



Is the word alive? Questions about poetry and theatre in As aves da noite, Hilda Hilst

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ABSTRACT. This article aims to analyze the play *As aves da noite*, by Hilda Hilst, written in 1968. It deals with the Jewish Holocaust in the Second World War. Its plot revolves around the figure of Father Maximilian Kolb who volunteered to die in the so-called 'hunger Dungeon' in place of another arrested person by the SS. The development of the characters and their dialogues resonates Adornian's question about what type of poetry is possible after Auschwitz. Hilst proposes the non-appeasable nuisance, with the isolation experience of the viewer/reader, through her lyric theatre and specific details for the creation of the scenario.

Keywords: poetry, resistance, memory, experience, performance.

A palavra tem vida? Questões sobre lírica e teatro em As aves da noite, de Hilda Hilst

RESUMO. Este artigo se propõe a analisar a peça *As aves da noite*, de Hilda Hilst. *As aves da noite*, peça de 1968, tematiza o Holocausto judeu na Segunda Guerra Mundial. O enredo do texto gira em torno da figura do Padre Maximilian Kolbe, voluntário para morrer no chamado 'Porão da fome', em lugar de outro preso pela SS. A elaboração das personagens, bem como seus diálogos ressoam a questão adorniana sobre que tipo de poesia é possível após Auschwitz. Através do seu teatro lírico e de rubricas específicas para a criação do cenário, Hilst propõe o incômodo não apaziguável, com a experiência de isolamento do espectador/leitor.

Palavras-chave: poesia, resistência, memória, experiência, performance.

Questão de sistema - II
Existem muitas filosofias
e racionalizações para tudo
mas você verá, um dia,
no rosto dos usuários,
perplexidade.
(Alex Polari, 1978, p. 32)

Que verso te recompõe?
Que fibra te comove ainda?
(Hilda Hilst, 2008, p. 244).

Introduction

The eight plays in Hilda Hirst's *Teatro Completo* (2008) were written between 1967 and 1969. She never again repeated the experience with the genre throughout her poetic work. Her option for drama was a political response to the historical context of the period due to the fact that the post-World War II period and the Brazilian Military Dictatorship were characterized by a coercive stance of subjectivities that, foregrounding the alienating process of consciences within society, triggered the commitment of the Arts. The civilized world and common sense seemed to have been brutalized

when they become accustomed to estimates (hypothetical due to the distancing of the victims) on diaspora and deaths at a non-estimable scale and cease to be shocked at such terrific losses:

[...] humanity has learned to live in a world in which killing, torture and mass exile have a daily experience hitherto unnoticed [...] (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 58)

There was an unbelieving gaze and several ethical questionings that affected artistic production during the war, with continuous demands for aesthetic reflections in the post-war period. However, Hilst's theatre does not smack of an

artistic commitment diffused in Brazil at that time. Contrastingly to CPC and to the Teatro de Arena, Hilst's essential lyrical diction never sought didactic sharpness or Brecht's explicit models. As in all literary works, the theatre is above all a reflection on the measure of the word, or rather, which type of word is possible in art within an exceptional context. That is why it becomes undated.

The inclusion of drama in Hirst's lyrical works is part of a literary project in which the mapping of the social context is, at the same time, an enhancement of a reading of the human statute – evaluating its potentialities within the Nietzschean sense – and questioning man's illuminist project, putting the perspective in doubt. In the case of Hilst, reason is not enough to think the world processed by faith, since God's image, recurring in several plays, is a metaphor for the emptiness of human desire and the loss of critical sensitiveness that upholds the type of Fascism of which they are the victims.

According to Jean-Pierre Ryngaert in *Ler o teatro contemporâneo*, all themes have a sort of playfulness which is proper to them and required specific means to narrate them:

In dramaturgy that became a model (or anti-model), Brecht imposed radical epic forms. On the other hand, Beckett gradually cleansed the plot of all stories and made it focus on what, in his view, is basic, namely, the presence of death. He imposed a strict taut regime on the traditional narrative to the point of providing a permanent threat of definitive silence. After the words of such important critics, it is difficult to question once more and rather ingenuously: "How may one tell a story?" and "What may one narrate?" The old dramatic models, loaded with meaning, similar to the good old unifying narratives, were affected. [...] One had to start again. Every young playwright may ask how the story teller's dress (slightly eaten by moths) should be worn, if he, at least, calculates that the play cannot lack a plot (Ryngaert, 1998, p. 83).

