Bildung, Masochism, and Contemporary Male Subjectivities in Daniel Galera's *Mãos de Cavalo*

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Abstract: *In this paper, I analyze Daniel Galera's novel* Mãos de Cavalo *(2006) as a Bildungsroman, a genre that has become increasingly important for Brazilian literary criticism in the last 30 years. Through its protagonist, Hermano, the novel discusses the influence of gender, class, and mass media in the formation of young male subjects today. I also focus on a topic that has not been thoroughly analyzed: The main character's masochistic tendencies. With theoretical concepts that include Mikhail Bakhtin and Franco Moretti's critical readings of the Bildungsroman, recent approaches to the genre by contemporary Brazilian academics, and Sigmund Freud's analysis of masochism, I contend that Galera produced a significant reflection on some of the darker and self-destructive aspects of class inequality and masculine formation in contemporary Brazil.*

Keywords: *Contemporary Brazilian Literature, Brazilian Bildungsroman, Daniel Galera, masculinities, masochism and literature, Mãos de Cavalo.*

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Resumo: *Neste artigo, analiso o romance* Mãos de Cavalo *(2006) de Daniel Galera como um Bildungsroman, um gênero que se tornou cada vez mais importante para a crítica literária brasileira nos últimos 30 anos. Através de seu protagonista, Hermano, o romance discute a influência do gênero, da classe e da mídia de massa na formação de jovens homens na atualidade. Também me concentro em um tópico que não foi totalmente analisado no texto: as tendências masoquistas do personagem principal. Com conceitos teóricos que incluem as aproximações críticas ao Bildungsroman de Mikhail Bakhtin e Franco Moretti, abordagens recentes ao romance de formação por acadêmicos brasileiros e a análise do masoquismo de Sigmund Freud, argumento que Galera produziu uma reflexão importante sobre alguns dos aspectos mais sombrios e autodestrutivos da desigualdade social e a formação masculina no Brasil contemporâneo.*

Palavras-chave: *Literatura brasileira contemporânea, Bildungsroman brasileiro, Daniel Galera, masculinidades, masoquismo e literatura, Mãos de Cavalo.*

Introduction

During the last turn of the century, the concept of *Bildungsroman* gained significant attention in Brazilian literary criticism. Two seminal contributions to this trend were Cristina Ferreira Pinto's book *O Bildungsroman Feminino: Quatro Exemplos Brasileiros* (1990), which deals with novels by Lúcia Miguel Pereira, Raquel de Queiroz, Clarice Lispector, and Lygia Fagundes Telles, and Eduardo de Assis Duarte's paper "Jorge Amado e o *Bildungsroman* Proletário" (1994). Wilma Patrícia Maas comments on these works in "Formação Feminista e Formação Proletária"

(1999), a brief but insightful history of the concept of *Bildungsroman* in Brazilian literary criticism. Maas suggests that before the 1990s, the *Bildungsroman* remained in Brazil a relatively unproductive theoretical concept (Maas, 1999, p. 71), and she considers Ferreira Pinto's and Assis Duarte's works as instrumental for a renewed interest in the genre. For Maas, this was also made possible by new translations of key texts for the *Bildungsroman* tradition, including Goethe's classic *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, translated as *Os Anos de Aprendizado de Wilhelm Meister* by Nicolino Simone Neto in 1994. Significantly, this translation was accompanied by an introductory text by Georg Lukacs, which became quite influential in Brazilian academic circles. She then comments on some of the defining characteristics of Brazil's contemporary approach to novels of formation:[2]

> A apropriação do *Bildungsroman* no Brasil manifesta-se por tanto como uma assimilação do gênero a diferentes modelos históricos e ideológicos, através de um processo de deslocamento em relação às suas circunstâncias de origem, em proveito de novas cristalizações de sentido (Maas, 1999, p. 81).

For Maas, Pinto and Duarte set the tone for new readings of the concept of *Bildungsroman*, but they did so without aspiring to an ancillary fidelity to European models. On the contrary, their appropriation of the genre implied a transformation of its theoretical presuppositions according to Brazilian realities. Maas then poses an important hypothesis: Given the influential role played by Pinto, Duarte, and by Lukacs' Marxist reading of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*,

[2] Following both Portuguese and English-speaking authors, I will use the term *novel of formation* (*romance de formação*) as a direct translation of the German term *Bildungsroman.* The term *Bildung*, often translated as *formation*, has unique meanings in the German tradition, linked to nation-building, culture, ideas of youth, and social integration in the 18th and 19th centuries. In this paper, however, I will focus on a specifically Brazilian version of *Bildung* that applies to Galera's novel and its young protagonists.

contemporary Brazilian approaches to the genre have a decisive interest on issues of gender and class: "(…) a apropriação brasileira do gênero se estabelece a partir de núcleos histórica e socialmente determinados, como o movimento das mulheres e do proletariado" (Maas, 1999, p. 81). In this paper, I would like to contribute to this debate by analyzing Daniel Galera's *Mãos de Cavalo* as a *Bildungsroman*. With the mentioned studies in mind, I will focus on the novel's depiction of issues of gender and class, emphasizing its representation of masculinity in contemporary Brazil.[3]

