

# The Paradox of the Alienist

Abel Barros Baptista

Translated by Anna Klobucka

**Abstract.** This paper argues that the novella “O Alienista” articulates the two contrary dimensions of Simão Bacamarte’s last gesture as a twofold affirmation: an affirmation of the insurmountable difference that separates science from madness and an affirmation of their confusion in the person of the alienist. This double assertion is the story’s principle of coherence and the fulcrum of its originality: the narrative creates a distance between its two segments, bringing together at the moment of closure what it has never allowed us to confuse as it developed.

C’est un curieux paradoxe de voir la pratique médicale entrer dans ce domaine incertain de quasi-miracle au moment où la connaissance de la maladie mentale essaie de prendre un sens de positivité. D’un côté la folie se met à distance dans un champ objectif où disparaissent les menaces de la déraison; mais en ce même instant le fou tend à former avec le médecin, et dans une unité sans partage, une sorte de couple, où la complicité se noue par des très vieilles appartenances.

—Michel Foucault 526

Although Machado de Assis’ novella “O Alienista” does not enjoy a degree of prestige comparable to that accorded his novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, in spite of its inclusion in *Papéis Avulsos*, the first short story collection of the author’s so-called mature period, today it is nevertheless one of those texts that any modestly informed reader either already knows or considers familiar, as if he or she had read it before actually reading it. The reader fancies from the outset that the alienist Simão Bacamarte will in the end prove to be the only true madman in the placid town of Itaguaí, which in the

meantime he has turned upside down with his theories of madness and the establishment of Casa Verde, his asylum for the insane. It is, in fact, easy to argue that the novella itself suggests this from the beginning. In a sense, its outcome is indeed predictable: among other reasons, because given the logic of the protagonist's trajectory it is, as we shall see, the only possible outcome. Consequently, in approaching the story the critics' tendency has been to focus only on those aspects of Simão Bacamarte's figure and actions that point "beyond," with the alienist becoming the surface of "something else" that emerges from the depths of allegory. I quote the following recent example from an essay by Alfredo Bosi:

It is not enough to say of "The Alienist," the first novella of Machado's maturity, that it satirizes the application of a scientific perspective to the study of madness. It is true that, with the center of its plot occupied by the distinction between reason and unreason, the story acquires an amusing aura of a *comédie d'erreurs* animated by the ever-present suggestion that its only truly alienated character is the alienist himself. This is the superficial effect, the paradox sustained by the narrator from the beginning to the end of the novella. The *exemplum*, the typification that produces the comedy, at first reading appears to be associated solely with Dr. Simão Bacamarte, a man of science to the core, consequent to the point of ridicule. Like an operatic prima donna, Dr. Bacamarte steals the reader's attention.

But to me this story of madness seems to point toward another dimension, which both includes and surpasses the caricature of the perfect alienist. (88)

Bosi's use of the term "caricature" reflects the model of reading prevailing in Machadian criticism: the caricature allows for an easy recognition of its object, creating an illusion of intelligibility that satisfies the common reader. This surface, however, is deceptive: in the deception and against it the critic locates a fissure in which an explanatory—that is, demystifying—commentary can be planted. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that even this comic and fantastist novella has not escaped the vein of critical nationalism that has dominated the Brazilian tradition of reading Machado. Beyond the caricature lurks Brazil's historical reality, which can always be lucidly discerned and denounced, with the familiar result: Itaguaí becomes an allegory of Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Bosi's analysis distances itself, however, from the reference to Brazil, seeking in the novella a lesson broader and obviously removed from any national specificity. I return to the above passage at the same point where I interrupted the quote:

For it depicts clearly a scenario of power. Bacamarte is not in the least the type of a crazy scientist, marginalized and subject to the derision of the right-minded... His status as a nobleman who enjoys royal favor transforms him into a dictator of poor Itaguaí. The town's population suffers the effects of his terrorism of prestige, of which the relations between the physician and the patient, the psychiatrist and the madman, are merely particular cases. The exercise of power becomes, therefore, the axis of the story before the narrative turns to fanciful ideas of a steely-eyed scientist...

