocabulary will accompany the process, providing concepts and definitions, but will even see itself thematized by the narrative. Derrida's reading method has even been described as an "activation", a reading "that pays close attention to writing as writing, not as a mere window on some other, more 'real', reality".²⁷ He proposes this method as a counterpoint to philosophy's traditionally symptomatic method of reading, which entails "the reduction of the text to a context, a moral, a biographical or historical origin, a formal scheme, a psychoanalytic template, a political agenda", seeking instead to "activate the movements and relations (nonlogical, nonconceptual) upon which all these reductions depend".²⁸ The method I use in this analysis can also be described as such an activation.

This process will be more evident in the first part of the analysis, "Deconstruction and metaphysics", where I will establish a common vocabulary between Hilst and Derrida in order to define the journeys of the protagonists Hillé and Amós Kéres in philosophical terms. One possible objection to this strategy could be that it would imply a violence (to borrow a term

²⁵ Stephen Best & Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An introduction", *Representations* 108:1 (2009), p. 1.

²⁶ Jonathan Culler, "The Closeness of Close Reading", *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010), p. 22

²⁷ Attridge, p. 77.

²⁸ Ibid.

from Derrida) imposed by the theory on the text – indeed, but yet only partially since, as we shall see, the striking similarities between Hilst's and Derrida's vocabularies work to the advantage of this kind of reading. In this part, I will look specifically at how the protagonists deal with the question of language as an unavoidable tool through which their metaphysical searches can take place. Here, I will introduce and define some of the most relevant terms in Derrida's theory of deconstruction, such as "supplement", "play", "différance", "trace", and "logocentrism" which will be defined as they are applied.

In the second part, "Deconstructive behaviors", the focus will lie on the way in which this approach to language is materialized in the form of what is interpreted as signs of madness – the protagonists' alienation from social norms, their relation to eroticism as obscenity, and the process of metamorphosis. Establishing a dialogue between Hilst's poetic vocabulary and the terminology proposed by Derrida in his strategy of deconstruction can both allow a different reading of these novels, one which activates the deconstructive strategy implicit in these novels, and cast new light on a theory that, as we have seen, has been considered controversial.

1. Decentered structures: deconstruction and metaphysics

— *One day I was told: your metaphysical obsessions are of no interest to us, Madame D, let's speak of man here and now.*²⁹

The metaphysical (μετά: "after", φυσικά: "physics") is the starting point of the narrative in *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes*. The protagonists, Hillé and Amós Kéres, respectively, undergo a life-changing experience that puts them in contact with questions that refer to a dimension "beyond the physical" realm of reality. For Hillé, the experience is her sorrow for her recently deceased husband Ehud. This process takes the form of a metaphysical investigation, led by questions that refer to an immaterial dimension, such as: "What does it mean to be dead?", or "who created the body of Evil?".³⁰ For Amós Kéres, the experience is a revelation on a hilltop, where he has a glimpse of understanding:

Poetry and mathematics. The black stone structure breaks and you see yourself in a saturation of lights, a clear-cut unhoped-for. A clear-cut unhoped-for was what he felt and understood at the top of that small hill. But he didn't see shapes or lines, didn't see contours or lights, he was invaded by colors, life, a flashless dazzling, dense, comely, a sunburst that was not fire. He was invaded by incommensurable meaning. He could say only that. Invaded by incommensurable meaning.³¹

What did Amós understand? The fact that it could not be formulated more precisely than as being "invaded by incommensurable meaning" indicates the metaphysical aspect of his search. In this sense, the term "metaphysical" is used by Hilst as a synonym for a sort of abstract, philosophical curiosity in which the protagonists engage.

The philosophical interest of the protagonists is a recurrent theme in all of Hilst's literature. Both novels (as well as a large part of her work) are dedicated to the memory of the philosopher Ernest Becker. The narrative itself brings references to, among others, Ivan Illich, Georges Bataille, and Bertrand Russel. Hillé and Amós read and talk about philosophy and experience life with philosophical glasses. However, when Hillé is told that her "metaphysical obsessions" are opposed to the question of "man here and now", another sense of metaphysics is revealed: a sense that relates to what the philosopher Jacques Derrida referred to as

²⁹ Hilda Hilst, *The obscene Madame D* (Nightboat Books, 2012), p. 10.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 8, p. 14.

³¹ Hilda Hilst, *With my dog-eyes* (Brooklyn: Melville House NY, 2014), p. 10.

"metaphysics of presence". And it is in this sense that the strategy of deconstruction enters the picture.

To do deconstruction presupposes the existence of something that has been constructed – for Derrida, presumed truths and beliefs that were constructed along the history of western philosophy, and that have always relied upon transcendental, metaphysical signifiers ("an invariable presence—*eidōs*, *arché*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth) to define, for example, what the "man here and now" means.³² The designation of such signifiers, or "invariable presence", means a moment of decision: one term is chosen *instead* of another, establishing hierarchical binary oppositions (such as essence/existence, man/animal, God/Evil, madness/reason, and so forth), which is the task of deconstruction to unveil – that is, de-construct. The philosophical experiences of Hillé and Amós reveal themselves to be unavoidably mediated by language – the questions of Hillé, Amós' difficulty in formulating himself. The way in which they relate to language can be looked at, as we shall see next, in dialogue with the way in which Derrida regarded language in his theory of deconstruction.

1.1 The play of significations and substitutions

According to Derrida, the truths and beliefs on which Western philosophy has relied are constructions built around a center, a metaphysical presence. One of the ways in which Derrida illustrates the metaphysics of presence is through the metaphor of the structure. The text "Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the human sciences" appears in the context of structuralism, and so Derrida refers to the history of Western philosophy as a series of "structures" that were given different "centers" (that is, the metaphysical "presence"). The function of the center, he writes, is to give coherence to the structure, by giving it "a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play."³³ To be in what Derrida calls the "play", therefore, means the loss of the center, which leads to a state of anxiety, "for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset".³⁴

³² Derrida 2008, p. 213.

³³ Derrida 2008, p. 212.

³⁴ Ibid. The English translation used here translates the original French "jeu" alternately as "game" as "play". In my analysis I give preference to the term "play".

Likewise, the life-changing experiences of Hillé and Amós throw them into a state of anxiety that is illustrated as structures that have lost a center. Amós, for example, describes his journey as "[t]he madness of the Search, which is made of concentric circles and never arrives at the center, the obscuring, incarnate illusion of finding and understanding".³⁵ *The obscene Madame D* opens with the following metaphor: "I saw myself removed from the center of a thing I don't know how to name".³⁶ This impossibility to name the center, the metaphysical presence, is what originates the play of signification. "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely", says Derrida.³⁷

In the novels, this metaphysical presence in which Hillé and Amós try to center their structures takes the form of God. Or rather, God functions as the projection of this presence, of the answer to their metaphysical searches, their "deepest question":

To return to the center would be to find the answer to the deepest question; however, there is no answer to what is not known, what is not glimpsed. The two characters are searching for something they can't name; in fact, God would only be a superficial vision of what they are searching for.³⁸

The impossibility of naming reveals a tension that lies in the core of deconstruction: the tension between the name and what it refers to, or between signifier and signified. In "Structure, sign and play...", Derrida also defines the movement of the play as "the movement of supplementarity", which refers to a tension between language being a system of finite signifiers and the possibilities of signification being infinite: "This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions".³⁹

The term "supplement" was originally employed by Derrida in his analysis of its use by Rousseau in his body of work, and became one of the designations for the possibility of deconstruction, as it means "either something added on to improve or complete it (the normal English meaning): to supplement one's income, to take a dietary supplement. Or it is something substituted, that which supplants the other. The latter also applies a threat, the

³⁵ Hilst 2014, p. 41.

³⁶ Hilst 2012, p. 4.

³⁷ Derrida 2008, p. 213.

³⁸ Pimentel, p. 174. My translation.

³⁹ Derrida 2008, p. 220.

supplement replaces the original".⁴⁰ Meaning both addition and (/or) substitution, supplementarity refers thus to the coexistence of several meanings in the play of signification.

Hillé and Amós, by losing their centers and being thrown into the play, deal with language's movement of supplementarity, that is, with the tension between a finite language and infinite possibilities of signification, in different ways that originate unique poetics. Derrida writes: "The *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*".⁴¹ Hillé, at one side, makes use of this overabundance in order to compensate for language's finitude. Her metaphysical search is defined by an excess of questions, her (failed) attempt to formulate an exact question that will lead to a satisfactory answer:

... my soul forever in constant emptiness, I sought after names, I palpated angles,
nooks, I caressed hems, looking inside, go figure, curls, wefts, twists, at the bottoms of
trousers, in the knots, the visible quotidians, the insignificant absurd, in the minima,
the light one day, the understanding of us all destiny, one day I will understand, Ehud
understand what?
life, death, these whys⁴²

Amós, on the other side, relies rather on the lack of language in order to avoid the movement of supplementarity. After the wordless revelation on the hilltop, he perceives language as an insufficient medium to express human experience, preferring, as a mathematician, "a short and harmonious equation that would scintillate the as-yet unexplained".⁴³

Hillé and Amós' different approaches to the movement of supplementarity, either trying to compensate for it with excess or to avoid it through lack, are both revealing a common preoccupation: that of accuracy. In both cases, it is suggested a feeling of frustration towards the impossibility to "crystalize the instant in the word, translate the spark and disgust in lucid parameters".⁴⁴ Because language, differently from a mathematical equation, does not function on a basis of exact correspondences. The relationship between signifier and signified is rather arbitrary, hence the play of significations and substitutions, or movement of supplementarity, or yet "différance" – another Derridean term that refers to the inaccuracy inherent to language and illustrates the aim of deconstruction.

⁴⁰ Peter Salmon, *An event, Perhaps : A biography of Jacques Derrida* (Verso Books, 2021), p. 141.

⁴¹ Derrida 2008a, p. 222.

⁴² Hilst 2012, p. 4.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 28.