Following Maas' hypotheses, it does not seem helpful to rely on the more restrictive definition of the concept of *Bildungsroman* often linked to Western models (like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*), or to look for how the novel fits into its (Eurocentric) parameters. Quite the opposite: my objective is to work with a rather flexible definition of the genre to see how Galera reappropriates it in the Brazilian context. To begin with this definition, we should remember that, in some of the most insightful theoretical texts on the genre, *Bildungsromane* are seen as symbols of collective historical transformations. In "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism," Mikhail Bakhtin states that novels of formation imply a radical revolution in the history of Western narrative. This change occurs precisely with the appearance of young protagonists who, as Bakhtin puts it, are in the "process of becoming," as opposed to heroes in the epic or the

[3] More recently, other critics have focused on race as a crucial aspect of Brazil's novels of formation. This discussion was stimulated by Conceição Evaristo's novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003), which led to critical analyses such as Duarte's review "O *Bildungsroman* Afro-Brasileiro de Conceição Evaristo" (2010) and "Conceição Evaristo e as Configurações de um *Bildungsroman* de Pobre" by Luiz Carlos Felipe and Alba Krishna Topan Felman (2018). In these papers, the intersections between race, class, and gender are essential. Unfortunately, *Mãos de Cavalo* has very few references to the race of its characters. In contrast, it is very explicit about social expectations of masculinity and economic status. Because of this, my analysis will focus on gender and class as the novel's most prominent elements. The issue of race, or more importantly, its erasure in Galera's novel, would be an interesting topic for future critical works.

premodern novel, which he defines as "ready-mades" with an "unchanging nature" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 21). For Bakhtin, however, these changes are not merely individual:

> [The protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*] is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him (. . .). It is as though the very foundations of the world are changing, and man must change along with them (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 23–24).

In *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti expands on Bakhtin's ideas, but he focuses explicitly on the relationship between novels of formation and modernity: "In this first respect, youth is 'chosen' as the new epoch's 'specific material sign,' and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability" (Moretti, 2000, p. 5). Moretti's hypothesis implies that, from its origins, the *Bildungsroman* is not only the depiction of a young subject struggling to reach adulthood but also an apt representation of political and social changes linked to processes of modernization. Bakhtin and Moretti propose an essentially historical interpretation of the genre: When dealing with novels of formation, the reader must find links between individual growth and the collective transformations of a specific society, especially in times of drastic changes. For our purposes, this means that a reading of *Mãos de Cavalo* should consider the protagonist's story as a commentary on a particular historical context: Brazil at the turn of the 21st century.

Mãos de Cavalo deals with three historical moments in a fictionalized version of the city of Porto Alegre in the south of Brazil: One around 1985, a second at the beginning of the 1990s, and a final one some fifteen years later. We could define this as the post-dictatorship era in Brazilian

history, marked by the consolidation of neoliberalism and globalization in the country (Bezerra, 2022, pp. 1, 135). It is also an era of high democratic hopes, especially after Fernando Henrique Cardoso's two presidential periods (1995-2003), following the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello for corruption. This period, which coincides with the formative years of the novel's protagonist, was defined by a new economic stability after years of high inflation combined, thanks to Cardoso's neoliberal policies, with an unprecedented consumption of transnational goods and media. However, the country continued to be plagued by one crucial problem: inequality. Discussing Brazil's entrance to the 21st century, Lila Moritz Schwarcz and Heloisa Starling argue that the key issue of the era was a perverse coexistence of democracy, economic stability, and social injustice (Schwarcz and Starling, 2015, p. 502). As we will see, the novel discusses these historical developments in different ways.

Each of the novel's three defining moments is narrated as an immediate present, and the links between them are unclear. The narrative begins when a ten-year-old child goes downhill on his bicycle at full speed. Once this episode ends, the reader finds two intercalated narrative sequences. The first one deals with a group of adolescents who are beginning to experiment with sex, extreme sports, drugs, and alcohol. Each of its chapters has titles like "O Bonobo," "Downhill," or "Naiara." The other series features an adult plastic surgeon who plans to leave his wife and young daughter for a few days to climb a particularly dangerous mountain in Bolivia. As opposed to the previous chapters, this sequence's titles refer to specific moments on a Sunday morning: "6h08," "6h13," "6h17," etc. The unifying thread of these narrative sequences is only revealed later in the novel: The young bicycle racer in the introductory chapter is the

adolescent nicknamed "Mãos de Cavalo," who is also Hermano, the adult plastic surgeon. This fragmentary structure already points to the difficult consolidation of the protagonist's identity as he grows up. His *Bildung* is anything but linear and cohesive.