The asylum is the House of Power, which Machado knew long before the opponents of psychiatry voiced their denunciations. [...]

There is, then, a preexisting state of authority that bends the tongue and the spine of those who surround Simão Bacamarte. This authority is exercised in the name of an activity considered to be neutral, "above common appetites": science and the love of truth that inspires psychiatry. (88-90)

The pertinence of these observations is undeniable: the alienist's actions depend decisively on his power and are, unmistakably, acts of power. But is it viable to deduce this specific authority from some general and superior form of power? At the dawn of the rebellion, the barber Porfirio rises against "the experiments of a medical despot" (21).<sup>2</sup> But later he tells the already vanquished Bacamarte that "the government recognizes that the question is purely scientific and that scientific issues cannot be resolved by legislation" (29). The power referred to by Bosi has the form of a "preexisting command" that remains unmodified throughout history and that, in particular, seems to leave other powers unchanged, as if it were superimposed over all of them, from the beginning to the end and even before the beginning: an original condition that precedes and determines all else. This is why the alienist's action is reduced to a "particular case": arriving after power, it is a scientist's "fanciful idea." By thus opening the way towards the idea of caricature, Bosi ends up reproducing the common opposition encountered by the alienist in the framework of the novella itself, the opposition legitimized by the suspicion that Bacamarte is protected by his social status and the complicity of the powers that be, which enable his authority. In Bosi's analysis, Bacamarte's power is not specifically the power of a scientist. As a result, the novella's outcome loses definition and interest: at its limit, in fact, the alienist's condition, madness and its theories, and Casa Verde are all dissolved, leaving almost no residue in the operation of allegory. Once revealed, the only madman of Itaguaí represents, in the end, comic excess: the final touch of caricature and, as such, a mere sign of the hyperbolic surface of the story.

Nevertheless, and this is the fulcrum on which the novella's originality hinges, Simão Bacamarte is not revealed as the only madman of Itaguaí; instead, he *declares himself* to be the only madman of Itaguaí. In a very precise sense, to conclude that the alienist is the only one who is alienated means to adopt the ultimate conclusion of the alienist himself: it means to accept that Simão Bacamarte remains the only authority in the novella capable of deciding who is and who is not insane. This is not an insignificant coincidence, given that the story narrates the emergence of a new kind of power—the power to label and to exclude the insane—whose legitimacy its outcome at the same time sustains and contests. In this sense, the experience of reading the story requires the unmaking of an instance of predictability that does not reject what it promises. In other words, the outcome is made impossible by the same process that makes it predictable. This is the figure of the paradox I will now briefly describe.

The beginning of the novella introduces Simão Bacamarte as the greatest physician of all of Brazil, Portugal, and Spain, who had studied in Coimbra and Padua. He returned to Brazil because the Portuguese king was unable to “alcançar dele que ficasse em Coimbra, regendo a universidade, ou em Lisboa, expedindo os negócios do reino.” Bacamarte's reply to the king's appeal is significant in its specificity: “‘Science,’ he told His Majesty, ‘is my only office; Itaguaí, my universe’” (1).

The alienist enters the scene defined by this double restriction, which is already based on a rule of confinement. Science, his “only office,” should not, in principle, recognize any frontiers; and what are we to make of his narrowing down of the universe to Itaguaí? The town represents the space in which the scientist will exercise his “only office”: Itaguaí is, at the same time, Simão Bacamarte's laboratory and, figuratively, his universe. But the universe is also the space outside of which nothing exists; in this sense, Itaguaí is the part that disdains or does not know the whole, a delirious synecdoche that necessarily affects the “only office.”

Machado's model of a “philosophical novella,” which articulates “chronicles” of “remote times” (1) with a precisely demarcated fictional microcosm, finds its condition of emergence in this inaugural sentence spoken by Bacamarte. The utterance betrays already a degree of conflict between the universal nature of his “only office” and the limits circumscribed by the lunatic asylum to which he will confine himself, not just in the end but at the very moment of its founding. Still, it seems undeniable that this conflict is

also, in its turn, restricted and reduced to hyperbolic subordination—individual, caricatural, and comic—to the ideals and principles of science.<sup>3</sup> And if the episode of the wedding certainly echoes this suggestion, Bacamarte's decision to devote himself to the study of madness reinforces and particularizes it, implying that his caricature of a scientist is about to evolve into the figure of a mad scholar.

