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# "LET THIS WINTER WORLD REVEAL WHAT IT WILL IN ITS OWN TIME": ON THE IMAGES OF HOSPITALITY, RECONCILIATION, COMMUNION AND THANKSGIVING IN MICHAEL DAVID O'BRIEN'S *THE FATHER'S TALE*

*"Que este mundo invernal, paulatinamente, revele o que quiser": sobre as imagens da hospitalidade, da reconciliação, da comunhão e da ação de graças em "The Father's Tale", de Michael David O'Brien*

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**ABSTRACT**: Based on Weisgerber (1978) and Durand (1993), we understand that symbolic language allows the unity of a literary text to be sustained. By transfiguring familiar elements for both readers and characters, it seems to bring together narrative components that are scattered throughout the artistic text. The novel to which this work is dedicated, *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011), tells the saga of Alexander Graham who wanders down several tortuous paths in order to find Andrew Graham, his youngest son. During his journey, the character has a series of daydreams which, according to Amorim (2023), are particularly concerned with nostalgia for his hometown. Engendered by the *poetic*, *dreamlike* and *cosmic* aspects of the images of the *house*, the *snow* and the *igloo*, following Durand's (1993) classification, these fantasies, as we intend to demonstrate in this article, are also linked to ideas of *hospitality*, *reconciliation*, *communion* and *thanksgiving*. Therefore, we were able to see how literary images can be combined with multiple meanings.
**KEYWORDS**: Canadian literature; Michael David O'Brien; Literary space; Symbolic imagination.

**RESUMO**: Apoiados em Weisgerber (1978), e Durand (1993), compreendemos que a linguagem simbólica permite a sustentação da unidade de um texto literário. Ela, ao efetuar a transfiguração de elementos que são familiares tanto para os leitores quanto para as personagens, parece conferir a confluência dos componentes narrativos que estão dispersos ao longo do texto artístico. O romance a que este trabalho se dedica, *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011), traz a saga de Alexander Graham, que percorre errante diversos caminhos tortuosos para encontrar Andrew Graham, seu filho caçula,. Durante sua trajetória, o personagem tem uma série de devaneios que, consoante Amorim (2023), dizem respeito especialmente à nostalgia pela sua cidade natal. Engendrados pelos

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aspectos poéticos, oníricos e cósmicos das imagens da *casa*, da *neve* e do *iglu*, seguindo a classificação de Durand (1993), tais fantasias, conforme pretendemos demonstrar neste artigo, também se unem a ideias referentes à *hospitalidade*, *reconciliação*, *comunhão* e *ação de graças*. Portanto, foi-nos possível verificar a forma como as imagens literárias podem ser combinadas a múltiplos sentidos.
**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Literatura canadense; Michael David O'Brien; The Father's Tale; Espaço literário; Imaginação simbólica;

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## INTRODUCTION[1]

Exceeding the 1000-page mark, *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011) tells the story of Alexander Graham, a resident of the fictional Canadian city of Halcyon, who is a widower and father of two grown-up boys. Andrew Graham, the youngest, is a student in Oxford, England, and did not phone home for Christmas as usual. Alexander then starts looking for clues and discovers that his son has been co-opted by an apocalyptic cult. This discovery motivated him to go in search of his son, whatever the cost. Such a quest takes him on a long journey. Leaving his comfortable hometown, Alex travelled through a maze of clues left by Andrew through England, Germany, Finland and, eventually, Russia and China.

This paper is derived from doctoral research carried out between 2019 and 2022 that concentrated on analysing the novel *The Father's Tale*, written by the contemporary Canadian painter, iconographer and writer Michael D. O'Brien. Such study explored how the themes of *literary space*, *intertextuality*, *personalism* and *mimetic desire* are present in that book. In the first chapter of the thesis, we investigated the literary space in the novel and demonstrated the connections between the narrative and the main character's travels. In this way, considering the symbolic weight of elements identified in the previous investigation, such as, the *house*, the *kingfisher*, the *snow* and the *igloo*, we sought to study whether and how these images could unify the main themes of the narrative.

While the previous effort focused on analysing the motifs that represented for Alex a continuous source of strength that motivated him to carry on his search for Andrew, his wayward son, this article concentrates on the importance of the collective construction of the igloo. As well as symbolically bringing together the dreams of the house and the reveries engendered by the snow, the igloo also functions as a monument that expresses: 1) the hospitality of the Ozero Baikal community; 2) the reconciliation between Alex and Ilya Yevgenyevich, Irina Filipovna's eldest son; 3) the communion and thanksgiving that took place between Alex and the inhabitants of the Siberian village, especially Irina and Aglaya Pavlona, also known as The Crow, when they contemplated the glowing snow house. As such, this paper

[1] This paper is a revised extract from the doctoral thesis entitled "*From that point onward, the melody rose and took all the listeners with it. Into what realm?": four clefs, four readings, four melodies and one poetics in Michael David O'Brien's "The Father's Tale"* (Amorim, 2023). Please note that all non-referenced English translations were made by the authors of this article. We would like to thank the valuable suggestions made by those who anonymously evaluated this work. However, we would also like to emphasise that any errors or inconsistencies in this text are our sole responsibility.

constitutes a revised and expanded analysis of the images of the *snow*, the *house* and the *igloo*, based mainly on the writings of Bachelard (1994, 2002, 2011), Durand (1993, 1998), Weisgerber (1978), Onfray (2009) and Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998).

## "WOVEN WILLOW SAPLINGS": ON THE SUBJECT OF THE SYMBOLS THAT UNIFY THE ELEMENTS SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE LITERARY SPACE

Symbolic language is prevalent in artistic texts, as Santos argues that "symbols allow us to convey what would otherwise be inexpressible; through them, we communicate the uncommunicable" (1955, p. 9). In literary writing, it serves as a tool that provides coherence to the elements dispersed within the narrative's literary space, whether it be a poem, short story, novella, or novel. Weisgerber's insights into such space are essential for comprehending the significance of the symbol as a unifying element for the literary fragments scattered throughout the story, supporting the subsequent analyses:

> The words of the novel, while appearing to relate to the things of everyday life, actually construct a *sui generis* reality. The space of the novel is therefore a verbal space, created from scratch: a character that is consistent both with the nature of the fine arts and […] with the very notion of space (Weisgerber, 1978, p. 10).