In its first pages, *Mãos de Cavalo* also introduces several issues related to neoliberalism, globalization, and media, linking them to young men's formation in contemporary Brazil. An example of the transnational media's importance in the novel is its epigraph, quoted in English, and attributed to Nicholas Cage: "I would walk to school and actually have crane shots worked out in my mind where the crane would be pulling up and looking down at me as a tiny object in the street walking to school" (Galera, 2006, p. 7). With this initial paratext, the novel hints at how today's young subjects imagine their lives as a spectacle that needs media intervention to exist. Because of this, ideas that used to apply only to celebrities like Nicolas Cage now seem to concern everyone, especially young men and women who crave to be seen by their peers.

As we will see, these reflections are essential to understanding some of the collective elements that define *Mãos de Cavalo*: As part of a nation amid neoliberal globalization processes, the novel's young characters interpret their experiences, their sense of community, and their integration into society through their consumption of mass media. Galera's novel includes a complex version of *Bildung* in a national context where reality is always defined by globalized media images, languages, and fictions. His interest in the global media points to a time when

Brazil was defined by complex transnational processes that significantly affected the young protagonist's formation.[4]

As mentioned before, the novel's brief first section takes place in 1985. This episode includes a disconcerting rhetoric, very different from the fresh, oral Portuguese that defines most of the novel, as seen in this passage:

> Permanecer assim imóvel sem tocar os pés no chão exige uma técnica muito apurada e uma sintonia irretocável entre ciclista e bicicleta, sintonia que o Ciclista Urbano sem dúvida nenhuma possui com sua antiquada porém feroz Caloi Cross aro 20 com freio de pé, branca com adesivos de enfeite azuis, com pneus-balão vermelhos de garras salientes no lugar dos pretos e finos originais de fábrica, pouco adequados à velocidade e ao terreno do ciclismo urbano de elite (Galera, 2006, p. 10).

The character's nickname in this section, the "Urban Cyclist," points to Galera's use of language that is clearly influenced by the media. In its reluctance to disclose a real identity, this designation reminds us of characters like Batman or Superman, whose aliases describe, indirectly, their powers, fears, and obsessions. As we read on, we confirm that this chapter contains rhetorical strategies that remind us of the technical language used in sportscasts, as well as the representation of superheroes in films, comic books, and TV shows. Leila Lehnen even describes the episode's narration as a cinematic voice-over typical of Hollywood action films (Lehnen, 2013,

[4] Galera is one of the Brazilian authors who is most invested in the possibilities of the media, both as an outlet and an inspiration for his work. He made his first texts available on his blog, *ranchocarne.org*, where he also shared reviews of films and video games. Some of his works have become films, including *Mãos de Cavalo,* which was released as *Prova de Coragem* in 2016. I want to argue, however, that his engagement with the media is not simply an attempt to ride the waves of popularity (and profit) of these formats. His literary project engages critically with the media's influence on new subjectivities in the 21st century. For a detailed view of Galera's use of media in his work, see João Manuel dos Santos Cunha's "A Narrativa de Daniel Galera: Mídias Confundidas e Relações Intertextuais."

p. 176). However, this linguistic display is entirely at odds with what is happening: the protagonist is just a ten-year-old riding an old bicycle in his neighborhood. Ultimately, he is trying to mimic the rhetoric of mass media to create a more heroic version of his rather prosaic life. It is part of a performance that exemplifies the process of 'becoming a man' for the young boy.

This episode also introduces several masochistic tendencies that will define the protagonist throughout the novel. The central aspect of the Urban Cyclist's performance is not speed, but danger. Throughout the chapter, he recklessly rides his bike, and when he finally loses control and falls, he states: "As dores aumentam, mas há agora um certo prazer em suportá-las" (Galera, 2006, p. 19). And later: "É como se houvesse câmeras escondidas atrás dos postes registrando sua tenacidade física, sua recuperação vigorosa após uma queda espetacular" (Galera, 2006, p. 20). Here, the novel connects a masochistic enjoyment of pain with a performance of masculinity that is clearly influenced by globalized media, as is evident in the recurring *leitmotif* of the camera that seems to capture his most courageous deeds. At this moment, however, the boy is completely alone, except for an old lady who tries to help him after his fall. If the camera is a symbol of a male subjectivity that needs to be performed and seen by others, the reality of what happens shows that this desire remains unfulfilled, a tension that is repeated throughout the novel.

