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Drowning in Rikki Ducornet's *The Fountains of Neptune*

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Abstract: In this article, I will argue that Rikki Ducornet's The Fountains of Neptune is metaphorically permeated by water both in the sphere of the themes it explores and on the level of the text's structure. After a brief historical sketch of the philosophical search for the first principle and the process of the emergence of the tetrad of archai, I will elaborate on the metaphorical potential of fire, water, earth and air and provide a list of works by North-American authors (with special emphasis on speculative fiction writers) which use the four elements as concretizing poetic patterns and controlling metaphors. Next, I will elaborate on the position of elements in Rikki Ducornet's Tetralogy and proceed to focus on the metaphorical potential of The Fountains of Neptune. To this end, I will first concentrate on the function of the sea as an identity-bestowing space in which people's lives are anchored and then proceed to analyze the concepts of surface and depth introduced in The Fountains of Neptune in connection with human emotions. I will examine the relationship between memory, past and the unconscious the novel introduces and then concentrate on water's power of purification and its connection with innocence, (re)birth, and femininity. Finally, I will investigate what influence water imagery and the notions such as formlessness or changeability have on both the language and the narrative flow of the novel.

Keywords: Rikki Ducornet, the four archai, elemental imagery, Gaston Bachelard, water, reverie, consciousness, imagination.

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The Four Archai

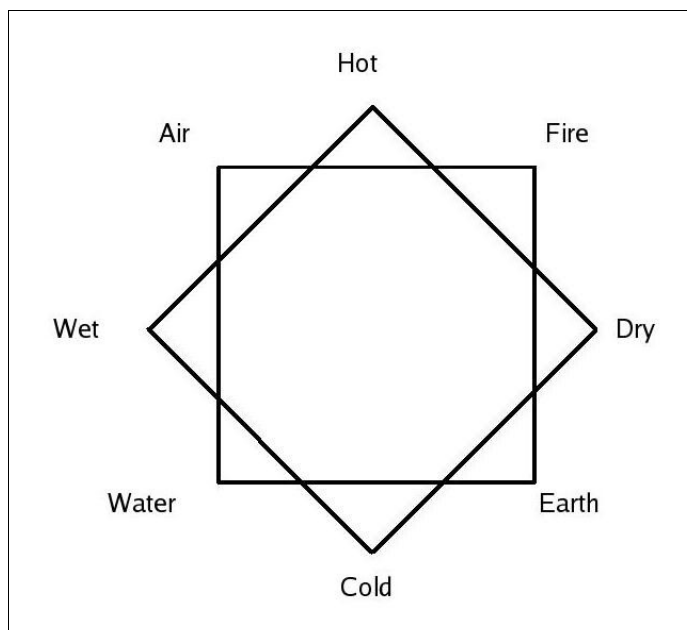
The earliest attempts at unveiling the character of the world date as far back as the 6th century BC. It was then, that in search of *arche*, the underlying principle of all natural things, ancient philosophers started to contemplate the structure of what in times of Aristotle came to be known as prime matter and what already in the pre-Socratic period had been thought of as the fundamental substance of the universe.

The first truly note-worthy philosopher who occupied himself with the search for the underlying principle was Thales of Miletus. Influenced probably by mythological accounts frequently describing creation as the process of emergence from the primeval ocean, Thales argued for the existence of one fundamental substance, water. The next thinker to wonder about the nature

of *arche* was Thales' disciple, Anaximander. Stating that water could in no way be the building material of its opposite, fire, he refuted his teacher's theory and posited that the first principle was the *aperion*, or the indefinite. Whereas Anaximander's cosmological hypothesis was centered on the concept of an immeasurable mass of unknown quality, Anaximenes, the second of the Ionian school of ancient philosophers, followed in Thales' footsteps and once again reduced *arche* to an infinite, yet specific, substance – air. As Malcolm Schofield writes in "The Ionians" (1997), Anaximenes thought that air "differ[ed] in thinness and thickness according to the substances which it constitute[d], and if thinned bec[ame] fire, if thickened wind, then cloud, then (thickened further) water, then earth, then stones" (58). Arguing the primacy of air, Anaximenes, just like his predecessors, was trying to reduce the multiplicity of the world's phenomena to a coherent, less perplexing pattern. His theory openly recognized the interconnectedness of fire, air, water and earth, and clearly emphasized the world's changeability. This line of thought was further explored in the writings of Heraclitus, according to whom, the ultimate substance was one that exhibited maximal changeability. Such changeability, Heraclitus argued, was inherent to fire. Heraclitus's exceptional interest in transformation and change resulted in his upward-downward path theory, which explained how in a series of fire's turnings one element is replaced with another.

By the early 5th century BC ancient philosophers had already arrived at a number of often mutually exclusive conclusions concerning the nature of the first principle. Still, it was not until a few decades later that rather than search for the superior stuff, the ancients began to perceive the physical world in terms of the coexistence of a number of prime substances.

The thinker who first proposed the theory of the tetrad of animate *archai* was Empedocles. Referring to the *archai* as the four *rizōmata*, Empedocles named them after four Greek deities Zeus, Hera, Nestis, and Aidoneus. The poetic and riddle-like statement caused controversies as to exactly which element corresponded to each of the gods. All the same, granting the elements divine names, Empedocles visibly hinted at their power and eternal character. According to him the elements remained in perfect equilibrium, but were being constantly set in motion by two opposite principles correspondent to the forces of attraction and repulsion: *philia* ('love', 'attachment') and *neikos* ('strife', 'hate'); according to Empedocles the interdependence of the two principles accounted for the processes of natural genesis (Wright 167).