'Silence' and 'Death' are also the signs employed by Silviano Santiago¹ on the incommunicability and the dearth of experiences in post-modern narratives – lacking any counseling, the narrator fictionalizes his own reminiscences which he never experienced. Whereas the narrative, 'loaded with meaning', as described by Ryngaert, looks introspectively on itself, full of the stories it narrated, the silence, characteristic to narrators wearing dresses 'eaten by moths', following Santiago, arrives eloquently from the reconstructions of a gaze on the world, as a

'retraction and distancing' (Santiago, 1989) of one self. Due to the gaze, there lies a hesitation

[...] between pleasure and critique, always keeping the stance of who, even shunning any activity, thinks, feels and enthuses with what survives of the body and the brain (Santiago, 1989, p. 59).

Feeling what one sees and thus being capable of creating, critically, the very dimension of existence: it is the lyrical-narrative theater of Hilda Hilst. The specific political and social scenarios of Hilst's plays, the Cold War and the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, seem to trigger a new aesthetic experience as if the elaboration of language would reconcile the 'experience of the gaze' and the word as memory:

That is why the memoir narrative is necessarily historical [...], or rather, a vision of the past into the present, trying to camouflage the process of generational discontinuity with a wordy and rational continuity of a more experienced man. Post-modern fiction, passing through the experience of the narrator who yesterday sees – and does not see – himself in the young man of today, is full of the 'present' (Octavio Paz) (Santiago, 1989, p. 56).

In drama, the lyric would be a process of re-signification and resistance to certain ideas and reasoning within a period of perplexity, a search for the broadening of writing possibilities (a way to problematize the human through language since the 'gaze of the present' and memory are not reconcilable).

In the case of the form, the choice of a hybrid artistic genre is not fortuitous but seminal for writing since it displaces the lyric from its own condition. In its most traditional definition (Staiger, 1978), the Lyrical is the expression of the poet's subjectivity. The concept contains the presupposition of totality as if a metaphysical and total expression of the 'I' were possible. The opposite occurs when the Lyrical appears in drama. In fact, it indicates the flaw, the 'impotence' of the 'I' and reveals that a total expression, the ideal representation between the word and the thing, is impossible:

By writing *As aves da noite*, I wanted to listen what was said in the prison cell of hunger, in 'Auschwitz'. A rather difficult task! If my characters show themselves too much poetic, this occurs because I believe that poetry, 'living and true', explodes in extreme situations. It is only in extreme situations we question the 'great darkness', God, eagerly, despairingly, with poetry (Hilst, 2008, p. 232).

This is why Derrida in *Paixões* perceives the worth of a non-reply, the worth of the obliquity of

¹ Silviano Santiago's opinions on post-modernism will not be developed in current essay since we do not intend to place Hilst drama within any chronological line or within any literary tradition. Our reflections triggered by the analysis of *O narrador pós-moderno* are considerations on the change in the narrative style from Benjamin up to the present.

the secret to think on the witness of literature. The performative act would compose the scene in which written literature denies an answer to reality. In other words, Literature is not committed to reality and does not give it any answer. The 'aesthetic game' is not reduced to the obvious and remains secret. *Le secret affiché*, the 'revealed secret', is the 'discourse from which one expects a grave, thoughtful and philosophical reply' (Derrida, 1995), but becomes performative because language is not reduced to knowledge; it unfolds knowledge and indicates the "[...] impossibility that any witness remains safe from oneself [...]" (Derrida, 1995, p. 41):

'There is a secret'. It does not pretend. Since it is heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the night, to the invisible, to pretension, even to the non-manifest, it may be revealed. It remains inviolable even when one believes it has been revealed. It would not lie hidden [...]; It simply exceeds the hiding/revealing play: dissimulation / revelation, night / day, forgetfulness / anamnesis, earth / heaven etc. Therefore, it does not belong to the truth, not even to the truth as a memory (p.41 *Mnēmosynē, aletheia*), neither to the given truth, nor to the promised truth, nor to inaccessible truth (Derrida, 1995, p. 44).

In other words, the witness given by literature, which is not reducible to knowledge or to certainty, is composed of 'clues' that "[...] neither attract nor conceal the relationship with the other, the being-with or by any other form of social bond" (Derrida, 1995, p. 51). It is in such a place, composed of 'clues', that the scene of Hilst's poetics occurs: abjuring God and stripping him of his luminous image are ways to contest the human and one's own darkness. The witness given by literature is performative due to the de-structuring of the values of certainty. One is not committed to any truth as if it were a kind of perjury which is able to legitimate that which one declares.

