

“THE KINGFISHER MIGHT CATCH FIRE AGAIN, REDUCING EVERYTHING TO ASHES”: ON THE INTERTEXTUAL RESONANCES OF GRECO-BRITISH POETICS IN MICHAEL DAVID O’BRIEN’S “THE FATHER’S TALE”

“O MARTIM-PESCADOR PODE PEGAR FOGO NOVAMENTE, REDUZINDO TUDO A CINZAS”: SOBRE AS RESSONÂNCIAS INTERTEXTUAIS DA POÉTICA GRECO-BRITÂNICA EM “O CONTO DO PAI”, DE MICHAEL DAVID O’BRIEN

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the intertextual elements within Michael David O’Brien’s *The father’s tale* by focusing on its connections to Greek mythology, particularly the myth of Alcyone, and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “As kingfishers catch fire”. Through literary allusions and symbolic imagery, O’Brien’s novel thoroughly engages with existential themes, where intertextuality becomes a crucial element in the protagonist’s journey. By weaving together past literary traditions and contemporary storytelling, the textual-author – the narrator – enriches the narrative by offering readers a multilayered experience that blends literature, memory, and meaning, thus creating an exploration of the human condition.

Keywords: Michael David O’Brien; The Father’s Tale; The Myth of Alcyone; Gerard Manley Hopkins.

RESUMO

Este artigo busca explorar os elementos intertextuais em *The father’s tale*, de Michael David O’Brien, concentrando-se em suas conexões com a mitologia grega, particularmente o mito de Alcíone, e o poema “As kingfishers catch fire”, de Gerard Manley Hopkins. Por meio de alusões literárias e imagens simbólicas, o romance de O’Brien envolve-se plenamente com temas existenciais, em que a intertextualidade se torna um elemento crucial na jornada do protagonista. Ao entrelaçar as tradições literárias do passado e a narrativa contemporânea, o autor textual – o narrador – enriquece a narrativa, oferecendo aos leitores uma experiência de múltiplas camadas que mistura literatura, memória e significado, criando assim uma exploração da condição humana.

Palavras-chave: Michael David O’Brien; The Father’s Tale; Mito de Alcíone; Gerard Manley Hopkins.

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INTRODUCTION²

In contemporary literary studies, the examination of intertextual elements within narratives provides abundant insights into the underlying themes and symbolic structures of a work. Thus, the present study focuses on identifying and analysing two principal intertextual components in Michael David O'Brien's novel *The father's tale* (2011). By leveraging the theoretical frameworks established by seminal scholars such as Bakhtin (1984; 2003), Barthes (1977; 1990), Genette (1997), and Kristeva (1969; 1980), we aim to elucidate the concept of literary intertext as it applies to this narrative.

Our analysis draws upon internal textual evidence to uncover the elaborate symbolic interaction within the novel, particularly highlighting the myth of Alcyone from Greek lore and its representation of the kingfisher bird's origin. Furthermore, we examine the influences of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "As kingfishers catch fire" on the novel's thematic and symbolic structure. In order to enhance our understanding of these intertextual dynamics, we will also incorporate the scholarly perspectives of Graves (2017) and Sobolev (2011). Therefore, through this exploration, we seek to reveal how these intertextual elements by offering a deeper comprehension of the symbolic forces at play and their broader literary significance, contribute to the richness of O'Brien's narrative.

"The confluence of literary palimpsests": brief notes on the phenomenon of intertextuality

When exploring different perspectives on the concept of intertextuality, one can conceptualize the phenomenon as an act of appropriation, alteration, or a predefined structure expressed in a cryptic manner that leads to a form of recapitulation. This idea is connected to Julia Kristeva's interpretation of intertextuality, as influenced by her study of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings. According to her, an explanation of intertextuality implies a theoretical potential as follows: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of

² This article is a revised and expanded extract from a section of the thesis "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). All non-referenced translations have been made by the author of the paper.

intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66).