To understand the evolution of this character's subjectivity and his attraction to pain and suffering, it is important to consider some theoretical approaches to masochism. Sigmund Freud dedicated several papers to this phenomenon because it represents a substantial challenge to his

entire theoretical project. Freudian analysis emphasizes *pleasure* as the driving force of the human psyche; because of this, the active search for pain and discomfort by some individuals implies a rather complex question for psychoanalysis. To solve this impasse, the 1924 essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism" focuses not on pleasure but on the death drive that Freud initially proposed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). There, he argues that the human psyche is not only driven by pleasure but also by a deeply seated impulse to return to a state of absolute rest. This negation of change can only be fulfilled by the destruction of organic life and its return to inorganic matter. According to Freud, the death drive is usually directed outwards as an aggressive impulse towards others, but, in some cases, it can be directed towards the self. This second expression of the death drive is the origin of masochism in three distinct versions. First, there is a primary form of masochism, defined as a basic pleasure in physical pain. Second, there is a specifically sexual masochism that implies the adoption of a passive role (mediated by pain, humiliation, or extreme unresolved tension) in sexual relations. Finally, there is what he calls "moral masochism," in which a subject secretly desires to be chastised (through illness, economic hardships, unsuccessful relationships, professional failures, etc.) to atone for an original sin that remains unconscious. For Freud, all versions of masochism share a similar structure: "(…) the subject assumes that he has committed some crime (the nature of which is left indefinite) which is to be expiated by all these painful and tormenting procedures" (Freud, 1995, p. 277). One of the

main tasks in the analysis of masochism is understanding the origin of this unconscious 'sin' that leads to a persistent desire for physical and emotional pain.[5]

Throughout the novel, Hermano exhibits all three types of masochism described by Freud. In the "Urban Cyclist" episode, we already see a primary masochism, a sense of pleasure regarding physical pain. Later, we will also see both sexual and moral forms of masochism, linked to the idea that he needs to atone for an unspecified original sin. To determine the elements that lie behind these masochistic fantasies, we should keep in mind Hermano's attempts to emulate the male heroes in different types of media. From the novel's first pages, we know that the ten-year-old boy is performing, through his daredevil stunts, a version of virility that he has seen in action movies, comic books, and video games. Such versions of manhood are, as we will see, fundamental aspects of his masochistic desire for punishment. Hermano's formation, marked by strong feelings of inadequacy, is clearly linked to media fantasies of masculinity that he will never be able to embody.

After its first chapter, the novel deals with the adolescent known simply as Mãos de Cavalo, and then with the adult Hermano, in intercalated chapters. The first episode with the fifteen-year-old shows him participating in a football game with his friends. Among them is someone they call Bonobo because of a combination of enormous strength and lacking looks.

[5] Freud's theories are certainly not the only ways to approach masochism. Later, both Michel Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure* (Volume 2 of his *History of Sexuality*) and Gilles Deleuze in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* dealt with the subject. For both thinkers, masochism displays and challenges hegemonic social dynamics by transforming power structures of punishment into productive explorations of pleasure and desire. In my view, however, *Mãos de Cavalo* deals with a much more Freudian version of masochism, because the protagonist never experiences it as a way to affirm his personality or question existing social structures. In the novel, there is a clear emphasis on the more disconcerting aspects of masochism rather than on how it could lead to a productive exploration of desire and the power dynamics surrounding it. In fact, I will argue that Hermano remains radically unable to challenge his community's expectations, particularly regarding masculinity and class, and that this is central to his masochistic shame throughout the novel. The protagonist's inability to question his society's power structures is much closer to the Freudian analysis of masochism than to Foucault's or Deleuze's approaches to the subject.

Bonobo is an "alpha male" of sorts, and he is the object of local legends about having defeated up to fifteen opponents in a single fight. He also has a different social status than the other adolescents of the middle-class Esplanada neighborhood, who refer to him as a "*marginal*" (Galera, 2006, p. 87). Hermano fantasizes about challenging Bonobo to prove his courage and, at some point, he commits an unnecessary foul against him. In the end, however, he shies away from any form of confrontation, and Bonobo calls him a coward in front of all their friends. The fantasy of displaying a rugged masculinity like that of his media heroes is, once again, unfulfilled.

Later, as he walks home, Hermano remembers a set of watercolors that he received on his birthday. When he arrives, he imagines a new version of the incident by painting the marks of an imaginary fight on his own body. After considering different media heroes like the comic book character Veto Skreemer, Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver*, and Mad Max (Galera, 2006, pp. 44-45), he paints wounds and bruises on his face. For Pamella Oliveira, this episode defines an important aspect of the protagonist's personality: his use of simulation to create new forms of experience (Oliveira, 2012, p. 172). It is interesting, however, that this fantasy still implies masochistic elements of guilt: "Sentiu vergonha, não exatamente pela encenação que tinha produzido e protagonizado, mas pelo fato de ter perdido uma briga roteirizada pela sua imaginação" (Galera, 2005, p. 46). In the end, in typical masochistic fashion, Hermano loses the fight he imagines, confirming his 'flawed' masculinity and reinforcing his feelings of shame. Bezerra reads this scene as follows:

> If on one hand, his shame indicates that he is still immersed in the ideal of masculinity that he has not been able to attain, his awareness of his defeat indicates a movement toward disalienation from his mass-mediated sensibility, as he is forced to confront the reality that he is not the superhero that he pictures in his mind (Bezerra, 2022, 140).

