

THE ALIENIST: MADNESS, SCIENCE AND PARODY¹

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ABSTRACT: The explanation of Simão Bacamarte's personal and public dimensions introduces the diegetic scenario that aims to highlight the part played by madness as a pretext for social control. After recuperating the conditions to which senseless people submitted to in modern times, especially in France, we point to the hubris as relevant in the field of science, exemplifying it by using the intertextual link between *The Alienist* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. During the conclusion, we aimed to show – after drawing a brief parallel between Simão and Brás Cubas – that Simão represents a parody of “the scientist”, a character that took shape with the evolution of the history of science and which was given unprecedented value after the 19th century.

KEYWORDS: science; social control; madness; hubris; parody.

The Alienist, by Machado de Assis, is a relatively short narrative – although it is longer than a short story. It is divided into 13 chapters where a narrator – whose tendency it is to look at everything from afar – relates events which took place in Itaguaí, a town located on the shore of Rio de Janeiro. Because the facts occurred in “remote times”, he declares that this account is based on information five by chroniclers who preceded him.

The attention of the reader is focused on the doctor called Simão Bacamarte, who exhibits, as the events occur, two facets: the personal, and the public.

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SIMÃO: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

Traces from Simão's personal facets are drawn during the first four chapters. When introducing him, the narrator does not spare any words for praising the doctor: besides being “the son of the nobility of the earth”, he is “the greatest doctor in Brazil, Portugal, and Spain” (Assis, 1962a, p. 253).

He studied in Coimbra and Padua and then returned to Brazil at the age of 34, after refusing an invitation from the king to remain in Coimbra and administer the university, or in Libon and work with royal affairs. He justifies his refusal by saying that “Science is my only employment; Itaguaí is my universe” (Assis, 1962a, p. 253).

Because of that, when arriving to the town he gave himself, body and soul, to the study of science, “alternating cures with readings, and demonstrating the theories with cataplasms” (Assis, 1962a, p. 253).

After submitting himself to the guidelines of science, Simão makes two choices which will complete his personal facet and determine his public one.

The first is the choosing of a wife. But, because of the intensity with which he dedicates himself to science, only pure reasoning and method could guide him in picking a spouse. So, instead of letting himself be seduced by beauty or other feminine qualities, he prefers the widow of a who – according to the polite way the narrator describes her - “is neither pretty nor nice” (Assis, 1962a, p. 253).

Therefore, the ugliness and the antipathy which characterize Mrs. Evarista reveal one of her husband's main qualities, since prevent him from, in his own words, “running the risk of neglecting science because of the exclusive, minute and vulgar contemplation of his spouse” (Assis, 1962a, p. 253). In addition to that, from the point of view of strict biological science, she exhibited qualities which were not undesirable, since she “reunited first-rate physiological and anatomical conditions, digested food easily, slept regularly, had good pulse and excellent eyesight. Therefore, she was capable of giving him strong, healthy, intelligent children” (Assis, 1962a p. 254).

But, after the course of months and years, without the children from his frustrated plans, Simão took refuge in science and, again, makes his

second choice: his field of investigation. Inside the vast field of medicine, what called his attention was the psychiatric area, that is, brain pathology.

SIMÃO: THE PUBLIC DIMENSION

In Itaguaí, Simão starts to exhibit his public image when intervening in the treatment of the town's mad people, who did not get any attention from the government. The calm ones roamed free around the streets, and the violent ones lived apart from everyone, at home with their families.

With the authorization of the City Council, the doctor open the Green House, where he intends to take in all the alienated. For subsidizing it – since in Brazil everything is taxed – a new tax is created.

With this, the scientist assumes a substantive dimension in the town, since his fame as a researcher attracts everyone's admiration and respect – even though they all considered it weird to lock all the mad people together in one place. Despite the weirdness, however, and besides respect, Simão ends up having a lot of power, to the point where he acted as the main responsible for the control of the collectivity.