The fictional space's unity, formed by metaphorical shifts in the narrative's language, becomes evident by examining the potential interpretation of literary images, which inherently possess arbitrary meanings. To comprehend the nature of symbols, we can refer to Durand's insights into their two components – the *signifier* and the *invisible* – and the manner in which each component functions:

> The symbol is therefore a representation that brings out a secret meaning, it is the epiphany of a mystery. The visible half of the symbol, the "signifier," will always be charged with the utmost concreteness, and, as Paul Ricœur excellently puts it, any authentic symbol has three concrete dimensions: it is at once "cosmic" (that is, it gathers its figuration by the handful in the very visible world around us), "oneiric" (that is, it is rooted in the memories, the gestures that emerge in our dreams and constitute, as Freud rightly showed, the very concrete mass of our most intimate biography) and, finally, "poetic," that is, the symbol also appeals to language, and to the language that springs forth the most, hence the most concrete. But the other half of the symbol, the invisible and indivisible part that makes it a world of indirect representations, of allegorical signs that are always inadequate, constitutes a quite separate kind of logic. Whereas in a simple sign the signified is limited and the signifier, though arbitrary, is infinite: whereas the simple allegory translates a finite

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> signified by a signifier and no less delimited, the two terms of the symbolon are in turn infinitely open (Durand, 1993, p. 12).

The symbol's signifying aspect, as outlined by Durand and aligned with Ricœur's perspective, is comprised of three distinct dimensions: *cosmic*, *oneiric*, and *poetic*. These dimensions, when applied to the analysis of figurative elements within the narrative, are proven invaluable. As readers embark on the journey, they can utilize the poetic images, such as the *house*, *snow*, and *igloo*, as guideposts. They serve as markers to aid readers in navigating the vast Romanesque[2] map of the book, enabling them to discover the thread and path, either alongside the characters or independently. Decoding the artistic text's organic unity also requires an active engagement with the act of reading across the literary space: "composed of words, Romanesque space includes all the spatial feelings and concepts that language is capable of expressing, but by annexing them to itself, it automatically changes their status" (Weisgerber, 1978, p. 11).

## "THE WINTER WORLD AND THE WINTER-BORN": ON THE IMAGERY ENGENDERED BY THE SNOW

Snow plays a significant role in the narrative of *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011), and an essential aspect for this analysis is the depiction of Halcyon by its narrator. It remains true to the geography and climate of the Canadian region, particularly in winter, when the town is deeply influenced by the cold, dry air that comes from the Arctic. It becomes evident that the elements of Halcyon's surroundings had a profound impact on Alexander Graham's temperament, as suggested by Bachelard, who recalled an old adage that says that "a landscape is a state of mind" (Bachelard, 2002, p. 54). The subsequent passage, extracted from the initial chapter of the novel's first section, vividly illustrates the city's routine during the bitterly cold winter days:

> On the following evening, Halcyon prepared for a winter's sleep beneath a sky turbulent with spiralling stars and jets of green aurora borealis. The hundred gabled

[2] We can infer from Weisgerber's ideas that the term Romanesque space, as well as being an authentic creation engendered by the reader's interaction with the words imagined by the writer, encompasses any literary genre, despite the nomenclature being apparently exclusive: "We always have to create it [the Romanesque space] ourselves, whatever the [literary] field" (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

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> rooftops of the old town core were merry with icicle refracting the Christmas lights that had appeared on homes and shops during the past week, competing with the luminous sky. The air was completely still, and the smoke from chimneys rose straight up into darkness. When occasionally a car passed slowly along icy Main Street, its tires would whine, mingling with the laughter of boys making their way home from the town rink with hockey sticks and skates dangling from their shoulders. Few other people were out on the sidewalks, it being after eight o'clock and the region groaning under an early cold snap (O'Brien, 2011, p. 18).

Moreover, Alexander's lifelong residence in this small town played a crucial role in shaping his personality. The streets and thoroughfares, the arctic-influenced climate, the nearly icy rivers, and the festive Christmas lights embellishing the residences all contributed to it significantly. In accordance with Onfray, "our essence is undeniably influenced by history, but equally so by geography, by the surrounding environment, and deeply so" (Onfray, 2009, p. 57).

When exploring snow's symbolism, one might expect to find insights in Gaston Bachelard's work on elemental poetry. Yet Durand, his former pupil, noted Bachelard's oversight of its imaginative potential. In attempting to uncover the reasons for this omission by considering his mentor's geographical background, Durand suggests that "the earth plays a more fundamental role in the daydreams of a continental plain dweller than the water dear to sailors" (Durand, 1998, p. 11).

Nevertheless, this Alpine writer evokes the imagination of diverse communities enduring near-constant snowfall. He adopts the phenomenological approach, akin to Bachelard's, in order to delve into the significance of snow within the Romanesque imaginings of certain literary figures. Addressing the material essence of snow, Durand contends that it "presents itself as an epistemological hurdle, meaning a substance that cannot be neatly categorized and dismissed as mere frozen water" (Durand, 1998, p. 13). Despite sharing the solidity of earth and the reflective properties of water, snow must be acknowledged as a distinct element which exhibits both auditory and visual characteristics. In terms of the former, the observer perceives elements associated with the semantic realm of *silence*:

> In fact, the sound experience of snow is linked to a tactile and kinesthetic process: it is the looseness, the slowness, the sweetness of snow that contains its silence. "Feather in the wind", "fluff", "cotton thread", "wool", "grey", are the banal experiences of the sound damping of snow (*Ibid.*, p. 14).

