

Lobo Antunes, the Psychiatrist

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Abstract: This article examines António Lobo Antunes as a psychiatrist and the scientific articles on literary creation he wrote in collaboration with Daniel Sampaio on Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland*, in an attempt to interpret this work through the psychiatric condition of the author, and on D. Duarte and the *Leal conselheiro*, focusing retrospectively on the psychiatric problems of the king throughout his work. Also, where close connections between Antunes's first novels are observed, brief references are made to two other articles concerning the role of the psychiatrist in society, as well as to problems of group analysis.

The son of João Alfredo Figueiredo Lobo Antunes, one of the most respected Portuguese neuropathologists, professor of neurology at the Medical Faculty of Lisbon, and grandnephew of Pedro Almeida Lima, the first Portuguese neurosurgeon, the disciple and successor of Egas Moniz, António Lobo Antunes's contacts with medicine and with the universe of mental disorders materialized very early. Antunes's choice of medicine, however, was not his personal decision, since he would rather have taken a literary degree. His natural ability as a writer was revealed at a very early age and has always overwhelmed everything else. It is only on account of his father's imposition, and against his own desire, that he enrolled in medicine at the age of sixteen.

After his return from war in 1973, he chose psychiatry since his first and favoured choice—surgery—seemed very difficult and implied a lot of competition. He began working at the Hospital Miguel Bombarda. It was at Hospital de Santa Maria, however, that he met Daniel Sampaio, who even now remains one of his closest friends. Until 1985, he devoted himself to psychiatry, practicing both at Hospital Miguel Bombarda and in several other hospitals around the suburbs of Lisbon. He also practiced at a private clinic he co-owned with Daniel Sampaio. It is from this close friendship and collaboration that four articles were written and published in scientific magazines. They dealt with psychiatric issues related to literature and to artistic creation. They also addressed the role of the psychiatrist in society, as well as scientific questions related to group analysis.

The first of those articles is entitled "*Alice no país das maravilhas* ou a esquizofrenia esconjurada" ("*Alice in Wonderland*, or Conjured Schizophrenia"); published in 1978, as the title suggests, it is a psychoanalytic approach to Lewis Carroll's classic. The authors begin the study by summing up all of the important historical data about the author and his time, focusing on Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll's real name) family life. In their analysis of the book and its symbolic mechanisms, they try to prove that it is through Lewis Carroll, the fantasist, the language innovator, the master of nonsense, and in his transformation into an autonomous entity that the rigid, boring, isolated and solitary Charles Dodgson is able to conjure up his psychosis. That is, Lewis Carroll is the indispensable counterpart that allows Charles Dodgson an ordinary existence.

Everything we know about Dodgson's life points to schizoid behavior that is nonetheless overcome by the precarious balance provided by Lewis Carroll's existence, which protected Dodgson from his own schizophrenia. Dodgson is Carroll's Victorian guardian or, as we might say, the super-ego of his own instinctive and creative activity, controlling him by mathematical abstraction and precision. On the other hand, they also try to prove psychoanalytically that Alice was not Charles's mother—as until then all the critics had claimed and defended—but instead was Charles himself. As to Alice's identification with the author, we have to note that Dodgson, due to the distance imposed by his own father, never identified himself with a paternal figure. Rather, he identified himself with a little girl, together with his four sisters with whom he had played during his childhood. Charles never came to terms with adulthood.

The sloppy and disturbing fall of Alice represents nothing more than a birth, together with the anguish and anxiety felt from someone who is penetrating a new universe. It is a kind of birth in reverse: a return from the adult world to childhood. The adult reality is replaced by childhood authenticity or the deterioration of the *Id* surrendering to sheer impulsive and instinctive activity. Sentences such as “a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that if you cut your finger VERY deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds” translate into nothing more than Dodgson’s inability to accept his penis, and “‘What a curious feeling!’ said Alice; ‘I must be shutting up like a telescope’” completes the castration. The lake of tears symbolizes the fear of a profuse menstruation that would break up the fragile bond between man and girl, and Alice quickly runs from that peril, seeking refuge among her animal friends (Dodgson’s childhood friends) that rescue him from becoming a woman.

The authors also reveal that Carroll, against what has been considered for a long time, was neither a humorist nor someone who wrote a children’s book; the truth is that this childish world is nothing more than his psychotic core and the only defense he found against the chaos of his instincts. Carroll seems to have influenced Lobo Antunes’s earlier work. Without being too exhaustive, we should keep in mind that in the initial quotation from *Memória de elefante* there is a sentence taken from *Through the Looking Glass* and that the descent to hell in *Conhecimento do inferno* is very similar to Alice’s fall. As a matter of fact, much in this novel and *Memória de elefante* reminds us of Carroll’s universe.