Given what we recalled (for those who had read it) or informed (for those who had not read it) about the protagonist's psychological profile, we move on to one of the themes mentioned on the title of this session.

MADNESS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

There is no doubt that madness maintains an intimate relationship with the notion of social control, since social control elected madness as one of its main instruments since the beginning of Modern Age. Society adopted countless measures to get rid of mad people, whose presence always acted as a source of fear, even though, ambiguously, it also exerted fascination.

Among the many segregating measures, one that stands out is that prohibiting mad people to attend church. Many times they were whipped publicly or persecuted to the outskirts of the cities and had to take refuge in the fields. Another alternative consisted in giving them to merchants who walked through towns, or to travelers who took them to distant locations and abandoned them. They were also given to boatmen so they could be

taken to other countries. But even during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, most places in Europe had specific locations for the detention and isolation of mad people. In Paris, at the Hôtel-Dieu, they were kept in dormitories. Therefore, they were not systematically banished from the city.

Michel Foucault relates that two themes were most talked about in erudite literature of the 15th century: the first was death, substituted – from the middle of the century – for madness (Foucault, 1978). Because of that, they are both associated with fear. At the end of this century (1492) a poem was written by Sebastian Brant called, in German, *Narrenschiff*, which, after five years, had its Latin version, called *Stultifera navis*, *Ship of Fools* (Figure 1).

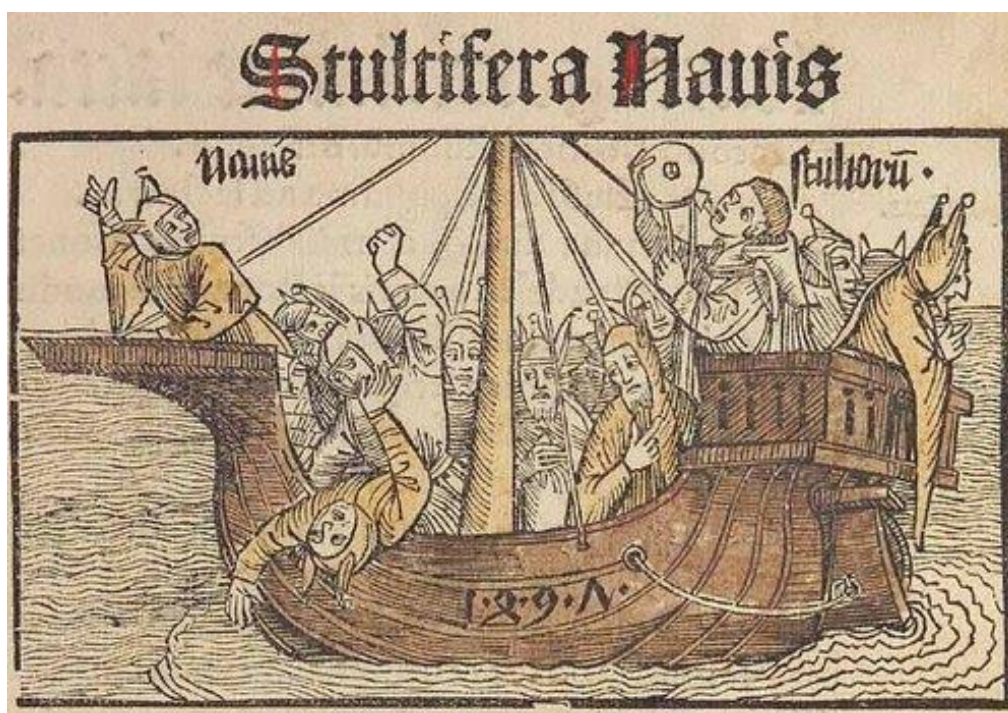


Fig. 1 – Illustration of the poem by Sebastian Brant.

