São Paulo, v. 24, n. 3, set./dez. 2024
Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Letras
DOI 10.5935/cadernosletras.v24n3p16-35
ISSN 1809-4163 (*on-line*)

"THEY WERE THE SOURCE AND THE FULFILLMENT, AND MAN WAS THE FRUIT OF THEIR LOVE": SOME PERSONALIST CONSIDERATIONS ON MICHAEL DAVID O'BRIEN'S *THE FATHER'S TALE*

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Recebido em: 1º ago. 2024. **Aprovado em:** 30 out. 2024.

How to quote this article: AMORIM, V. H de O. C. P. de; AMARAL, V. R. "They were the source and the fulfilment, and man was the fruit of their love": some personalist considerations on Michael David O'Brien's *The Father's Tale*. *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Letras*, v. 24, n. 3, p. 16-35, Sep./Dec. 2024. DOI: 10.5935/cadernosletras.v24n3p16-35

Abstract

This paper applies the philosophies of Stein (2003), Berdyaev (1944) and Solovyov (1948) to the analysis of O'Brien's novel *The Father's Tale* (2011),

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whose main intertext is the "Parable of the Prodigal Son". Using Stein's ideas, we investigate the innate dignity of the human person within the narrative. In turn, Berdyaev's perspective was seen as shedding light on the character's moral journey. Solovyov, finally, offers an understanding of unconditional love as a transformative force. By emphasizing the contemporary relevance of the authors' ideas in understanding dignity, human freedom and the divine aspect of human love, this study therefore contributes to the dialogue between literature and philosophy.

Keywords

Michael David O'Brien. Personalism. Theoliterary criticism.

INTRODUCTION[1]

Michael David O'Brien, a contemporary Canadian author, writes novels that often incorporate Christian themes. By exploring the relationship between father and son, forgiveness and redemption, in *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011) his narrator retells one of Christ's *parables of mercy* – which we understand to contain within itself a germ of what today is understood as *philosophical personalism* (Abbagnano, 2007, p. 759) – in a modern context. Not only does his narrative discuss theological and philosophical issues, but it also dialogues directly with the existential and spiritual concerns of contemporary readers.

Incorporating in an intertextual way[2] the biblical narrative[3] of the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" into its main narrative line, the novel tells the story of Alexander Graham, a widower and bookshop owner in rural Canada. As he embarks on a journey through Europe and Asia to find his youngest son, Andrew Graham, Alex finds out that Andrew has been drawn by the cult-like spiritual group named *New Advent Church of the Divine Emanation*. This maze-like journey takes Alex on an adventure through Eurasia as he pursues

1 The present study is derived from the personalist reflections present in both Amorim (2023), which is a research dedicated to O'Brien's *The Father's Tale*, and Amaral (2024), which is a work that focussed on Edith Stein's contributions to Western philosophy. Please note that all non-referenced English translations were made by the authors of this paper. Finally, any errors and inconsistencies herein are our sole responsibility.

2 We assume that "the [literary] text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes, 1997, p. 146).

3 Based on the writings of Alter & Kermode (1987) and Frye (2004), we also reaffirm the literary nature of the aforementioned parable.

the scant footsteps left behind by the mysterious organisation. Since the narrator expresses some of the philosophical ideas of personalism (Lamb, 2021, p. 459) in literary form, as well as the reference in *The Father's Tale* that tells us: "Theology is a typically Western discipline. Religious philosophy is typically Russian" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 646), we feel justified in approaching aspects of this novel in the light of philosophy of religion studies.

By considering the contributions of thinkers such as Solovyov (1948), Berdyaev (1944) and Stein (2003; 2018), who converge in their exploration of the themes of the dignity of the human person, creative freedom and divine and human love, we have hermeneutical keys that offer a possibility of exploring the presence of philosophical personalism in O'Brien's novel. Whilst coming from different traditions and contexts, Solovyov, Berdyaev and Stein share complementary philosophical concerns which, when integrated, can provide a triple lens for interpreting this literary work. By uniting the perspectives of Solovyov, Berdyaev and Stein, we aim to investigate how O'Brien's *The Father's Tale* can be interpreted not only as a narrative of redemption and paternal love, but also as a philosophical exploration of the human condition and the search for meaning in a complex and often contradictory world. We will therefore analyse it in three main sections, each focusing on the application of one of the philosophers' concepts to O'Brien's work. In the conclusion, we will synthesise the main intersections between the authors' ideas and discuss the implications of this analysis for future studies and contemporary applications.