Thus, the words *looseness*, *slowness*, *sweetness*, *feather in the wind*, *fluff*, *cotton*

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*thread*, *wool*, and *grey* effectively bring forth the serene auditory sensation of snow. Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998) suggest that silence, unlike muteness, holds deep significance, heralding inspiration and allowing significant events to unfold:

> Monastic rules stated that silence was a major ceremony. God comes to the soul in which silence reigns but strikes dumb the person who spends his or her time in idle gossip, and will not enter the soul which shuts itself off and remains obstinately dumb (*Ibid.*, p. 882).

At the same time, the observable presence of snow would be characterized by a translucent, crystal-clear whiteness, embodying an air-loving quality that unites the different features of the gradual frost descending from the heavens:

> The visual characteristics are freer from other sensory interference: it is obviously whiteness that triumphs, a quality so notorious that it is almost part of the very definition of snow, "sparkling", "immaculate", "infinite" whiteness, covering and opening up space above as well as below, and there isn't much difference between these images of invading, "marble-like" whiteness and the more intellectualised images of the "cloak" and the "shroud" (Durand, 1998, p. 14).

In order to better substantiate his phenomenological analysis of the symbolism of snow, Durand cites poets who construct literary reveries in which such figure reigns supreme. The author justifies various approximations between snow and other elements through the use of what he calls *poetic truth*, which has nothing utilitarian about it from a scientific and pragmatic point of view. Such a concept is based on a *prophetic truth*, that is, a revealed truth, since it is not something that can be empirically verified. Therefore, for Durand, there would be an adequacy of the thing to the spirit – which would be the opposite of the traditional definition of truth, which consists of the adequacy of the mind to the thing. In this way, starting from a prophetical and poetic truth, the Alpine thinker, alongside Paul Valéry, brings the whiteness of snow closer to that of desert sands:

> The snow desert, like all deserts, is a fierce purifying resistance to the seductions of the earth. This is why the desert of snow traces out multiple and gushing paths: it shows us a moral asceticism, a religious transcendence that goes beyond the poetics of snow and, above all – a fundamental path – a radical apocalypse that dialyses and fulminates the earthly (Durand, 1998, p. 22).

Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998) note shifts in desert symbolism in the Bible and

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Christian Era. Originally seen as a haunt of demons, as exemplified by the Christ, it later became associated with spiritual solitude, as illustrated by figures like Saint Anthony of the Desert and Saint Mary of Egypt. Richard of Saint Victor, an author from the 12th century, emphasized its significance in eremitical solitude:

> This is why, in the primitive Church, monks retired to the desert as hermits (the Greek for 'solitary' is *eremos*), there to confront their own nature and that of the world with the help of God alone. The symbolic undertones of the word are particularly appropriate in this context, because it was not long before it was no longer believed essential to retire to an actual desert in order to lead an eremitical life (*Ibid.*, p. 286).

The spiritual significance linked with desert symbolism is also extended to the snow. Durand suggests that writers like Jean-Marc Bernard and René Char, who explore nature's tangible aspects in their poetry, felt unsettled by snow. Thus, this barren frozen landscape becomes a sanctuary where poetry approaches its sacred essence.

When correlating the *desert* and *silent* aspects attributed to the alabaster snow, we find a passage describing Alex Graham's stay in a small cabin in the middle of the wild ice-covered Siberia: "Without effecting any obvious change in the atmosphere, the silence began to stretch into a seamless flow of eternity, and so unobtrusive was this that it did not immediately register on Alex" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 494). This eremitical stillness, as well as having a peculiar spiritual effect, mirrors the silencing effect of snow, which absorbs the noises of the landscape.

Durand (1998) also suggests a connection between snow and fire, which may seem contradictory given the objective opposition between cold and heat. Yet, in the realm of poetic expression, associating fire with snow becomes a prophetic truth that allows the *conjunctio oppositorum*[3]:

> If we show that snow, which for the average person is nothing more than coldness as opposed to the warmth of fire, is poetically confused with the lustral function of fire and warmth, our psychopoetic hypothesis that snow is essentially anti-earth will be justified (Durand, 1998, p. 30).

Such fusion of opposites, symbolized by the combination of snow and fire, is highlighted by Durand in the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. The Alpine thinker emphasizes Rilke's recognition that snow plays a pivotal role in the creation of a fireplace. Additionally, he

[3] A concept very dear to both alchemy and analytical psychology. It refers to the union of opposing elements. See BURCKHARDT, Titus. **Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul.** Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971.

points to the poetic prowess of Charles Baudelaire, who skilfully merges the external cold of winter with the inner warmth felt by those experiencing a snowy scene:

> And then the absurd coherence of the poetic development of the snowy images becomes even more apparent to us: we had started from a silence reinforced by whiteness, and the night became luminous. But then, more paradoxically, this luminous whiteness, which our senses rightly know to be cold, becomes warm in our hearts (*Ibid.*, p. 32).

Likewise, Durand emphasises that the star shape of the snow crystal will be its symbolic image, since the star will be "a symbol that [will] fix its mobile meanings" (*Ibid.*, p. 33). The extremely geometric figure of the icy star sculpture will attract the attention of those who are absorbed in contemplating the snowflakes accumulating on a bush, while the stillness that comes from this introspection will make distant references to the cosmos:

> A symbol, of which this is an example, is a complex not just of sensations, but of multiple affective meanings and real cultural learning. The symbol is the close conjunction of nature and culture. The symbol of snow is the star where silence, hexagonal geometry, light, purity, apocalypse, burning, brilliance and popular song come together. Snow star (*Ibid.*, p. 35).