Besides that, Genette (1997) employs a well-known metaphor to illustrate his approach to exploring the textual interrelationships within a literary work. He likens them to the palimpsests, which were a collection of leather parchments used in ancient times as a writing surface before the advent of paper. The literary critic also notes that these palimpsests were repeatedly reused by the addition of new inscriptions after the existing ones were partially erased. Consequently, he ended up deriving a parallel between the process of creating artistic texts and the ancient practice of writing, erasing, selecting, and rewriting:

That duplicity of the object, in the sphere of textual relations, can be represented by the old analogy of the palimpsest: on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through. It has been aptly said that pastiche and parody “designate literature as a palimpsest” (Genette, 1997, p. 398-399).

Thus, these literary palimpsests demand careful readers who can delight in uncovering the interconnections in a literary work, its precursor texts, and the echoes of these associations in their personal experiences, as per Barthes (1990, p. 10), “this ‘I’ which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite” (Barthes, 1990, p. 10). Consequently, the literary composition, much like the intricate weave of a fabric, appears to guide the reader towards specific realms of interpretation. Such fields, crucial for the comprehension of the meanings, are dynamic and can continually be shifted. Additionally, Barthes (1974, p. 14) also emphasizes that literary interpretation depends on the reader’s subjectivity:

The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks; like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult, according to certain principles, the flight of birds, the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meanings, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations.

Hence, our analysis also begins with the premise that “the narrator will be understood fundamentally as a *textual-author*, a fictional entity who, in the scenario of fiction, has the task of enunciating the discourse, as the protagonist of narrative communication” (Reis & Lopes, 1988, p. 61, emphasis added). Therefore, the textual-author will serve as the agent responsible for the tightly woven unity of the complete written entity that encompasses both the character and the entire literary work: “The Author: the agent of [1] the tensely active unity of the finished whole, [2] the whole of the character and [3] the whole of the work” (Bakhtin, 2003, p. 10). As a result, we assert that this threefold unity is constructed through the diverse textual references employed by the textual-author of the novel under scrutiny in this paper. Hence, our examination will explore the fundamental role played by such agent in harmonizing the voices within the polyphonic narrative of *The father’s tale* (O’Brien, 2011), which enhances the artistic cohesion of the novel, alongside a comprehensive utilization of literary allusions to contextualize the existential situations encountered by Alexander Graham, its main character.

Based on these discussions, we intend to demonstrate how *The father’s tale*, by referring to the various ways other literary texts are incorporated into the narrative, consistently employs intertextuality. For that reason, the textual-author, whether consciously or not, pays homage to novels, poems, literary themes, and characters from other writers.

Finally, we will explore how the constitution of the novel’s main character contributes to the investigation of his intertextual relationships, since Alexander, as well as being an avid reader, is also marked by a “consciousness [that] never gravitates toward itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness[es]” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 32), which can be represented by the other characters or by the voices of the books he has read.

“Deeper into the world of books”: The ornaments of literary life in *The father’s tale*

Following a brief overview of the concepts of *reader*, *intertextuality* and *narrator*, this subsection will explore the relationship between the reader Alexander Graham and the narrative structure of *The Father’s Tale* (O’Brien, 2011), which is rich

with literary palimpsests. In order to appreciate such association, it is crucial to highlight the significance of the textual-author's role – often conflated with that of the literary author – in achieving the cohesion of the literary work. Weisgerber's observations on literary space also underscore the narrator's function in the organization of the elements within the artistic text:

This means that the space suggested by the words of the narrative is determined primarily by the person and situation of the narrator. In the structure of the novel – in any well-arranged structure – materials, parts and aspects – all fit together, and our study, far from being able to isolate itself and ignore that of the “point of view”, will in many cases have to be based on it. The narrative form used [...] determines the way in which space is organised (Weisgerber, 1978, p. 12).