The first sign of this is embedded in the popular reaction to the idea of setting up a lunatic asylum in Itaguaí:

The proposal aroused excitement and curiosity throughout the town. There was considerable opposition, for it is always difficult to uproot the established way of doing things, however absurd or evil it may be. The idea of having madmen live together in the same house seemed itself to be a symptom of madness, as many intimated even to the doctor's wife. (2-3)

One of them is Father Lopes, who warns her that Bacamarte is likely to go insane: "All this intensive study, a man can take just so much of it and then his mind" (3). Further on, in the midst of "terror," one of the reasons proposed by the population to explain the overcrowding of Casa Verde is the "monomania afflicting the doctor himself" (16). And at the outbreak of the Canjicas rebellion, Sebastião de Freitas, the dissident councilman fascinated by the description of Casa Verde (by the barber who heard it from a local poet) as the "Bastille of the human reason," (21)<sup>4</sup> asks:

"I know nothing about science, but if so many men whom we considered sane are locked up as madmen, how do we know that the real madman is not the psychiatrist himself?" (21-22)

In a word, the possibility that the alienist might be the only true madman in Itaguaí is from early on clearly inscribed in the text of the novella. However, it would be rash to assume that the question asked by the "dissenter" councilman (21) is the climax of a clear and continuous process. In reality, much has happened in the meantime. More precisely, two things happened: first, the definitive installation of Casa Verde, whose true objective, we need to stress, is to study insanity rather than to protect or cure the insane—"The main thing in my work at the Green House is to study insanity in depth, to learn its various gradations, to classify the various cases, and finally



to discover the cause of the phenomenon and its remedy" (4)—and second, the formulation of Simão Bacamarte's "new theory," whose immediate consequence is the "enlarging the realm of insanity" (10)—"Till now, madness has been thought a small island in an ocean of sanity. I am beginning to suspect that it is not an island at all but a continent" (9)—and the resulting terror that, in its turn, leads to the rebellion.

But the essential consequence of these events is another and can be discerned at two levels. First, as a radical and irreversible alteration of the dividing line between reason and madness, which is the objective of Bacamarte's theory:

"Think of humanity," he said, "as a great oyster shell. Our first task, Soares, is to extract the pearl—that is, reason. In other words, we must determine the nature and boundaries of reason. Madness is simply all that lies beyond those limits. But what is reason if not the equilibrium of the mental faculties? An individual, therefore, who lacks this equilibrium in any particular is, to that extent, insane." (11)

Second, what also happens is a definition of an *institutional site of decision-making* with regard to this boundary site that coincides with the alienist himself who is invested with his powers by the town council. At the first level, the only resistance is offered by Father Lopes, in the name of tradition and of the uselessness of attempting to break with it: "Under the present definition of insanity, which has always been accepted [...] the fence around the area is perfectly clear and satisfactory. Why not stay within it?" (11). The second level encompasses the entire political scene surrounding Casa Verde, from the town council's actions to the episodes of popular revolt and, above all, the crucial paradox of the story's outcome.

Therefore, the subversion of the state of things that greeted the arrival of Simão Bacamarte in Itaguaí goes much further than a change of habits with respect to protecting and treating the insane: the town has gained a lunatic asylum but has lost the notion of the boundary separating reason from madness—"The terror grew in intensity. One no longer knew who was sane and who was insane" (19). The "new theory" has changed the status of Casa Verde, which metamorphoses from a passive shelter for the allegedly insane into an active center of vigilance of the community and the seat of both legislative and executive power. Simão Bacamarte's gaze, his "restless and police-like eye over the crowd" (8), watches, interrogates, and seizes: his "eyes [...] like daggers" (13) are the main policing agency of Itaguaí and are served by perfectly legitimate and competent

means of apprehension. In sum, Casa Verde defines the madness that it then shelters coercively, and no limits are set for its actions by any other authority.

