

Measuring Manliness: Education and the boarding school novel

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Abstract

After the boarding school's ascendancy in the 19th Century, its popularity declined somewhat in the 20th Century, partly over concerns that children were being turned into adults too soon. Prolonged adolescence had become the dominant trend, which required education at half pace – the model of day school, where pupils attend school without leaving the family home.

However, the boarding type of education remained a powerful source of inspiration among novelists: even when day schools were becoming predominant, writers were still drawn to a type of education that enabled them to depict not only the brightness and promise of innocent adventures in the classroom, but also the dark, nocturnal side of micro societies ruled by boys on their own. In an ambience of masculinist ideology that influenced other literary genres – and also other arts of the time – the boarding schoolboy novel allowed the expression of strong gender considerations and original proposals for educational policies rooted in sexual segregation, raising such subjects as male friendships, an uneasy but popular topic.

In this paper, the fortunes of the educational model implied by the boarding solution and the conventions of the literary genre it originated are examined, with a focus on the Portuguese-speaking world, as part of a broader project on the schoolboy as cultural hero in prose narratives of Brazil and Portugal.

Keywords: boarding school, masculinism, literature, boyhood, Portugal, Brazil.

A vanishing educational model?

Although the boarding school system was meant to produce gentlemen, not novels, this form of education left an outstanding legacy in literature. The boarding school is indeed a literary myth, and also a sociological one: a complex combination of narratives encompassing themes of utopian vision, social engineering, power relations, burgeoning sexuality and individual boldness. Debate may go on about its peculiarities; here we consider the ideology and ethics behind the pedagogical practice of boarding schools and the way they are reflected in literature.

Boarding schools have rich historical roots; in his *A History of Education in Antiquity*, Henri-Irenée Marrou (1982) predictably mentions their Spartan ancestry, the ἀγωγή, where 'boarding school' meant the military barracks of the youth in arms: 'The whole system of education was thus collective: children were simply torn from their families and made to live in community. (...) [A]t the age of twelve the "adolescent" – πάμπαις – had to be made tougher, and was obliged to leave home and go to a boarding school – i.e., the barracks' (Marrou, 1982, 20-21); the arts too, as well as warfare, were imparted in residence in Ancient Greece, since Marrou also refers to young ladies' boarding schools where again a sort of 'community life' was in place, taking 'the form of a religious fellowship, θίασος'. Such was the case, among other examples, of the arts school led by Sappho, the poetess and educationist from the island of Lesbos (Marrou, 1982, 34-35). In 19th Century Europe, where Classics were such an important part of education, these ancient models certainly played a role in the fashioning of the boarding school ideal as part of a classical revival.

During the High Middle Ages in Europe, the Church also created boarding schools both for the priesthood and for laypeople, mostly attached to monasteries. Immersion, seclusion from the outside and segregation from family and household were the prerequisites for an efficient education, and boarding had become an obvious need, given how widely the population in semi-rural areas were scattered. Besides the Church's educational initiatives, royal patronage also created boarding schools, sometimes to prepare the elite for the highest offices, and elsewhere to care for the poor in institutions meant for orphans or neglected children. The boarding paradigm was so universal that it extended to the very different situation of non-schooled youths, like apprentices, who boarded at their master's house – an educational system that has shown a remarkable resilience to changes: by Late Modernity it *'was really rejected as a training method only under the modern external pressures of universal education and a raised standard of living'* (Lane, 1996, 211).

Still, it took an entire chapter of Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* ('From Day-School to Boarding-School') to illustrate the rise of the 19th Century's boarding school trend because, despite being a 'comeback' of something deeply rooted in universal educational experience, it was also a newly shaped, post-Jesuit, *bourgeois* institution that constituted in many ways a novelty for its civilian, secularist and rigidly classist approach.

Combining residence with teaching, boarding schools stand for an alternative home, being at the opposite pole from home schooling – a solution which, in the 19th Century, became ever more limited to royals and aristocrats. Boarding schools also differ substantially from joint residence with the teacher, like the above-mentioned apprentices who boarded in the house of their masters exclusively for professional training. In fact, the most striking specific feature of this system is the joint residence with peers. The vision of a monosexual society, where boys ruled over other boys, which could hardly be sustained in the outside world, was indeed the utopian appeal of the boarding school system, resulting in an intricate mixture of guardians and bullies, camaraderie and tyranny, order and chaos.