The poem illustrates a common practice, as seen above, for ridding the city of mad people. In one hundred and sixteen of the cantos about this boat which glided through Rhineland and the Flemish channels, parade the lunatics who travel in it: angry, gluttonous, snitches, drunks, riotous, debauched, impious, bad interpreters of the Bible, adulterers, arrogant people, stingy people, luxurious people, wizards etc. Hieronimus Bosch was

probably inspired by this poem when he did his painting of the same name (Figure 2). The painter, as is known, became “famous for his appalling representations of evil” (Gombrich, 1981, p. 275). During the first decade of the next century, 1509, Desiderius Erasmus writes *The Praise of Folly*.



Fig. 2 – Ship of Fools, by Hieronimus Bosch.

England was the first to systematically lock away the alienated, although they were not the only one to be taken away, since in 1575 the building of correction houses for the “punishment of the vagabonds and the relief of the poor” (Foucault, 1978, p. 54). It is easy to see that the measure is closely related to social control, independently from alienation.

With William Tuke in England and Phillipe Pinel in France, seclusion becomes the rule during the 17th century, with the places generally called “strength houses”. In England, a famous place was the York Retreat.

In France, the year of 1656 is an important one, since in this year the General Hospital was opened in Paris. Among its main goals it is to hinder “mendacity and laziness, as well as the sources of all disorders” (Foucault, 1978, p. 64). However, the first General Hospital was created 40 years before, in Lyon. In 1676, a royal decree determines the existence of general hospitals in all cities. This explains why, on the verge of the Revolution, 32 countryside towns have general hospitals.

According to Foucault, the measure is related to the “bourgeois necessity of organizing the world of the poor, and for that the leper colonies were used” (1978, p. 53) which, empty since the Renaissance, were reactivated in the 17th century with another purpose, that is, they become to receive all the destitutes from both sexes. They take in those who present themselves spontaneously and also those referred by the authorities. In many cases the establishments which had taken advantage of the leper colonies had also inherited the belongings of the diseased, which allowed these places to be occupied by a heterogeneous population of sick, poor, destitute, homeless, mad people, that is, invalids, convalescents, curable or incurable.

In Paris, several establishments were grouped under the centralized administration in Salpêtrière, which had been a madhouse for women. These houses, although designed to relieve the poor, also had a repressive role, because they gathered detainees in general, to which the king or their family pays a pension. In 1662, the General Hospital grouped 6,000 people, that is, 1% of the Parisian population.

Prior to the creation of the General Hospital, the rule was to simply exclude the unemployed and homeless. In this scenario, hospitalization, required for reasons very different than healing, was an imperative of work which aroused two reactions, one was the poverty which subjected to the rules and the other rejected the assistance and tried to escape the order society and the Church wanted to impose.

We highlight, then, that with regard to control over the community, the work starts to take substantive role at the beginning of the industrial world, which explains the proscription of idleness. Even the mad find themselves involved in this prohibition because, like the others, they were also forced to work. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first seclusion houses arose in England and in the most industrialized regions of the country. The General Hospital of Paris had an ethical status which implied the relationship between morality, punishment and work for those who did not do the services they were supposed to do. And that rule was for everybody, that is, not specifically for mad people, which simultaneously made being imprisoned a benefit and a punishment.

Although in France religion was seen with reserve and even as a cause for madness, in Germany and in England there was intense concern with religious education and the surveillance of customs in seclusion houses.

In Paris, those responsible for the management of these places were directors appointed for life and whose powers were expanding from the hospital to the outside, that is, extended to the whole city. They were the authority for the management, administration, commerce, police, court, correction and punishment of all the poor and, therefore, worked, in practice, as true tyrants. Everything indicates that here is the model for Simão Bacamarte's Green House.

It is also clear that the houses, far from being strictly medical facilities, effectively had legal structures, and the people who were responsible for them, together with the powers beyond the courts, decided, judged and executed. In this sense, art. XII of the decree of 1656 becomes clear:

[...]the directors will have: poles, iron hoops, prisons and cells in said General Hospital and places dependent on it according to their opinion, without the possibility of appealing the orders given by them within said Hospital;

and as to the orders that interfere with the outside, they will be implemented in form and arrangement notwithstanding any objections or appeals made or that could be made and without prejudice, and for which nevertheless no defense or exception will be granted (Foucault, 1978, p. 50).