The quality of the episodic aspect in Hilst's drama would not be precisely the co-participation of commitment in the 1970s (as Alcir Pécora, 2008, states in 'Editor's Note' of the *Teatro Completo* of Hilda Hirst), neither the underscoring of the post-war fractures. Beyond such perspective, Hilst's drama rehearses expectations, opens into discourses and different types of knowledge, by analyzing future societies from the womb-context in which it was conceived.

As an archive, as a site in which memory resides, literature looks towards the past/present at the same time as it underscores the future. In *Mal d'Archive*, Derrida elaborates on the fictional aspect of the

archive as the living place of memory which does not close itself to the past, but performatizes it and 'consigning'² its factors to the future:

[...] as impression, writing, prosthesis or general hypo-amnesia technique, the archive is not merely a place for storage and for the conservation of 'past' contents that would exist anyway and that anyhow, without the archive, we still believe that it happened or would have happened. The technical structure of the file archive also determines the structure of the archive content in its emergence and in its relationship with the future. Archiving produces and registers the event. This is our political experience for the information media (Derrida, 2001, p. 29).

Since the past is always being re-signified by memory, the archives must be understood as the dynamic movement of the rewriting of history. It is the difference between memorization and memory: whereas the latter occurs at the enunciation level and within the possibilities of understanding history as a dialectic movement, the former establishes itself on repetition, closing the anarchic and consignatory potential of the archive in a dumbness that makes it merely a storage place of discourse or knowledge, and providing it with the status of the 'truth'.

One may perceive that all the plays, as archives, have a predominantly allegoric stance in the etymologic sense of the word: the Greek root 'állos' supposes the very movement of literature in which heteronomy is the act of affirming otherness so that history becomes the 'other' which touches the Lyrical. It is the enunciating memory of Hilda Hilst's plays.

The Lyrical and drama: a sort of listening; a sort of asking

The theme of the 1968 play *As aves da noite* is the Jewish Holocaust during World War II. The plot comprises the character Father Maximilian Kolbe who volunteered to die in the Hunger Dungeon instead of another person imprisoned by the Gestapo. The construction of the characters and their dialogues echo Adorno's interrogation on what type of poetry is possible after events in Auschwitz. Through her lyrical drama and specific stage directions for the scenes, Hilst proposes the non-appeasable bothering through the experience of the spectator/reader's isolation. Scene and stage directions reveal the author's intentions with regard to the reception of the text of the play:

² According to Derrida, an archive holds a diachronic stance with regard to time and knowledge. "[...] the archontic power that also concentrates the unification, identification, classification function goes hand in hand with what we label 'consignation' power. The meaning of the term 'consignation' is not merely the indication of a place or the placing within a site, but the act of 'consignation uniting the signs' (Derrida, 2001).

Scene

A Cylinder of variable height, according to the height of the theatre.

Internal height of the cell, within the cylinder: 1.90m.

Within the cell, low iron door, with a small loophole.

Window around the cylinder covered by transparent material (wire, acrylic, or other).

Chairs around the cylinder, separated from one another by screens.

Note

The scene of *As aves da noite* gives the spectator the opportunity to completely participate with what occurs within the cell. I wanted the spectator to feel total isolation. That is why chairs are separated by screens (Hilst, 2008, p. 231).

Hilda Hilst's text is a system pervaded by a permanent state of perplexity in which aesthetic options necessarily pass through issues of context. Consequently, the dynamics of her poetic work is a consequence of the astonished gaze of the author on the period – and this is precisely why it is not dated.

Word-body

In drama, the body is the word's metonymic instance: contiguity exists between the authors' voice (or the character's) and the text. However, representation (Foucault, 1999) is not the only element involved, but also the establishment of another heterotopic language because it is constituted on/of another *topos*, and 'represents' the relationships of a language placed in permanent crisis, moving in a successive-incessant direction opened to the otherness of signs.

If the 're-invention of language' (in the text or in the voice of the actor) means the displacement of the habitual meaning, the relationship of signic representation in the language becomes disarticulated too. In other words, similarity, the category that makes us aware of (or acknowledge) the link between word and thing, is destabilized by an internal crisis of language. According to Foucault in *As palavras e as coisas*:

Without any doubt, heterotopes trouble us: they secretly undermine language; they impede naming this and that; they disrupt common names or entwine them; they damage the syntax – not merely that which constructs phrases – but that, more covertly, which 'maintains together' (besides and one in front of the other) 'words and things' (Foucault, 1999, p. XII-XIII).