Published in 2011, *The father's tale* explores the expedition of Alexander, a widowed bookseller and father to two boys, as he strives to locate his youngest child, Andrew Graham. On a hermeneutic level, the narrative unfolds by artfully crafting and harmoniously merging diverse micro-narratives. Examining it from this perspective allows one to discern the textual-author's skilled utilization of literary symbols as significant signposts guiding both the characters' odyssey and that of the readers navigating the Romanesque realm. On a different interpretive plane, one can observe the extensive array of literary references within the novel's fabric. This phenomenon is enabled by a pivotal event in Alexander's adolescence, which allowed him the opportunity to cultivate an immense literary knowledge that resonates throughout the text:

He had spent two years of his early adolescence in bed, recovering from the ravages of rheumatic fever. In those days the disease damaged the heart, they said, and the only cure was total inactivity. During convalescence, he had plunged deeper into the world of books, and remained there. Thus, what might have been a transient state – a young man's diffident temperament – became his permanent form (O'Brien, 2011, p. 27).

The aforementioned quote indicates that Alexander has been an avid reader since his boyhood, whose mind was shaped by a blend of literary motifs, some of which will become identifiable later. Such engagement with literature will have a lasting impact on his life, particularly during the train travels across England and Russia. He encountered

such countries for the first time through their literary depictions in the writings of authors such as Lewis, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. The influence of the books he has read and revisited will also reverberate in his moments of contemplation, which are imbued with a coherence reminiscent of the unity sought in literary creations, as Barthes (1977, p. 148) put it:

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

Moreover, Alexander showed a preference for literature over film for his leisure, which he thought as being more enjoyable and sleep-inducing. For instance, when Alex was worried about his struggle to connect with his lost son, he decided to take some books to bed:

Deciding that he was incapable of both, he went to bed, taking with him the Christmas Books of Charles Dickens, the Oxford Illustrated edition, and a dreadfully dense tome that he had recently acquired for the shop, a study of nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary movements, written sixty years before the Bolshevik Revolution by an expatriate Decembrist living in Paris. It was so delightfully soporific that, if Dickens failed, the Russians would surely put him to sleep. And in this, as in so many other matters, Alex was right (O'Brien, 2011, p. 50).

From this excerpt, it can be deduced that Alexander had a habit of perusing the same book on numerous occasions. This recurrent reading, whether it was the second, third, or fourth time, not only aided in comparing his impressions but also played a role in nurturing and strengthening literary imagination, as proposed by Bachelard (2002, p. 201-202):

We might note in passing that material images are often images to be reread. Only rereading allows the power of an image to reverberate completely, filling one again with interest; this affective interest becomes literary interest. There is no literature but upon rereading. [...] To be picturesque, an image must be unexpected. Material

images, on the contrary, must return us to regions of unconscious life where the deep roots of the imagination and the will intertwine.

Besides, it can be asserted that, in the lives of Alexander and Carolina, his former wife, the sway of literary imagination played a pivotal role in their selection of a moniker for the bookstore they had set up. This establishment would subsequently emerge as both the primary means of sustenance for their growing family and as playground, as their offspring, driven by an incipient literary reverie, ventured into the labyrinthine passages created by book-laden shelves:

“What’ll we call it, then?”

“How about Halcyon Bookshop?”

“Unimaginative.”

“True. Any suggestions?”

They held hands and pondered it for a few minutes.

“The Kingfisher!” Alex exclaimed, sitting upright. “Halcyon is the old name for the Greek myth of the kingfisher.”

“Now that sounds like a winner”, Carol said, nodding. “Yup, I think that’s it.”

They shook hands on it, then kissed and got back to work.

Jacob was born, and before long he was toddling across the parlor, knocking over stacks of books, climbing shelves, bothering the book browsers with a hundred unanswerable questions.

[...].

In the blink of an eye Andrew was there too, chewing the spines of dictionaries, playing with stationery, scattering correspondence across the floor (O’Brien, 2011, p. 57-58, emphasis added)).