1.2 The language of others: *différance* and deconstruction

The idea of language as an arbitrary system originates from Ferdinand de Saussure. Not only arbitrary but also differential: describing language as a system where "there are only differences without positive terms", he shows how every word only acquires its meaning from its position in relation to the entire system of language, and meaning is produced through the differences between words, rather than by a stable "origin" or "presence". In other words, language is a construction. When taking up the concept of "*différance*", Derrida is starting from this insight, and extending it to his deconstruction theory. *Différance* is, he writes, "the playing movement that 'produces' differences".⁴⁵

Since language, which Saussure says is a classification, has not fallen from the sky, its differences have been produced, are produced effects, but they are effects which do not find their cause in a subject or substance, in a thing in general, a being that is somewhere present, thereby eluding the play of *différance*.⁴⁶

The key to understanding the functioning of this term lies in its silent *a*. *Différance* and difference are homophonic words, however, by changing the written form with one letter, Derrida is able to join two different meanings of the French verb "*différer*": in English, "to differ" and "to defer". Meaning is produced by its movement of both differing and being deferred:

Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general.⁴⁷

By making these two meanings coexist in the same term, Derrida is illustrating the strategy of deconstruction: when taking apart a binary opposition, deconstruction does not aim to simply invert the hierarchy, maintaining it in the reverse order. Deconstructing is rather, by "rescuing" the subordinate term of the hierarchy and giving it a new meaning that is both different and deferred, evidencing this possibility of coexistence of different meanings – a possibility that exists precisely because language is both arbitrary and differential.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, "*Différance*", *Margins of philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago P., 1982a), p. 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The poetics of deconstruction in the narratives of Hillé and Amós include giving an account of their awareness of language's arbitrary and differential character. This can be expressed, for instance, as a feeling of alienation towards language that evidences its constructedness. In the words of Hillé: "Who names the world for me? To be here on Earth, the existence of the Earth, being born, deciphering oneself and learning the adequate language of others, to feel good".⁴⁸ By referring to language as the "adequate language of others", and acknowledging that the world is named *for* her rather than *by* her, Hillé is illustrating the fact that language is a constructed system, where one understands and interprets, "deciphers", one meaning by its relation to other meanings within the same system, "because language always also belongs to others. When stepping into language to let your voice take shape, language is always already there".⁴⁹

What leads back to the question of accuracy. The arbitrary and differential character of language is what allows the play and significations and substitutions. It allows *différance*. Hillé and Amós seek rather accuracy when dealing with language:

"Words. These were the fine veins that he had never managed to wholly extract from the mass of hard and rough earth where they lay deposited. He didn't want deceiving effects, or empty sonorities. [...] How to formulate exact words, various letters brought together, chained, short or long words, to extract from inside himself those fine veins that lay untouched there inside him? They were there, he knew it, but how to extract them? Everything would come undone."⁵⁰

In this passage, Amós is describing the impossibility of accuracy in the process of formulating a speech. Translating his feelings or thoughts into words would only evidence the failure of the signifier in making an exact correspondence to the referent, that is, the feeling or thought that the word is supposed to decode. The result would be rather "deceiving effects, or empty sonorities". Hillé as well offers a metaphor for the formulation of speech:

Dross, yes, the attempt to compose a speech without knowing anything of its beginning nor its end, nor why the necessity for this speech, why the necessity to try to situate oneself, which amounts to attempting to remain clutching a rope over the abyss and without even knowing how it is that one wound up there, nor whether one ought now to move to the right rather than the left, around the fog, below a roar, or above it?⁵¹

⁴⁸ Hilst 2012, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Hans Ruin, "Introduktion", in *Schibboleth* (Stockholm: Symposion, 1990), s. 17. My translation.

⁵⁰ Hilst 2014, p. 9f.

⁵¹ Hilst 2012, p. 43f.

For Hillé, the language-rope does not make a precise connection between sign and meaning, but it is rather hovering over an abyss of infinite possibilities of meaning. Paradoxically, it is precisely Hillé and Amós' attempts at accuracy which generate a poetics of deconstruction. Trying to avoid *différance*, the play of significations and substitutions, they end up reinforcing its functioning within language.

This contradiction is possible because, as Derrida stated, there are ways of relating to the play: the first one, which he defined as "the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilt-ridden, Rousseauian side of the game", is a way that "seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from free play and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation".⁵² This way of relating to the play is expressed in Hillé and Amós metaphysical search for answers, for an origin, whether in God or mathematics, a stable center to which they would arrive through language's accuracy. The other way of relating to the play "would be the Nietzschean affirmation; the joyful affirmation of the game of the world and of the innocence of its creation, the affirmation of an infallible world of signs without truth or origin, open to active interpretation".⁵³ Involuntarily, Hillé and Amós perform this way of relating to the play through the narrative outcome of their searches, which create a poetics of deconstruction. These two sides of the play are incompatible, says Derrida, "even if we live them as simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy".⁵⁴ In the following pages, the poetics of deconstruction will be analyzed closely on the basis of Hillé and Amós' individual approaches to language.

1.3 Hillé's poetics of excess

I file my nails in the dark, I cock my ears, I am leaned with my back against the
partition under the stairs, I listen to myself, there are living beings inside,
beyond the word, they express themselves but I don't understand, they palpitate,
breathe, there is a code in the middle, an immense umbilicus, it dilates, tries to
speak to me, I sound myself attentively, folded into myself, winds flowers
astonished birds, my name is Hillé, mein name Madame D, Ehud is my
husband, mio marito, mi hombre, what is a man?⁵⁵

⁵² Derrida 2008, p.223.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hilst 2012, p. 7.

In this passage, Hillé describes her decentering by referring to what would perform the function of a center (it could be her essence, her consciousness, or God) as something impossible to communicate with. Even though she is aware of the existence of something to be grasped, a "code in the middle" (the original text uses the term *centro*, "center"), embodied as "an immense umbilicus" (an "origin", as Derrida would say) that tries to express itself, her language is insufficient to establish contact with it. Her attempt to talk in different languages proves unsuccessful, since this communication could only be established "beyond the word". Word is, however, the only means of communication Hillé has at her disposal. Finite as it is, it forces Hillé to take excessive detours, and by doing it, to experiment with the infinite possibilities of creating meaning.

The mixing of languages, as well as the excess of questions, are strategies employed by Hillé that appear throughout the entire narrative. As Ehud puts it: "causa mortis? the accumulation of questions from his wife Hillé".⁵⁶ Another form in which the supplementary character of language takes place in the narrative of Hillé is through her use of neologisms. In order to achieve greater accuracy, she creates her own glossary with terms such as "laumim" and "intellijackass".⁵⁷ Or as the following excerpt, where Hillé resorts to excess in an attempt to accurately describe a tonality of red: "... once dead, I will have the color I always wanted to have, a saffron-red or a red without denomination, between brick-strawberry-sepia and shadow, by your side I chromo made in scarlet, finished the both of us, perfect because we are dead".⁵⁸

1.3.1 The proper name

Hillé's strategy of deconstruction through excess is better represented in her relationship to the proper name. "The naming of an object is to perform [...] an act of founding violence", according to Derrida, since it means to "perform a number of operations" with the objective of fixing one meaning or essence to what is named.⁵⁹ By calling attention to the effect of naming, Hillé discloses the arbitrariness of such an act:

Why is gold gold? Why is money money? Why am I called Hillé, and why am I on this Earth? I learned to name a great number of things, learned the names of a great

⁵⁶ Hilst 2012, p. 17.

⁵⁷ The word "laumim" does not have a meaning in Portuguese. "Intellijackass" is, as in the original *intelijumência*, a combination of words that allow two different meanings to coexist: an example of the use of *différance*.

⁵⁸ Hilst 2012, p. 49. "brick", in the original the neologism *tijolês*, a qualitative substantive derived from "tijolo", brick. The equivalent in English would be "brickness" or similar.

⁵⁹ Salmon 2021, p. 77.

number of people, but there must be a slew of things that have no name and yet they never cease to be what they are, and me if I weren't Hillé who would I be? Someone feeling and observing the world.⁶⁰

The proper name thus reflects language's process of signification: the unnamed things would therefore not lose their essence, "cease to be what they are", whilst the naming of "Hillé" brings, as it is the case with "gold" and "money", a set of significations that intend to fix a meaning, inscribing the named into the system of language.

However, this meaning can also be deconstructed through re-naming. The loss of name functions as a loss of center, and being re-named "Madame D" by Ehud ("from now on, I will call you Madame D. *D* for Dereliction, do you hear? Abandonment, neglect"), or by being re-named "sow" by the neighbors ("House of the Sow, that is what they call my house now), Hillé is able to engage in a deconstruction of herself by making new connections between the signifier (her name) and the signified (her supposed essence).⁶¹

I walked dark in the streets, I stopped at the edge of rivers that were also dark, and abject but clear in myself I lived with Hillé and her darkness and her pettiness, her having been and forget, her having been and not able to remember, her being and being lost. Today I live with Dereliction, with Madame D, the grandiloquence that dwells in her, her way of raising herself before an Other who doesn't listen to her, she spots herself, contorts herself before Him, old idiot, every which way.⁶²

The excerpt above also shows the employment of a narrative technique whose function is to put the deconstruction of the self in evidence. Suddenly interchanging first and third-person narratives, Hillé is alternately seeing herself from an internal and an external perspective. The effect on the reader is that of ambivalence, she is both herself and others. In the poetics of deconstruction, Hillé/Madame D/the Sow is both a Being as presence and a Being as sign, the Being assigned by the proper name.

The names of Hilda Hilst's characters are often a revealing source of analysis. In interviews, she often mentioned the significance of the names and encouraged the readers to research them. It is then possible that Hilst was aware of the homophony between Hillé and the greek term *hylè*, meaning "matter" and used as such in philosophical contexts.⁶³ From the

⁶⁰ Hilst 2012, 23.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 4, p. 6.

⁶² Ibid, 47.