When Ryngaert discusses the construction of a new language in drama, he underscores poetry as the factor that corrupts the stable link between representation and the world. The corrosive effect of poetic or even lyrical diction within the text of the play (especially when staged) may cause a 'different topography', if not Foucault's heterotopy. One may think of the metaphor of the paper as a body ploughed by words with its 'topos' changed by foreseen dissimilar scribbling, which disorders anatomy, or 'syntax'.

When the limits of writing are forced through the presence of the body that reads it (at this point, one should remember that the character is also a text), poetry reminds us 'what this speech says and to what suffering the person is subjected when trying to conciliate language and body' (Ryngaert, 1998). Lyrical drama, therefore, keeps an aesthetic distancing from common automatized speech, and responds to a political demand. Through a language crisis, it invests in a reflection on human capacities. According to Ryngaert:

The language crisis also attacks, more subtly, the manner the characters express themselves, which would not correspond to their true state, in which they are invested with a language which is not theirs, due to social norms.

[...]

The displacement of language is a way by which it is heard differently, revealing its political implications. The hiatus between the character and language he speaks also questions his dispossession, which lacks any metaphysical traits (Ryngaert, 1998, p. 162).

It is interesting to discuss in detail the frontiers of poetry in the 20th century. According to the Italian theoretician Alfonso Berardinelli, during this period, the classical concept of the lyrical genre, manifestly Hegelian, is distanced from the concept of poetry as a way to underscore questioning against the expression of someone as an individual who speaks for himself. According to the literary critic,

[...] touching the 'frontiers of poetry', displacing them and forcing them, is necessary to get out of the stylistic systems that are prone to closure [...] (Berardinelli, 2007, p. 184).

From the confluence between the genres (and bodies, since we are dealing drama), the opaqueness of lyrical poetry would be readmitted in its function as a producer of strangeness and thus de-automatization, 'representing' resistance against the reification of the world. However, this does not mean the healing of the fracture between the individual and society and a return to the Hegelian

'lyrical essence'. On the contrary, the non-transparency of the signs in poetry is due to a dissonance which is social rather than purely aesthetic:

[...] dissonance is the laceration of existence that poetry, with its own resources, cannot heal. What distances and opposes the poetic and the real world is also that which binds them in a mortal bond. The bond is simultaneously aesthetic and historical: it determines the non-communicative and anti-realist forms of the modern lyric and denounces the state of things in contemporary society [...] (Berardinelli, 2007, p. 36).

As the most disordered place in representations, literature cultivates meanders and waywardness to deal with words as enunciation rather than enunciated (Foucault, 1999). Consequently, the text of drama has an animic vigor and becomes present in representation:

[...] the text of dram does not imitate reality; it proposes a construction for it, a verbal imitation ready to develop on the stage [...] (Ryngaert, 1998, p.5),

- an active construction, centered on the author, but dialogical between the text and the spectator/reader who, through the enthused gaze, creates new displacements in language and several other possibilities for the representation of the world.

Under the aspect of 'meaning' in 20th century drama plots, Ryngaert states that

[...] 'several contemporary authors take a different look at the plot. They place themselves less as story tellers and more as writers, resorting to all types of dense writing' (Ryngaert, 1998, p.7).

The above consideration seems to summarize the other dealt with above. It gives us an idea of what is meant by 'dense writing' as a concept to express body-word, or rather, a category which, in Hilst's opus, is the theoretical site to discuss Literature and its wanderings. The aesthetic option for drama seems to suggest a broadening of the possibilities of reflections through metalanguage, since, precisely at that site, the word is personified in the body not merely by the presence of the actors on the stage but also through the gaze of the spectators who demonstrate their activities in the text. As an elaboration of writing possibilities, Hilst's dramatic text is another 'persona' in her works (Rodrigues, 2007).

Further, the desacralization of drama, even as language, is desired, perhaps close to the meaning attributed to it by Antonin Artaud in *The Theater of*

Cruelty. The critic defends the de-automatization of gestures (which are also a type of language) in the performative act through lyricism and metaphysics which are not concentrated in the author but which 'manifest external forces' (Artaud, 1999):

[...] to invent a metaphysics of the word, of gesture, of expression, to remove it from psychological and human stalemates.

[...]