The Kingfisher Bookshop, in addition, would ultimately serve as a sanctuary for Alexander, who was coming to endure the successive family tragedies that loomed ahead: the ailment afflicting Carol, the passing of his mother, and the financial burdens compelling him to part with certain family heirlooms and his father’s legal books. Nevertheless, he made sure to sell for a good price most of the stuff he inherited, “so the family and the bookshop survived” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 58). Henceforth, Alex felt a profound connection to Kingfisher, for navigating through its intricate bookshelves provided solace similar to his walks within the confines of the town of Halcyon:

Other men took to drink or verse, or worse, but Alex would lock the door of his shop and set forth to wander at random in the dark hills that were as familiar to him as his labyrinthine bookshelves and the hyperion heights of the town (O’Brien, 2011, p. 25).

If the Kingfisher Bookshop holds deep meaning for Alexander and its nickname has a mythopoetic origin, it is crucial for this paper to explore the literary references surrounding this term. Thus, such references are not superfluous. This is because the term *Kingfisher* is also entrenched in the name of the city – through its Greek-anglicised rendition, Halcyon, which refers to the mythological origin of the bird where he spent his entire life. This allusion to ancient Greek literature relates to the kingfisher figure, a recurring symbol in *The father's tale*, especially in the hero's daydreams. Furthermore, it appears in the title of the narrative's final chapter, *As kingfishers catch fire*, thus tying up the entire story through a poetic connection with the literary imagery of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a British poet whose literary imagery will be discussed later. The *kingfisher bird*, therefore, serves as a potent symbol that represents not only Graham's city and bookshop-home but also the tranquil moments that offer consolation for an introspective person: "As he sat shivering on the riverbank, a streak of blue shot past him, a kingfisher diving for a fish" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 373).

In the episode narrated in Chapter 15, from which the above quote was taken, Alex has encountered distress while situated in Russia. As he journeyed to Moscow by train, the scenery, which bore a faint resemblance to the ones he had frequently observed in Canada, prompted an almost reflexive recollection of his teenage bout with rheumatic fever. The reminiscence, specifically of the kingfisher, then served as a poignant link to his yearning for home and for Andrew. Henceforth, in the following sections, guided by Kristeva's ideas regarding the clarity of other discourses within the literary text, we shall explore the intertextual resonances emanating from the Hellenic mythological roots of the kingfisher and Hopkins' poetic verses dedicated to the blue bird within O'Brien's novel:

The poetic signified refers to other discursive signifiers, so that in the poetic utterance several other discourses are legible. A multiple textual space is thus created around the poetic signified, whose elements can be applied to the concrete poetic text. We will call this intertextual space. Taken in intertextuality, the poetic statement is a subset of a larger whole, which is the space of the texts applied in our ensemble (Kristeva, 1969, p. 255).

Thus, in accordance with Kristeva, these intertexts possess distinct poetic significances that indicate connections to elements found in diverse discursive contexts, which engender intersecting literary realms within the novel.

“A kingfisher flashing turquoise feathers and a fiery belly”: The Greek-British mythopoetic undertones

Graves (2017) recounted the story of Alcyone from the Greek myth of *Alcyone and Ceix* in the following way: Aeolus, the god of the winds, was her father, and her mother was Egiale, the Heliad. According to the sources consulted by Graves, Alcyone married Ceix of Traquine, the son of Eóforo, a deity associated with the dawn. The couple enjoyed a perfect and loving life, as they playfully called each other Hera and Zeus. This jest angered the gods, leading them to unleash a storm while Ceix was on his way to consult the oracle. After his drowning, Ceix appeared as a ghost to his grieving wife. In her resentment and compulsion, Alcyone resided in the city of Trachine. Out of deep despair, she chose to throw herself into the sea. Graves emphasized that the benevolent deities transformed both of them into kingfishers. In the ongoing narrative of the Greek myth, Alcyone, now a female kingfisher, annually carries her mate's remains for burial during winter, grieving almost constantly. She then builds a small nest using thorns from a needlefish, casting it into the sea, where she lays and nurtures her eggs until the offspring emerge. This entire sequence unfolds over fourteen days – the seven days leading up to the Winter Solstice and the subsequent seven days – commonly known as the *Halcyon Days*. Meanwhile, Aeolus regulates the winds to ensure they do not disturb the waters.