⁶³ Derrida, for example, mentions it in *Of grammarology*, coincidentally in a subsection called "The battle of proper names", in which he discusses Levi-Strauss' anthropological study with the Nambikwara people in Brazil. In it, he compares the act of writing with that of constructing roads: "The *silva* [forest] is savage, the *via rupta* [road] is written, discerned, and inscribed violently as difference, as form imposed on the *hylè*, in the forest, in wood as matter".

same original Germanic word that originated Hillé comes also its variant "Hilda" or "Hilde", and readers and researchers of Hilst have thus speculated about the character being an alter-ego of the writer. In any case, the appearance of a sow named "hilde" (written in lowercase) in *With my dog-eyes* creates a further connection between these two novels: "And why not live with hilde? A Germanic name. She must be blonde. What I mean is she must be a white sow. They're rare".⁶⁴ The name Amós has, like many of Hilst's characters' names, a Hebrew origin whose meaning is related to the word "burden". This novel also brings a reflection on the question of the proper name and its assigned meanings in the figure of Libitina, Amós' brothel lover:

Your name is really Libitina?
 Yes it is, they confused it with another. A cousin of my mother's told my father he thought that Libitina had something to do with the word passion. Her mother thought it was pretty.
 Passion? Wouldn't it be libido?
 What? Like I would know, Amós? I only know that later they said it was all wrong. The cousin's cousin looked it up in a book and found out that Libitina was an old lady who took care of presents that people made to the dead. Mycology.
 What? You mean mythology?⁶⁵

The proper name functions as a means of centering the subject, providing it with an individual identity that is connected to the uniqueness of the name. But, such as with language in general, it can only function because there it is at the same time unique and repeatable. Another term through which Derrida highlights the sign's ambivalence between uniqueness and repeatability: "The individual, the single, the unique, this pure 'this', that occurs only once; Derrida treats these phenomena under the umbrella concept of 'datum'".⁶⁶ For the English language, "datum" originates the words date and data. The calendar's date functions in the same principle as the name, or the signifier: a principle of tension between "recurrence and uniqueness, repetition and singularity", which "derives its meaning from a fixed structure, according to which we assign names and numbers to individual and unique events or sequences of time in order to allow them to recur – to keep track of them, simply put".⁶⁷ In *The obscene Madame D*, this principle of the "datum" under which the proper name functions is taken up in a playful manner, in the figure of a character who is assigned, against

⁶⁴ Hilst 2014, p. 33.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 13f.

⁶⁶ Ruin, in Derrida 1990, p. 14. My translation.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

his will, a date for a proper name. This example provides further illustration of the violence that the proper name imposes on the subject, forced to center or re-center itself according to the meanings assigned by it:

what you need Tenth-Of-The-Month is to fuck
don't call me Tent-Of-The-Month, you know I don't like it
daddy why do they call him Tent-Of-The-Month, eh?
because every day he screams to his wife: not today, only on the tenth
why daddy?
because his wife wants him to stick her, boy, and he only sticks when he's
light-headed, on payday: the tenth of the month.⁶⁸

1.3.2 Deconstructing God

The practice of re-naming for evidencing the arbitrariness between signified and signifier is carried to its extreme in Hillé's re-naming of God. The Incommensurable, the Luminous, the Vehement, the Name, Pig Child Builder of the World, Precious Child, Glistening Divinoid Head, and the All-Powerful. These are some of the around twenty different names Hillé refers to God with. This overabundance is the apex of her poetics of excess, and the ultimate evidence of language's insufficiency since it is still not enough to establish contact with God. Hillé's conversation with Him, fused with her conversation with the deceased husband Ehud, is constituted mostly by unanswered questions. In the occasions where a direct conversation between Hillé and God seems to take place, it serves only to show the precarity of the connection between the parts:

[...] I am asking the Mad Child: are you there with Ehud? Death, fetid, worm, ditch,
swelling, are they all a part of You?
Hillé, nothing of me is an extension of you
Did we not make an agreement?
What?
You aren't a Father?
I know nothing of myself, how could I extend myself into another?
There was no contract?
What do you mean? You're crazy. I live in a void of darkness, I play with bones, I'm
dirty somnolent in a desert, there is nothingness and the darkness
I can't hear you
I am saying that I sleep most of the time and that I am dirty
What? What are you saying, my God? I can't hear you

⁶⁸ Hilst 2012, p. 38.

That one day a light may surge from here
What?⁶⁹

Besides showing how difficult the connection with God is, such as in a phone call with bad reception, the short conversation also depicts God in ways that are unexpected inside a Judeo-Christian tradition – living "in a void of darkness" from where "one day a light may surge", not omniscient nor paternal but rather knowing nothing of himself, "dirty somnolent in a desert".

Regarded as a method, deconstruction means "to examine [the] binary oppositions in which the first term is privileged – good/evil, positive/negative, pure/impure, simple/complex, essential/accidental, imitated/imitation (as well as speech/writing, man/woman, light/darkness, white/non-white, Western/Oriental) – to problematize them, uncover their fabrication, and analyze the violence that this initiates and sustains".⁷⁰ Re-naming God, and depicting Him in ways that differ from those in which He has been constructed, Hillé offer a deconstructive image of Him. Another example questions more of these binary oppositions:

Pig child, some place somewhere, in those beyonds, elsewhere, so far, where you are, wearing yourself out, inventing sophisticated machineries of flesh, and daring to delight on the seventh day: that man has a brain but can reach nothing, that he feels love but is never fulfilled, that I know I exist but never know anything of the reason for my most infinitesimal gestures, that I feel the paroxysm of hate and horror to the point at which it consumes and liberates me, that little by little I stop wanting to procreate and instead eat ass, that I crawl starved of all my senses, that you rotten, men, that you rotten and decomposed live body of worms, urn of ashes thereafter, that your peers forget you, that I forget and shout into eternity in search of a better idea of a new gangling geometry, more ecstasy for my plenitude of matter, liquors and oysters.⁷¹

There are several clues to Hillé's deconstruction of God in this excerpt. She begins this (one-part) conversation by animalizing, as well as infantilizing God (Pig child), who in the Western tradition is often imagined as an anthropomorphized, yet divine figure. She then deconstructs the notion of an exalted God: He, who, according to tradition, is intrinsically good and merciful, is portrayed as perverse, inventing man only to enjoy His leisure time and amuse Himself with his suffering. Towards the end of the quotation, God also becomes aware that He is a construction, a center around which man has built structures, and desires to be

⁶⁹ Hilst 2012, p. 20f.

⁷⁰ Salmon, p. 6.

⁷¹ Hilst 2012, p. 18.

liberated by him. God wishes to be forgotten by man in order to forget Himself and to be able to "search in eternity for a better idea" and "more ecstasy for my amount of matter", as even this binary opposition is deconstructed: God is portrayed not as a spiritual but as a material being, matter consuming matter, "liquor and oysters".

These inversions of God though are especially significant, taking into account the fact that God, who created man in His image, also gave man the task of naming. Through language, man re-names and re-creates God in his own image, and inverts the roles of creator and creature. But what deconstruction reveals is that the role of the creator is, already, always the role of the creature, since

both "God" and "man" are signified through and by a discourse, that is, through a consequential inversion, conceived as the result of their speech. The biblical conceit that "in the beginning was the word" is more often than not taken to be an account of divine origination through speech. God names, and brings into being what he names. But what if every beginning is already belated and occulted by virtue of the way in which it is signified?⁷²

By deconstructing God, either through the overabundance of proper names she refers to Him with or in the unexpected way she describes Him, Hillé, instead of coming closer to some truth or origin, instead of accuracy, is provoking herself the play of signification and, as a consequence, the destabilization of the structure that she has centered around God. "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely", writes Derrida.⁷³ By relating with what Derrida called the "negative" side of the play, the attempt of accuracy, Hillé is actually achieving its "positive" side, that "determines the noncentre otherwise than as loss of center".⁷⁴ Because of language's deconstructiveness, the center is not lost, but always replaced in the infinite play of significations and substitutions.

1. 4 Amós' poetics of lack

How do I feel? As if they'd placed two eyes on the table and said to me, I who am blind: this is that which sees. This is the material that sees. I touch the two eyes on the table. Smooth, still tepid (recently wrenched out), gelatinous. But I don't see the seeing. That's how I feel trying to materialize in narrative the convulsions of my spirit.⁷⁵

⁷² Butler, p. 17.

⁷³ Derrida 2008, p. 213.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 223.

⁷⁵ Hilst 2014, p. 38.

Differently from Hillé, Amós responds to language's movement of supplementarity by trying to eliminate it through the lack of words. The formulation of speech is compared with an attempt to see, and to see the act of seeing, but lacking the necessary tools, namely the eyes. Amós shows a feeling of alienation towards the formulation of speech as he lacks words. In the play of signification, the speech is formulated blindly. Laconic since childhood, Amós becomes even more self-conscious of the artificiality of human language after the wordless revelation on the hilltop. "How can the old love live in me if I understood the instant of Love and now belong to the world of mutes, the fingers wriggling with anxious signals and my throat wide with blanks?".⁷⁶

Therefore, although his internal discourse seems coherent to the reader, Amós' communication with others is represented by its failures, in his effort to make himself understood: "I respond to the others. To some. I forget the 'consider', 'therefore', 'let us assume', 'thence it follows' and attempt the incoherency of many words".⁷⁷ If the excess of words causes incoherency, Amós makes the opposite movement to that of Hillé, towards fewer and fewer words, in an attempt at mathematical accuracy. However, it turns out that *différance* can still show itself in scarcity: "Let us assume that much can be proven with a few words: an unprogrammed plus-minus, answer-surplus frightening through synthesis the other as well as itself, that which answers".⁷⁸ Because the play of signification is infinite, one can, with a few words, in the limitation of language, achieve much. This undecidability Amós refers to as an "unprogrammed plus-minus", both unpredictable and ambiguous, illustrates the operation of the play: an "answer-surplus", an excess of significations. It is this inaccuracy of *différance* that causes Amós anxiety: "There's a plus-minus in me that only frightens me".⁷⁹

Therefore, mathematics is represented in Amós' narrative as a counterpoint to language in its *différance*. With its unpredictable results, language is the opposite of a mathematical equation. At the same time, there is another side of Amós that lies under the surface and grows increasingly along the narrative: the poet. "I was born a mathematician, a magician / I was born a poet", says the first of the several poems that will all the more often cut through the prose narrative of the novel and allow Amós to embrace the *différance* of language.