A reading of the novel based on the connected concepts of male formation and masochism complicates this reading of the episode. In fact, this could be seen as a classic example of Freudian moral masochism, of a persistent sense of shame and defeat produced by fantasized (and poorly understood) personal shortcomings. According to Freud, the feelings of shame that define a masochist do not imply a process of disalienation but, on the contrary, the satisfaction of an unconscious desire that maintains the protagonist in an alienated condition. In fact, Freud calls this sense of guilt "one of the most serious resistances" to the psychoanalytic process of helping patients understand their unconscious problems (Freud, 1995, p. 280). In Hermano's case, the idea that he is a coward is linked to his inability to emulate the global media heroes that have become his defining models of masculinity: This is his unconscious 'original sin'. From Freud's perspective, these fantasies, instead of leading to a moment of insight, satisfy Hermano's masochistic desire to see himself as someone who deserves to fail. Apart from this, we must also remember that the issue of social status also defines Hermano's relationship with Bonobo. His feelings of inadequacy are linked to his inability to act according to expectations regarding his image as a middle-class male. With his behavior, Hermano shows his powerlessness to confront pervasive social demands on his gender and class. As we will see, the novel's development proves this point.

A historically situated concept of masculinity, linked to both national and transnational contexts in a post-dictatorship and neoliberal Brazil, is essential to understand Galera's novel. Throughout Hermano's personal development, he feels a great deal of anxiety when faced with this issue. This may seem surprising because, as Halberstam puts it, in our societies, masculinity has implied a "naturalized relationship between maleness and power" that is also linked to other social structures of power, such as race and class (Halberstam, 1998, p. 2). It is interesting, then, that Galera's protagonist, who embodies male youth and physical power and is part of Brazil's middle classes, feels that the demands of a classic performance of masculinity can also lead to a deep sense of dissatisfaction. In Hermano's case, he is clearly unable to embody the attributes that he perceives as naturally masculine according to his class and his global models of male conduct: Strength, emotional detachment, open sexual behaviors, and the use of violence to show dominance and authority, especially over those perceived as 'inferior.' The text, however, allows us to see that feelings of inadequacy are not only individual: they are the symptoms of a society in which the intricate webs of inequality and patriarchy are suffocating for everyone, including young middle-class men. As C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges explain, when male privilege is naturalized, there is a tendency to imagine that men are not culturally 'gendered,' that their position is 'normal' and not the product of socially determined demands and performances (Pascoe and Bridges, 2016, p. 3). In the novel, the protagonist's angst is due to his inability to embody the social fictions of class and gender that he perceives as natural for any middle-class male subject. Furthermore, contemporary media are presented as the key purveyors of these rigid ideas of manhood. Hermano is compelled to personify the characteristics of his gender as defined

by films, TV shows, video games, and graphic novels. His masochistic desire for shame and punishment is a product of his inability to personify the highly regulated ideal of a middle-class masculinity that presents itself as 'natural' but that, paradoxically, always remains unattainable; this is the unconscious original lack that underlies Hermano's masochism. Furthermore, Hermano's ideas of masculinity imply broad social and political issues, as Pascoe and Bridges, following Halberstam, explain:

> Therefore, it is important to see men as *gendered* because masculinity replicates power and affords power to those with that identity. It is important to investigate masculinity to understand the ways in which politics, the state, institutions of school and work, religion, family, and nationality are infused with, and themselves shape, masculinity (Pascoe and Bridges, 2016, p. 3).

In my reading of the novel, the issue of masculinity will open ways to interpret Hermano's masochistic acts and fantasies in broader terms, linked to issues of gender and class on a collective, national, scale. There is a specific episode in which precisely these two elements begin to play an essential role in Hermano's formation. In a defining moment of his youth, when he tries to put into words his highest aspirations, he says he wants to become:

> (…) alguém menos calado, que conseguisse incorporar na trama da própria vida a belíssima violência das graphic novels coloridas, a virilidade dos heróis dos seus filmes favoritos, a fluidez selvagem das ações e as palavras de alguém como... era preciso confessar agora, não apenas para si mesmo mas para todo mundo- alguém como o Bonobo, essa figura quase caricata em sua feiura, cujo maior talento era agredir os outros, mas que encarnava algum tipo de *ideal obscuro* a que Hermano desejava ter acesso (Galera, 2006, p. 121; my italics).

Here, Hermano clearly shows how globalized mass media defines his main models of masculinity in ways that remain obscure or, in Freudian terms, unconscious to him. This quote, however, also shows an important tension within the gender and social norms of his community. The only person he knows who could embody these male ideals is Bonobo, someone that he should scorn for belonging to a lower social class. In his formative search for an identity, the young protagonist begins to experience the convoluted systems of inequality that continue to define his neighborhood, an allegorical microcosm of the nation itself. Bonobo, for example, is admired for his violent masculinity, but he is also marginalized because of his class. Later, Hermano tries to befriend Bonobo, defying his community's implicit social rules, but several events cut their relationship short.