The question asked by the dissident councilman testifies to this metamorphosis of the initial state of things and to the anxiety it has provoked. But there is more to it: the councilman refers to a site of authority and his dissidence has to do precisely with the exercise of this authority. The entire council seems to be in agreement on one point: that its own authority outranks that of Casa Verde. However, while the council exercises its authority confirming the autonomy of the powers that it has conferred on the alienist—and consequently informs the rebels that “[Casa Verde was a public institution and] that scientific research must be hampered neither by hostile legislation nor by the misconceptions and prejudices of the mob” (20-21)—the dissident demands restrictive measures. Not because he is against science and its autonomy but because he suspects that Simão Bacamarte may be exercising his powers illegitimately. But this route, which respects the science and assails the scientist, is no longer available; once it has been affirmed that Simão Bacamarte and no one else has the authority to define madness, who other than himself to “know that the real madman is not the psychiatrist himself?”

In effect, the revolution carried out in Itaguaí by Simão Bacamarte, who emerges from it with absolute powers, consists quite simply in declaring madness to be the exclusive province of science and in removing it from the purview of religion, morality, tradition, or common sense. And, in Itaguaí, science is synonymous with Bacamarte. How, therefore, can he be confronted if his power is the power of science and if he is the only agent competent to evaluate his own actions? Moreover, it is Bacamarte himself who makes this express announcement as he faces the rebels:

“Gentlemen,” he said, “science is a serious thing and it must be treated seriously. For my professional decisions I account to no one but God and the authorities in my special field. If you wish to suggest changes in the administration of the Green House, I am ready to listen to you; but if you wish me to be untrue to myself, further talk would be futile. I could invite you to appoint a committee to my care, but I shall not, for to do so would be to account to you for my methods and this I shall never do to a group of rebels or, for that matter, to laymen of any description.” (24)

These words are addressed to the rebels, but can also be taken to encompass the members of the town council. The ineffectiveness of the position

taken by the dissident councilman exposes the dilemma facing Itaguaí's governing body as the Canjicas rebellion breaks out: either it refuses science or it submits to the scientist; either it destroys Casa Verde, denying science an exclusive oversight of madness, or it remains in the hands of the alienist, making its own authority subservient to his. Machado's novella traces this predicament and the consequences of the councilmen's decision with pitiless clarity: a new power has emerged, which is stronger than their own authority and threatens it insidiously. From the time of the rebellion onwards, the growth of Simão Bacamarte's power is paralleled by the loss of power by the council. This loss is independent of the council's actual membership, as demonstrated by the barber Porfírio's attitude after he is invested with authority, which tends to be interpreted as a simple, or at least transparent, mockery of political opportunism. But it is not at all clear what kind of advantage Porfírio could derive from betraying the principal demand of the rebellion that brought him to power; at the time, after all, "the barber felt a surging ambition to rule," (24) and led the rebels towards Casa Verde, diverting them from their initial objective of seizing the town hall. The essential import of this situation is therefore that although the council's authority is assumed by the rebels, its subordination to the alienist is no longer reversible and the barber can only accept it as his legacy. He knows this, in fact, and uses his knowledge to justify the compromise he is seeking:

Rightly or wrongly, everybody thinks that most of the people locked up here are perfectly sane. But the government recognizes that the question is purely scientific and that scientific issues cannot be resolved by legislation. Moreover, the Green House is now an established municipal institution. We must therefore find a compromise that will both permit its continued operation and placate the public. (29)

He then adds, to the astonishment of the alienist who remains convinced that the triumph of the rebellion could only lead to the immediate destruction of Casa Verde:

"That is because you don't appreciate the grave responsibility of government," interrupted the barber. "The people, in their blindness, may feel righteous indignation about something that they do not understand; they have a right, then, to ask the government to act along certain lines. The government, however, must remember its duty to promote the public interest, whether or not this interest is



in full accord with the demands made by the public itself. The revolution, which yesterday overthrew a corrupt and despicable Town Council, screams for the destruction of the Green House. But the government must remain calm and objective. It knows that the elimination of the Green House would not eliminate insanity. [...] These are matters for science, not for politics.” (30)