⁷⁶ Hilst 2014, p. 42.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 15.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

1. 4. 1 Poetry and mathematics

"Poetry and mathematics", is what Amós saw in the instant of his revelation, which illustrates the coexistence in him of these two irreconcilable approaches to language. Mathematics is for Amós a center that can bring stability to his structure, and give him that "reassuring certainty" that syntax cannot: "In mathematics, the old world of catastrophes and syllables, of imprecision and pain, was cracking up".⁸⁰ The difference between poetry and mathematics is, in fact, *différance*. A non-solved equation can offer a "possibility of surprise", but one which is simply a question of deciphering:

I looked at numbers formulas equations theorems and it was a pleasure, a fiery freeze, a bodyguard for wandering alone without the speech-rupture of others, logicity and reason and nevertheless the possibility of surprise as though we were unfolding a piece of silk, blue triangles on the fresh surface and suddenly just a dull little grid, lines that we can separate and recompose into triangles again, yes, this we could do, but where did the blue get to, where?⁸¹

Language, on the other hand, does not offer equations that will lead to definitive answers, to a "center" or "origin" that can function as a definitive meaning. If language would be translated into an equation, it would rather be one where infinite results are possible. This is the sort of understanding that Amós has a glimpse of during the revelation: "I felt the un-feelable, I understood the non-equational".⁸²

There is a mutual influence between poetry and mathematics in Amós' experience of the world. Because at the same time as he seeks mathematical accuracy in language, his non-conceptualized, "non-equational" revelation reveals another dimension of understanding where the principle of exact correspondence does not apply. In this sense, the concept of *différance* invades Amós' mathematical perception of reality:

We pass over to the other side. Of the triangle now. It wasn't the flesh that was harmed, no. Stones and shatterings. The sinuous slowly invading the rigid hypothetical track of equations. An S of sweet seduction. Of Shadow, of Sorbet, of Solution until, a thousand steps later, feet are burned in dunes of sun.⁸³

⁸⁰ Hilst 2014, p. 19.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 28f.

⁸² Ibid, p. 33.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 43.

Amós' change of paradigm, illustrated as passing to the other side of the triangle, is that of the sinuosity of language in its *différance* invading a rigid, mathematical conception of reality. A change that, for him, is both seductive and risky: one can be burned by taking it too far.

At the beginning of the narrative, Amós shows a preference for haikus, the more concise and accurate form of poetry – poetry's equivalent to an equation, perhaps. Although, throughout the narrative, his poems get longer and more abstract. There is a correspondence between Amós' trajectory after the revelation, seeking back to that glimpse of understanding, and his increasing use of figurative language, which distances itself from mathematical accuracy and makes use of the possibilities opened by language's play of significations. From the middle of the narrative, Amós starts a series of poems where he portrays his act of "designifying":

Designifying
I'm melting the measure
I created.
Blotting the lines:
Circles
That all around me I drew
And where I lived
Distorted and trembling
Before the auburn of life.⁸⁴

"Designifying" is Amós' own term for designating what Derrida calls language's *différance*. If de-signifying means discarding one meaning, it is at the same time a movement that produces meaning, showing a possibility of re-signification.

Another Derridean term that can be applied here is "trace", which refers to language's vestigial character: creating new meanings is less a task of substitution than it is one of addition, the several possibilities of signification coexisting. For Amós, "melting the measure" is the movement necessary for "blotting the lines". Or, as in a verse further on: "Designifying / I am digging out screams / Burying height and hauteur".⁸⁵ In the complementary movement of digging out and burying, new meanings emerge extending the trace of the previous, "discarded" ones. Deconstructing can be understood as this movement of both burying and digging out, as long as both the "old" and the "new" meanings remain. After the revelation, thus, Amós is able to engage in a deconstruction of the self – not because the mathematician's worldview is substituted by the poet's, but precisely because

⁸⁴ Hilst 2014, p. 32.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 45f.

both sides that inhabit him can coexist: "I'll say with precision what my non-comprehending is. Of majestic meaning. Colorful. Dilated".⁸⁶

1. 4. 2 The opposition speech/writing

Derrida's most important work, *Of grammatology*, is mostly centered on the deconstruction of the opposition between speech and writing. According to him, the history of Western philosophy has privileged speech as a more "true" form of language, writing being a secondary, supplementary representation of speech. "Writing, from this perspective, is the external, the physical, the nontranscendental, and the threat posed by writing is that the operations of what should be merely a means of expression might affect or infect the meaning it is supposed to represent".⁸⁷ Amós, in his attempt at mathematical accuracy, transparency of speech, prefers to renounce speech altogether. Nevertheless, it is in the practice of writing poems that Amós finds his way to communicate, and thus engages in the deconstruction of the opposition between speech and writing. His shift from the mathematical to the poetical language comes, as we have seen, as an expression of his embracing of language's *différance*. "Even without existing, I'm enjoying it very much. Drink. [...] On the fifth glass, I try out a few poems. On the tenth glass, I finish them. Then I read them aloud".⁸⁸

Poetry allows Amós a new perspective on language. His previous belief in the possibility of mathematical accuracy starts to be put in doubt:

At night returning to his studies, searching, searching principally for order, mind and heart integrated once more in those magnificent suns of ice formulas expansions expressions, Amós would drift sublimely over some pages, and wasn't it in a sudden burst that everything was no longer? Like if you thought you knew every little corner of your own house and then discovered, for instance in the hall through which you'd passed many times, in the hallway my God, you discovered a crag with mirrored surfaces or a black prism.⁸⁹

This change of perspective on language entails a change of perspective on the outcomes of language, constituting a critique of what, in Derrida's terminology, receives the designation of "logocentrism",

⁸⁶ Hilst 2014, p. 40.

⁸⁷ Culler 2008, p. 91.

⁸⁸ Hilst 2014, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

because the "phonocentrism" that treats writing as a representation of speech and puts speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning is inextricably associated with the "logocentrism" of metaphysics, the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning – thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word – conceived as existing in itself, as foundation.⁹⁰

By assuming an anti-logocentric perspective on language with the help of poetry, Amós is able to challenge his own idea of accurate speech, facing its artificiality:

A poem lacing up its shoes
Preparing itself entirely
And gentlemen
Making sausages with facts
Tiny eructations
Flitting terrified around the room.⁹¹

As superficial as sausages and eructations, speech is itself a supplement.

In *Of grammatology*, Derrida takes the term "supplement" from Rousseau's body of work, where it acquires two different meanings, both that of addition and that of replacement. Speech is, for Rousseau, superior to writing. "Languages are made to be spoken", he says, "writing serves only as a supplement to speech".⁹² Contradictorily, writing is the means necessary for him to improve, correct the flaws of speech. What Derrida draws attention to is that this logic of supplementarity functions not only with writing in relation to speech, but even with speech itself in relation to what it means to represent. "The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself", he writes.⁹³ Speech is, as much as writing, a system of signs and functions according to the rule of *différance*. This is the insight Amós comes to through the practice of poetry: if writing allows him to *dessignify*, it is because language itself, both in its phonetic and graphic form, bears the capacity of being *dessignified*. "Writing can be compensatory, a supplement to speech, only because speech is already marked by the qualities generally predicated of writing: absence and misunderstanding".⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Culler 2008, p. 92.

⁹¹ Hilst 2014, p. 22.

⁹² Derrida 1998, p. 144.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 145.

⁹⁴ Culler 2008, p. 103.

2. Deconstructive behaviors

— *it's the only way to stay alive, trying not to understand.*⁹⁵

The first part of this analysis sought to analyze the poetics of deconstruction in *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* as expressed in the character's different approaches to language's inherent *différance*, in their different strategies to manage its movement of supplementarity. As we have seen, Hillé and Amós' poetics are driven by a search for accuracy in language that has a metaphysical motivation, that is, the search for a center or origin that can re-stabilize the structure of their worldviews after a life-changing experience. Besides that of language, there is yet another dimension of the narrative in which this poetics is represented, namely through deconstructive behaviors.

The life-changing experiences of Hillé and Amós provoke, as we have seen, an anxiety that is expressed in their relationship to language. Along with it, they undergo a series of behavioral changes, both similar and different for the two of them. They both show an immediate need for isolation, since they feel alienated not only from the common language, but from society's norms in general. This non-conformity is expressed to a large extent by their relationship to the body's most basic needs, especially in what regards their sexuality. The strong connection to the body is materialized in their increasing identification with animality, culminating in a process of metamorphosis that coincides with death.

In the literary work of Hilda Hilst, the materiality of the physical body is as significant to the characters as their philosophical concerns. As Eliane Moraes puts it: "by juxtaposing a poetry of the pure and immaterial with the realm of the perceptible and contingent that constitutes daily human life, Hilst exceeds her own method, subordinating abstract models to the concrete imperatives of the material".⁹⁶ In this manner, by aiming her attention to the body's materiality in its most basic needs, especially regarding sexuality, Hilst became no less known for having written "provocative" characters that challenge normative social norms than she is for her more abstract, philosophical thematic. As it will be demonstrated next through the cases of Hillé and Amós, her characters' inversion of such needs is often interpreted, from the point of view of social norms, as a sign of madness.

According to Alva Martínez Teixeira, it is possible to draw a pattern in Hilst's characters, "since they end up coinciding in many of their characteristic traits, such as, for

⁹⁵ Hilst 2014, p. 47.

⁹⁶ Moraes, p. 62.

example, the existential obscurity caused by the feeling of degeneration and the feeling of death".⁹⁷ As Hillé expresses it by speaking "of the burden when old age comes, of the disappearance, of that thing which doesn't exist but is raw, alive, Time",⁹⁸ such as does Amós by poetically interpellating God that "there is old age and death / In everything that you created: suns, galaxies. And in us: / Animals of your pasture",⁹⁹ it is clear that "Hilst's characters manifest a ruthless awareness of the fleetingness and scarcity of the time at their disposal".¹⁰⁰ In fact, death and metamorphosis coincide in these novels, constituting an apex in her representation of the material condition.