In *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011), we come to understand, through one of the deceased Yevgeny Pimonenko's diary entries, that Ilya, his firstborn, was affectionately referred to as *zimorodochka* by his widow, Irina. This Russian term, as used by the author-narrator in the novel, can be translated as *the little one born in winter*. Within the literary narrative, it holds significance that the myth of Alcyone interlaces with Alexander's hometown – Halcyon –, the name of his bookstore – Kingfisher –, and the endearing nickname bestowed upon Ilya by his mother as recounted in Pimonenko's posthumous diary:

Snow is falling heavily outside. Our love grows and grows. Ilya is born! A beautiful child. Irina sings to him constantly and calls him *zimorodochka*—the little winter-born. Baptized by Father F on the eve of my hearing before the hospital committee.

[...].

Zimorodok was also the Russian word for kingfisher. He now realized that the word was a remote derivative of the Greek myth of Halcyon.

Born at sea – born in winter – born in adversity (O’Brien, 2011, p. 649-656).

In the above passage, Pimonenko incorporates a timeless allusion to the Halcyon Days by seamlessly merging maritime and wintry elements under the theme of adversity. Irina’s fond reference to Ilya also succinctly encapsulates the *symbolism of snow*³ and the Alcyone myth. Therefore, recognizing the kingfisher as a versatile symbol throughout the narrative is crucial, as it threads consistently through its pages.

Additionally, the entry on the *kingfisher* in *The Dictionary of symbols* (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1993) reveals that this bird, in traditional Chinese civilization, is linked with attributes such as *fidelity, marital bliss, beauty, nobility, and delicacy*, which can be felt in the aforementioned quote. This is also evident in Chapter 33 of O’Brien’s novel, where Irina, the Russian widow, underscored the link between a particular avian species and Alexander’s proclivity for contemplation. This connection was highlighted while they were perusing paintings of birds created by her grandfather:

“What kind of bird is this, Irina?”

“Not a bird that I know of. Do you suspect it’s a kingfisher?”

“I did wonder.”

“That would be consistent with your symbolic tendencies. No, it’s merely a beautiful bird. I’ve often wondered why it wasn’t a specific species. I think my grandfather wished to make an embodiment of all winged creatures that seek freedom in the skies. Tell me what you see in it. Does it escape the flames?”

“That is what I hope” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 822-823).

Furthermore, within the pages of Chapter 16 in *The father’s tale*, which details Alexander’s stroll through a Moscow metro station, the textual-author skilfully distinguished the protagonist, who, amidst the shapeless and anonymous crowd, assumed the likeness of a kingfisher:

As the kingfisher plummeted like a bolt, the sun shimmered on his back, and the holy cobalt, the sacred silver of his feathers, caught fire. He plunged beneath the surface of the waters—where all currents crossed, ebbed, flowed, the swimmers trailing ribbons of affirmation and denial like the seaweed that clings to those who drown in deep waters. And when he could see again with his eyes, it seemed to him that he swam among them not as a man apart, but as one of them (O’Brien, 2011, p. 402).

³ Cf. Amorim & De Paula, 2024.

Should the mythological genesis of the symbolic emblem of the kingfisher find echoes within the storyline of *The father's tale*, a similar connection can be drawn to the poem alluded to in the final chapter of the novel. Additionally, at a particular juncture in the plot, Alexander and Father Toby recited the opening verses of a sonnet, commencing in the following manner: “‘Kingfishers catch fire!’ he shouted at Alex. ‘As dragonflies draw flame!’ Alex replied” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 99). This constitutes an unconcealed allusion to the sonnet “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” penned by the British poet and Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889):

‘*As kingfishers catch fire*’
 As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves – goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*.
 I say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –
 Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men’s faces (Hopkins, 1996, p. 115).