The novel's other intercalated chapters discuss two hours in Hermano's life as an adult, when he considers joining his friend Renan on a climbing expedition to the Bolivian Cerro Bonete. There is little information about this peak, which makes the ascent very dangerous. This creates unnecessary tensions between him and his wife, Adri, who feels it unfair for him to leave her and their two-year-old daughter, Nara, for an unsafe adventure. It gradually becomes clear that the couple has serious communication issues, and that Hermano is simply trying to flee from his marital problems by embarking on this reckless journey.

As these chapters develop, we confirm that Hermano's adult subjectivity is still defined by the masochistic traits of his youth, linked to preconceived ideas of masculinity. This is evident, for example, in his decision to become a plastic surgeon, described in the novel as:

> (...) a profissão que justificaria uma entrega completa à disciplina e ao mesmo tempo absorveria o seu fascínio pelo sangue, pela mutilação, um sentimento ambíguo que combinava a atração estética pela violência a um medo francamente covarde da violência de fato (Galera, 2006, p. 127).

As we follow Hermano's story, we see that he is now married and has a lucrative profession, which should lead to a typically fulfilled journey of male formation in the classic *Bildungsroman* tradition. However, the novel shows us that his subjectivity is still marked by a persistent sense of dissatisfaction. Hermano chooses to become a surgeon because it is difficult and demanding, but also because it allows him to experience violence in a distanced way. Here, his feelings of inadequacy resurface: The surgical intervention on anesthetized bodies also reminds him of his 'cowardly' fear of any direct experience of violence. The protagonist's main paradox is that no matter his achievements, he always feels inadequate, as is typical of Freud's "moral masochist."

As the novel progresses, we see several new elements that define Hermano's formation. In the chapters dedicated to his youth, we learn that he is lonely and withdrawn. He only partakes in playing video games with his reclusive friend Morsa, and in some sporting events with other boys in his neighborhood. Most of Hermano's friends are starting to date, but he, now fifteen, remains distant and aloof. One day, as he tries to establish a friendship with Bonobo, he decides to visit his house. Bonobo's sister, Naiara, tells him that she is alone and invites him to wait in her room. After a while, she declares her attraction to Hermano, and they begin to kiss. Once again, he imagines that a camera is capturing what happens but, for the first time, he describes this as a

form of alienation that, instead of symbolizing his desire to be seen by others, disconnects him, literally, from his own lived experience: "Era como se ele mesmo se destacasse do corpo para se tornar o observador. Era ele quem operava a câmera, quem saia da cena, atravessava a membrana entre realidade e imaginação e escolhia uma cadeira na plateia vazia de um cinema escuro" (Galera, 2006, p. 140). Later, he asks Naiara to bite his chest as hard as possible, and she accepts. Nothing else happens, but afterward, they have an open conversation about their sexual desires. Since his body is filled with bruises, Hermano confides that he is constantly looking for physical pain, although he is unable to explain why. Naiara, on the other hand, mentions that she is attracted to male figures who suffer or cause suffering, especially the protagonist of the Japanese TV show *Spectreman* (who is blinded by his enemies). As they get dressed, Naiara mentions that her mother and brother are, in fact, home: She hid this to add danger to the entire affair.

This moment is important for several reasons. In the *Bildungsroman* genre, the transformation of young characters into adults depends on several rites of passage, and the exploration of sexuality is crucial among them. Even though we wait for this moment throughout the novel, the result is underwhelming because the experience does not change Hermano's subjectivity in any significant way. Instead of being a transformative event, this encounter confirms his masochistic personality, although it does add the sexual component that was missing until this point. There are, however, a few details in this episode that will become significant for his transition to adulthood. When Hermano's wife Adri gives birth, he insists that she should be called Nara, a name that is strikingly similar to Naiara. At first, it seems like this decision is related to a romantic nostalgia for Bonobo's sister. The novel, however, dispels this possibility because

he accepts early on that he has no feelings for her. In fact, as an adult, he admits that he does not like his daughter's name, and that it represents "um denso concentrado de possibilidades não vividas deixadas de lado por um motivo ou outro a favor de outras possibilidades que se concretizaram. (…) [U]ma nostalgia difusa, não de todo agradável" (Galera, 2006, p. 96). By naming his daughter Nara, Hermano is not paying homage to his first love: he is masochistically reminding himself of painful events from his past. As we will see, these incidents imply a traumatic experience that includes inequality, simulation, masculinity, and media, the key elements in Hermano's *Bildung*.