This is how the rebels’ leader spells out, like a perfect disciple of Simão Bacamarte, the principal and irreversible transformation introduced by the alienist in Itaguaí: besides noting that the power taken by the rebels is diminished, he also forfeits the chance to reinforce it, presenting his gesture as a proof of responsibility and ability to govern. Nor does he issue the decree to do away with Casa Verde until he perceives that he is about to lose all of his newly conquered authority. The alienist takes advantage of this opportunity by seizing fifty of the barber’s supporters, a severe blow that puts an end to Porfírio’s rule as his position is assumed by another barber. When order is finally restored by the authority of the viceroy, the alienist reaches the highest point of his power and influence. The original councilmen are restored, but they do not recover the authority they held prior to the establishment of Casa Verde or even before the Canjicas rebellion, and their position is about to become even weaker: the council does not hesitate to hand over to the alienist first its dissident member and then its own president. The council’s surrender is accompanied by the final elimination of all resistance on the part of the general population of Itaguaí, which occurs when Simão Bacamarte places his own wife in the asylum:

Suspicion, distrust, accusations were all negated by the commitment of his own wife whom he loved with all his heart. No one could ever again charge him with motives other than those of science itself. He was beyond doubt a man of integrity and profound objectivity, a combination of Cato and Hippocrates. (35)

The inversion proposed next by Bacamarte, who stipulates that the currently insane enjoy, after all, a perfect balance of their mental powers, while it produces spectacular effects in the life of the community, represents also an immanent modification of his science, which demonstrates its ability to sustain self-criticism and correction. It may appear as a gigantic disruption to an outsider’s eye, but it arises in perfect continuity with the alienist’s previous theory if it is viewed from the perspective of scientific progress. Therefore, it does not

alter the balance of power. The council accepts the new theory and legislates with respect to the conclusion of the fourth paragraph of Bacamarte's proposal, which has to do with the arrest and internment of the newly insane: it authorizes the procedure, albeit limiting its duration to one year and claiming the authority to close Casa Verde if it should prove necessary for reasons of public order. It appears that the councilmen are taking precautionary measures to guarantee that their own authority will always prevail over the alienist's. Their action, however, proves to be a mere formality and its efficacy is soon ruined. The dissident councilman Freitas proposes a restrictive clause: that under no circumstances should any member of the council be interned. The councilman Galvão opposes the motion, arguing that "in authorizing a scientific experiment on the people of Itaguaí, the Council would itself be unscientific if it exempted its members or any other segment of the population from subjection to the experiment," and, in conclusion, that membership on the council "does not exclude us from the human race" (37). The irony of this episode is extraordinary; it presents the triumph of the alienist over the council as an act of subordination that is at the same time an act of transgression:

Simão Bacamarte accepted the ordinance with all its restrictions. As for the exemption of the Councilmen, he declared that they were in no danger whatever of being committed, for their votes in favor of the amendment showed clearly that they were mentally unbalanced. He asked only that Galvão be delivered to him, for this Councilman had exhibited exceptional mental equilibrium, not only in his objection to the amendment but even more in the calm that he had maintained in the face of the unreasonable opposition and abuse on the part of his colleagues. The Council immediately granted the request. (38)

Bacamarte's triumph is complete: speaking, as always, in the name of science, he is once again able to neutralize the measures aimed at limiting his power as a scientist. Moreover, he manages to steer the council towards a unanimous vote in favor of violating the clause it has just approved with the single dissenting vote by councilman Galvão. Total subordination to science is no longer merely a caricatural trait of the scientist: it has metamorphosed into a state of subservience in which the entire town exists, held by force in subjection to scientific principles. In Itaguaí science has become the Law.