Before investigating this sonnet, it is imperative to scrutinize the philosophical presumptions that moulded Hopkins’ literary oeuvre, as they also reverberate in the narrative under examination in this study. Sobolev (2011) affirms that three concepts, namely *inscape*, *instress*, and *to selve*, resonate throughout his poetic body of work. Nevertheless, upon exploring the definitions put forth by Hopkins for his terminology, Sobolev acknowledges that, notwithstanding their apparent contradiction, it is feasible to propose an interpretation that is more exact and truer to the contemplations of the British poet:

“Inscape” means “organized form” in the full generality of this term; and its exact, narrower meaning is specified only by its actual application. At the same time, not all possible “organized forms” can be designated as “inscapes”: this term refers only to the embodied forms, the forms that are actually “imprinted” on matter.

Correspondingly, never once does Hopkins use this term to designate an ideal “metaphysical” or “logical” form, which is revealed only to the mind (Sobolev, 2011, p. 35).

By proposing the syntagma *ordered form* as the meaning of the term *inscape*, the researcher emphasised that this interpretation can only be given to forms that exist in the materiality of things. It is not, therefore, an interpretation that appeals to the immaterial aspect of things. Likewise, Sobolev reminisced about a correspondence wherein Hopkins elucidates the concept of *inscape* by drawing analogies from the realms of music and painting. According to Sobolev, these parallels strongly correlate with the poet’s original contemplations when he introduced the notion of *inscape*:

Hopkins’s own definitions of “*inscape*” also conform to the definition under consideration. In the above quoted letter to Bridges, he writes: “But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling ‘*inscape*’ is what I above all aim at in poetry” (LI 66). In light of the analogies he proposes (“melody in music” and “design in painting”), one can arguably conclude that in his explanation of the meaning of ‘*inscape*’ Hopkins consciously uses two terms whose semantic fields coincide only partially (“design,” “pattern”) in order to foreground two distinct, though related, components of this meaning: the unique form and the structural principle of repetition (Sobolev, 2011, p. 37-38).

Hence, the scholar suggested the inclusion of an ordered structure as the definition of *inscape*, which shows how Hopkins’ analogies, while employing the expansive interpretations of the terms *design* and *pattern*, imply the concept of a distinctive form coupled with regularity as a fundamental factor. Consequently, Sobolev proposed a signification that denotes the lack of inherent segmentation in the term *inscape*:

This word is difficult not because it is vague, but simply because its meaning is irreducible to one narrow application. To put it another way, the range of the application of “*inscape*” does not allow for narrowing down its general definition. *Inscape* is the embodied organized form (Sobolev, 2011, p. 38).

Regarding the term *instress*, it cannot be dissociated from the notion of *inscape*. Sobolev then contended that Peters’ interpretation aligns most faithfully with Hopkins’

perspective, and he suggested a more thorough comprehension of the terminology employed by the British poet:

Peters suggests that “instress” refers to two essentially distinct notions, “related to each other as cause and effect”; as a cause, “instress” stands for “the inherent energy” of being, which is responsible for the “actuality of the object”; as an effect, it designates the impression of a given object upon man, when this impression is taken in its singularity and concreteness (Sobolev, 2011, p. 40).

Hence, the researcher provided more precise definitions for two terms pivotal to the appreciation of Hopkins’ poetry. While inscape is linked to the realm of materiality, instress allows one to perceive beyond surfaces, which enables the observer to explore the more refined layers of reality. Furthermore, another distinctive aspect of Hopkins’ poetic language revolves around his unique usage of the noun *self*. Additionally, Sobolev noted that the Jesuit poet introduced an innovation by transforming the noun *self* into a verb, giving rise to the word *to selve*. This term denotes the thing in action, which essentially represents the active expression of its essence. The scholar supported this assertion by having proposed an analysis of the sonnet “As kingfishers catch fire”, which illustrates how the material world in Hopkins’ poetic imagery is anything but silent. In the verses, the reader discerns the poet’s assertion that every entity has been fashioned with the intent of carrying out a specific action, allowing it to articulate its intrinsic nature and emanate its core existence. Whether it be the flames of the kingfisher, the radiance of the dragonfly, or the tolling of the parish bells, each entity fulfils its designated purpose and radiates its essential nature.