In *The Father's Tale*, Alexander had this kind of introspective experience in the evening following his expedition to a church, when he found himself attentively surveying his environment and became aware of a phenomenon that had eluded his notice until then. Alex observed the moisture in his breath crystallizing into delicate ice formations, a stunning moment that captivated him and seemed to momentarily freeze in time through the beauty of the ice crystals:

> He blew a few puffs of frost and felt a moment's surprise when sparkles of color materialized in the microscopic crystals of his breath. He smiled and thought to himself, "There's always something new. I've lived for more than four decades, and never before have I noticed this" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 19).

Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998) point out that being a source of light and heat is one of the most emphasised virtues when thinking about a star. Their various representations on the ceiling of a religious temple point to the celestial reality of these stars. Furthermore, it should be underlined that this ethereal characteristic is a spiritual symbol:

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> This celestial character turns them into symbols of the spirit and especially of the warfare between spiritual forces, or light, and material forces, or darkness. Stars shine through the darkness and are guiding-lights in the night of the unconscious (*Ibid.*, p. 924).

The light of the stars and the luminescence of the snow are also linked to the whiteness of the Milky Way. Such idea, derived from the prophetic philosophy developed by Durand, indicates cosmic experiences from the contemplation of winter clouds, which point to the primordial nebula. Moreover, the inconstant uniformity of shades of whitish grey seems to be the culmination of a meditation proposed by the snow:

> After its symbolic and stellar trajectory, snow then appears to us with a strange power of evocation and substance. From being poetic, it becomes philosophical. From being a small sensual antithesis, full of moral and aesthetic appeals, it extrapolates a vast cosmogony. It no longer just erases the earth and its mirages, it constitutes the world... and even Being (Durand, 1998, p. 37).

Likewise, the *stellar* and *igneous* aspects of snow were strongly present in *The Father's Tale* during the construction of the igloo – to be explored in more detail in the last subsection of this article – mirroring the appearance of a fiery star in the wintry cerulean sky while Alexander and his Siberian friends were engaged in building the monument: "The sky was deep blue, and a star shone in it. More snow blocks were pushed in through the entrance" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 752).

Finally, we can examine an important section of the novel's narrative that contains a story engendered by snowy reverie. In the chapter entitled *The war of the winterborn*, there is a fable that Alexander Graham created after months of living in Ozero Baikal, which gave him an intense experience of the snow. The parable was told by the character to his class at the village school. In the story, we see how Alexander worked phenomenologically with some of the multiple ontological levels of winter. *Zimorodok*, the Russian word for kingfisher, was the name of the village and its residents were known as *The Winterborn* since they had never experienced other seasons than winter. The people were very strong and had lived there for almost a hundred years. Alexander divides the winters experienced by them in two: the weak one and the strong one. One year, the weak winter did not come and the rivers did not thaw, which caused a great famine.

However, there was an old legend among them about a land on the other side of the mountains surrounding the village. After discussing the value of the myth, they decided to set

off in search of this land until they saw a different people on the other side of the road. Both peoples became afraid of each other, a situation that lasted for a few days until the sound of a trumpet echoed across the vast expanses. This noise preceded the appearance of a gigantic stag, which they thought of as the king of all stags. The enormous animal, after being the victim of their arrows, guided them to a place where they would make their new home:

> "This is your home", cried the stag. "Here you will learn to sing and dance and love one another. And if you learn what I would have you learn, many are the peoples and nations that will flow from you; born from your flesh, they will push back all the northern void, rebuke the darkness, and cover the earth with rejoicing." With that, the stag turned and walked into the water, and as it departed from the people, they wept and stretched out their arms toward it, pleading with it to come back to them, but it did not. Then the golden light filled their eyes, and the sounds of brooks and wind filled their ears. Their tears turned to laughter and their cries to songs. The stag disappeared into the light of the sun, and his going from them was no longer a death but a promise of return (O'Brien, 2011, p. 810).

In the fable, Alexander developed a series of themes related to the rich symbolism of snow and its possible petrifying reverie, in Bachelard's words. The appearance of the gigantic stag, however, seems to shatter the icy dreams engendered by the sparkling whiteness of the ice crystals. As stated in the *Dictionary of Symbols*, the stag can also be associated with cyclical renewal:

> Because of the spread of its antlers, which regularly drop and grow again, the stag is often compared with the Tree of Life and symbolizes fecundity and the rhythms of growth and rebirth. These properties are to be found as commonly in the decorations of Christian baptisteries as, for example, in Muslim, shamanistic, Mayan or Pueblo Indian tradition. It is 'one of the symbols of continual creation and renewal' (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1998, p. 920).

This subsection, based on Durand (1998) and Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998), briefly explored certain words – silence, whiteness, desert, the ice-fire diptych, crystal and star – that literally and metaphorically characterise snow. However, a thorough study of the presence of such characteristics in the plot of *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011) will culminate in the last subsection of this article, in which we will investigate, leaded by Durand (1993) and others, the *cosmic*, *oneiric* and *poetic* aspects of the niveous substance combined with the habitability of a house in the shape of an igloo. For now, it remains for us to investigate the figuration of the search for a home in Alexander's journeys.

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## "KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE": DREAMING OF AN ILLUMINATED HOUSE

During a journey, travellers might need to find a temporary dwelling that resonates with their native home, and that points back to that mainstay of their earliest childhood. This search is necessarily related to the intense desire for seclusion that comes as a result of a journey full of challenges. This temporarily illuminated house will provide a shelter that will protect the traveller from the darkness of night and the shadows of twilight:

> The house where the lights shine out in the deserted countryside is in fact a literary theme that comes down through the centuries and that is found in all literatures. The house where the lamps are lit is like a star in the forest, guiding travellers who are lost. Astrologers liked to say that in the course of the year, the Sun dwells in the twelve houses of the Sky, and poets endlessly see lamplight as the rays of an interior star (Bachelard, 2011, p. 84).