It is not a question of directly putting metaphysical ideas on the stage but develop several kinds of temptations and a proper atmosphere around these ideas. Humor together with its anarchy, poetry with its symbolism and images provide (as the first idea of means) a channel for the temptation of these ideas (Artaud, 1999, p. 103).

Hilda Hilst does not seem to have adopted any specific program for her drama – something highly convenient since the critic has several possibilities of theoretical solutions to understand it. Her initial remarks to the plays and the stage directions (as if they were the author's spontaneous theory) will be analyzed for an in-depth understanding of the drama.

It should be underscored that very close to what has been remarked by Artaud, Hilda Hilst provokes distancing from the usual language to reflect on the processes of representation. This is not to say that Hilst adopted the program of the French playwright. There is actually a kind of reassessment of representation types in language that brings the work of the two authors closer.

The definition of the term 'cruelty' condenses Artaud's ambition, or rather, to purify the sensitive perception of the spectators through the rupture of the common register of language in favor of

[...] a transgression of the common limits of art and of the word to actively undertake, magically, 'in real terms', a kind of total creation by which man retakes his place among dreams and events. [...] Drama is not possible without the cruelty factor foregrounding the whole drama. Within the degenerated stage we are in, it is through the skin that metaphysics enters the spirit (Artaud, 1999, p. 105 and 114).

Chronologic distancing in Hilst and the proposal of a meeting of metaphysics through bodies, besides the derision of the entire 'logos' (Rodrigues, 2007), the attempt to 'redefine' theorems and corollaries, seems to maintain a sort of dialogue with Artaud's project.

According to Jacques Derrida, Artaud actually proposed going beyond Western cultural values through the re-elaboration of the dramatic art in *The*

Theatre of Cruelty 'and the closure of representation'. Derrida explains that normally the relationship between the word and drama mirrors the logocentric tradition in which reason, as control exercised by the author in a demiurgic manner by the text, embodies the representation crises that corrode sensitiveness

The theater of cruelty is not a 'representation'. It is non-represented life. Life is the non-representable origin of representation. 'He may have said 'life' instead of 'cruelty' (1932, IV, p. 137). Life bears man but man's life does not have first place. Man is merely a representation of life and it is the humanist limit of the metaphysics of classical drama. The theatre may be censured similarly as one condemns a terrible fault in the imagination. Drama should be similar to life, not individual life, the individual aspect of life in which the 'characters' are triumphant, but a sort of freed life which sweeps human individuality and in which man is a mere reflection [...] (Derrida, 1995, p. 152).

The theater 'of life' is proper to Hilda Hilst, since she seeks a redefinition of the Lyrical so that the word would not be subjected to 'repetition' and to 'ingenuous mimesis' (Derrida, 1995), but would be capable of transporting the human dimension in all its extension. This is the aim of the isolation of the spectator in *As aves da noite*: so that the theater and the lyric are not perceived as mere unfolding of life or existence, but as life – or part of its 'redefinition'.

The distancing of the word is another type of distancing that should be taken into account in the reading of Hilst's drama, as if one desired to re-elaborate the concept of the Lyrical, raising it to the existence level, to the level of the collective, to discover the possibilities of language when it represents the human. The Lyrical should be elaborated that would

underscore the meaning of a new lyricism of the gesture which, due to its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, goes beyond the lyricism of words. The intellectual submitting to language is shattered and a new and deeper intellectuality is born: it lies underneath the gestures and the signs elevated to the dignity of private exorcisms (Artaud, 1999, p. 103).

The poet chooses silence at several instances for the resignification of language, as a way of questioning the primacy of intellectuality, and exposes its impotence as a form of representation: words become 'fossilized' and 'ground in their meaning' (Artaud, 1999).

Shunning the word and giving preference to silence is part of the proposal in the re-dimensioning

of the lyric in Hilst's drama in which the body becomes the metonym of language and deeply new representation.

The relationship between poetry and body, which will be reworked later on (Rodrigues, 2007), is amplified by the gaze, the third important factor in drama. In Phenomenology, the gaze is the mediator between us and the world. "Seeing is having at a distance", states Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and mind* (Merleau-Ponty, 2004).

In his *Fenomenologia do olhar*, Alfredo Bosi remarks that

Eidos, form or figure, is the kin term of *idea*. In Latin, with a slight difference in sounds: 'video' (I see) and *idea*. Etymologists discover in the term *history* (Greek and Latin) the same etyma *id*, which lies in *eidos* and in *idea*. History is the vision-thought of what happened (Bosi, 1989, p. 65).