Nevertheless, what I will argue for in this part of the analysis, is that this dimension of Hilst's literature is not a contradiction of her metaphysical motif, but rather the ultimate expression of it. Contrary to Moraes' argument that "the animal enunciates an impersonal plane, purely biological, on which identities are reduced to the particularity of their material", an analysis supported by Derrida's theory of deconstruction can allow a reading where the characters' sense of mortality, culminating in metamorphosis/death, represents rather a liberation from this "existential obscurity" (or in Derrida's words, the anxiety caused by a desire for a "reassuring certainty").¹⁰¹ Instead, the anxiety of Hillé and Amós is caused by the limitations of the human condition, of the decentered subject, whether expressed through the limitations of language or of the materiality of the body. It is by finding themselves in the limits of these limitations, in an attempt to transpose them in order to reach a supposed metaphysical truth, that Hillé and Amós navigate the ambivalent zone of madness.

2.1 The opposition madness/reason

The behavioral changes undergone by Hillé and Amós are not immediately perceived by themselves, but are, instead, informed of it through the gaze of others. In their own perspectives, what takes place is rather the philosophical investigation brought about in the context of the loss of a center, their attempt to reach a metaphysical truth.

Hillé, people find your way of looking more and more strange
what way?
you know very well
it's that I don't understand

⁹⁷ Teixeira, p. 76. My translation.

⁹⁸ Hilst 2012, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Hilst 2014, p. 54.

¹⁰⁰ Teixeira, p. 79. My translation.

¹⁰¹ Moraes 2018, p. 68.

what don't you understand?
I don't understand the eye, and I'm trying to get closer.
I don't understand the body either, that caltrop, nor the bloody logic of the days, nor
the faces that stare at me in this village in which I live, nor what are a house, a
concept, what legs are, what is coming and going, toward where and what [...].¹⁰²

Hillé herself, as the excerpt shows, does not share the perception of her gaze becoming "more and more strange". In fact, the object of strangeness for her is the fact of being stared at in the village. In her conception, it is not her that becomes mad, but the neighbors:

sow, exhibitionist bitch, a small mercy she only shows her privates in her hovel
that's not true, and the enormous masks she displays in the window, who has the
right to frighten the world like that?
say Luzia, your behind frightens people too
and your ass, your trap just the same
your fetid toothless mouth too
jesus the neighbors have lost their minds¹⁰³

There is a text of Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", in which he points out the opposition madness/reason as a construction of Western philosophy. The text is an answer to Foucault's book *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, in which he attempts to write a "history of madness itself". An impossible task, argues Derrida, since madness can only be conceived as an opposition to a supposed reason: "The attempt to write the history of the decision, division, difference runs the risk of construing the division as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation".¹⁰⁴ In this way, it is only within the logic of reason that it makes sense to point to anything outside that logic as "madness". In *The Obscene Madame D* and *With My Dog-Eyes*, the protagonists are perceived as mad by others who place themselves in the position of the rational.

In this sense, the gaze of others is diagnosing: Hillé's process of madness is perceived as the extreme conclusion of her sorrow for the deceased husband:

madame D, madame D, look, two little buns for you, I made them myself, it's
me, your neighbor, do you remember? listen madame D, you cannot shut
yourself away like that, death is something for me there's no recipe, y'know,

¹⁰² Hilst 2012, p.6f.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", in *Writing and Difference* (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 41.

he'd be sad, monsieur Ehud, to see you like this, he's dead for sure, death takes all of us, still you could collaborate some with your neighborhood, couldn't you? all those faces you put when you decide to open the window frighten my children [...].¹⁰⁵

For Amós, the offered diagnosis is that of burnout, mental exhaustion caused by work, and he is asked to take vacations in order to recover:

Let's proceed, Professor, I can't stay much longer, so please just take a leave of absence, twenty days, relax. But sir, you still haven't been clear with me about the rumors. Very well: there are obvious signs of wandering off. Pardon? Of aloofness, if you like, yes, of aloofness on your part during classes, sentences that break off and only continue after fifteen minutes, Professor Kéres, fifteen minutes is too much, they say you simply disconnect. I disconnect? What sentences were they? It doesn't matter, please just rest, take vitamins, tranquilizers. He takes off his glasses again, covers his top lip with his bottom one, sighs, smiles: come on come on, don't worry yourself, you've always been impeccable, just excellent, but between us ... The dean clasps me by the arm, squeezes my wrist in his fingers: between us, they're not understanding anything anymore. Who? Your students, Professor, your students.¹⁰⁶

As a result of the diagnosing gaze, grounded in the metaphysical opposition madness/reason, Hillé and Amós gain awareness of an imposed state of mind, which collaborates with their deconstructions of the self. This is materialized in the narrative with the technique of shifting the narrative voice between first and third person:

From here I can hear him comparing the lucidity of an instant to the opacity of infinite days, I can hear him thinking of the various manners of madness and suicide. The madness of the Search, which is made of concentric circles and never arrives at the center, the obscuring, incarnate illusion of finding and understanding. Madness of the refusal, one of saying everything's okay, we're here and that's enough, we refuse to understand. The madness of passion, the disordered appearance of light upon flesh, delicious-tasting chaos, idiocy feigning affinities. The madness of work and of possession. The madness of going so deep and later turning to look and seeing the world awash in vain slaughter, to be absolutely alone in the depths. Is Amós? From here can I hear him thinking how should I kill myself? or how should I kill in me the various forms of madness and be at the same time tender and lucid, creative and patient, and survive?¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Hilst 2012, p.12.

¹⁰⁶ Hilst 2014, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 41f.

In this passage, the question of madness for Amós reveals itself as ambivalent. There is a sort of madness in which he engages: the metaphysical search, the Search with capital S, described as an "incarnate illusion of finding and understanding". But to abandon this sort of madness, engaging instead in its refusal and "saying everything's okay, we're here and that's enough, we refuse to understand", would also be madness. In this manner, Amós inverts the opposition madness/reason, in the same way as Hillé does by stranging the gaze she receives from the neighbors, by returning the diagnosing gaze to a normative society that undertakes other sorts of madness, the madness of refusal, of passion, of work and possession.

The poetics of deconstruction, here, shows itself in two manners. On the one hand, through the protagonists returning the diagnosing gaze, the classification received by the surroundings, thus inverting the metaphysical opposition between madness/reason. On the other hand, through the narrative technique of alternating narrative voices, which allows Hillé and Amós to view themselves from an outside perspective that disconnects them from the Being assigned to them by the proper name (see also section 2.1).

2.2 Metaphorical eroticism

Madame D, the vital comprehension of life is to contain the heart. make me a
coffee
And in the darkness, I buffalo do not fear, I am my own master, I don't know what
darkness is but I accommodate it, the water strokes m flanks, I slide into myself,
the enchantment of a snout in waters, I don't sense you, I vibrate with my four
hooves, I am the master of my own body, my great hard body, buffalo, do I know
death? buffalo, do I stalk infinity?
contain the heart, is that what you said?
I also asked you for a coffee¹⁰⁸

As in the excerpt above, the narrative of *The obscene Madame D* takes place primarily through the dialogue between Hillé and the recently deceased Ehud. At times, it is God who takes the place of the interlocutor. From an outside perspective, however, the conversation is actually Hillé's monologue – one of the signs interpreted by the surroundings as proof of her madness. Which Hillé is informed about by Ehud, or the materialized memory of him: "Are you talking to yourself now, Madame D? you know, Hillé, you've got to see people, you've got to fuck me, and pull yourself together a bit".¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Hilst 2012, p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

This is representative of the function of the character Ehud in the narrative: to pull Hillé back to the dimension of materiality, reminding her of its inalienability from her philosophical concerns: "look, this cloistering of yourself has a lot to do with the body, people need to fuck, are you listening, Hillé?".¹¹⁰ Hillé's philosophical speeches are repeatedly interrupted by (the ghost of) Ehud's trivial remarks, whether by recalling their past sex life, commenting on her appearance, or simply asking her to make him a cup of coffee. As a complement to Hillé's relationship with language analyzed previously, Ehud materializes the part of Hillé's consciousness which reminds her of the impossibility of transcendence, of reaching the metaphysical dimension: she is, after all, still human.

The participation of the figure of God in this dialogical monologue, constituting the triangle Hillé-Ehud-God, allows a number of interpretations. God is addressed as a father (even though a deconstructed such), so the strong sexual connotation of the conversation provides the tripartite relationship with a charge of mystical Electra complex. Hillé calls herself an "incestuous theophagite" and plays with the materiality of "the body of God", as the communion bread is called in the Christian tradition, the absurdity of the ritual of ingesting it and the sexual connotations it brings:

I ingested the body of God and I must continue, I did it because I believed, but nonetheless I didn't always understand, I contemplated this pig-world and thought to myself; He has nothing, That One, but nothing to do with this, This One inside has nothing to do with this, This-One, The Luminous, The Vehement, The Name, I ingested deeply, salivating, licking my lips I demanded: make it such that I understand, that's all.¹¹¹

But, as the passage also shows, Hillé's sexual desire is no more than a projection. Ehud's insistence in establishing a sexual conversation with Hillé is repeatedly ignored by her, who rather directs it towards her actual desire: the philosophical desire, her metaphysical search for answers, projected in the image of God:

go on, come now, get undresses, take, kiss me, open your mouth, more, don't groan like that, these groans aren't for me, I know, it's for the Pig Child that you groan, for the invisible, for the light the disgust, you fornicate with that Other, don't fuck with me, damn you, you don't fuck with me.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Hilst 2012, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 6.

¹¹² Ibid, p.37.

Since Hillé's conversations with Ehud/God are actually her monologue, her sexual acts are performed with neither, but rather with herself. The question of masturbation (auto-affection, to use the Derridean term) is taken up by Derrida in *Of grammatology*, in his analysis of Rousseau's use of the term "supplement". As mentioned above (section 1.1), with "movement of supplementary" Derrida is referring to the tension between language's limitedness and the unlimitedness of possible significations within it. This idea is originally based on the sexual connotation of the supplement for Rousseau, where masturbation supplements, accreasing and substituting by imagination, the sexual act with a "presence".