This brief summary intends to illustrate the importance assumed by the seclusion – be it of the demented, of patients, beggars or unoccupied – as a resource for their exclusion from social life.

However, when leprosy had practically disappeared and, therefore, the leper colonies had become the new locations for seclusion, aversion to that disease – already discriminated against by the Scriptures and, in the Middle Ages, taken as a manifestation of God's wrath – moved to madness. So says Foucault "from the 15th century, the face of madness haunted the imagination of Western men" (1978, p. 15). And on the following centuries, he continues, "the fear and anxiety [as] rebound from the seclusion, reappeared, but redoubled" (1978, p. 353).

That said, we can return to the events in Itaguaí to ask whether there it was, in fact, the madness that acted as an instrument for social control or if it only addressed something that transcends it.

SIMÃO BACAMARTE: THE POWER

The Green House had immediate success and attracted mad people not only from Itaguaí, but from all around the town. Right after opening it received an addition because of its success.

Simão's method accommodates all the rigor that his scientific convictions imposed on him, which leads him to study each case based on careful and extensive anamnesis, seeking to recover and analyze all information that could shed light on the disease. Alongside his empirical concerns, he continues to deepen in the theoretical research and one day calls one of his friends, the apothecary, to announce to him that he will start an experience "that will change the face of the Earth. Madness [...] was until now a lost island in the ocean of reason; I start to suspect that it is a continent" (Assis, 1962a, p. 260).

To further elucidate his new conception, he adds another metaphor, saying that in the shell of the human spirit, which is the subjective totality

taken by madness, reason is the pearl. That is, the only value is concentrated in the most insignificant part.

It is recalled that Itaguaí's framework reflects something Parisian, for the authority and the power of Simon are the same as those of the directors of the hospices of France, and he, aware of his power, conducts a careful tracking throughout Itaguaí's territory for any possible mad people. As a result, he brings two deserving citizens into the House, and when one of their cousins tries to defend them, she is locked away as well. The displeasure starts to appear, first inside the houses, then in public spaces.

Despite that, they all had great hopes for the return of Mrs. Evarista, the doctor's wife, who had traveled to Rio de Janeiro. When she returns, big parties around the town were thrown in her honor. But this does not stop Simão from locking away more people inside the House, which increases the dissatisfaction, because all the people of Itaguaí become terrified of the rumors about the injustices and tyranny committed by Simão

THE REACTION OF THE PEOPLE

These are the reasons why, in Itaguaí, the fear and the distress caused the popular rebellion led by the barber Porfírio when he heard about the imprisonment of Coelho, who was considered a model citizen. The barber is the head of the petition against Simão delivered to the City Council but, not happy with doing only that, he also leads the rebellion that marches towards the doctor's house. Simão, however, refuses to justify his own acts.

Encouraged by the barber, who wants to take over the political command of the town, the crowd threatens to demolish the Green House, but is stopped by the police who, using their guns, harms many and scares away the rest.

In an unexpected attitude, however, a group of soldiers who agreed with the popular demands joined the crowd, and the other soldiers, wanting to avoid injuring one of their own – in a corporatist gesture which is rare among us – also join in the protest. The barber then assumes power and takes the necessary legal steps. Among them is negotiating with the doctor. During the negotiation, Porfírio declares his love of Science and admits that the government does not have the necessary conditions for the treatment of madness. Because of that, he wants Simão to do something that will make

the people happy. The barber is acclaimed again when he leaves the doctor's house.

But after a few days some supporters of the barber are taken into the Green House. And another barber, called João de Pina, accuses the colleague of selling out, and assumed power, until a force sent by the King sets everything back in order.