The gaze, a way of perceiving the world, is the sensitive and active reception and expression of ideas, or rather, it is constituted in the world and constitutes the world. According to Bosi,

[...] the gaze is not an isolated thing; it is rooted in corporality as sensitiveness and motricity (Bosi, 1999, p. 66).

Similar to painting, drama is the body's technique. Man becomes a seer-visible to man, mirroring and doubling to himself and that which he represents. Before the eyes of who sees or reads, 'shapes' multiply themselves in 'ideas' and the initial text is transformed due to the fact that the reception of the gaze is not merely passive but active too:

[...] the perception of the other depends on the reading of its relevant phenomena, among which the gaze has the fullest of meanings (Bosi, 1989, p. 77).

It is interesting to note the possibilities of meaning through silence during the gaze: the expression of who looks at the expression of who acts is full of meanings and occurs within the interval of 'not evident pauses', as Hilst indicates, or rather, "[...] language says decisively and categorically when it renounces to say the thing" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 73). The sign stands through the absence and also through the suspicion of who assists and suspects what is being shown to him. Bosi remarks:

It is also true that the expressive gaze, the gaze-language of existential discourse, seems, within contemporary thought, to be recorded by the suspicion schools which better describe it. It is the gaze which underwent Marx's ideological reduction and which has been influenced by the knowledge of the will to power in which they discovered

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It has been compromised by the unconscious motivations mentioned by Freud. Contrary to the rational gaze, which reigned sovereign during two centuries, this type of gaze was born philosophically humble since it acknowledged to be captive within the web of needs and impulses (Bosi, 1989, p. 81).

Consequently, Hilda Hilst's gaze, or the gaze with which she narrates, is a silence disturbed by meanings and enunciations.

Within the shell of the mollusk

One of the main themes of Hilda Hilst's literary project is affection – allegorical constructions necessarily pass through the comprehension of who understands the urgent need to improve sensitive capacity within a society touched by the most insidious aspect, paradoxically, more subtle, of power forms: violence. Perhaps that is why a character, the Christian God, is underscored so that lack of love and the defeated state among people is constructed. Consequently, 'interrogating the great obscure, who is God,' becomes the tool for the analysis of reality and resistance of the effects of reification. If the drama form seems to be efficient to reproduce the eloquence of the gestures in the moments of silence within the speeches of the characters, it is due to the fact that the allegories established in the lyrical-dramatic performance require that readers/spectators interfere and produce the sub-text which is capable of elaborating the semantics of reality and the word which will remove him from the conditions of a silenced person.

As in many other plays, *As aves da noite* is full of notes, play and stage directions by the author to underscore the moments of pause among the characters' actions. The strengthening of advanced stages in emotional weakness shared by the prisoners in the hunger dungeon is contrasted to the epidermal characterization of psychological profiles. With the exception of the Poet and the Jeweler, described by their fragile states, no other receives any other indication. With the exception of Father Maximilian, no one has a name. The single common factor shared by all – the Jailor or Prison Warden (a Jewish prisoner among the others), the Student and the Woman – is their age, or rather, a 17-year-old poet and other young adults. SS soldiers and Hans, an SS helper, have no other characterizing feature.

It is interesting to consider the formation of the characters in Hilst's drama: no heroes are extant. Father Maximilian, whose discourse teaches mercy and tolerance, will not escape defeat:

Maximilian: [...] when I went to the seminary '(trying to be relaxed)' I thought that God will show himself in my prayers [...] God would show himself. I thought that the act of prayer would be followed by infinite consolation, that I would have feelings, you know? I would feel light; the heart would be filled with light, heat, who knows [...] perhaps visions. Once I saw a halo when the Holy Sacrament was exposed [...] do you know what it was? '(he giggles)' Someone switched on the light of the sacristy. '(he giggles)' You know, the light inside also illuminated the altar, simple. '(he giggles)' Simple, simple, the light from the sacristy.

[...]

Student: And now?

Maximilian: Now, darkness and light are the same. '(pause)'

Student: You eagerly desired such a death, didn't you?

Maximilian: I could not contain myself. Truly, I could not contain myself (Hilst, 2008, p. 252-279).