REGARDING THE RESONANCES OF THE "PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON" IN THE NARRATIVE OF *THE FATHER'S TALE*

Alexander's contemplation of Rembrandt's painting "Return of the Prodigal Son" in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg reveals unequivocally that the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" is the main intertext in the novel. Furthermore, his scrutiny of the painting's details also reflects how he was feeling at the time:

> At first glance, the painting seemed to be immense, because he was standing only a few feet from it, and he was forced to crane his neck as he looked up from *the battered feet of the son*, through the *tender* hands that embraced him, to *the face of the father* (O'Brien, 2011, p. 350, emphasis added).

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ISSN 1809-4163 (*on-line*)

In the following extract, we can also see how the author-narrator expresses Alexander's impressions, both from contemplating the painting and the parable it represents. Both the reference to the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" as the central intertext of *The Father's Tale* – since its main elements permeate O'Brien's novel – and the circumstance in which Alex found himself, are highlighted by the terms below:

> Red, umber, and sepia bathed the image in *warmth*. The son knelt before the father with his head *on the old man's chest*, as if seeking *refuge in the folds of his garments*. The father bent over him, both hands on his son's back, the fingers splayed slightly, palm to the flesh that had come from him, *that had fled* from him, and that was now *returning* to him. The hands *protected and comforted*. The *tilt* of the aged head and the *half-lidded* eyes conveyed *infinite compassion*, a *wisdom* that was in no way *naïve* about the *sins* of the son but that submerged all wrong in *mercy*. The *dignity* of the father embraced the *degraded* son in a communion that would restore him to his *lost* dignity. To the right, robed in a different kind of dignity – that of the righteous, the good, the responsible – was the elder brother, who regarded the scene dubiously, and with resentment. His upright body was unbending, his hands clasped tightly around the staff of his authority. Alex could hear the words of protest muttered by the elder son: 'This *son* of yours…'. And the words of the father's answer: 'This *brother* of yours…' *Was lost and is found* (O'Brien, 2011, p. 350, emphasis added).

Certainly, this experience evoked many memories within him, since, as a good Catholic Christian, Alexander tried to keep the flame of his faith in Christ alive by both prayerfully reading the Sacred Scriptures and participating in liturgical celebrations. The text of the parable contains an apparently simple narrative, but one that allows the reader to analogically – and to varying degrees – identify with the characters. Below is the full quote from the parable:

> The lost son (the 'prodigal') and the dutiful son
> 15:11 He also said, 'A man had two sons.
> 15:12 The younger said to his father, 'Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me'. So the father divided the property between them.
> 15:13 A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.
> 15:14 'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch,
> 15:15 so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs.

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15:16 And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything.
15:17 Then he came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger!
15:18 I will leave is this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
15:19 I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.'
15:20 So he left the place and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly.
15:21 Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.'
15:22 But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
15:23 Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration,
15:24 because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.
15:25 Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing.
15:26 Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about.
15:27 'Your brother has come' replied the servant 'and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound.'
15:28 He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him;
15:29 but he answered his father, 'Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends.
15:30 But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.'
15:31 The father said, 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.
15:32 But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.' (Lk 15:11-32).

Pérez Urbel, a Benedictine monk, wrote several comments on the Parables of Mercy in his masterpiece Life of Christ (2000). When referring to the "Parable of the Prodigal Son", he emphasises that this is the most consoling narrative spoken by Jesus Christ because it reveals the deepest essence of God's heart. According to him, this story, although brief, has an extraordinary power to move people:

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> On the next page, the most consoling of the Gospel, Luke gives us the parable of the prodigal son, which brings out the essential feature of God's concern for sinners: love. And he reveals it and shows it in such a marvellous way that it is difficult to find in any literature such a prodigy of inspiration and feeling. 'This narrative,' says Ricciotti, 'constitutes, in the moral field, the greatest argument of hope for every child of man and, in the literary field, it will always be the greatest argument of despair for every admirer of the human word. No writer in the world has ever managed to achieve such power of emotion in a narrative so brief, so true, so naked of any literary artifice. It's extremely simple and its design is only linear, and yet the effect is greater than that of other descriptions rightly celebrated for the wisdom of their construction and the clarity of their language' (Urbel, 2000, p. 363).