Yet the story does not limit itself to the description of science as a form of authority and neither does it concentrate on the relationship between sci-

ence and political power. Machado's motto is the same as Bacamarte's: *Plus Ultra!* "The Alienist" develops as a narrative of the emergence and consolidation of a form of power, but its closure presents a fundamental disturbance, which is at the same time inseparable from this power and incompatible with it. At the highest point of the story's hyperbolic audacity its conclusion is shown to be unforeseeable through the same means that make it possible: Simão Bacamarte's self-diagnosis. The originality of Machado's novella distances it from the model of satire that proceeds by unmasking, since the alienist does not simply go mad in the end and the story does not simply close with the revelation of his madness. Simão Bacamarte *declares himself to be insane* and his declaration makes a decisive difference.

After freeing the last resident of Casa Verde, Bacamarte becomes restless: "Were they all really insane? Did I really cure them? Or is not mental imbalance so natural and inherent that it was bound to assert itself with or without help?" (43). Further reflection makes him opt for the latter possibility, which brings about a crisis:

The psychiatrist contemplated his new doctrine with mixed feelings. He was happy because, after such long study, experimentation, and struggle, he could at last affirm the ultimate truth: there never were and never would be any madmen in Itaguaí or anywhere else. But when he was happy a doubt assailed him. In the field of psychiatry a generalization so broad, so absolute, was almost inevitably erroneous. (43)

To resolve his crisis—"the most dreadful of the spiritual tempests" (43)—Bacamarte has no other solution than to declare himself the only madman in Itaguaí. With this extreme gesture, he maintains his power as the alienist, which is upheld in this confrontation with the last and only insane individual in Itaguaí: it is still Bacamarte and no one else that makes decisions about madness and asserts who is and who is not alienated. It is thereby confirmed that only the alienist can be in the position to answer the question asked by the dissident councilman. Yet, of course, with the same gesture Bacamarte destroys the site of power he has come to occupy: what appeared as the condition of possibility and a guarantee of the legitimacy of his actions is, in the end, madness itself. Its manifestations are not accounted for in the substance of the theories the alienist kept proposing but are rooted instead in the very process of their elaboration and in the conditions that assure autonomous and continuous unfolding of this process. Thus, the coldness of his behavior,

his inflexible prosecutorial vigilance of the community, his imperviousness to considerations and interests unrelated to science, his conviction, self-denial, patience, and persistence are all incorporated—at the moment when he discovers in himself a consummate personification of madness—as a complete set of symptoms of insanity without ceasing to function simultaneously as a perfect description of an ideal scientist. The fact that it is Bacamarte himself who makes the discovery and spells out his diagnosis demonstrates precisely that he has not abandoned this ideal and makes it impossible for him to consider that all his earlier activity may have been prompted and spurred on by madness. Simão Bacamarte does not give up. On the contrary, since to conclude, at that juncture, that there have never been any madmen in Itaguaí—not a single individual showing a perfect balance of his mental powers—is what would force him to capitulate considering all his work to have been, from the beginning, nothing but a gigantic and useless fraud. The firmness of his self-diagnosis allows him to overcome his distress and anxiety, insofar as they are provoked by a *crisis of science*, and his public declaration, followed by self-interment in Casa Verde, is the ultimate gesture that fully legitimates his work as an alienist and, in particular, assures that prosecution of the insane remains a viable option. In the alienist's madness resides the last chance of survival for the science of madness, demonstrating as it does the necessity of believing in the latter's basic tenets: that insanity exists, that the boundary separating it from reason also exists, and that it is possible to define its location. In a word, Simão Bacamarte proclaims himself mad in order to safeguard the distinction between reason and madness: he becomes alienated so that he goes on being an alienist.