As the Western educational heritage became thoroughly contested during the 20th Century, complete and permanent education came to be perceived as turning children into adults too soon. Nowadays, the time for families to dream about sending their young to the legendary Swiss boarding schools seems long-gone. Adolescence turned fashionable and the dominating trend became to prolong it beyond any possible age limits, a tendency that was to favour the half-pace education of day school, in which the pupils attend school without really leaving home; this solution was more in line with the raising of mothers' standing within households and their propensity to resist the emancipation of youth, their wish to keep 'their children' under a 'protective wing'.

To this new trend, others were added during the 20th Century: co-education counteracted the monosexual creed of this educational model – it was rarely thought to combine harmoniously with the constraints of boarding and accounted only for a residual number of schools – and compulsory schooling, which was the death blow to apprenticeship. In the process, families were also encouraged to intervene more in schooling matters and the young have now been bound physically and psychologically to the family's symbolic and material space, no matter how much they resent being overprotected.

The rising popularity of the day school paradigm from the 1960s onwards affected mostly the mentioned civilian and secularist, private-owned institutions mentioned above, which have become scarce. However, other types of boarding schools seemed better positioned to resist decline:

1. A few elite-exclusive, status-focused, mostly single-sex traditional boarding schools continue to attract their own public, now in some cases from across the globalized world;
2. Some ethnically oriented boarding schools assert their right to existence as ways of cultural resistance in a world tending to uniformity: e.g., African American boarding schools in the USA and Māori boarding schools in New Zealand;
3. The Church and Army, remnants of the medieval priestly and warrior orders that sustained the pre-bourgeois boarding school, managed to maintain a few complete education institutions, pleasing

families in religious terms and/or providing the discipline and rigour that are allegedly unfashionable in the mainstream system;

4. And far more visible in foreign literature are the boarding schools with a strong vocational component operated by welfare authorities to accommodate and instruct the destitute (being these real orphans or 'orphans of living parents'). Here public imagination, helped by ultrarealistic novels, had a tendency to picture these schools as unhappy heirs of the infamous orphanage depicted in Charles Dickens' 1838 feuilleton novel *Oliver Twist*. Today, they remain a recurrent target of negative attention in the media.

In Portugal and Brazil, the boarding schools belonging to the Church never faced concurrency from local elite-oriented ones so typical of other cultures. The priesthood-gearred boarding schools directly run by the dioceses were called *seminários*, where poor boys had a hope of social promotion through instruction, but often left with no wish to embrace a religious career. Still active, despite facing increasing desertion from the 1970s due to the decline in numbers of aspirant priests, they left a sizeable mark in Brazilian and Portuguese literature. The Church also put in place a number of the welfare type of institutions.

The Army, too, retained its boarding schools, catering primarily, but not exclusively, to the families of officers and accepting others enamoured of a military style of education; they are enjoying a slight gain in enrolments these days, perhaps due to widespread militarism: '*From their heyday of more than 900 military schools between 1783 and 1914, approximately 40 remain. While the choice of attending military board schools has always existed, the option has recently experienced a minor resurgence*' (Shane, Maldonado, Lacey and Thompson, 2008, p. 181). While institutions of this type were the setting in Austria of Robert Musil's landmark novella *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906), they did not receive a great deal of literary attention in Portuguese literature outside memoirs by former soldiers (Raul Brandão and Júlio Dantas among the most prominent of these memoirists).

Not only the controversial type of welfare institutions, but also the other surviving boarding school types in Portugal are either under the fire of persistent harsh media campaigns targeting them over court scandals or suffer the pressure of government disaffection. The combined forces of mainstream indifference or hostility, growing parental control and pressure for uniformity give apparently scant hope for their expansion in the near future, despite the signs of slight recovery from elsewhere: for the time being, the boarding school model, religious or secular, military or civilian, public or private, monosexual or co-educational, tends to be ever more confined to the few niches listed above.

Literature goes to school: the literary conventions of the boarding school novel

As for the novels inspired by boarding life, aiming at both young and adult readers, they appeared as the relics of a forgotten past and their demise mirrored the decay of the institution itself. In the late 20th Century, boarding schools were to be found more in the memoirs of now elderly old boys than as favourite settings for newly written popular novels, until the surprising worldwide success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007): despite their plots being about fantasy and not realistic school life, these stories set at a boarding school proved the universal and enduring appeal of the boarding myth itself.

In Portuguese-speaking literature, the upper class group of boarding schools was only featured in narratives imported from abroad, translated or recreated; the ethnic kind of schools was absent both from the educational map and the literary one; the same applies to the institutions for the deprived: school subjects were not favoured by the social critics of the 19th Century, the so-called 'realists', and were ignored by those of the 20th Century, who preferred unschooled, slave-working youths for heroes of their novels centred in adolescence. Therefore, Portuguese-speaking boarding school novels and memoirs focus on establishments intended for middle to lower-middle class youth, either Church run or secular and private owned.