By portraying the figure of the father, the parable seems to offer a literary illustration of God's love, which respects human freedom. Valentin Tomberg, in analysing this parable, also points out that it symbolises both human history and the interaction between divine love and human freedom:

> Only the worshippers of God's love [...] understand that the story of the prodigal son is a real drama of real love and real freedom, and that the father's joy and feast were true, just as the father's suffering and that of the son before their reunion were true. They also realise that the story of the prodigal son is the story of the whole human race and that the story of the human race is a real drama of real divine love and real human freedom (Tomberg, 1989, p. 191).

We therefore have a brief introduction that will enable us to read O'Brien's novel in greater depth. The following three sections will deal, respectively, with the contributions of: 1) Edith Stein's phenomenological personalism; 2) creative freedom in Nicolas Berdyaev's personalism; and 3) the divine spark in human love present in Vladimir Solovyov's personalism.

EDITH STEIN'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSONALISM

Edith Stein (1891-1942) was a Jewish philosopher born in Wroclaw (in the Old Kingdom of Prussia, a German kingdom at the time). A pupil and assistant of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and a scholar of St. Thomas Aquinas, she made original contributions to phenomenology and scholasticism. In

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fact, Stein sought to articulate these two currents in her main works. According to Rus (2015), the central question raised in Stein's work as a whole is: "What is the human being?". The work "The Structure of the Human Person" (Stein, 2003) especially offers us a panoramic view of what we can call *Steinian personalism*. In it, Stein employs the phenomenological method to achieve a description of the human essence in all its three main dimensions: body, soul and spirit. This analysis will help us to shed light on the vision of the person that is implicitly present in the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" (Lk 15:11-32) and that is found in the philosophical and theological foundations of *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011).

The starting point for Stein's notion of the person is the idea taken from St. Thomas Aquinas that the human being is a recapitulation or synthesis of the cosmos: "to be a man means to be simultaneously a thing, a plant, an animal and a spirit, but all in a unitary way" (Stein, 2003, p. 603). Thus, considering that there is a hierarchy in the cosmos, Stein affirms that the human being is a marvellous synthesis between all its levels, which obey a "law of continuity", that is, a rule according to which the higher level almost always encompasses the lower one. For this reason, Stein traces an investigative itinerary from simple corporeality to the heights of spirituality.

All the levels have fundamental aspects for the constitution of the human person, and all of them deserve a detailed phenomenological analysis on Stein's part. She also explores human corporeality and its relationship with the plant and animal kingdoms. In her description, the human body is an ordered whole, where the parts have specific functions, thus differentiating it from a simple agglomeration of matter. In the plant kingdom, Stein introduces the concept of entelechy, which is an inner form that organises matter with a final purpose that is also present in humans. Plants, such as flowers, are seen as examples of the maximum development of this configuring force. In the animal kingdom, the sensitive soul allows perception and response to stimuli and differs from plants in its capacity for movement and sensitivity, but without rationality.

Compared to animals, human development results in unique individuals, and the human soul has a spiritual dimension that transcends corporeality. And so we come to the specificity of the human being. What sets them apart from the lower "kingdoms of being" is their spirit. This is why, in the parable of the prodigal son, the figure of the "pig" – to whose way of life the prodigal son is relegated – represents a break in the ontological hierarchy between the

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kingdoms of being, because on leaving his father's house, the prodigal son is placed in a situation inferior to that of the pigs. In fact, the parable indicates that the very dignity of the human being, through the spiritual gift of his freedom, can be jeopardised.