As it is, according to Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1998), a representation of the cosmos and situated on the *axis mundi*[4], the house is an extremely important symbol of great density because, as Gaston Bachelard claimed, "our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). Likewise, the French academic recalls that the house where one was born remains in the memory of adults as a distant emblem of refuge:

> We love to go on living in a house which no longer exists because in that house, we relive - often without being fully aware of it - a dynamics of comfort. The house has protected us, therefore it comforts us still. The act of dwelling is overlaid with unconscious values, unconscious values that the unconscious does not forget (*Id.*, 2011, p. 87).

This internalised and sometimes dreamlike dwelling will always be filled with those forces that represent stillness, rest and recollection, essential factors for the human person to be able to gather together the scattered soul elements. Therefore, it is not completely absurd to say that the house restores the psychic structure of a human being:

> In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human

[4] This concept is very important to the study of mythology. For further information, see: CAVALCANTI, Raïssa. **Os Símbolos do Centro**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2008.

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> being's first world. Before he is "cast into the world", as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle (*Id.*, 1994, p. 6-7).

On the other hand, Michel Onfray recalls and lists a series of factors that make it difficult to transform an impersonal space into a dwelling in the full sense of the word, that is, one that functions as a home in the sense evoked by Bachelard:

> However, dwelling is not to be confused with pure and simple occupation of a place. It is not enough to have a few clothes and a few possessions in a space to make it a home. The act of dwelling centres on everyday archival practices, it is true, but it also articulates habits and rituals without which the anguish that torments body and soul cannot be removed. A temporary residence doesn't mean living or having set up home (Onfray, 2009, p. 86-87).

On his subsequent and difficult journey through Siberia, while on the train trip from Moscow to Novosibirsk, Alexander Graham befriends two priests, Sergius and Seraphim, who introduce him to *poustinia*, also known as the little desert. The *poustinia* was recorded by Catherine Doherty in her best-known book *Living Desert: Poustinia* (Doherty, 2008). Despite its origins in the ancient Russian *Startsi*[5], Doherty's book introduced the concept of *poustinia* to the contemporary Western world. In the book, the author characterises it as an introduction to the inner desert, symbolised by a remote, quiet place where the devout Christian can raise both arms – that of contrition and that of supplication – to God in atonement, intercession and reparation for sins – his or her own and those of all humanity.

Furthermore, entering into *poustinia* involves silence, which can engender listening to God, and suggests an entry into *kenosis*, that is, the emptying of oneself. A *poustinia* is a modest hovel or sparsely furnished room where a person goes to pray and fast before God. The word has its origins in the Russian word for *desert* and a person who is destined to reside permanently in a *poustinia* is known as a poustinik. A hut or room that functions as a *poustinia* usually consists of a bed, table and chair, a cross and a Bible. Doherty announces the practice as a possibility of meditation so that anyone, in any state of life, can experience a day of stillness, isolation and prayer.

[5] The *Startsi*, *elders* in Russian, are very characteristic figures in the Russian Orthodox Church. They were represented by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and others. For further information, check: OLIVEIRA, Victor Hugo Pereira de; BISERRA, Wiliam Alves. Arquétipos do velho sábio e do peregrino nos Relatos de um Peregrino Russo. **Guavira Letras**, v. 26, p. 302-317, 2018a.

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In a certain section of the book entitled *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1994) phenomenologically analyses the hut of the hermit – a person who decides to live in isolation in order to dedicate himself more intensely to continuous prayer. We can say with certainty that the *poustinia* is very close to the hermit's hut as described by the philosopher:

> The hermit's hut is a theme which needs no variations, for at the simplest mention of it, "phenomenological reverberation" obliterates all, mediocre resonances. The hermit's hut is an engraving that would suffer from any exaggeration of picturesqueness. Its truth must derive from the intensity of its essence, which is the essence of the verb "to inhabit." The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut. And although geographers may bring back photographs of hut villages from their travels in distant lands, our legendary past transcends everything that has been seen, even everything that we have experienced personally. The image leads us on towards extreme solitude. [...]. The hermit is alone before God. His hut, therefore, is just the opposite of the monastery. And there radiates about this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe. The hut can receive none of the riches "of this world." It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge (*Ibid.*, p. 32).

In this small cottage, Alexander Graham was able to experience the welcome, rest and spiritual recollection that he so desperately needed. He also experienced the effects of the contents that had been suffocated in his mind as a result of the completely uncertain journey. Finally, his meditation is interspersed with images and memories stored in his emotional memory:

> He knelt on the floor before the cross and turned his attention away from a thousand avenues of thought and the images that sprang up in his imagination. The images were the most intrusive, pleasant but very strong: the hills of Clementine, the woman recumbent on the winter fields with the jewel of Halcyon on her breast. Carol dancing in his arms – I'm nobody, who are you? – three prancing deer. Andrew holding up a sports trophy, his face beaming. The girl from Smolensk glowing with restored innocence. Alyosha clean and happy, his wounds healed. A kingfisher plunging, seizing an underwater fish and flashing with it into the sky (O'Brien, 2011, p. 504).

Wherever the character goes, Halcyon and the sweet memories associated with it will be in his heart. This reverie also brings back more recent memories of Russian people he met in Moscow. Hence, we realise how necessary it was for him to have a time of silence and meditation so that the content of his interiority can emerge and blend in with the surrounding landscape. Therefore, we seek to demonstrate how the house, especially symbolized in the presence of a *poustinia*, is of paramount importance for Alexander Graham's interiority. In the following section of this article, we will seek to explore the way in which the igloo, built by

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Graham and his new friends from Siberia, condenses both the symbolism of snow and the house.