With that, the doctor keeps locking people up, now including the barber Porfírio, the president of the City Council and, as amazing as it may seem, Mrs. Evarista – an unexpected gesture which convinces everybody of the honesty and competence of the doctor, who did not hesitate to lock away his own wife. But Simão, facing the revealing statistics that showed that 4/5 of the inhabitants of Itaguaí were locked away, decides to review his diagnosis of madness. And after a few days all patients are released.

Public life is restored with the release of the patients, and the town breathes a sigh of relief, which encourages private and public parties and dances.

A new theory, however, occurs to the distinguished scientist who – contrary to what he believed before – starts to see in the perfect and permanent balance of mental health the main sign of madness. With that, new people are locked away and a new classification for the alienated is born: “A gallery of modest people was created; [...]; another for tolerant people, another for truthful people, another for simple people, another for loyal people, another for magnanimous people, another for sage people, another for honest people etc.” (Assis, 1962a, p. 284).

But the progress of the doctor's theoretical reflection ends up in irony when, in self-diagnosing himself, he concludes that he is the very face of balance. Facing his own refusal to accept himself as such, P. Lopes completes his diagnosis when he assures the doctor that the fact that Simão refuses to accept his perfection is due to another one of his virtues: modesty. With that, because of his attachment to scientific coherence, he locks himself away, and dies a few months later.

INTERTEXTUAL LINKS

When, for the purpose of analysis, the text of *The Alienist* – which is linear and structurally simple – is broken down to its basic scheme, where

do all the details disseminated in the discourse sequence converge to? They all point to the polarization of two characters: one is collective: the inhabitants of Itaguaí; the other is individual: Simão.

On the one hand, the citizens want simply to preserve their survival and their companionship, since the latter is a necessary condition of the former, given humankind gregarious nature.

On the other hand, the figure of Simão brings the conviction of the value of science. But to this is added the presumption the doctor has regarding his own power and superiority over all other people. He thinks himself a God by the strength of the hubris.

Another fictional character who appeared in the literary scene during this same century was Victor Frankenstein (1818), the acclaimed creation by Mary Shelley. This doctor let himself be seduced by the glory of science when creating the creature who was going to be the responsible for his unhappiness. Victor says: “When I was younger I believed I was destined for something great. I am very sensitive, but had a coldness in judgement which recommended myself for important things” (Shelley, 2009, p. 225). Scientific knowledge required intense dedication for him as well, since his purpose is nothing less than creating life itself: “Under the guidance of my new masters, I threw myself into the search for the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life; the latter completely monopolized my attention” (Shelley, 2009, p. 42). But, because he considered health a “vulgar subject”, he plants his final goal in a horizon which goes beyond science and reaches personal glory, satisfying his love for himself, as he declares: “what glory would this discovery involve if I could banish forever the affliction of disease from human beings and turn humans immune to anything but a violent death!” (Shelley, 2009, p. 42).

If his blind dedication to science constitutes here the cause of the tension and the tragedy, which progressively increase during the story, the path taken by Simão Bacamarte is different and even opposite. Although I do not know any reference regarding Machado having read Shelley’s masterpiece, an important essay was probably among the motivations for the creation of Simão Bacamarte: *The Praise of Folly*, by Erasmus, which includes conceit, that is, exaggerated self-esteem, as the first symptom of

madness. Machado's library includes a copy of this work in a French volume from 1877 (Jobim, 2008).

Two aspects can clarify what I read as the main message from the text, that is, what it is essentially saying, which, as I understand, transcends the issue of madness.

BRÁS CUBAS AND SIMÃO

The first aspect involves the placement of *The Alienist* in the works of Machado de Assis, where the theme of madness can be found many times, as is indicated by Ivo Barbieri (2008). Published in 1882, the text introduces the book called *Papéis Avulsos*, a year after the publishing of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*.

If Brás claims to have written with the quill of jest and the ink of melancholy, quill and ink are, now and here, of the same quality, since, in the total absence of melancholy, the very last name of the protagonist, Bacamarte, signs the jest to get to irony, a subtle tool of parody.