But what is no longer deferred is also absolutely deferred. The presence that is thus delivered to us in the present is a chimera. Auto-affection is a pure speculation. The sign, the image, the representation, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusions that sidetrack us.¹¹³

Language, says Derrida, functions according to the same principle:

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [suppléant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can fill itself up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.¹¹⁴

Thus, for Hillé, the absence of Ehud is supplemented by her imagination, at the same time as the imagined presence of Ehud is a supplement for the imagined presence of God ("you fornicate with that Other"), who, in turn, is a supplement for her desire for a metaphysical truth. Derrida writes about the "chain of supplements": the necessity of supplementing announces a necessity of "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception".¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, the eroticism of Hillé is performed publicly and interpreted as further proof of madness:

¹¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, Corrected ed., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) p. 154.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 145.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 157.

Madame D, stop doing that, that behavior befits a shameless woman, ah! what's this, madona, showing your privates now, hey Antonia! hey Tunico! all I did was bring her bread and look at how she's done herself up, she's all naked, oh Blessed Virgin! she's lost her marbles, should be handed over to the police that woman.¹¹⁶

In *With my dog-eyes*, Amós' relationship to eroticism is subject to a similar misinterpretation. As a result of his need for isolation, he plans to move in into a brothel he used to visit as a young student. Even though Amós takes part in sexual activities in the brothel, what he seeks in there is not sexual fulfillment, but peace of mind for his studies: "Staring at the ceiling I think I should take a walk down to Maria Ancuda's brothel. Are they all dead? Freshness. Lightness. Early morning brothel silence. Would there still be a corner for my desk?".¹¹⁷ From the outer perspective of Libitina, his lover, this is interpreted as a fetish:

Solid Libitina, her breasts those of a twenty-year-old. She faked her sighs, and expelled ohs ays baby you're killing me cutting me like a knife you're socking it to me and other silly things, her little-girl teeth, thick gums, put your little books between my legs, she asked once as though she suspected some sort of defect in me, don't you want to? you want to cum on the thing you like the most, your little books, don't you baby?¹¹⁸

The erotic experiences of Amós are thus, such as is the case with Hillé, a supplement for a desire that is beyond the body's physical needs. In his "chain of supplements", his brothel lover Libitina, whether in his physical presence or in Amós' imagination, supplements his sex life with his wife Amanda. At the same time, Amós' sex life in general, with both Amanda and Libitina, is a supplement for his metaphysical desire.

[...] good-night my love Amanda tells me, sated in this moment, her arms finally at rest, one of her hands on my chest, such effort to complete that act, such an effort I'm making, debaucheries that I wrenched out from a darkness in me, Amanda-Libitina interlaced, I nude in my forty-eight years sucking her down the middle, the hair wet, I nude at twenty getting royally sucked, the two mouths salivating over this poor cock [...].¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Hilst 2012, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Hilst 2014, p. 27.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 14f.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 19f.

In fact, eroticism acquires for Amós a nihilistic overtone. Associated with his aggravated laconism after the wordless revelation on the hilltop, entailed by the insight that in a world where, due to the play of signification, meanings are no longer accurate, Amós' only alternative is to abandon the search for meaning. But still doomed to carry on enduring human life, Amós approaches the materiality of the body in a self-destructive manner that reaches the extreme of suicidal impulses. In this new paradigm, sexuality is regarded as an expression of obscenity:

[...] I reflect: after that incommensurable experience there are only two options: live a pathetic, indecent life, transude obscenity, why not? Get drunk every night, and vicious, sputtering, shake my dick timetotime for Amanda's friends, plumed knowitalls, psychologists historians nattering housewives, wives of my horrid colleagues, and jerk off right between their thick legs, stiff and bright exploding with haikus, eh? I close my eyes. The second option: abandon house Amanda son university. Have nothing. Lean my carcass against a nearby wall and here comes someone: you hungry, man?¹²⁰

Eroticism, therefore, takes on a supplementary character for both Hillé and Amós. Hillé's auto-affection supplements her metaphysical search by accrescing the imagined presence of Ehad/God in her lonely present, at the same time substituting both her physical and metaphysical needs. For Amós, his sex life with Amanda and Libitina, as well as his imagined "obscene" life, supplement the emptiness left by the instant of revelation.

2.3 Becoming animals

As we have seen so far through the treatment of madness and eroticism, Hillé and Amós' relationship with the materiality of the body is an extension of that with language. In their poetics of excess and lack, language, inaccurate as it is, is shown as an obstacle to access to the metaphysical. At the same time, it is the tool through which communication can take place, which allows their poetics that uses the play of signification as its raw material. Language is, in fact, one expression of the materiality of the body and an aspect of the argument made in this chapter, that the poetics of deconstruction also shows itself in the physical dimension of the narrative, as deconstructive behaviors. Hillé and Amós sense of mortality and consciousness of physicality is not a contradiction, but rather a confirmation of their metaphysical searches, showing the body, such as language, as an unavoidable obstacle, but also an inalienable tool. In the words of Amós: "Amós Kérés. Innocent as a little

¹²⁰ Hilst 2014, p. 26.

animal-child gazing On High. But they say the High is nothing and that you need to watch your step. Your ass too. With a mirror. I'm looking. Unforgettable grotesque condition".¹²¹

The ass as a symbol of this apparent contradiction, the aporia between the "unforgettable grotesque condition" and the metaphysical desire, recurs in *The obscene Madame D*:

Oh Lord, do you have like we do the same fetid hole? Hidden back there, but recalling itself to you how many times a day, hidden all compressed, humble back there, but draining all vanity, impossible for man with that luxury in his back to believe himself to be a sneeze from the Divine, senators, endless speeches, the polished vests of politicians, a carnation at the buttonhole, women in satin, looking askance, fussing, their permed hair, but the hole there, did you think of it?¹²²

If God created man in His image, He would, then, necessarily own "the same fetid hole". Operating the deconstruction of the oppositions God/human, Divine/earthly, immaterial/material, the contradiction is, however, only apparent. The process of deconstruction, as we have seen, does not entail an inversion of hierarchies, but the maintenance and acceptance of its contradiction. The fetid hole is a luxury, the High is nothing and the ass is just valid a connection with the metaphysical as the soul.

The process of metamorphosis is the definitive expression of this apparent aporia. By becoming, respectively, a sow and a dog, Hillé and Amós provide alternative – deconstructed – interpretations for their madness and its related eroticism, as well as take their poetics of deconstruction to its apex. Because deconstructing the opposition human/animal is ultimately a question of language, as Derrida reminds us, calling attention to the fact that "animal" is but "an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature".¹²³ As is the case with the opposition reason/madness, there is no inherent boundary between the two sides until it is assigned through language.

The point of departure of this text of Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am", is his experience of seeing himself naked in front of his cat. The gaze of the cat provokes in him a feeling of shame, and shame for being ashamed, which he calls "*animalséance*" (a wordplay with the French words *animal* and *malséance*, which means "impropriety"): "the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in

¹²¹ Hilst 2014, p. 40.

¹²² Hilst 2012, p. 24f.

¹²³ Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am", *Critical Inquiry* 28:2 (Winter, 2002), p. 392.

truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant".¹²⁴ Being called a "sow" by the neighbors is part of Hillé's classification as mad and involves her approach to eroticism, as "sow", *porca* in Portuguese, has a double figurative meaning that can refer both to lack of hygiene or to a person's supposedly indecent behavior, especially regarding one's sexuality. Naked in front of the neighborhood, Hillé is mad, indecent and dirty: "look, The crazy woman is watching us / she rolls her little sow eyes / Jesus she's all ruffled".¹²⁵ Her nudity, however, has a different meaning from her own perspective – the perspective of a being becoming animal, from where it can be deconstructed:

The animal, therefore, is not naked because it is naked. It does not feel its own nudity. There is no nudity 'in nature' [...] Man could never become naked again because he has the sense of nakedness, that is to say of modesty or shame. The animal would be in nudity because it is nude, and man in nudity to the extent that he is no longer nude.¹²⁶

In the process of becoming the sow, Hillé is neither naked nor mad. The animal does not experience *animalséance*. The sow, for her, stands rather for her advancing in the metaphysical journey:

In the eyes of the village, of these practically adjoining houses, in the midst of all these people I'm like a giant graying sow, for many of those I have known I'm a little red sow and questioning, prowling around the tables and in corners, burrowing flesh and skeleton trying to reach the tender, the buried, the sparkling white of your bones, for my mother I was only ever a question, pride, paradox, whereas Hillé before her father had always been the secret, attentiveness, a conch, what is passion?¹²⁷

This duplicity of meanings assigned to the sow constitutes already a deconstructive approach, but it is complicated further in view of the deconstruction of God, named "Pig Child" by Hillé. This play of meanings questions not only the opposition human/animal but even that of human/divine, or material/immaterial. The word "body", *corpo* in Portuguese, is

¹²⁴ Derrida 2002, p. 372.

¹²⁵ Hilst 2012, p. 40f.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 373f.

¹²⁷ Hilst 2012, p. 12f.

an anagram of "pig", *porco*.¹²⁸ Hillé emphasizes the ingestion of the body of Pig Child and that of animals, blurring the lines between animal, human and divine:

If we ate one another's flesh, what taste? and a soup of ankles? And a soup of feet?
We put pork's feet in food don't we? Why must everything die, Ehud, eh? Animals,
say, why do we kill them? To eat. But eating is abominable, no? All that stuff going
down the tube and later becoming mass and even later shit.¹²⁹

A similar strategy is employed in the narrative of Amós, where the deconstructive poetics make use of the anagrams "dog" and "God".

The little boy:
it was God that
makes this silly
world, daddy?

Yes, little buddy.
He was also a
Nobel Prize?
Yes, little buddy.

How ddodered
What?
How dog, daddy.¹³⁰

The sow makes an appearance in Amós' story, as we have seen, in the figure of hilde. Creating a connection between the two novels, it is as Isaiah's pet is the already metamorphized – that is to say, deified – Hillé (see also section 2.1): "The sow is God. All stretched out too. Dreaming. hilde and her little eyes the color of artichoke. Smooth-ribbed and innocent. The artichoke has everything to do with God".¹³¹

For Amós, such as it is for Hillé, the process of becoming-animal is a metaphor for the metaphysical search: "And everything begins anew, the patience of these animals infinitely digging a hole, until one day (I hoped, why not?) transparence inundates body and heart, body

¹²⁸ The play with the words *corpo* and *porco*, "body" and "pig", is recurrent in Hilst's work. She showed elsewhere the intentionality of this wordplay: "because each one of us, Clódia, has to find our own pig. (Attention, not to be confused with body.) Pig, person, pig, body inside out". Original: "porque cada um de nós, Clódia, tem que achar o seu próprio porco. (Atenção, não confundir com corpo.) Porco, gente, porco, corpo às avessas." (Hilda Hilst, *Contos d'escárnio*, 79).