The altruism of Father Maximilian Kolbe who offered himself to go to the death dungeon instead of another prisoner is not a heroic act but an opportunity to exercise virtue and be a martyr: lessons learnt in the seminary, empty of light and consolation. 'Your God is not nice', will be the Jailor's remark to Maximilian. If one of the heroic abilities is bearing a rather uncommon painful destiny, this is due to the fact that torture is not lost in time and sufferings become monuments built by memory:

Jeweler '(rising tension)': They will remember us. Twenty years from now, they will remember us. Every one, on each day, on each night, will remember us [...].

Student: At first ... they will remember. Then... you know, there is something in man that makes him forget... '(Pause. Slowly)' Man is ... '(low voice)' greedy... greedy (Hilst, 2008, p. 290).

All sacrifice is harmless in the wake of forgetfulness. All sacrifice becomes harmless before the fact that new immolated people will lose their faces in the loads they have to carry and which they do not unload.

Memory is a process open to the re-interpretation of the past which unties and reties its knots so that new events and understanding are rehearsed (Richard, 1999, p. 332)

The above definition is by Nelly Richard in her essay *Policies of memory and techniques of forgetfulness*, on the way the democratic transition in Chile blurred

the memory on traumas and started a new exceptional state, a consensus, which annuls the value of experiences and dumbs discourses:

To which language [and we may add, to which image] will we resort so that the vindication of the past is morally attended as an interpellant of a social narrative, if almost all languages that survived the crisis have recycled their words in passive conformity to the insensitive tune – affectionless – of the communication media and if these communication means merely administer [...] the poverty of experience [...] (Benjamin) of a technological updating without any mercy or compassion for the fragility and precariousness of the remaining fragments of wounded memory? (Richard, 1999, p. 332).

Hilst wants to transform her drama into experience. Her plays deal and do not deal with the specific contexts in which they were written: they are allegories of the human; it is 'the memory of disaster' read in the weariness diagnosed in the wounded image offered without any shame to an accommodated nebulous perception.

The spectator will assist alone the human downfall. As a narrator 'rooted in the people', the play narrates to the public (and also shares) its fractures. The language chosen by the poet intends to bother, re-sensitizes words empty of representation, and awakes memories to maintain active the past as a hybrid of the present. If we glance at the 1960s as a traumatic past, a state of exception, we do so to understand that our times impose new traumas and create an exception regime which perpetuates the fascism of that period. Nelly Richard continues:

We have the policies of institutional obliteration of guilt which, due to non-punishment laws (indults or amnesty), separate truth from justice, and thus unbinding both – by law – from the ethical complaint that identified culprits will not win again through the same perverse operation of non-identification. Among the secret associations within the network of convenience and transaction lie the dissipative forms of forgetfulness that the communication media prepare daily so that neither memory (we may say lightning of memory) nor its suppression are conspicuous in the midst of so many fine invisible censorship that restrict and anesthetize the field of vision [...] (Richard, 1999, p. 330).

At the beginning of the play, the Poet has to recite some verses so that the prisoners may find solace:

Jeweler '(to the poet)': Continue... it may give us some solace. '(Pause)'

Poet '(Recites the poem, touching himself, looking at himself. Tense. Moved)':

And I approach this dead person.

Jailor '(objective)': You are not yet dead.

Poet '(slowly)':

I recline myself on what was a face. Oval in white.

Far-gone eyelids

Disciplined mouth for a song. The long arm

A wing-like shoulder... He loved. Worn by dreams.

An accomplice of the afflicted, he was built and remade.

In salt and wheat.

'(He changes slightly the tone. Smiles)'

The dark womb did not produce,

'(Serious)'

Perhaps that's why he has

Large hands

And yelled the verse. He loved. He loved.

'(He speaks fast, looking at himself)'

He has children's feet: tall and curved.

The body, long as a lance. In its entire and clear.

'(Without a pause. Deep voice. Exalted at the beginning till the word 'hour'. Then, more suave)'

Ah, extended time, a long time, without an end

Where I extend myself

Not to contemplate everything from the outside

Embarrassed gaze breathing the hour...

Before, there was a suspended gaze as a bow,

I look at the thread that surrounds it, a burial urn.

Jailor '(Objective)': You are not yet dead.

Poet '(Keeping the same tone)':

After the night, an immense corpse...

And the straw of my name...

'(A high voice as if it were a call)'

What verse will compose you?

What fiber moves you still?

'(Low voice)'

World, World...

The corpse moves

Within the pretended shell of a mollusk.

Touch it. It recoils, dumb.

'(He shrinks)' (Hilst, 2008, p. 242-244).