But, independent of their ways of expressing, there are common traces between Simão and Brás. Firstly, they are both obsessed with a single idea: Brás by the idea of plaster, Simão by the idea of science. With the aggravating fact that Brás, because he is cynical, was completely aware of the evil consequences of obsessions: "May God rids you, reader, of a fixed idea; better a speck, better a log in the eye" (Assis, 1962b, p. 514). This does not prevent Brás, with his plaster, to feed his own thirst for fame, that is, his love of glory, and to declare it.

Simão's fixed idea is translated into his compulsion for science, to which is added a desire which is identical to that of Brás, that is, personal glory. When the doctor chose the theme of madness, the narrator clarifies that

There was not in the Colony or in the Empire an authority in this subject, which was practically unexplored. Simão Bacamarte understood that Portuguese science, and particularly Brazilian science, could receive immortal honors – an expression used by himself, but in a delirium of domestic intimacy; outside he was modest, as would be expected (Assis, 1962b, p. 254).

Despite the excuse of modesty given by the narrator – a poor excuse, since the narrator himself clarifies that the modesty was only on the

“outside” -, the metonymic play between the whole, that is, “Portuguese science” and “Brazilian science”, and the part, that is, the true beneficiary, Simão, is evident.

THE TEXT AND 19TH CENTURY SCIENCE

The second aspect implies the climate of the time when *The Alienist* was written: the two last decades of the 19th century. I outline now, shortly and superficially, the general lines of science of the time so as to indicate that the scientific knowledge plays a determinant part in Machado’s work.

Historians are practically unanimous as to the importance science gains in the 19th century. E. Burns, for example, considers that, more than in the 17th and 18th centuries, the label of “intellectual revolution” would be effective and appropriate for defining the period between 1830 and 1914, that is, most of the 19th century (1948, p. 739). He adds that there had never occurred in such a small fraction of time so many discoveries and so many theoretical advances. Science historian W.C. Dampier claims that the 19th century “has more than enough titles as to be considered the beginning of the scientific era” (1986, p. 227).

Among the characteristics of the time is the limited philosophical production, whose importance is discreetly rescued only by Augusto Comte’s positivism, almost at the end of the century. Alongside that, the interest of scholars, echoing English empiricism, focuses on applied research and, without abandoning theory, aims to know not only nature, but also of humankind. Darwin’s work *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and the first edition was completely sold in one day.

Consciously or not, the notion that matter constitutes final reality and living organisms are no more than mechanisms is disseminated. This conception explains why experimental and mathematical methods of mechanics go beyond the field of physics and take over chemistry and biology also. In the field of biology, research related to theories about cells, alongside questions about the spontaneous creation of life, are the most popular. These issues will appear in Literature, as is illustrated in *Frankenstein*.

But, besides the fields which have already been talked about, the development of Geology and Astronomy were also significant. Astrology was associated mainly to observations done using telescopes, which received many improvements at the time. In the field of physics, research advanced especially in relation to heat, light and electricity.

It is important to mention, also, the growing interest in mathematics, with emphasis in geometry and statistics; the latter, in fact, is first applied to social experiments, with the example of Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin and a scientist of many interests related to genetics and psychology. Because he believed everything was measurable, he tried to develop a method of calculation to evaluate the effects of prayer quantitatively (Ronam, 2001, p. 75). It is now known if he had more scientific success than Simão Bacamarte.

This brief outline of science in the 19th century clarifies, in a general way, the conditions it gave the next century to register an explosion of technical and industrial products, results of the theoretical evolution of the sciences of nature, especially in the field of electro technology.

EPILOGUE

The last step consists of questioning the main source of tension between our two characters – Simão and the people of Itaguaí.

Are the people of the town afraid of madness in itself? That is not what I see, because the notion of madness which is presented in the text is imprecise, fluid, with no persuasive or even rational basis, because it oscillates between two scientifically inconsistent poles: at one time it is taken to be the unbalance of mental health, and then as excessive balance, and then as absolute perfection.