## "FROM EVERY JOINT OF THE SNOW BLOCKS, LINES OF RADIANCE SHOWED": A CONJUNCTION OF THE DIFFUSE ORBS

During his stay in the village on the shores of Lake Baikal, Alexander Graham became so involved with the community that he ended up turning into the English teacher at the primary school. In one lesson, he asked the class about something that falls from the sky, is white and serves to form a place to live. Ilya, one of Irina Filipovna's sons, gave him the correct answer: "A house of snow!" (*Ibid.*, p. 746). After explaining what a snow house is – an igloo, in Inuit language – to those who traditionally build them to live in, and how to build them, Alexander proposed to his class that they assemble a snow house together:

> The building of the igloo took several hours. Alex showed the children how to make a ring of standing blocks about ten feet in diameter. By design, the lowest level was not horizontal: the upper edge angled gradually like a ramp, and as it completed the circle it began to form the second level. Alex showed his helpers how to lean the blocks carefully a few degrees towards the center. Each successive layer increased the incline until a dome began to take shape before their eyes (*Ibid.*, p. 751).

The teacher and his students had a great time of communion during the construction of the igloo. It is also clear to see that Alexander is a very practical man, despite having a more introspective personality, extremely marked by bookish overtones:

> On hands and knees, he crawled through the hole. Several bodies crawled in after him. They all stood up oohing and aahing. Above their heads the open hole let in enough light for them to see. The sky was deep blue, and a star shone in it. More snow blocks were pushed in through the entrance. Alex cut them and lifted them to the ceiling, a foot above his head. One by one they shrank the sky until a single hole at the top of the dome remained, awaiting its cap. Alex cut the final block about ten inches square, its edges sharply beveled so that they would fit snugly with the surrounding blocks. Using both hands and going more by touch than by sight, he pushed it through the hole at an angle, felt it fall onto the roof, then pulled it back toward the hole. Lifting with the fingertips, maneuvering carefully, he positioned it above the hole and let it drop gently into place (O'Brien, 2011, p. 752).

The igloo was almost ready. However, once Alexander had positioned the last block, the snowy house became very dark. The solution came after a meal in which Irina Filipovna, echoed by Kiril, praised the teacher's actions by saying that he has enlivened Siberian culture.

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Like the inhabitants of the village on the shores of Lake Baikal, Alexander had a vast existential and phenomenological experience of snow and, like them, is full of daydreams about it. Meanwhile, Ilya would be in charge of finding the light bulbs that will illuminate the igloo, while Kiril would look for the candles that will help the ice house glow:

> The night was moonless, and there were few lights on in the houses at this end of the village. The igloo glowed like a blue coal. From every joint of the snow blocks, lines of radiance showed. Silence fell on the crowd as they gazed at it. Instinctively, people stepped back, withdrawing farther and farther in order to have a better view of the whole. Doors opened in the nearby houses, and more people came out to see what was happening. Soon the entire igloo was ringed by admirers. As each new person approached, he fell silent. Within fifteen minutes it seemed as if the entire village had arrived, for the igloo was now surrounded by a ring of people three and four deep (*Ibid.*, p. 756).

The igloo built by Alexander and his host community will be perceived from a distance as a star of cerulean light, which is a reference to the stellar shapes of snowflakes. Its constitution is strongly influenced by factors such as the density of the vapour in the upper layers of the atmosphere, the cold and the dew point. At the sight of the illuminated igloo, people exclaimed words, such as, *diamond*, *a comet that fell from the cosmos*, *a blue fire*, *flaming snow* and *a jewel in an icon*. This last one is uttered by Aglaya, as known as The Crow, who was a very religious lady from the village. Spontaneously, she began to sing a very evocative hymn in a minor key, as it was utterly melancholic. Gradually, everyone present joined in the musical expression that sprang up in response to the sight of the luminescence. In this manner, the spontaneously created lyrics referred to winter, darkness, cold and the light of awakening:

> The lyrics were overlapping and repetitive; they were variations on each other, inflections, each one adding to the meaning and to the symphonic effect. Alex understood – though he did not know how – that this was neither an unveiling of a collective soul nor a manifestation of the group's psychology, nor anything other than what it was. The people of Ozero Baikal, many of whom had survived a diabolic century by ingenuity or miracle or a combination of both, were living in the new era as if awakening from a dark dream. Now, as they sang, they listened to themselves singing (O'Brien, 2011, p. 757).

As Durand declared, "snow demands religious worship" (1998, p. 24). This act, which engendered the hymn composed and performed by the community, is made possible by the silence created by the snow, which absorbs and attenuates sound vibrations due to the air

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trapped between its flakes. This silence, however, has all the qualities listed by Max Picard (1964) in his book entitled *The World of Silence*, where he discusses the positive nature of silence, which points to higher moral and spiritual values. After all, would the hymn of the Ozero Baikal community exist without the healing power of silence? One of Picard's main premises is that silence is useless because it can be uncomfortable and it is difficult to profit from such emptiness:

> Yet there is more help and healing in silence than in all the "useful things". Purposeless, unexploitable silence suddenly appears at the side of the all-too-purposeful, and frightens us by its very purposelessness. It interferes with the regular flow of the purposeful. It strengthens the untouchable, it lessens the damage inflicted by exploitation. It makes things whole again, by taking them back from the world of dissipation into the world of wholeness. It gives things something of its own holy uselessness, for that is what silence is: holy uselessness (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

Emerging from her meaningful silence, Aglaya began to sing the hymn impromptu and was followed by the other older residents of the village. However, most of the song was sung by Alexander. The syntagmata *cold*, *light*, *darkness*, *dream*, *love*, *beauty*, *fire*, *heart* and *soul* run through the Baikal hymn and summarise the character's feelings as a foreigner as well as those of the community that has welcomed him. Below, with the appropriate interpolations, we quote the poem created by the latter as a response to the sight of that alluring icy fiery sapphire:

> The light came to us
> Unexpected it came, in the dark and the cold
> Just when we thought that the dawn would not come,
> A light burst forth in the gloom.
> Then we awoke to see
> The dream among us at last,
> "The waking dream.
> [GRAHAM'S PART]
> "O children of Baikal.
> "O children of Baikal, you whom I do not know, You who know me not,
> In beauty did Love make us, but we have lost,
> Oh, we have lost—"
> "Our hidden face, our name, our way.
> But Love, a genius, takes us by the hand this night
> And guides us through the mountains and the ice.
> Love knows us better than we know ourselves,
> Though we in our disbelief could not keep faith with him,
> Or with each other."
> "Blinded we were, and blind we are,
> To trees bursting into flame all about,
> And the hand of Love pressing into the cold stone
> A memory of heat."
> "O serdtse, O dusha!