In order to understand human dignity, Stein emphasises the importance of the concept of spirit as an immaterial dimension without spatial limitations that encompasses intellect, will and mind, which allows human beings to transcend the biological existence of plants and the instinctive life of animals. The human spirit provides a rich inner life that is guided by intelligence and values, and the human being is seen as a unity of body, soul and spirit that occupies an intermediate position between the material and the spiritual. Stein also underscores the interdependence between body and soul, where the body reflects the inner life of the soul, and the soul, by acting as a mediation between body and spirit, enables the integration of sensibility and spirituality and thus characterises the human spirit as a "materialised spirit". According to Stein, the interdependence between body and soul is clear in the way that soul and body aspects influence each other, as in the example of the heart racing with strong emotion. Because the body reflects the inner life of the soul, it is not just its shell or prison. Unlike angels, who are pure spirits, humans have a soul that combines spiritual, soul and bodily elements to act as a mediation between body and spirit, thereby making the human spirit a "materialised spirit". Inspired by St Teresa of Avila, Stein compares the soul to an 'inner castle' with various dwellings, where the "self" can move freely. There is a deep place inside this castle, known as the "soul of the soul", where the person can fully know themselves, make decisions and meet God:

> What my duty is, my conscience tells me. Whether I fulfil it or not is a matter of my freedom. In every man there is an enclosure free from any connection to the earth, which does not come from other men and is not determined by them. In it, man stands alone before God. This is the innermost part of the soul, the individual and free self in the absolute sense, the personal self. What you have received from the origins from which it comes is placed in your hands so that you can mould it and with your own performance make it fruitful (Stein, 2003, p. 740).

From a movement of recollection towards his centre, that is, the "soul of his soul", that the prodigal son was able to decide to return home. The parable

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portrays this movement of interiorisation with the expression Εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν (Lk 15:17), which literally means *having gone to (or arrived) within oneself*, which we can translate, in a more common way, *as coming to one's senses*. In this way, if we were to present an outline of what Stein develops as an answer to the question "What is the human being?" and which serves as the foundation for the vision of the person underlying *The Father's Tale* and the "Parable of the Prodigal Son", we would venture to point out the following: the human being is a free, spiritual and singular person. Thus, within the narrative of *The Father's Tale*, it is notable how Alexander Graham, at a certain point, begins to describe and compare some of the characteristics of his children:

> Of the two sons, Jacob was the one more like Alex, though only proximately so. His unadventurous spirit resembled that of his father, but there the similarity ended. He loved to talk, and his conversation was always about structures, systems, the significance of certain collations of data, and the codifying of objects and people. As a boy he had liked to build things in the basement: edifices of crates and cast-off lumber, engines made from nuts and bolts and old copper pipes, and structures from his grandfather's extensive collection of Meccano sets. He was inventive where Andrew was creative. He collected stamps and coins, while Andrew collected abandoned bird nests and odd-shaped stones. Jacob liked to draw buildings and machines with drafting pen and ruler; Andrew loved to draw arabesques of wind and landscape, the movement of birds, and the idiosyncrasies of people's faces, using charcoal and pastel sticks that snapped in his fingers. Jacob searched out intricate ideas and dependable principles; Andrew was lured by feeling and surprise. Despite these differences, both boys had been gifted with kind and affectionate natures, and this combined with their physical appearance made them popular with adults and sought after by friends. If Andrew was handsome, Jacob was more so. He was brown eyed and olive skinned (Carol's contribution), shorter than his younger brother but more prone to develop muscle. On the high school playing fields, Jacob had been a studied athlete, Andrew a flamboyant one, and both were successful at it. Girls fell in love with them instantly, saved from disaster only by the Graham tradition of respect and manners – and, Alex made sure, the Catholic tradition of manly virtue (O'Brien, 2011, p. 113-114).

The character's appreciation of the uniqueness of his two children seems to be implicit: different from each other, unrepeatable and free. Regarding the question of uniqueness, Stein states that each human being has their own peculiar substantial form, created directly by God, and it is their soul that individuates them, not matter, as St. Thomas Aquinas said. Therefore, it is the soul that

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makes each person unique. In this sense, Stein will reaffirm the origin of the soul from a unique creative act of God, in which not the parents, but God himself creates the unique human soul: "We must not consider as inherited the individual, personal-spiritual soul, which is what makes humans human [...] our soul was created directly by God" (Stein, 2003, p. 724-725). For Stein, the fact that the soul was created directly by God is an indication of its uniqueness and dignity. In this sense, it differs enormously from animals, whose development takes place in the direction of an exemplarity of the species itself, and never in relation to a unique personality.