A school novel is easily identifiable by its conspicuous school theme, and the presence of a main set of conventions traceable back to the folk tale: from an initial conflict (usually with family), the hero journeys far

on a mission 'to grow'; feeling abandoned by his parents, he has to fight fearful enemies, rivals and other distracters from the assigned mission; he tries to befriend prospective allies; meanwhile he discovers the problematical nature of society and its willing agent, the school; he overcomes (*or not*) the challenges, either joining his invincible enemy (accepting a more or less comfortable place among the society once detested so vigorously) or remaining at a distance from it, as an 'artist'; finally, the once misfit adolescent is co-opted by society, losing the innocence and beatitude of the pre-school stage, together with the rebelliousness of youth. Only by surrender is he able to accomplish the ascribed mission.

The *peripetia* and characters of the typical narrative structure include: the first day at school (and occasionally the last); excursions to the outside world; contrasting personality types; discipline and bullying; sports and team rivalry – mostly in the English-speaking novels since team sports faced strong official resistance and therefore were introduced late in Portuguese education (for different reasons, resistance to British sports came from nationalists in Portugal and from left-oriented writers in Brazil)²⁵; contrast between daylight behaviour and the dormitory night moods; lack of nourishment (as in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*); loyalties, jealousies and treachery by untrustworthy friends; episodes of daring and punishment, physical and/or psychological; the eruption and repercussions of erotic tensions with troubling results for the individual and the group, sometimes with the breaking of anti-sexual rules among pupils or staff, or with an occasional, disturbing feminine presence; growing distrust of the adult world (intergenerational conflict presumably extensive to the pupil's family, parents or their substitutes); consequent disbelief in education (and possibly in God, when the Church is in charge of the school); and detailed moral portraits of teachers (e.g. the friendly or weak teacher versus the tyrannical and unfair one).

These episodes and twists may not be found in each and every novel, but they certainly are the most commonly featured.

The trouble with boarding: friendships and manliness

New Zealand author Hugh Walpole (1884-1941) proposed his own inventory of boarding school novel components:

All the conventional things are there, the football, the fights, the bullying, the friendships, and the rest. It is a true story and not, I think, sentimental (Walpole, 1927).

Since the main topics are listed here so concisely, Walpole's reader may think that the subgenre is nothing more, in fact, than a series of clichés. But Walpole was to detail what he meant by 'the friendships': the young and immature male friendships, the real cornerstone of the schoolboy novel:

No one has yet written in English an account of a boy's friendship that does not appear either too emotional or too unemotional to be true. Tom Brown's protection of Arthur still appears to me a beautiful and true thing... (Walpole, 1927).

The problem with this matter, he argues, is that it is plagued with taboos – and here truth is only possible *within wise limits*:

The fact is that boys are both little beasts and little heroes, that the age of puberty is the terror of parents and headmasters, and that no one dares to speak frankly, even in these frank days, of what everyone knows to be true. However, these are dangerous matters. I didn't write in Jeremy at Crale the school-story that I would like to have written, but I did, I think, tell the truth so far as I thought wise (Walpole, 1927).

²⁵ - In Brazilian boarding school novel *O Ateneu* (1888), a series of traditional games is described.

In his famous 1910 essay on Hölderlin, Wilhelm Dilthey called these passionate friendships ‘*a kinship of souls*’ and highlighted their subversive potential:

A kinship of souls which can no longer be obstructed by conventions, a striving for the development of our full potential, which will no longer allow itself to be suppressed, the awareness of personal dignity – all this came into conflict with the social order and, in the end, with the very nature of things (Dilthey, 1985, p. 337).

The powerful boys’ exalted, romantic friendships, although short-lived, had the potential of raising awareness of individual aims opposed to society’s designs and to ‘the nature of things’.

The second problem, closely linked to the first, is the question of manliness, a most praised virtue in the 19th Century and the early 20th Century. Authors needed to be extremely gender-conscious while striving to achieve the right measure of *masculine* virtues in their characters: not lacking and not exceeding the virtuous middle, avoiding both the traps of unmanliness and those of ‘overmanliness’. Accordingly, Walpole criticized *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* author, Thomas Hughes, for being ‘*almost too manly in his admiration of British virtues*’.