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> From the west I came like sarma wind,
> Out of emptiness the storm-tossed came;
> I did not fall from the sky, but I fell."
> "In the east you dwell, which is another's west,
> And gather here beside the waters of abyss
> To forge your young within your flesh
> And sing together of the unremembered dream."
> "I was drowning, I was drowning, children of Baikal,
> As you would drown upon my sea.
> Yet Love the King has seen our grief and pitied us,
> And drawn us to this house
> To give a place where all might live."
> "I must go into the west and never more be seen,
> Yet ever will I carry you, as you must carry me.
> The hearing heart forgets no word that love has sung this night;
> Remember it and light the heart-lamp of the soul
> To push back all this northern void—" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 759-760).

Thus, the sacred uselessness of the silence and the hymn of the Ozero Baikal community united Alexander and the people who welcomed him in a joyful communion. In this way, the igloo synthesises the symbols of the house and the snow, as explored in the previous subchapters. It will also represent the light surrounded by darkness as well as be an emblem of both Alexander Graham's nostalgia for his own home and his hope of being able to meet Andrew again, combined with the healing experienced by the people of that community. Before being destroyed by Sonia, a troublesome teenage girl of the village, the shining house of snow radiated its beauty rendering everyone speechless:

> Alex and the boys went up to the school yard, where a small crowd had already gathered. As on the night before, the lamps were lit, and the enchantment of the glowing igloo spread among them. There was no singing, but a hush settled on everyone, expressions of awe and pleasure evident on many faces. There was little conversation, and this was subdued, as if the people were experiencing an instinctive reverence, believer and nonbeliever alike, in the presence of such beauty (O'Brien, 2011, p. 783).

Finally, it is worth mentioning how Aglaya Pavlovna, one of the few people from Ozero Baikal who still kept the flame of the Russian Orthodox faith alive, summarised the importance of Alexander's gift to the community in the figure of the luminous snow house:

> This house teaches them. It tells them that a house of light is possible, and more than that, it shows them that other houses of light are possible, perhaps very great houses of light. They don't think this with their minds but with their hearts. As they go back to their homes and lie down to sleep, they gaze into the darkness, and the darkness is no longer burdensome, for the house glows in their minds. It shows them that they love the light and that they love its beauty. They see no more than this. In time they

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> will come to hunger for the House of Light that is in the heavens and can never be destroyed."
> "The snowhouse is a sign, then?"
> "Yes. It's half-serdtse, half-glubina dushy. But the half can lead to the whole, if the heart listens. If the heart learns."
> Alex took the old woman's arm and walked with her up the slope to her cabin. They said good-night on her doorstep, and he returned to the clinic. There he read for a while, prayed the rosary and the chotki, and fell asleep with the string in his fingers. During the night he dreamed of horses (*Ibid.*, p. 784-785).

Similar to individuals gathered around a bonfire, Graham and his Siberian companions circled the igloo in a manner reminiscent of a campfire, which unites in their wholeness elements as contrasting as ice and fire, as Durand (1998) suggests. Additionally, considering Pavlovna's contemplations, it is conceivable to draw parallels between this occurrence in the Siberian community and a segment from the lecture titled *Breath of the Living Spirit*, presented by Richard Alpert – also known as Ram Dass – in 1975. In it, the author alludes to a spiritual fire, asserting that it is the eternal destination for humanity, resembling Pavlovna's House of Light:

> As if in each of us, there once was a fire. And for some of us, there seem as if there are only ashes now. But, when we dig in the ashes, we find one ember. And very gently we fan that ember, blow on it. It gets brighter. And from that ember, we rebuild the fire. Only thing that's important is that ember. [...]. The ember gets stronger, flame starts to flicker a bit, and pretty soon you realize that all we're going to do for eternity is sit around the fire (Alpert, 1975, 0 h 01 min 39 s).

Pavlovna, in her masterful synthesis, establishes a symbolic correspondence – *quod est superius est sicut quod inferius*[6] – between the earthly and luminous *House of Snow*, a present that is conditioned by the disintegrating element of time, and the *House of Light*, an apparent reference to Paradise as understood within the framework of Christian spirituality, whether Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox. In order to demonstrate the ineffability of Heaven, Saint Paul of Tarsus states, by combining passages from the prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, that this mystery could only be revealed by the Holy Spirit:

> We teach what Scripture calls: the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.

[6] This is an emblematic adage taken from the Emerald Tablet, a hermetic text full of allegorical and symbolic figures that influenced, amongst others, the practice of Alchemy. For a verification of the application of this principle to Literary Theory, see: LIVINGSTON, Ray. **The Traditional Theory of Literature**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962.

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> These are the things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God (Bible, 1 Corinthians, ch. 2, v. 9-10).

With this supernatural aid, mystics and theologians began to think about what happens after death. Trese (2008), summarising the main authors of Western Christianity, relates the term *beatific vision* to the joy so intense that only God himself can grant the grace necessary for it to be endured:

> The "beatific vision" is the cold theological term for the magnificent reality which beggars human imagining or description. That reality is not merely a "vision" in the sense of "seeing" God. It is a union with God; God possessing the soul and the soul possessing God in a unity so ravishingly complete as to be infinitely beyond the ecstasy of the most perfect human marriage. As the soul "enters" heaven, the impact upon it of the Infinite Love that is God would be so shattering as to annihilate the soul, if God himself did not give to the soul the strength it needs to endure the happiness that is God. If we are able for a moment to tear our thoughts from God, how petty then shall we think the worst of our earthly sufferings and trials to have been; what a ridiculously small price we shall have paid for the searing, tearing, choking, spiralling happiness that is ours. It is a happiness, too, that nothing can take from us. It is a telescoped, concentrated instant of pure bliss that will never end. This is happiness eternal, this is the essential happiness of heaven (*Ibid.*, p. 165).