CREATIVE FREEDOM ACCORDING TO NICOLAS BERDYAEV'S PERSONALISM

Nicolas Berdyaev, a prominent Russian intellectual, produced a wide-ranging work that integrated philosophy, literature and theology. However, according to Bolognesi (2018), his doctrine, like that of other Russian thinkers, did not clearly separate these aspects: "for a better understanding of his thought, it is important to note that the Russian philosophy of the group of intellectuals to which Berdyaev belonged did not dissociate philosophy and religion" (Bolognesi, 2018, p. 30). Berdyaev's work emphasises the interconnection between creativity, freedom and mysticism, with related sub-themes that are central to his writings. Bolognesi, in his master's thesis, offers a synthesis of these three predominant themes in Berdyaev's work:

> The novelty of Berdyaev's hypothesis on creativity lies in its direct relationship with freedom. [...]. For Berdyaev, creation would not be complete and man would be a co-participant in this process of completion, with man's part being to create something new with the gifts granted by God and also to share the result for the common good. [...]. Slave of freedom and apostle of freedom were Berdyaev's codenames. Undoubtedly, of all his work, the most studied point, and the one for which he has become best known, is the theme of freedom. [...]. Berdyaev's thought reflects mysticism from two angles: direct personal experience and the influence of authors he has read and studied. The mystical experiences, which he himself lived through, come through in the transcribed quotes, in which Berdyaev recounts situations of enlightenment, access to another world, intoxicating ecstasy and other synonymous descriptions (Bolognesi, 2018, p. 36, 38, 54).

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One of his most important books, *Freedom and Slavery* (1944), explores human freedom from various angles. But for these reflections to be understood, it is necessary to examine the essence of the human person in the first part of the book. According to Berdyaev, the person cannot be reduced to nature, because it is freedom that defines them. Thus, the person is both part of the species because it is both a unique and unrepeatable individual and a part of society: "But personality, man as a person, is not a child of the world, he is of another origin. And this it is that makes man a riddle" (Berdyaev, 1944, p. 21).

In *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011), the concepts of freedom, mystery and the personality as a microcosm – a whole directed towards a destiny – are exemplified in the life and actions of Alexander Graham. In the episode of the first chapter, where he saves two children from a frozen river, we see how freedom and mystery are manifested in his act of courage. By risking his own life to save the children, even when he could have ignored the situation, Graham acts driven by the mystery of altruism and compassion for others:

> The shock of the cold water stunned him, and in the sudden darkness he felt for a moment that he was losing consciousness. Kicking hard, he resurfaced, pushed away the chunks of ice floe, and lashed his way slowly toward the children. The tug of the current increased as he approached them, and his legs were dragged downward. His boots hit the rocky bottom of the riverbed. The water level was just above the sternum of his chest. Three feet away the children's eyes were rolling, and the boy's arm was sliding off the shelf again, a body length from where the river plunged over the dam. Alex forced his dead legs to move, one step, another. Another. The water level was now at his neck. The boy let go of the ice just as Alex half-swam, half-leaped between him and the dam. Grabbing the children's arms, he swiveled around toward the shore, dragging them after him. Straining his toes downward, he searched with his feet, hoping to touch a stone, a submerged log, anything that would give him purchase. Without warning, one leg refused to go down full length; it no longer had any feeling, and he did not know if it had cramped or had hit something on the bottom. He pushed with his hips, and his body was propelled forward. The dead weight of the children followed with agonizing slowness. Close to the shore he stood upright and found that the water was just above his knees. The ice shelf shattered before him with every step. Shaking uncontrollably, numb in all his extremities, he pulled the girl into his arms and staggered toward solid ground. He dragged her onto the shore and laid her down on the snow, then turned back for the boy, who was gasping loudly, trying to rise on all fours. Alex grabbed

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> him around the chest and pulled him up, and together they staggered out of the water. As he fell to the ground, Alex saw people running toward him; he heard car horns beeping, doors slamming, shouts, cries; and in the few seconds before he closed his eyes, he saw galaxies slowly revolving in the open places that are high above the enclosures of the heart (O'Brien, 2011, p. 30).