According to Walpole, at the junction of these two main problems – employing the right dosage of manliness and rendering the immaturity of ‘*beautiful and true*’ tender hearts –, arose the most delicate and elusive subject of ‘*a boy’s friendship*’ that made boyhood emotional life ‘*very dangerous and difficult for analysis*’: it required a challenging balance between *emotional* passion and *unemotional* manliness. To Walpole, a sensible rendering of male bonding was the key to safely write within a genre where the passionate infatuations of boyhood, inherently perplexing and disconcerting, struggled to safely progress into crystal-clear manliness.

In the late 19th Century, a resurgence of the masculine ideals (Corbin, 2011) made manliness a subject many seemed fervent about. That was a time when thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Weininger indicted feminine characteristics and disapproved of cultural feminisation, which they linked to moral decay and vital weakening.

This masculinist ideology was pervasive at the time and can be found in various types of novels, be they school themed or of adventure – historical, colonial, war, westerns, picaresque, etc. Besides being centred on the young male protagonist, they also required a male authorship to attract a male audience seeking realistic psychological characters for a complicity based on the male experience. Their distinctive male monosexual flavour made them intended for the enjoyment of a predominantly, if not exclusively, male audience: ‘*...my boys, you whom I want to get for readers...*’ (Hughes, 1911, p. 16). That is why many boarding school narratives adopt a conveniently matching misogynistic tone, that of a *male-oriented novel*, because they are expected to reflect the span of life when the boy is separating from everything motherly or feminine in order to acquire his highly-valued male identity.

Ramalho Ortigão (1836-1915) was among those representing this tendency in Portugal. At the famous boarding school Colégio da Lapa in Oporto, he was the teacher of French and the lifelong friend of the much celebrated writer Eça de Queiroz (1845-1900). He travelled in Europe for years and wrote books and essays about The Netherlands, England and France, advancing his own theories on manliness adapted to Portuguese culture; like Queiroz, he was an admirer of the new educational fashions.

One of the main points Ortigão wanted to make is the need for mothers to step back from sons when the boys reach puberty, something he thought most mothers were not prepared to do. Such was the case of the Portuguese Queen Maria Pia (1847-1911) towards her son, Prince Carlos (1863-1908). In June 1883, when the Prince was aged 19, Ortigão reacted with outrage to the news he read in a newspaper: ‘*Her Majesty the Queen is willing to take at her care, following daily, with great discernment and extreme caution, the education of her*

[two] sons'. In a public letter to the Prince that he publishes in his political magazine (co-published with Queiroz) *As Farpas*, he asserts boldly: '*Such an intervention is deplorable, Your Most Serene Highness, deeply deplorable*'.²⁶

Unfolding his argument, Ortigão states that

the mission of the mother in the education of a man ends when he reaches the fourteenth year. (...) The psychoses, as well as the anatomic outbursts and the physiologic functions belonging to puberty, hold secrets that no mother has the right to access in a boy's education (...) Any mother who intervenes to restrict the legitimate intellectual curiosities of a young male offends equally his decorum and hers.²⁷

Ortigão points out that it is because of the influence of such a mother that the Prince is attending the Holy Mass too much, instead of befriending a companion and a comrade:

Because your Highness did not have until today a [male] companion and a friend, you keep virgin one of the main tools of human activity, your heart, and in it, useless and unproductive, lay buried the precious capital of your affections.²⁸

Of course, royals had their private tutors; they did not attend bourgeois boarding schools but it was the idea of preserving sons from the damaging influence of mothers that was likewise implied in the mental climate that made the monosexual boarding school with its anti-familial penchant so successful.

At the core of wide social upheavals, the reputation of the boarding school was doomed to decline when the balance swung toward families and females: against all warnings of the 19th Century masculinists, mothers started to have a say in boys' education. Day school was preferred for providing for the unprepared, immature youths who would depend on families for longer, while boarding schools were designed to cater for more readily functional and independent youth, as fathers were more likely to wish for: in Portuguese-speaking boarding school novels it is always fathers who want to board their sons precisely to liberate them from the influence of female relatives and maids.

In the typical masculinist novel the main dialogue and interaction occurs among males. Females are excluded from the deuteragonist role, usually reserved for a male companion, and they are not the target of romantic investment: often they are limited to the roles of mothers (or motherly figures) or prostitutes, both of them providers of services and care. Coherently, the male characters usually show strong abhorrence of sex and females, who '*are not even considered to be desirable sexual partners*' (Viola, 1997, p. 164); the heroes are defiant of their influence (*'the boy's inaptitude for female guidance'*: Hughes, 1911, p. 27) and they use them merely as commodities, albeit resenting them as an obstacle to their free male lives: as in Rudyard Kipling's boy hero Kim's famous formulation, '*How can a man follow the Way or the Great Game when he is eternally pestered by women?*' (Kipling, 1902, p. 420).