In the chapters dedicated to the adult Hermano, we see that he feels torn by his decision to leave his family and climb the Cerro Bonete. Ultimately, he abandons his original plan and begins driving toward Esplanada, his childhood neighborhood, making it clear that he still needs to confront some aspects of his past. At some point, however, he witnesses a shocking scene. A gang is savagely attacking a young boy:

> Vê a cena toda do alto, como se o Pajero estivesse sendo acompanhado por uma grua, o carro se aproximando em alta velocidade do cenário do combate. A desvantagem numérica é gritante, mas dessa vez não vai se esconder. Vinte metros. Lembra do V8 propulsionado pelo nitro de *Mad Max,* rasgando o deserto da terra devastada enquanto é perseguido pela gangue de piratas sanguinários sobre rodas. Precisa enfrentar todos dessa vez. Dez metros. Não está somente imaginando cenas do filme. Agora ele é Mad Max, incorporou o guerreiro da estrada (Galera, 2006, p. 149).

The novel's leitmotif of the camera is now applied to the adult Hermano, showing the continuing influence of contemporary global media on his adult subjectivity. After some

hesitation, he leaves his car and fights the entire group. He fights bravely, savagely, mimicking the deranged Mel Gibson in *Mad Max*, and, in the end, he manages to save the boy. As the scene progresses, it becomes clear that his entire life has been a search for a moment like this, where he could live out the fantasy of being a "real man." The word *fantasia*, typical of the Freudian masochistic subject, is repeated several times in the episode, and at the end of the fight, he thinks:

> Salvou a vida desse garoto e agora estão indo ao local onde aguardarão até que suas feridas cicatrizem. É o momento dos filmes, das histórias em quadrinhos e dos livros de aventuras em que um homem descobre sua verdadeira natureza e se torna um herói. Está completamente embevecido por essa *fantasia*, tanto que a frase "Eu sou médico" lhe soa artificial, totalmente alheia a quem de fato é e ao que está acontecendo naquela manhã de domingo (Galera, 2006, p. 154; my italics).

Here we see the power that these media-fueled fantasies have over Hermano, even as an adult. His subjectivity is still based on media fictions of masculinity that define his self-image as a man. This is one of the novel's contributions to the contemporary *Bildungsroman* genre: it shows how today's reality and, especially, today's images of masculinity, are based on the topics, models, and rhetorical strategies of global mass media. Without reflecting on these elements, depicting male formation in contemporary societies would be impossible. Importantly, this mediated image is also linked to ideas of self-harm and a poorly understood sense of shame and dissatisfaction that never leads to a productive moment of pleasure, insight, or rebellion against social norms. There is, however, an additional step we should take to analyze Galera's novel as a *Bildungsroman.* Following Bakhtin and Moretti, we should attempt to read Hermano's story as more than the depiction of an individual life. As a true novel of formation, *Mãos de Cavalo* is also

a complex cipher for a collective reality and its transformations. As we will see, we can only fully understand the novel's most complex political messages through an analysis of the intersections between masculinity, media, and inequality in the Brazilian context.

Despite the spectacular nature of the previous episode, *Mãos de Cavalo*'s climax occurs not in the present of adulthood but in the past, when Hermano's childhood comes to an abrupt end. At a party, a young man nicknamed Uruguaio tries to force himself on the birthday girl, Isabela. Bonobo head-butts him in front of everyone and stops the grotesque scene. This, however, generates the anger of Uruguaio and his friends, since they see Bonobo as a 'lesser' member of their middle-class community. Here, the novel explicitly shows the discriminatory links between gender and class that define this community. These young men assert their masculinity by aggressively 'conquering' women and humiliating those who they consider their 'social inferiors.' Later, a gang led by Uruguaio attacks Bonobo and Hermano when they are walking together late at night. As they try to run away, Bonobo accidentally falls into a hole in the ground. Hermano escapes, but he witnesses a horrific scene from afar: Uruguaio and his friends beat the helpless Bonobo to death, violently reinforcing the class and gender power structures that define the neighborhood. To avoid being called a coward, Hermano hits himself in the face and shows up at his house, telling everyone a false version of what happened in which he tried and failed to save Bonobo. As readers, we recognize a typical pattern in the young Hermano's behavior: every time he has an opportunity to show his courage, he is paralyzed by fear and simulates heroic deeds to cover up his fear. He also directs his aggressive instincts towards himself in ways that combine pre-established models of masculinity and masochistic desires for punishment based on

poorly understood feelings of inadequacy. In the end, Bonobo's death ratifies his own masochistic wishes: he becomes the coward he secretly wanted to be.

These events also modify our understanding of the novel's plot and, especially, of Hermano's entire formative process. Because of the text's structure, we learn first about Hermano's display of courage as an adult in a chapter titled "6h43." In the following chapter, "A Clareira," we discover that the previous heroic scene is a re-writing of the events of his youth when he abandoned his friend to save his own life. The most obvious reading of these contiguous episodes is that, through his adult actions, Hermano redeems himself after deserting Bonobo in his youth. I would argue, however, that the novel's formal structure, Hermano's masochistic tendencies, and the reader's detailed knowledge of his adulthood problematize the redeeming qualities of this episode.