As well as freedom and mystery as personality traits, the extract draws attention to Alexander Graham as a microcosm with a specific destiny. His act of altruism prepares him for a mission that requires abandoning human certainties, as he navigates a labyrinth of information about his son, co-opted by a spiritual organisation that closely resembles a doomsday cult, and deepens his understanding of fatherhood. Furthermore, Berdyaev notes that the members of a profession, class or group can be distinct individualities, but that doesn't mean that they are intelligible personalities. For him, true personality in the human being is the overcoming of identification with a social grouping. Furthermore, Berdyaev sees personality not as a substance, but as a creative act, ideally free from passivity:

> Personality is activity, opposition, victory over the dragging burden of the world, the triumph of freedom over the world's slavery. The fear of exertion is harmful to the realization of personality. Personality is effort and conflict, the conquest of self and of the world, victory over slavery, it is emancipation (Berdyaev, 1944, p. 24).

One of the most creative acts in *The Father's Tale* (O'Brien, 2011) was the construction of the igloo and the musical celebration of the Ozero Baikal community. Alexander, in gratitude for the hospitality of the Siberian community, who welcomed him despite having no money or documents, began building the igloo. The community's enthusiastic participation – both in the construction and the subsequent celebration – demonstrates how creativity was applied with physical, mathematical and aesthetic principles:

> 'It's a diamond', said one old man.
> 'It's a comet that fell from the cosmos', said a woman.
> 'It's blue fire, said another.
> 'Burning snow!'
> 'A jewel in an icon!' a small voice rasped, for Aglaya the Crow was among them as well. Standing at the bottom of the trail, leaning on a cane as she inspected

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> the new creation, she nodded her approval. Without warning, she lifted her head in the silence and began to sing. Her voice was thin and tremulous, an old woman's voice, yet rich in emotion. Alex did not know the song, and what it meant he could not guess, for Aglaya's words were unclear. People on all sides began to hum, for it seemed they knew it, or if they did not, they were able to enter into its spirit without difficulty. The tune was in a minor key, melancholic and evocative (O'Brien, 2011, p. 756).

At this event, distinctions based on profession and social class were overcome. In addition, the song was created collectively, with contributions from several people. Thus, the moment represents an expression of collective freedom through the creativity involved in building the igloo and composing the song.

THE DIVINE SPARK IN HUMAN LOVE ACCORDING TO VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV'S PERSONALISM

Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov was a Russian poet, literary critic, theologian and philosopher who lived in the second half of the 19th century. His work is marked by reflections on central issues of mystical theology, rational philosophy and empirical science. According to Consentino, Solovyov presented a series of lectures in 1878 in his work *Lectures on the Divine Humanity* (1948), in which he sought to compile the three major areas of his interest: "providing him with the conceptual apparatus necessary to pursue his true prophetic mission: the realisation of the Kingdom of God, the eschatological end of the universal process" (Consentino, 2007, p. 95). Furthermore, these lectures reveal traces of a way of thinking that, according to Pahman (2019), can be associated with personalism, a characteristic that can be seen throughout the Russian thinker's work:

> Although Soloviev did not consider himself a personalist, several essential aspects of what came to be called personalism can be found in his thought: the inviolable dignity of the human person, understood in terms of Kant's categorical imperative; the importance of free human action; and the relational nature of people, advocating a middle ground between atomistic individualism and collectivism (Pahman, 2019, p. 1).

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DOI 10.5935/cadernosletras.v24n3p16-35
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ISSN 1809-4163 (*on-line*)

As Solovyov understood it, every human person is initially a natural phenomenon influenced and moulded by external conditions, which determine their actions and perceptions. For the philosopher, these aspects form the empirical character of personality and represent its natural conditional properties. However, he indicates that there is, within each human personality, something absolutely unique and indefinable that resists external determination and remains constant in all circumstances. Therefore, this unique element imprints an individual mark on all actions and perceptions that forms the essence of the personality and its specific personal idea, which determines its value and role in the universal context.