²⁶ - "'Sua magestade a rainha quiz especialmente tomar a seu cuidado seguir dia a dia com grande discernimento, e extremado cuidado a educação dos seus filhos". Deplorável, serenissimo senhor, profundamente deploravel, similhante intervenção!' (Ortigão, 1883, p. 62).

²⁷ - 'A missão da mãe na educação do homem termina quando este chega aos quatorze annos. (...) As psychoses, assim como as manifestações anathomicas e as funcções physiologicas, caracteristicas da puberdade, encerram segredos que nenhuma mãe tem direito de devassar na educação de um rapaz. (...) Toda a mãe que intervem fiscalmente nas legitimas curiosidades intellectuaes de um mancebo offende egualmente o pudor d'elle e o d'ella' (Ortigão, 1883, p. 63).

²⁸ - 'Vossa alteza, que ate hoje não teve ainda um companheiro e um amigo, conserva em folha um dos principaes instrumentos da actividade humana, o seu coracao, e n'elle, improdutivo e inutil, o capital precioso dos seus affectos desempregados' (Ortigão, 1883, p. 61).

In the boarding school novel by Portuguese writer José Régio (1901-1969), which was the first instalment of the *The Old House* cycle,²⁹ the type of the prostitute makes its brutal appearance unmasked, in a sordid night encounter with the young pupil in the vice quarter of the town; in the after-school times depicted in the second instalment, a variant of the prostitute's character – the lascivious woman – is presented as the unscrupulous girlfriend of prefect Senhor Bento Adalberto. Females are therefore chiefly associated, either as mothers (Ortigão) or as prostitutes (Régio), with the concept of *decadence* as synonym of feminization, one of the main fears of the time.

The voiceless adolescent

... a knowledge of that peculiar species of human beings, the boarding-school boy... (Bangs, 1895, p. 32).

It is fascinating how the subject of school life interested a wide adult readership. Perhaps one of the major assets of the adult boarding school novel lay in the ambiguity of a child's or a youth's actions and thoughts being conveyed by an adult writer to an adult readership. Walpole has crystallised this paradox:

Jeremy at Crale has been my single attempt at a school-story. The genre is not an easy one for the very simple reason that a school-story can be only truly written by a boy who is still at school (... so) we await the schoolboy of genius who will tell us what things are really like!' (Walpole, 1927).

Besides being written in a period of life already far from school days, these novels are the work of authors who have really not fitted in – due to *their* peculiarities more than to the peculiarities of a given school. The novels were possibly a masochistic return to situations and events that had shaped their personalities: in Portuguese-speaking literature, the protagonist of the boarding school novel is never the sadistic bully or the athletic type, nor the pliable, submissive young boy, but the bookish, perhaps shy, definitely intellectual and certainly conscious and rebellious character one imagines will turn into a writer. Generally, he is acutely aware of the traps that lure both sides of a power relationship, and this susceptibility is usually rooted in miscommunication with his father, the biographical root of many schoolboy novels in Portuguese.³⁰ After all, 'in school it was power, and power alone that mattered' (Lawrence, 1921, p. 356).

As remarked by Walpole, the schoolboy novel marks the (temporary) silence of the schoolboy writer himself, who needs to take years to write his own story: the precondition seems being no longer a boy, nor a pupil at school.³¹ So the only remedy to the silent boy are old boys turned into writers, even if they 'all recall the same things' (Walpole, 1927), arguably an articulate set of similar experiences giving some unity to the subgenre across cultures. If 'infancy' means 'not yet being able to speak properly' (Isidorus, 2006, p. 241),³² adolescence turns out to be 'not yet being able to write his own story'. The adolescent has had many authors writing in his name but he is denied his own version. This is ironic, since the school novel asserts the emergence of adolescence as an autonomous and valued topic.

²⁹ - Published in 5 instalments between 1945 and 1966.

³⁰ - And of a significant part of Portuguese literature as well, as highlighted by Phillip Rothwell in his *A Canon of Empty Fathers – Paternity in Portuguese Narrative* (2007).

³¹ - Argus Cirino (1984), who is among the last Portuguese speaking boarding school novel writers, stated in the prologue of his book that he actually wrote it while still at school. This must be a fictitious claim since boys of sixteen years are not expected to have the required skills to write a coherent novel.

³² - Isidorus, XI, 2, 9: '[D]ictus autem infans quia adhuc fari nescit, id est loqui non potest': A human being of the first age is called an infant (infans); it is called an infant, because it does not yet know how to speak (in-, "not"; fari, present participle fans, "speaking"), that is, it cannot talk.

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