The novella articulates the two contrary dimensions of Bacamarte's last gesture as a twofold affirmation: an affirmation of the insurmountable difference that separates science from madness and an affirmation of their confusion in the person of the alienist. This double assertion is the story's principle of coherence and the fulcrum of its originality: the narrative creates a distance between its two segments, bringing together at the moment of closure what it has never allowed us to confuse as it developed. For what can be inferred from all this is not that the boundary between madness and reason is movable and impossible to pin down; or that the project for a science of insanity is the greatest insanity of all; or that what disturbs the realization of this project and brings about its crisis is doubt, anxiety, distress, or insecurity with regard to the limits of the domain of madness. Simão Bacamarte's ges-

ture reveals that the entire science of madness is founded on a division that excludes madness programmatically from the territory of reason; that is, a science of madness can only be constituted if, as a matter of principle and prior to any scrutiny, it is considered to be safe from insanity. The gesture is impossible because it proposes such a scrutiny in perfect continuity with Bacamarte's actions as an alienist. This is the true essence of his madness: a new kind of madness that required the entire experience of Casa Verde in order to become revealed. The alienist would not have recognized his own insanity if, at the beginning, he had not believed himself safely sheltered from insanity. In this sense, what makes Simão Bacamarte the only madman of Itaguaí is that he is the only scientist of Itaguaí.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Katia Muricy has seen in "The Alienist" an allusion, also by way of caricature, to the "process of normalization of the Brazilian society": "Thus, the town of Itaguaí appears as an allegory of nineteenth-century Brazilian society; if the mores described in the novella are still those of colonial Brazil, Simão Bacamarte's scientific novelties correspond to the innovations that psychiatrists were at that time introducing through social medicine" (33). The issue of the importation of foreign models dominates this reading: according to Muricy, Machado avails himself of caricature in order to denounce the inadequacy of an imported model. The critic attempts to move beyond this confrontation and this denunciation, however, even though retaining as central to her argument the reference to nineteenth-century Brazilian society: "At stake is not merely a description of our maladjustment to European models. Machado's text attains its critical dimension insofar as it bears witness to the process of normalization being undergone by the Brazilian society, with all its idiosyncrasies, presenting it as uniquely ours and expressing skepticism with regard to its values. It is possible to discern in the humor of 'The Alienist' a penetrating criticism of Brazilian psychiatry's controlling intent with regard to the country's population, as well as a precise understanding of the reciprocal alliance between the emergent discipline and the political power. But it is particularly owing to its ironic view of experimental positivism, of high humanitarian ideals of psychiatric knowledge, and of the presumable conformity of the latter with universal principles of reason—conformity deployed by medical discourse to legitimize psychiatry's intervention in the society—that the narrative reaches its most sophisticated level of intelligence" (36).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from "The Alienist" are taken from *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories* (1963) translated by Helen Caldwell and William L. Grossman. "The Psychiatrist" was translated by Grossman.

<sup>3</sup> A reading of the novella that insists on distinguishing between Simão Bacamarte and the "authentic scientist," separating science from a parodic attack on a scientist, may be found in João Camilo dos Santos' essay, "Algumas Reflexões sobre 'O Alienista.'"

<sup>4</sup> This expression is particularly significant. A little earlier, someone—"an unsuccessful doctor"—says that Casa Verde "is a private prison," an opinion that "caught on and spread so rapidly" (34). The comparison with a prison is highly obvious, especially since the alienist's authority involves, as well, efficient means of apprehension. But the reference to the Bastille is even more important, given that it evokes the famous pioneer of psychiatry Philippe Pinel.



### Works Cited

- Assis, Machado de. *The Psychiatrist and Other Stories*. Trans. Helen Caldwell and William L. Grossman. Berkeley: U of California P, 1963.
- Bosi, Alfredo. "A Máscara e a Fenda." *Machado de Assis. O Enigma do Olhar*. São Paulo: Ática, 1999. 73-126.
- Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- Muricy, Katia. *A Razão Cética. Machado de Assis e as Questões do Seu Tempo*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1988.
- Santos, João Camilo dos. "Algumas Reflexões sobre 'O Alienista.'" *Colóquio/Letras* 121-122 (July-Dec. 1991): 41-56.

Abel Barros Baptista is Associate Professor at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Among other books, he is the author of *Em Nome do Apelo do Nome* (1991) and *Autobibliografias. Solicitação do Livro na Ficção e na Ficção de Machado de Assis* (1998). He is also the Associate Editor of *Colóquio/Letras* and the editor of the sixteen-volume series *Curso Breve de Literatura Brasileira* published by Cotovia (Lisbon). E-mail: abelbb@mail.telepac.pt