¹²⁹ Hilst 2012, p. 22.

¹³⁰ Hilst 2014, p. 38. The word for "dog" in Portuguese is *cão*, but the English word is also used in the original, as it is the case with this poem, written in English.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 40.

and heart of mine, Amós, animal infinitely digging a hole".¹³² From the outside world perspective, Amós is going through physical changes, namely an inclination of the head and an involuntary smile, that are interpreted as signs of his maddening:

Some days beforehand Amanda had said that I was smiling in a new way. New? I asked. Yeah, weird, you don't smile like that. But was I smiling? Of course you were smiling, Amós, or at least your mouth was all stretched out, look, you're almost always smiling, and it looked like this. Her mouth made an imperceptible movement to the right, a little crease on that side of the face. And yes, it looked like a smile. But why was I smiling?¹³³

As it becomes clearer throughout the narrative, these physical changes constitute his ongoing metamorphosis. Becoming a dog is perceived by Amós not as a sign of madness, but as an approximation of a more natural state:

I can tell my head is inclined too far to the left. I try to center it. It keeps leaning gradually to the left. And the fact that I am standing also worries me. How is it possible that I can stay standing up? I'd be more comfortable on all fours, my eyes scraping the floor, my hands wide-open and stuck to the surface of the streets. It would be safer for me.¹³⁴

Also his muteness, accentuated after the revelation, is an expression of his transition toward animality. Analyzing the opposition human/animal, Derrida calls attention to the aspect of language in the construction of the opposition: the limit between human and animal is, after all, imposed through designation. "Finding oneself deprived of language, one loses the power to name, to name oneself, indeed to respond to one's name. (As if man didn't also receive his name and his names!)"¹³⁵

Muteness is, thus, assigned to the animal on the basis of the system of language: "The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what respond means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction".¹³⁶ A response, therefore, presupposes a common language. The difficulty of communication between the human language and the animals' wordless language, the challenge of being able to read a reaction that is not a response, is taken up by Hillé:

¹³² Hilst 2014, p. 19.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 16.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

¹³⁵ Derrida 2002, p. 388.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 377.

I suffocate in this abyss, I grew up searching, I gazed the gazes of animals facing the sun, steps of the old stairway, I gazed at the back leaned against the wall and my eye in that eye, I saw questions float in those gellified waters; others, dead for so long, had sedimented that eye, and I entered into the body of the horse, the pig, the dog, held my own face and cried.
 what's wrong, Hillé?
 the eye of the beasts, mother
 what's wrong with the eye of the beasts?
 the eye of the beasts is a dead question.¹³⁷

The gaze of the animal is a reaction to Hillé's gaze. The expected response, though, which could only take place through language, is interpreted as a "dead question". It is, therefore, a question assigned by Hillé to the animal in her attempt to communicate, to put herself at the same level as the animal, "entering into their bodies".

Derrida writes about the "bottomless gaze" of the animal, a gaze that reveals the artificial limit imposed between human and animal:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.¹³⁸

In the process of metamorphosis, however, this limit is blurred by Hillé and Amós. In the following passage, for instance, Hillé suggests an animal reaction, liberated from human language:

I don't come to terms with people, with the world, the sun out there is not a sun of gold, I want to go without end and I search for you, I vomit, Pig Child, I gallop buffalo zebra giraffe from the beginnings, I crumple brutally on my four hoofs, and I slump breathless in the grass, I am a very fat animal, humid, lucid, who continues to search for you, now I don't articulate, but I am also not mute, some roars, some strident violent, come out of my throat—buffalo at present I dive—some darkness.¹³⁹

Not articulating, but nevertheless not mute, Hillé's poetics of excess shows itself, in the metamorphosis, in the form of strident, violent roars, her own language when engaging in her search after the Pig Child. Not a proper response in terms of the language of humans (which she no longer comes to terms with), still a proper reaction to her metaphysical experience.

¹³⁷ Hilst 2012, p. 13.

¹³⁸ Derrida 2002, p. 381.

¹³⁹ Hilst 2012, p. 9f.

As this example shows, the animal symbolizes Hillé being able to express herself in a manner that dispenses the anxious relationship to language, in its need for accuracy. Also Amós, becoming a dog, can relive the wordless glimpse of understanding from the revelation, experiencing the world without language:

With my dog-eyes I stop before the sea. Tremulous and sick. Bent, thin, I smell fish in the driftwood. Fishbone. Tail. I gaze at the sea but don't know its name. I remain standing there, askance, and what I feel is also nameless. I feel my dog body. I don't know the world, nor the sea in front of me. I lie down because my dog body orders it. There's a bark in my throat, a gentle howl. I try to expel it but man-dog I know that I'm dying and I will never be heard. Now I'm a spirit. I'm free and fly over my miserable being, my abandonment, the nothing that contains me and that made me on Earth. I am rising, wet like fog.¹⁴⁰

The poetics of lack accompanies Amós in his last, "gentle howl", contrasting to Hillé's "strident, violent roars". Hillé, after completing the process, is described as "a fright that acquired comprehension".¹⁴¹ She becomes Madame P (P stands for *porca*) in order to acquire this comprehension, and in the same movement it is suggested that God would achieve the same outcome by transitioning into human: "And it comes to mind that I could only understand Madame P by becoming who she is. And it also comes to mind, Lord, that in a certain way, but I don't know which one, you aspire to be, Hillé, a tormented human being. AND TO FEEL."¹⁴²

In any case, with the metamorphosis, by being liberated from language, they are able to reach as close as possible to the metaphysical understanding desired throughout the narratives. As Derrida puts it: "It would not be a matter of 'giving speech back' to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation".¹⁴³ In the poetics of deconstruction of these novels, the animal represents not a privation but, on the contrary, precisely a liberation from the metaphysical anxiety caused by language. The addressing of the question of the body's materiality stresses the material condition of language, the way in which it creates and maintains binary oppositions.

It is also interesting to note that, in both novels, the metamorphosis/understanding coincides with death. Hillé dies when becoming a "fright that acquired comprehension". Also

¹⁴⁰ Hilst 2014, p. 58.

¹⁴¹ Hilst 2012, p. 57.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁴³ Derrida 2002, p. 416.

Amós' father had warned: "it's such an effort to try not to understand, it's the only way to stay alive, trying not to understand".¹⁴⁴ In both cases, it is suggested that understanding is deadly, incompatible with existence in the material world. Derrida wrote about the opposition between life/death as "the ultimate aporia", since it regards the passage of a border that only can be conceived from "this side" of the border: "It is on this on the side of *Dasein* and of its here, which is our here, that the oppositions between here and over there, this side and beyond, can be distinguished".¹⁴⁵ In a similar manner as with the oppositions madness/reason or human/animal, death is assigned, through (the living being's) language, upon the (wordless) dead. In *The obscene Madame D*, the opposition life/death is already put into question through the constant presence of the deceased Ehud. Amós, in the passage above, narrates his transformation into spirit. Making death and understanding coincide, the novels suggest a continuity of consciousness, in a realm that can be more compatible with the acquired comprehension.

2.4 On the question of the metaphor

The actual completion of the process of the metamorphosis by the end of the novels adds a touch of fantasy to the narratives that had so far operated within realism. The reader is confronted with the question of how the entire stories are to be interpreted. Is it to be read as a fantastic twist or as a poetic metaphor? If we are in the realm of fantasy, it is the case of accepting the terms of fiction, regarding the metamorphosis as reality within the limits of the narratives. If we are in the realm of realism, the metamorphosis gains then a metaphorical function that is open to interpretation. We discussed above that becoming animals is the apex of the protagonists' relationship with the materiality of their bodies. But is it a process that takes place inside the protagonists' (supposedly) maddened perspectives? Is there a hidden meaning behind the metamorphosis, which would entail a pedagogical intention?

The difference between metaphor and allegory is a question of extension. If the entire narrative functions as a metaphor, it becomes an allegory. And as an allegory, it is supposed to present a hidden, moral message to be interpreted by the reader. In the text "White mythology", Derrida wrote about the function of the metaphor in a philosophical text. The language in general, he points out, functions according to the same principle of the metaphor:

¹⁴⁴ Hilst 2014, p. 47.

¹⁴⁵ Derrida 1993, p. 52. The term *Dasein* is retrieved from Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, meaning "existence". More on Derrida's deconstruction of the opposition life/death can be found in *Life Death* (Original: *La vie la mort. Séminaire (1975–1976)*), a compilation of fourteen seminars on the theme. The conscious exclusion of the preposition *and* between "life" and "death" enhances his suspension of the boundary between the two.

signifiers stand for something else, a process of substitution that, with daily use, ceases to be apparent. This is how, in the process of using language, we take the sign to be the "thing itself". Metaphors work because, in their case, the substitution is still apparent. This is how they acquire their value of metaphor, of one thing that stands for something else. Philosophy, writes Derrida, has had the historical role of putting metaphors into circulation. He makes, however, a distinction between the philosophical and the poetic metaphor. In the first case, "it can quickly be seen that the internal articulation is not that of the metaphors themselves, but that of the 'philosophical ideas' metaphor playing exclusively the role of a pedagogical ornament".¹⁴⁶ In the latter, "one is hardly concerned with the profound meaning of the metaphor or the comparison, but rather above all with its original brilliance".¹⁴⁷

As poetic works of literature that thematize philosophy, *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* find themselves on the border between these two possibilities of metaphor. The question of whether it is to be interpreted as fantasy or as a metaphor or an allegory is left open. In any case, it is only possible to extract a metaphorical value from the metamorphosis because we operate inside binary oppositions such as human/animal or nature/culture. In the same way as the madness of Hillé and Amós is assigned to them by those who consider themselves to be on the side of reason, the metamorphosis can only function as "something that stands for something else", it can only acquire a moral or political symbolism, if it is regarded from outside that "something", that is, the animal. Leaving the question open, Hilst allows the metaphor(if the reader chooses to interpret it as such) to function deconstructively.