By meticulously assembling the primary spiritual scribes of Eastern Christianity, Clément (1995) eloquently unveils the profound and preconceived encounter with Paradise, employing a rich tapestry of poetic and mystical expressions:

> Having reached interior freedom, where the 'passions' cease, or are transformed into love, and participate in God's pure 'passion of love', we let the light of God transfix us. In this light, whose source is utterly elsewhere, we then see, beyond the stirring of 'thoughts', our heart-spirit as an interior heaven, sapphire in colour. It is an abyss of light or, better, of transparent glory, inwardly azure, as a sign that the world is becoming interior to the spiritual person. To descend into the heart, say the ascetics, is thereafter to climb Sinai, where God revealed himself to Moses (Clément, 1995, p. 173).

We see a coincidence between this quote and the accounts of the illuminated igloo's construction and the æsthetic bliss experienced by Graham and his Siberian friends. As stated by Clément, the blue colour symbolises the interior sky for the spiritual person. In O'Brien's narrative, this particular colour appears when the light bulbs are placed inside the igloo, giving it a luminescence capable of leaving the community of Ozero Baikal stunned to the point of comparing it to a luminous, icy-blue sapphire on fire. Furthermore, according to Chevalier &

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Gheerbrant (1998) on the symbolism of the sapphire:

> [Bishop Marbodius said that] sapphires possess a beauty like that of the heavenly throne; they denote the hearts of the simple, of those moved by a sure hope and of those whose lives shine with their good deeds and virtuousness. […] Christianity took the sapphire as a symbol both of purity and of the enlightening power of the Kingdom of God (*Ibid.*, p. 826).

The authors of the *Dictionary of Symbols* extend these symbolisms to the blue colour, which can be recapitulated by the following syntagmata: 1) *depth*, when we compare blue to other colours; 2) *immateriality*, when we see the metaphorical emptiness and transparency of air, water, crystal and diamond; 3) *purity*, due to the reference to the infinite horizon; and 4) *coldness*, when we come across the classic theories of colour. They also point out that blue, together with white, are traditionally associated with the figure of Saint Mary since they "express a detachment from the things of this world and the flight of the liberated soul towards God, that is to say towards the gold which comes to meet the virginal white as it ascends into the blue of Heaven." (*Ibid.*, p. 108-109).

Thus, the parallel between the igloo – House of Snow – and Paradise – House of Light – is reinforced by the symbolism of the sapphire and its characteristic colour, an approach that reiterates the symbolic correspondence presented by Aglaya Pavlovna. Clément also mentions in his work the spiritual exercise characteristic of Eastern Christianity, which consists of the descent into the heart. Hence, Alexander Graham understands the analogy between terrestrial space and infinity through the lens of the *mysticism of the heart*[7], which reverberates in Aglaya's life as an excellent representative of Russian Christianity in the narrative.

## FINAL REMARKS

Throughout this article, we have sought to explore the cosmic, dreamlike and poetic dimensions of the symbolism of snow, the house and the igloo in the narrative of *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011). Relying on Eliade's studies, we reiterate that symbolic thought is

[7] This is a meditative practice that is very characteristic of Eastern Christians. For further information, see: OLIVEIRA, Victor Hugo Pereira de; BISERRA, Wiliam Alves. Homo Cordis Absconditus: A Mística do Coração nos Relatos de um Peregrino Russo. **Teoliterária: Revista Brasileira de Literaturas e Teologias**, v. 8, p. 89-115, 2018b.

necessarily part of the literary text:

> Symbolic thinking is not the exclusive privilege of the child, of the poet or of the unbalanced mind: it is consubstantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason. The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality – the deepest aspects – which defy any other means of knowledge (Eliade, 1961, p. 12).

Consequently, we think that a writer will always use symbols in their literary art. We have therefore proposed a reading, albeit not a definitive one, of the three aforementioned symbols. The musical conception of the symbol proposed by Corbin also guided our study:

> The symbol announces a plane of consciousness distinct from that of rational evidence; it is the "cipher" of a mystery, the only means of saying something that cannot be apprehended in any other way; a symbol is never "explained" once and for all, but must be deciphered over and over again, just as a musical score is never deciphered once and for all, but calls for ever new execution (Corbin, 1969, p. 14).

In the narrative, the presence of snow plays a crucial role in shaping Alexander Graham's personality and influencing the Siberian community. This icy element not only contributed to the creation of the giant stag fable, but also served as a symbol that permeated the novel's thematic layers. Concurrently, the symbolism associated with the house, particularly the yearning for comfort and nostalgia, threads its way through the storyline.

The novel further intertwines these symbolic elements through the depiction of the igloo. Such snow building seems to signify a seamless integration with the environment, blurring the boundaries between the constructed and the natural. This adaptation to the seasonal nature of the Arctic landscape symbolises resilience in the face of challenges, utilizing the snow-covered surroundings as both a response to and an incorporation of the environment.

Culturally, the igloo embodies the wisdom and knowledge of indigenous cultures, illustrating a sustainable and efficient approach to housing developed over generations. Beyond its practical aspects, the building of an igloo often involves a communal effort, symbolising cooperation and shared responsibility within the community. Such unity is further emphasised by the spontaneous creation of an *a cappella* hymn by the Siberian community, led by Aglaya Pavlovna and Alexander Graham, strengthening the bonds of friendship among the villagers. Consequently, the igloo becomes a multi-faceted symbol in the novel, representing environmental integration, seasonal adaptation, cultural wisdom, and community solidarity, as well as hospitality, reconciliation, communion and thanksgiving.

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