The novel's final chapter, "O Enterro," is dedicated to Bonobo's burial, where the adolescent Hermano feels an overwhelming sense of guilt. There, he briefly tells Naiara that he does not love her, in an attempt to be sincere after inventing a false version of Bonobo's death. As he leaves, he states in the novel's ending: "Agora sabia exatamente o que fazer. Não seria necessário fingir nunca mais" (Galera, 2006, p. 188). The problem is that Hermano says these words as an adolescent, and we, as readers, already know him as an adult. The novel's structure and its temporal leaps prove that Hermano's adult life is an exercise, not in this purported honesty, but in continued simulation, linked to his fantasies of masculinity and their connections to constructs of gender and class. His decision to become a surgeon, his inability to talk to his wife about his emotional problems, his desire to climb a perilous mountain, his daughter's name,

all these details contain crucial elements of his past and his masochistic personality. Moreover, in his eyes, the only way to find redemption as a grown-up is by continuing to embody the stereotypes of masculinity that oppressed him throughout his adolescence. The act of saving a child is undoubtedly courageous, but, in the novel, it still depends on the perpetuation of the culturally sanctioned fantasies of masculinity that are the origins of his search for punishment and shame. As Nelson Eliezer Ferreira puts it, this event: "...evidencia o caráter episódico e frívolo da virilidade, sem que essa se converta em uma autodescoberta redentora. Sua luta contra os rapazes, inclusive, pode ser considerada uma resposta subserviente e irrefletida a uma imposição social de gênero" (Ferreira, 2020). The moment of deliverance in the novel does not imply a radical resignification of Hermano's past or a decisive liberation from the male stereotypes that led to Bonobo's death. As a text, *Mãos de Cavalo* shows us a dark image of contemporary male *Bildung*: Hermano's belated redemption is dubiously achieved only when, instead of being able to question the alienating masculinity that affects all the novel's characters, he manages to embody its suffocating standards, marked by violence, aggression, and self-harm, for a brief period of time.

Bonobo's burial deserves a detailed analysis because of its complex messages linked to the historical aspects that both Bakhtin and Moretti consider essential in novels of formation. Apart from being a decisive episode in Hermano's life, it is the moment in which the novel presents, in clear terms, some of the collective elements linked to turn-of-the-century Brazil that are intertwined with the protagonist's individual *Bildung*. Once Bonobo dies, the neighborhood unites in a tense collective mourning:

> Havia orgulho e um bairrismo autêntico. O que faltava, e ninguém até agora havia notado, era a tragédia. Mais especificamente, uma morte trágica. E o fato da primeira morte trágica da Esplanada ter sido a de seu morador menos estimado, não raro detestado, a corporificação da delinquência e da agressividade despropositada dentro de uma vizinhança relativamente pacífica, veio, para perplexidade geral, a intensificar os sentimentos de abandono, de insegurança e de angústia que, por fim, conectavam de modo irreversível aquele grupo de indivíduos que, mais por acaso que por qualquer outro motivo, vieram se assentar fisicamente próximos uns dos outros (Galera, 2006, p. 181).

Paradoxically, Bonobo's death transforms Hermano's neighborhood into a more cohesive political community. In my reading, this community in also an allegorical image of Brazil in an era of high democratic hopes, economic stability, and globalization. The newfound unity of the neighborhood is based on the preservation of a conservative and discriminatory status quo in terms of gender and class. In the novel, individual and collective fantasies, like the masculinity portrayed by the global media or the middle-class status that this community wants to maintain at all costs, are the origin of destructive impulses that lead to the novel's violent ending and its protagonist's sense of shame. In my view, through this narrative of formation, Galera presents an image of Brazil as a nation still defined by deep structures of inequality and gendered violence, even in its auspicious return to democracy and its neoliberal promises of economic welfare. As we see in the novel's conclusion, these social notions of gender and class become obstacles to any real personal fulfillment or harmonious sense of community. Hermano will never embody the masculine ideal of his global media heroes and models; this is at the core of his masochistic fantasies and his unending sense of inadequacy, even as an accomplished adult. Bonobo is also

unable to embody this image of "true masculinity" because of his economic status, which immediately transforms him into an "inferior" and marginalized member of his community. The neighborhood only finds a tense unity, based on fear and anxiety, when it manages to preserve its unequal class structures by excluding its poorest inhabitant in the most radical terms: through his death. And in the end, all these elements in the novel point to essential issues in contemporary Brazil, where the class inequalities that have been a significant part of the country's history find new iterations today, linked to masculinity, media, and neoliberal globalization. Following Maas, we could say that Brazilian *Bildungsromane* continue to question some of the country's most critical social problems. Galera's novel is a new example of a specifically Brazilian way of using novels of formation to understand the country's past and present. In this case, the life of a young, middle-class boy embodies the tense confluence of masculinity, globalized media, and social inequality in contemporary Brazilian society. Because of *Mãos de Cavalo*'s insightful look at these issues, the young Hermano's desire to become a "real" man is also a broad meditation on some of the key social and political tensions that define Brazil (and our neoliberal and patriarchal world) today.

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