The second article written by Lobo Antunes and Sampaio in 1980, whose title is “D. Duarte, or, Depression on the Throne,” deals with King Duarte and the study of his book *Leal conselheiro*, a moral education volume, dating from 1435 to 1438, with a total of 103 chapters. This article suggests that the King might have suffered from manic-depressive psychosis, demonstrating this theory with the use of examples from his daily life and his family history as depicted in his book. There is an astonishing modernity in the phenomenological description done by D. Duarte about his deep sadness, together with his psychomotor inhibition, affective indifference, sense of guilt and suicidal ideation. There is even a chapter in *Leal conselheiro* dedicated to the melancholic mood, which provided the authors of the article with a major opportunity to describe the endogenous depression. They also reinforce that the therapies recommended to D. Duarte at the time are not so different

from the ones recommended nowadays.

The manic-depressive sign of D. Duarte seems to have several causes: genetic, psychological, physiological and so on, in such a way that he can be taken as a typical example of someone suffering from this kind of disorder. Everything in the personality of the King says so: difficulty in making decisions, permanent hesitation, jealousy of his brothers, and lack of imagination. As a retrospective diagnosis we can say that D. Duarte has suffered from bipolar manic-depressive psychosis, resulting in several seizures during his lifetime. His personality is shaped by cyclothymia, which is a recurring psychosis in which the patient has frequent mood swings between elation and depression, a condition that has affected all Portuguese kings since Count D. Henrique.

The third article under the same collaboration is called "Violência e relação terapêutica: os Hitlers de bolso no poder" ("Violence and the Therapeutic Relation: The Pocket Hitlers in Power") and dates from 1981. It is no longer about literary matters, being a study on the practise of psychiatry and attesting to the Freudian position of the authors. It is therefore relevant in order for us to understand its ideas and how they can be applied to Antunes's first novels.

The authors begin their article with some considerations on how medicine is still today anthropologically connected to ancient practices of magic and stress that the relationship between doctor and patient must be rendered an act of submission, thus allowing the patient to suffer all kinds of manipulation. The disease is seen as a sanction, a fault from the gods, to the dead, or society in general, or the disclosure of a taboo. So, the doctor is a kind of priest that determines the punishment or the expiation.

But if the doctor is a priest, the psychiatrist—who deals with mental disorders—is seen by the patient as someone who can read his thoughts, and know his misery and most intimate wishes. He plays the role of a genuine wizard, of a shaman possessed by magical powers. Nonetheless, most of his power is offered to him by his own patients, who want to see in him that entity and hope for a quick and magical solution for their problems. The psychiatrists come together in what can be called true tribes or churches of different shrines. We are in the presence of two parallel schizophrenic systems: one from the doctors and the other from the patients. The psychiatrist centers his power on several acts of violence: from the long hours he forces his patients to wait before receiving them, to the distance that he imposes between them, to the constant rush, to the lack of information granted to the patient, to the

violence of the diagnosis, and so on.

There are countless similarities between these thoughts and the way the character of the psychiatrist is depicted in the first novels of Lobo Antunes, in *Memória de elefante* and particularly in *Conhecimento do inferno*. In these novels the psychiatrist is also indifferent to the spectacle of pain: he is the executioner, the officer in the concentration camp, the SS officer, the castrator, the policeman, the “unfunny fool,” “labeller of others’ suffering,” “deceiver of the brain,” in an endless spiral that leads to doubt who is actually sane or mad. The psychiatric institution is the scene of the most repulsive filthiness and decrepitude; the therapies and diagnoses are described as inhuman and cabalistic; the patients as animals—dogs, pigs or birds—and psychiatry is “the art of cataloguing anguish” or simply “bullshit.”

To finish, we have an article with the title “Contratransferência em Grupanálise” (“Countertransference in Group Analysis”), published in 1982. It is mainly centred on technical aspects of psychiatry, in particular on group analysis, which aims, according to the authors, to fulfill a lack of information on how the analyst lives his own work, what he does, how he interprets and does group analysis. We shall not enter into any further details connected with this article since it is somewhat technical and written for a specific audience, but we refer to it as a mere curiosity because it was produced based on the experience in group analysis of its authors.

We also know about the existence of another article, being in fact the first ever written by Lobo Antunes, together with Maria Inês S. Dias. This article is the result of a lecture presented at the Portuguese Society of Neurology and Psychiatry in 1974, to which this society has granted the Sandoz Prize. We are aware that this lecture follows the same reasoning as the article about Lewis Carroll, being however directed to the poet Ângelo de Lima. Unfortunately, in spite of all our joint efforts with the author himself, the several institutions and the people involved, it has been wholly impossible to find it. Still, we did not want to leave it overlooked.

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