Hence, we understand that the notions of: 1) *inscape*, which encompasses the integration of orderly structure; 2) *instress*, that embodies the presence and impact of a singular dynamism within a being; 3) and *to selve*, which refers to the radiating of the subject or object’s ontological vitality; serve as valuable hermeneutic tools which unlock the realm of Hopkins’ poetry. Therefore, the next step is to explore the implications of the intertextuality between the poem “As kingfishers catch fire and the novel *The father’s tale*.

During a visit to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Alexander experienced a moment of solace from his distress as he gazed upon a watercolour by John Ruskin that depicted a kingfisher. The author-narrator underscores the aesthetic appreciation –

inscape – that the character felt when he recognized the beauty – instress and nobility of the bird depicted in the painting – selving – that lent its name to his city, his bookshop, and, as he later discovered, to Irina’s firstborn:

After that, they happened upon a small watercolor by John Ruskin. It was a kingfisher flashing turquoise feathers and a fiery belly, its dignified tilt of head and regal beak expressing its pride in being itself. It intrigued Alex so much that he felt a rivulet of awe trickle into the stream of his worries. For a full minute all thought of his missing son vanished (O’Brien, 2011, p. 238).

This *rivulet of awe* thus established a notable connection between two specific occurrences in the novel. The initial one relates to the aftermath of Alexander’s courageous act, depicted in the first chapter, where he risked his life to rescue Jamie and Hannah from drowning in the cold river. This incident leads to his visit to their family, where he meets Theresa, their mother, and Edward Philips, the children’s maternal grandfather. Following a somewhat awkward introduction, Alexander engages in conversation with the old man. Theresa had informed her father that the widower owned Kingfisher Books, which piqued the old man’s interest. During their discussion, the two men explore the kingfisher as a species, presenting it as a purely informative topic. Over time, Edward transitions to the bird’s emblem, considering it both a simple decoration and a symbol. This exchange reaches its climax with an explicit mention of the Greek myth of the kingfisher:

“Mr. Graham is the owner of Kingfisher Books”, she called to him.
“He’s a friend of ours, Papa.”

The old man stood, and children fell laughing from him like monkeys dropping from a tree.

“Eh? What’s that? Did you say kingfisher?”

He came over to the couch and towered above Alex.

“Do you realize what the kingfisher is?” he growled in a low voice.

“I think I do”, Alex answered uncertainly.

“Do you know that the kingfisher is a nonpasserine bird, a member of the family Alcedinidae, bright feathered, usually iridescent blue with the assistance of sunlight, crested, with a short tail and a long, stout, sharp bill?”

Alex nodded in affirmation.

“Ha! That is data! But do you really understand its presence in the world? Or is it merely decoration—the bird on the five-dollar bill?”

Alex politely refrained from replying.

“Do you know what the halcyon is?” Mr. Phillips went on. “It is not the usual definition, is it? It is not golden, prosperous, or pacific, is

it?” The old man’s eyes flashed about the room. “Do you see us, Graham? Do you really see us?”

[...].

“These, Graham, are my offspring and the labor of my love, nurtured in adversity! How can I tell them that the light is dying and soon may be lost? How should I impart the knowledge of the halcyon, lest it cease to pass from generation unto generation?”

Alex grasped at a thread:

“I have always been intrigued by the Greek myth of the halcyon, sir.”

“Have you? That is rare in these times. Few now realize that it is the bird above all other birds, held in ancient legend to nest at sea about the time of the winter solstice. It calms the waves for the sake of its chicks, incubating within their shells.”

“Yes”, said Alex. “It is the father of the fathers of all kingfishers, though it is greater than those we now call kingfisher.”

The old man nodded triumphantly, then returned to the dining room table, where he sat down with a look of grave satisfaction.

Alex glanced at his watch with a stab of anxiety (O’Brien, 2011, p. 97-98).

The initial strong allusion to the Alcyone myth illustrates how the author-narrator consistently pays intertextual tribute to the ancient Greek narrative throughout the novel, which follows Genette’s framework. Moreover, in the subsequent event, which occurs towards the narrative’s conclusion, Alexander, having returned to the city of Halcyon, engages in a conversation with Mr. Edward Phillips once more:

“Now, tell me of the kingfisher. Did you see him?”