The personification of the world made it a metonymic instance for man's discourse. Elegy declares the death of love and the triumph of fear warranted by the 'disciplined mouth'. In other words, violence in its different forms becomes a familial oppression. Consequently, no one is estranged; it may not be perceived and becomes part of the social mores, as a 'touch' that dumbs and makes us recoil.

The two verses that fathom the existential are proper to the Poet: 'What verse will compose you? What fiber moves you still?' The tag 'evening birds' is given by him and addresses the SS:

They are like birds with their wounded wings... and if you want to help them... you will not know how... neither where to hold them. They are like evening birds [...] (Hilst, 2008, p. 269).

The people who are jailed in the dungeon ask about the human dimension: innocence, love, soul, life and its end. The Student ruminates on his quasi-scientific theories and tries to explain them to himself, to the other, to the SS. The Jeweler seeks some form of pure life in stones. The Jailer does not admit innocence and seeks incessantly the memory of the iron keys of his former office. The Woman seeks mercy despairingly since it is her task to separate the body of the Jews killed in the gas chambers. Father Maximilian cannot help his cell mates since his religious principles are not enough to love certain birds of the night:

Jailer '(with irony)': Ah, yes, it's true, we will have love ... for the first time. For the first time, the world will have mercy; the whole world will be full of love for us. Isn't that alright, Maximilian? Was it not for this that your God planned this sort of thing? Love for the chosen people. Love at any price! Love (Hilst, 2008, p. 275).

Maximilian's self-sacrifice will not save men from themselves: fated to die, generated within the 'dark womb', we are all equal, or perhaps we are the reverse of one another:

Student: You desired very much this kind of death, didn't you?

Maximilian: I could not contain myself. Truly, I could not contain myself. [...] I don't know ... it was more than an impulse; much more.

Student '(Referring to Hitler. He looks at the loudspeaker, a very somber tone)': He also feels like that... much more than an impulse. He is the reverse, did you know that? The reverse. The other face of every one of us [...] (Hilst, 2008, p. 279).

The characters' moments of lucidity are scarce and brief. Most of the time, the prisoners are in a

state of delirium due to their abject state. The above dialogue between the Student and Maximilian, in which both seem to be at the limit between madness and sanity, exemplifies the issue. Whereas the two characters were speaking on Maximilian's need to self-sacrifice himself to his God, the Student perceives the similarity that there is between people and the disfiguration of the definition of Love, according to the Liturgy.

The last scene in *Aves da noite* occurs after the Poet's death and a dialogue ensues between Hans, the SS and the remaining prisoners. The Nazi soldiers take a crown of barbed wire to Maximilian who does not consider himself worthy of it. When Maximilian refuses, the SS orders all to remain standing, in a circle around the crown, and warns them:

Henceforth, gentlemen, (slowly) a holy morning, a holy day, a holy morning, a holy day, as a circle, gentlemen, a perfect circle. (with one hand, he makes a circular movement, faster and faster) Perfect, infinite, infinite, infinite. (Discrete smile. Exits abruptly) (Hilst, 2008, p. 297).

Damnation is reserved for those 'who are not yet dead': as a perfect and infinite circle, the days follow without any holiness or salvation.

'Is the word living?' – asks the Student. And the Poet, trying to believe what he says, following Hilst's directions, answers:

Who knows, one day the word changes into matter... and everything that it says will remain thus... image... live, that's it, a live image before the eyes of all... and all those who come will be obliged to remember us... '(To the Jailer)' Isn't it so? (Hilst, 2008, p. 261).

It seems that the word lives in the memory. Hilda Hilst wanted to suggest a performative lyric for a work on the re-interpretation of the past which, as a perfect, infinite circle, we still live although frequently we forget it since we believe we are safe 'within the pretended shell of the mollusk'.

Final considerations

The reading of the play *As aves da noite* made us perceive, in Hilst's option for drama, an adherence to the artists' commitment in the 1960s. At the same time, there is a reflection on the word and its possibilities of meanings. A hypothesis has been constructed on hybridity between literary genres, drama and lyrical. Hilst's incursion in drama is a manner of conserving the opacity and closure of the lyrical, removing oneself from the didactic trend in dramaturgy for clearness of the awareness message for the people. In fact, it adopts a uncomfortable syntax

for the public and thus a dissidence that resists reification and barbarity of the capitalist society. This is due to the fact that poetic language is more resistant to hostility during periods of dictatorships which always make humans abject in their milieu

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