Therefore, the focus of the tension, far from being madness, is fear. Fear and distress are the factors which act as effective agents for social control in Itaguaí: fear of being locked away, fear of social segregation, fear of arbitrary imprisonment. For maintaining the exposition as closely to the perception of the time as possible, I will use a fictional text where D. Diderot comments on the psychic effects of seclusion exemplified by the cloister. He says:

Man was born for society; separate him, isolate him, and his ideas will become detached, his character will chance, a thousand ridiculous affections will take over his heart; extravagant ideas will be born in his spirit, like thorn bushes in savage lands. Put a man in a forest, he will become ferocious; in a cloister, where the idea of necessity joins the idea of servitude, and it is even worse; one can leave a forest, but not a cloister; one is free in the forest, but a slave in the cloister. It necessary, maybe, to have more strength of soul to survive solitude than misery: misery debases, solitude depraves (1962, p. 134).

And he finishes with a question: “Is it more worth living in abjection than in madness? It is what I will not dare decide; but it is better to avoid one and the other” (Diderot, p.134-5).

Fear, says J Delumeau, one of its historians, is not a feeling of individuals considered particularly, but with it “is also the collectivity and civilizations are committed to a permanent dialogue” (Delumeau, 2009, p. 12). These feelings of fear and distress explain even the rebellion of the peaceful people of Itaguaí, because it occurs “in the collective sphere what is evident in the individual sphere: that is, the link between fear and distress on one side, and aggressiveness on the other side” (Delumeau, 2009, p. 36).

But if fear is a feeling motivated by something that is known – in this case, the arbitrary power Simão has to lock away anybody -, distress is usually associated to dreading something unknown.

For that, the fear caused by Simão Bacamarte in intensified and completed by the distress being silently disseminated in the context of the town by the action of science, whose notion remains mysterious and preserved, distant and unreachable, due to the unpredictability of the criteria used by the doctor.

With the purpose of highlighting the importance of the evaluation done by Machado about science, because of the vanguardist character of the critique, I use what has been pointed out by Roberto Schwarz when commenting the variety of philosophical theories present in *Posthume Memories*: “It was natural that the enthusiasts would transform scientific spirit in panacea and in the opposite of what it was. But Machado noticed the ironies hidden in the situation and explored them systematically” (2000, p. 152).

That is, concludes Schwarz: “Where the amazed saw redemption, he took a step back and wrote down the existence of a specific problem” (Schwarz, 2000, p. 152).

This explains why Simão Bacamarte’s traces of character are unaltered throughout the narrative, besides manifesting a coherent and stable behavior. His only changes are of a theoretical nature and, therefore, inaccessible to the layman. As to the rest, that which he reveals to be at the end was already in him since the beginning, which is the ironic suspicion that he might be an alienated.

After all, it is what can be verified by the warning that, still in the first chapter, gave voice to P. Lopes, when he said to Mrs. Evarista, talking about Simão: “Studying all the time like that is not good, turns the senses” (Assis, 1962a, p. 255). Planted from the beginning, this admonition is extended throughout the text and reiterated by various characters, until it is finally confirmed in the epilogue as irony and parody – the only alienated, according to the scientist Simão, is the man Simão.

In short, the seduction provoked by science, which in Mary Shelley’s narrative evolved and consumed itself in a rhythm of progressive and crushing tragedy, in Machado the same seduction is dissolved in jest and converted into a caricature because Simão, taken over by his deliriums of greatness and by paranoia, is nothing more than the finished parody of the scientist: the opposite of wise, since his theories are reduced to hesitant and irresponsible experiments focused on his pairs.

Because of that, Machado’s narrative, disguised as an irresponsible ludic account, has the function of calling our attention to the fact that science is not always what it exhibits in appearance and that – because of the irresponsible senselessness of its agents – it can become a source of fear and distress.

To the law researchers, one question remains: is the predictable science of Law exempt of also playing this “noble” task of social control with identical consequences?

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