“I saw him, the king of birds revered in ancient myth, bright feathered, as blue as royal robes. I saw him meditating by the rivers and the sea. In other places he was hunted through the reaches of the world, and in the darkest places his song was silenced. Yet ever does he spring up again, calming the sea, coming to rest in the heart of the soul, waiting for his day.”

“Some say he is no more.”

“Never will he cease to speak the word he was sent to be.”

Tears came to the eyes of Mr. Phillips. “Then it is true, what I always hoped for?”

“What did you hope for?”

“That the universe sings a song. And the halcyon sings with it. His is a song no other can sing.”

“If this is so, it is because he is small.”

“Yes, he is small. And very brave. Tell me, Graham, does he still catch fire?”

“He does, Mr. Phillips. As dragonflies draw flame.”

“Christ dwells with him?”

“Christ dwells with him, crucified and resurrected.”

“And does he still play in ten thousand places?”

“Yes, he still plays in the places where he dwells, and there he sings to the Father of us all” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 1070-1071).

During their discourse, they have investigated the kingfisher and explored the poetics of G. M. Hopkins. Consequently, it showcases the author-narrator's resourcefulness in amplifying the resonance of the kingfisher's song throughout the Romanesque expanse of *The father's tale*. Regarding it being a powerful image, it is of utmost importance to conclude this section with some considerations about the nature of the symbol and how it applies to the kingfisher and its presence along the novel. Durand (1993), drawing from Ricoeur's thoughts, has delineated the visible aspect of the symbol, termed *the signifier*, through three distinct characteristics: 1) It is *cosmic* because its shape is derived from the wealth of tangible elements that exists in our observable world; 2) It is *oneiric* on behalf of it being rooted in the memories and experiences that manifest in our dreams and encapsulate the palpable essence of our inner narrative; 3) It is *poetic*, inasmuch as it echoes through language, particularly in its most salient manifestations, thus rendering it most concrete and tangible. Therefore, throughout the narrative, the kingfisher emerges as a symbol imbued with multifaceted significance. Its avian essence roots it firmly in reality, which lends it with cosmic resonance. Yet, the bird also embodies elements of the ethereal that appears in the reveries and daydreams of Alexander, Yevgeny, and Irina. Lastly, the kingfisher's mythological origins in Ancient Greek lore and its tribute in a British poem infuse it with a poetic aura with enriched imagery.

Final Remarks

With this study, we endeavoured to reveal and explore the main intertextual references in Michael David O'Brien's *The father's tale*. Through the lens of intertextuality, we explored how O'Brien's narrative engages deeply with literary traditions, particularly through its allusions to Greek mythology and the poetry of Hopkins. Our analysis pointed out that these intertextual elements are not mere decorative features but are integral to the novel's thematic and symbolic structure. The myth of Alcyone and the symbolic kingfisher served as potent metaphors that encapsulated the protagonist Alexander Graham's journey and the broader existential themes of the novel. Moreover, our study also underscored how the protagonist's literary imagination, shaped by a lifetime of reading, influenced his perceptions and

actions, thus creating a narrative space where past, present and several levels of fiction are in constant dialogue.

Particularly significant is the influence of Hopkins' poem "As kingfishers catch fire" on Alexander's spiritual development. The recurring motifs of the kingfisher and the theme of catching fire thus symbolized Alexander's quest for spiritual awakening and his understanding of the divine in the ordinary. The textual-author's use of Hopkins' concept of *selving*, where each being fulfils its unique role within a divine order, resonates deeply with Alexander's journey as well, and it also reflects his transformation as he recognized his life as part of a larger, divinely orchestrated purpose.

To sum up, we conclude that *The father's tale* stands as a testament to the power of literature to shape and reflect human experience. Without a doubt, the intertextual references not only enrich the narrative but also invite readers to engage in a deeper level of interpretation, where the echoes of other texts reverberate within the novel's fabric. Therefore, by illuminating these connections, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of O'Brien's work and its place within contemporary literary discourse.

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