¹⁴⁶ Derrida 1982a, p. 221.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Final discussion

I started this analysis by establishing a common vocabulary between that of Hilda Hilst in the novels *The obscene Madame D* and *With my dog-eyes* and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. The angst caused by the protagonists' life-changing experiences, described as a "loss of center" or "unstable structure", acquired thus new, complementing (or supplementing) meanings by being read along with Derrida's use of the same metaphors. In this dialogue between literary work and theory, it was possible to draw parallels between Hillé and Amós' attempt at accuracy in language and the "need for a reassuring certainty" that has shaped the history of Western philosophy. Language's resistance to accuracy could be defined in terms of "play of significations or substitutions", or "movement of supplementarity", or yet, "différance".

With this common vocabulary, I proceeded to look more specifically at how each of the protagonists approaches language. Hillé performs her search with a philosophical monologue/dialogue with Ehad-God, based on an excess of signifiers: an accumulation of questions, richly metaphorical soliloquies, and an obsessive re-naming of God. Being given new names, God is portrayed as a child, an animal, and a bored constructor aspiring to be human. With the practice of re-naming, Hillé is able to deconstruct herself and God. Seeing her own name as a signifier separated from the referent, her essence, Hillé can reinvent herself by incorporating new signifiers – "the sow" and Madame D, later Madame P, when this reinvention is materialized in the actual metamorphosis. In Hillé's poetics of excess, some metaphysical binary oppositions such as God/Evil and human/animal, are deconstructed, mainly through the method of re-naming.

Amós, the mathematician, seeks to give his philosophical search a mathematical accuracy, relying on the lack of words. It is, however, in poetry that he can find his way to communication. Through poetry, Amós can deconstruct himself and his paradigms by "dessignifying" the world as he knows it. The focus here lies on the binary opposition speech/writing. In his dessignifying strategy, it becomes more evident how the outcome of deconstruction comprises not only an inversion of binary oppositions established in our system of thought. It also means disclosing how these binary oppositions are constructed, and the maintenance of their "trace". To deconstruct, then, does not mean assigning new meanings to concepts to avoid a contradiction. It means, rather, to embrace the contradictions inherent to this assignment of new meanings, to stay in the contradiction and work within it.

In the second part, I tried to show how these different approaches to language are embodied in behaviors that are publicly interpreted as signs of madness. Hillé talks to herself and uses a vulgar vocabulary, alienates herself from people and social norms, shows inappropriate eroticism. Amós assumes a nihilistic posture towards life, fantasizing a life of either total isolation or unruly obscenity, and is perceived to get ever more distracted and laconic, as he gradually changes his body posture into the more comfortable posture of an animal. I started this part of the analysis by discussing specifically the opposition madness/reason, an opposition that is, as Derrida argues, forged in language. But that, as Hilda Hilst shows, has concrete effects in the material realm. Thereafter, the analysis moved on to the specific signs of madness, starting with the question of eroticism. Using eroticism as a disguise or escape for a more abstract, philosophical desire, Hillé and Amós problematize oppositions such as moral/immoral, pure/impure, material/immaterial, bodily/spiritual. They remind us of the inseparability of transcendentality and the body's "unforgettable grotesque condition". Finally, I discussed the symbolism of the protagonists' metamorphosis and death, the culmen of the deconstruction through the oppositions human/animal, nature/culture, life/death. I included here a discussion on whether the metamorphosis is to be regarded as fantastic realism, or as a metaphor or allegory, concluding that the novels allow different interpretations that leave the question open to the reader.

What this part of the analysis showed, is that their relationship with the body's materiality does not contradict, but rather enhances their relationship with the abstract, metaphysical dimension of language. This answers the questions that were proposed at the beginning of this analysis, on how the experience of decentering and portrayal of madness relates to the question of language. It is, in fact, the main conclusion of my analysis: language does not stop in language. Instead, language (contrary to what critics of deconstruction and post-structuralism affirm) shapes material conditions and thus has socio-political consequences. Language's inherent capacity for deconstruction has concrete deconstructive effects. In other words, language's capacity for deconstruction is not only uttered, it is also performed. Madness in these two novels is portrayed as the result of the anxiety caused by the failure of language in the formulation and, as a consequence, the accomplishment of the protagonist's philosophical searches. At the same time, it embodies this failure and recreates the material conditions of the search. In this way, madness functions as a link between these two realms (the abstract and the concrete) in which language acts, deconstructing the opposition. In this way, Hilda Hilst portrays, literarily, one of the main problems philosophy has ever been dealing with. As we have seen, Derrida called attention to the fact that

philosophy has regarded language as an obstacle between the human being and the metaphysical, "real" meaning. But language is for us, as humans, the only tool through which we can communicate our experiences. It is, in fact, the very material that shapes those experiences in the first place.

In literature, however, language is not a problem. Or it is a problem that can be used to its own advantage: it is precisely in the failure of language that Hillé and Amós can elaborate their unique poetics, a poetics of deconstruction. In their attempt at accuracy, at staying at the negative, Rousseauian side of the play, the side that attempts to decipher the ultimate, metaphysical meanings of reality, they turn out to reveal its positive, Nietzschean side, the one that embraces the play of significations, language's *différance*. By experiencing these contradictory, irreconcilable sides of the play, and using it as the material for creating a poetics, they provide some insights into the relationship between literature and philosophy, as they have been regarded historically. "Philosophy characteristically hopes to solve problems, to show how things are, or to untangle a difficulty, and thus to put an end to writing on a topic by getting it right".¹⁴⁸ Literature, on the other hand, can indulge in the problem and favorably leaves it unsolved. Philosophy cannot manage unanswered questions; literature is all the better the less it claims to give a definitive answer. With deconstruction, pointing out the claim for truth as a metaphysical illusion, Derrida uses literature to make philosophical self-criticism and takes a step toward the approximation of the two disciplines.

Also, literature does not share philosophy's claim for universality. By reading the two novels alongside a theoretical corpus, it was possible to connect the individual experiences of Hillé and Amós to a larger phenomenon, that is, the unfolding of the history of Western philosophy. But the theory itself, being read through literary glasses, can see itself reflected in the individual with all its nuances. In spite of deconstruction, Derrida's body of work is still centered on the universal subject called "man". The literary works analyzed by him are mostly written by the canonized, universal figure of "man" – Rousseau, Nietzsche, Mallarmé. Hillé and Amós, being read as the universal subject, do not cease to show their particularities. The analysis showed that the journey of Hillé, for example, is shaped by the question of gender. The question that has accompanied this analysis, on how literature can contribute to philosophy, can thus be answered in this way: philosophy, being read along literature, gains a poetical treatment that creates greater identification with the reader. Here, Derrida's theory of deconstruction could see itself reflected in the decentering of Hillé and Amós. The novels

¹⁴⁸ Culler 2008, p. 90

allowed us to read it through humanized (and animalized) subjects living in a body with physiological needs, and interacting with society. Also, Derrida's philosophical concepts could be understood in the light of new metaphors: the "language-rope" and the "fine veins of words" for the arbitrariness of language, the "answer-surplus" and "unprogrammed plus-minus" for *différance*, the "immense umbilicus" for the center, etc.

Future research on the topic could focus more on this exchange. The philosopher and writer Michael Boylan, for instance, has proposed the term "narrative philosophy" for works of fiction that "can on its own *set out claims* that are relevant to philosophical discussions and contribute (as narrative) to the philosophical debate".¹⁴⁹ According to his schema, Hilst could be regarded as a level-three author of narrative philosophy, that is, "novels written by non-academics who see the indirect discourse of fiction as their only way to communicate what they see as true".¹⁵⁰ The question could also be approached from the side of philosophy. "What is literature?" is, as Derek Attridge points out, "after all, a philosophical, not a literary question".¹⁵¹ Derrida, both reading literary works as a source of philosophical insights, and reading philosophical works as literary texts, has problematized the division between the two. Hilda Hilst, claiming that her literary works, whether they have a narrative or not, are "pure philosophy", did the same. Between the two there is, however, the term "fiction". Literature is not concerned, as philosophy is, with giving ultimate answers to the question of "what is", but with how the "what is" can be fictionalized.

There is also room for extending the method used in this analysis to other works of Hilst. Analyses of Hilst, I mentioned previously, usually regard her corpus in its entirety, since the themes explored by her form a pattern throughout different works. The philosophical search projected in a deconstructed image of God returns, for instance, in the protagonist of *Kadosh* (1973). Such as Hillé, Kadosh reinvents God through re-naming (the Stone Dog, the Great Obscure, the Question-Thing, etc.). Amós' attempt to apply scientific accuracy in life can be traced to the character Axelrod Silva, from the 1980's short stories collection *Tu não te moves de ti* (*You do not move away from yourself*, without translation). Axelrod is a history professor who, trying to decipher the logic of history's timeline, experiences life from a state of hyper-lucidity that leads him to madness and death. The question of animality is especially evident in the short story "O unicórnio" ("The Unicorn", without translation), from the collection *Fluxo-floema* (1970). Such as is the case with Hillé and Amós, the process of

¹⁴⁹ Michael Boylan, "What Fictive Narrative Philosophy Can Tell Us: Stories, Cases, and Thought Experiments", *Revista del Instituto de Filosofía, Universidad de Valparaíso* 1:2 (2013), p. 61.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 60.

¹⁵¹ Attridge, p. 1.

metamorphosis of the narrator is started by a crisis provoked by the failure of language in providing understanding. Also here, the narrator experiences a conflict between her animalized body and the gaze of a normative society. These are some examples of how the poetics of deconstruction is a constant feature of the writing of Hilda Hilst. Further reading of her literary works in light of the theory of deconstruction can provide a greater understanding of how she makes use of philosophical concepts to provoke a questioning of social constructions that this theory has helped to unveil.

Finally, I hope that this analysis can offer new insights into Hilstian studies, and contribute to raising interest and curiosity about the work of a writer that is now being rediscovered in her own home country by a new generation of new readers and researchers, and who only now is starting to gain greater international recognition.

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