In addition, Solovyov defended the thesis that the qualitative differences of fundamental beings are reflected in the diversity of their relationships. In other words, if all fundamental beings were identical, their relationships would also be identical. However, since each being has its own specific character, it must relate to others in a unique way by taking a specific place in the universal pattern. Therefore, this unique relationship constitutes the objective idea of being as the complete manifestation of its inner peculiarity. Furthermore, for fundamentally different beings to relate to one another, there must be something common between them, which is itself an essential idea or fundamental being. This essential relationship between ideas is similar to the logical relationship between different concepts, in which the concepts of species relate to a concept of genus in a complex organism of beings. Several of these organisms can centre around another being with a broader idea to form higher-order organisms. This hierarchical structure continues until it reaches the most general idea, which encompasses all the others:

> This is the idea of the unconditional goodness, or more exactly, the idea of the unconditional grace [benevolence], or Love. In reality, every idea is a good – [good] for the bearer of it – his good and his love. Every being is what it loves. If, however, every specific idea is a certain specific good and specific love, then the general universal, or absolute idea is the unconditional good and the unconditional love, i.e., such love which equally contains in itself all [i.e., the ideas of all entities], which corresponds to all. The unconditional love is precisely that ideal whole, that universal integrity, which comprises the proper content of the divine beginning. For the plenitude of ideas may not be conceived as their mechanical aggregate, but is [instead] their inner unity, which is love (Solovyov, 1948, p. 110).

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Besides that, according to Solovyov, all ideas and beings are, in essence, manifestations of love and goodness. Unconditional love is the ideal fulfilment that encompasses and unites all ideas and entities not as a simple aggregate, but as an inner unity that reflects the divine principle. To put it another way, unconditional love is the universal wholeness that contains and harmonises all forms of love and good. This divine principle of reflecting internal unity can be seen in Alex's internal dialogue in the moments that leads up to his meeting with Andrew:

> For a few seconds Alex hesitated, unable to recognize him. Then he knew him – knew, knew, knew him fully. He rushed to the front door, threw it open, and raced down the steps. For an instant, fear crossed Andrew's face as he stared at the man running toward him. Then his face crumpled, and he threw himself into his father's arms.
> Alex's hands were firm on Andrew's back, Andrew's head was on his father's chest, eyes closed, holding him. Enfolding the prodigal rags, Alex heard:
> *'Have you lost him?'*
> *'I have run from him.'*
> *'You must return to him.'*
> *'Will he want me?'*
> *'Yes, he will want you.'*
> *'How is it so, this speaking between you and me? Do you know me, sir?'*
> *'I know you. And you know me.'*
> *'Do I know you, sir?'*
> *'More than any other.'*
> *'But how do I know you? Tell me who you are.'*
> *'I am you. As you will be, in time.'* (O'Brien, 2011, p. 1052).

Unconditional love and forgiveness can be seen as central to the final dialogue between Alex and Andrew. We believe that Alex, as a father, seeks to reflect unconditional grace as described by Solovyov by recognising his mistakes and asking for forgiveness to create an environment conducive to reconciliation between both of them. We also realise how deeply the two are bonding with each other in a way that illustrates the unconditional love that transcends individual flaws. Notwithstanding imperfections, this love seeks to promote acceptance and forgiveness, which are essential for healing and family harmony:

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> Andrew shook his head, staring at the floor. 'Please forgive me', he said in a small voice.
> 'I forgive you, my son. And I love you.'
> 'I know that, Pa. I know you love me. How could I not know it?'
> 'Do you forgive *me*?'
> 'Forgive you? What on earth do I have to forgive you for?'
> 'For failing to be the father you needed.'
> 'Don't talk like that!'
> 'You went in search of something you hadn't been given by me.' (O'Brien, 2011, p. 1055).

Whereas Solovyov idealises unconditional love as divine and perfect, human experience often presents an imperfect form of love. By aspiring to this ideal, Alex and Andrew achieve reconciliation and mutual understanding. The inner unity of ideas, according to Solovyov, manifests itself in mutual forgiveness that transforms acts of apology into a true integration of heart and spirit:

> 'We paid for it, the both of us. And that's the way it was meant to be.'
> 'Not like this. It shouldn't have happened.'
> 'It wasn't God's first choice for our lives, that's true. But when it happened, and the darkness fell, he brought another kind of good out of it. The pain is gone now, Andrew, and I'm home. I'm a different person, and I hope a better person.' On an impulse Andrew knelt on the floor and put his arms around his father (O'Brien, 2011, p. 1065).

Alex also recognises that all parents are imperfect and pass on flaws to their children, which seems to resonate with Solovyov's vision of family love, which should be unconditional. In the end, the cycle of guilt and forgiveness reflects the human search for a more fulfilling love:

> There are no perfect parents in this world, Andrew. None. We all make our mistakes, and we leave marks and gaps in our children's lives. But we do love them – imperfect love, as all human love is. Then, when children become adults and have their own families, they begin to understand. They in their turn learn the need for forgiveness. In prison I learned to forgive my own father, and I saw that he needed to forgive his father. No one is exempt from this. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve (O'Brien, 2011, p. 1056).

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Finally, it's important to note that the inner voice Alex heard while hugging Andrew, possibly divine, seems to symbolise the fullness of love and grace that offers him the strength to practise forgiveness and unconditional love.

FINAL REMARKS

Despite coming from different philosophical backgrounds, Edith Stein, Nicolas Berdyaev and Vladimir Solovyov offer complementary perspectives on human dignity, freedom and love. Stein, with her phenomenological personalism, emphasises the integral unity of the human person as body, soul and spirit by stressing its specificity, for unlike plants and animals, human beings are spiritual, singular and free beings. Berdyaev, with his focus on creative freedom, sees the human being as a co-creator with God, while emphasising the importance of individual freedom as a reflection of the divine image. For his part, Solovyov centres on the idea of unconditional love as the highest expression of the relationship between God and the human being, where divine love is the unifying force that transcends and transforms human existence.

Stein provides a vision of human dignity based on the integration of body, soul and spirit. In the novel, Alexander Graham's journey to rescue his youngest son can be seen as a quest to restore lost dignity, which seems to reflect the Steinian view that true dignity is found in the full realisation of the human person, which was glimpsed in Alex's brief contemplation of the personalities of his two sons. Berdyaev, however, emphasises creative freedom as an expression of the divine image in the human being. Alexander's quest is not only physical, but also spiritual and moral and it reflects the creative freedom and individual responsibility that Berdyaev emphasises. Alexander's quest also symbolises the struggle for true freedom, which is the ability to love and forgive unconditionally. Finally, Solovyov sees unconditional love as the essence of the relationship between God and human beings. In the novel, Alexander's love for his son, even in the face of difficulties, parallels the unconditional love of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. This love is what finally allows for redemption and reconciliation, thus showing that divinised human love is capable of integrating all faults.

We can therefore conclude that *The Father's Tale* uses the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" as an intertext to explore human dignity and the relationship

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between freedom and the divine foundation of human love. Through the philosophical lenses of Stein, Berdyaev and Solovyov, we realise how the novel has several hermeneutic levels that show how human dignity can be restored through unconditional love and creative freedom. As a powerful illustration of how divine love works in human life, the story of Alexander Graham and his son Andrew provides a path to redemption and the full realisation of the person.

In this way, we reckon that *The Father's Tale* is not only a narrative of redemption and paternal love, but also a philosophical exploration of the human condition. In this way, we hope that this work, by bringing the intersection between literary studies, philosophy and theology, will enable further study of the work of a contemporary Canadian writer, as well as the application of personalist ideas in literary analysis.

"Eles eram o Princípio e o Fim, e o ser humano era o fruto de Seu amor": uma investigação personalista de *The Father's Tale,* de Michael David O'Brien

Resumo

Este artigo aplica as filosofias de Stein (2003; 2018), Berdyaev (1944) e Solovyov (1948) à análise do romance *The Father's Tale*, de O'Brien (2011), cujo principal intertexto é a "Parábola do filho pródigo". Utilizando as ideias de Stein, investigamos a dignidade inata da pessoa humana no âmbito da narrativa. Por sua vez, a perspectiva de Berdyaev foi vista como uma luz na compreensão da jornada moral do personagem. Solovyov, por fim, oferece uma compreensão do amor incondicional como força transformadora. Este artigo, portanto, contribui com o diálogo entre literatura e filosofia ao realçar a relevância contemporânea das ideias dos autores na compreensão da dignidade, da liberdade humana e do aspecto divino do amor humano.

Palavras-chave

Michael David O'Brien. Personalismo. Crítica teoliterária.

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