The theory of the four *archai* reconciled the ideas of Empedocles' ancestors and came to prevail in Western thought for more than two millennia. Over time, it was slightly altered. In an attempt to adapt the notion of the elements to his atomic hypothesis, Democritus of Abdera stated that each element was in itself construed from atoms whose shapes varied according to the elements' differing properties. Plato, on the other hand, although not an atomist himself, proposed that the four elements, or *stoicheia* as he called them, had concrete, geometrical shapes – earth was shaped like a cube, fire a tetrahedron, air an octahedron, water an icosahedron. The shapes came to be known as polyhedra, the regular solids. To

the canonical tetrad of particles Plato added one more form, dodecahedron, thus extending the number of elements to five. The fifth classical element, aether, or the quintessence, was named by

Aristotle. Convinced that there was only one prime matter but simultaneously aware of this matter's remoteness and impenetrable character, Aristotle accepted the Empedoclean theory but rejected Plato's polyhedra and instead paired each of the four terrestrial elements with its primary quality: hot, cold, dry, or wet (Ball 7):

For Aristotle each element was endowed with two qualities. By inverting either of the qualities, elements were transformed into one another: as dryness turned into wetness, hot and dry fire became air; deprived of moistness, wet, cold water transformed itself into cold but dry earth.

The Empedoclean theory of elements remained at the center of philosophers' attention until the 17th century. In the meantime, however, there appeared new ideas about the character and changeability of the material world. The fusion of Greek philosophy and Egyptian chemical arts led to the emergence of alchemy, the science of transformation, which introduced not only the belief in the metals' maturation taking place in earth, but above all theories about the existence of the next three fundamental principles: sulfur, mercury and, slightly later, salt (Morris 4). Over the centuries, early alchemical attempts at transforming metals into gold or at obtaining the mythical Philosopher's Stone evolved into a scientific search of boiling, distillation, coagulation and melting, the search which culminated in 1869 when a Russian chemist, Dmitri Mendeleev, put forward the periodic table of chemical elements. A couple of decades later, Ernest Rutherford's atom model truly unveiled the face of *materia prima*, while the theories of combustion and of the four states of matter (liquid, solid, gas, plasma) explained the transitory character of all substance, making it finally virtually impossible for anyone to still perceive the world in terms of the four canonical *archai*. Nonetheless, in spite of scientific progress, the concept of fire, air, water and earth as the primal elements seems to have never loosened its hold on people's imagination.

Elemental Metaphors (and North-American Fiction)

As early as in the ancient times a link was established between the four elements and the so-called four primary colors – white, red, black and ochre. Implicative of equilibrium and unity, the fourness of the elements came to correlate also with the cardinal directions of the compass and with the so-called four “humours.” The humoral principle maintained that people's bodies are filled with four different substances – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm – each corresponding to one of the ancient elements – earth, air, fire and water respectively (Ball 10-11). In the 2nd century, Galen, a Roman philosopher of Greek origin, developed these ideas into the theory of temperaments, claiming that each human temperament – melancholic, sanguine, choleric or phlegmatic – resulted from the prevalence in human body of one of the four fluids.

By the end of the Renaissance, scholars openly acknowledged the ability of the elements and temperaments to capture human imagination. In 1634, in his work “A Treatise of Health and Long Life,” a Jesuit savant Leonardus Lessius wrote that “[d]reams are nothing else but the Apprehension of the Fancy, when the Senses are asleep. . . . [I]n Sleep, so likewise in Waking,” Lessius argued “the Fancy of the most part apprehends Things agreeable to the Humour and Quality then prevalent” (71). In the 20th century, Lessius' hypothesis that the forms of people's dreams depend on the elements which dominate their psyches was embraced by a French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. In *Air and Dreams* (1988), *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1987), *Water and Dreams* (1999) and *Earth and Reveries of Repose* (2002), Bachelard analyzed the works of writers such as Flaubert, Nietzsche, Poe or Novalis in terms of the imagery they employed. As Anne E. and Colin Martindale point out, Bachelard “made it clear that the four elements can be seen as an imaginal vocabulary for the expression of ideas and feelings,” with writers using not only “one of the four elements but draw[ing] on all of them in order to express different moods, ideas, or emotions” (837). At first understood only literally, over the years the elements acquired figurative

meaning and, acting as concretizing metaphors, found their place in philosophy, theology, art and literature.

Literary manifestations of the four *archai* abounded already in the 16th and 17th centuries. Probably one of the first American authors to make use of elemental imagery was Anne Bradstreet, who employed the classical tetrad in her "Quaternions on the Seasons, the Humours and the Elements" (1962). Various references to the elements appear also in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), as well as in the poetry of Walt Whitman or, more recently, W.S. Merwin. The fourness of the elements provides as well the organizing principle of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943): "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding." The concept of the classical four surfaces also in many works by contemporary Native American authors, for example in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988). Nowhere else, however, is elemental imagery more visible than in the broadly-understood North-American fiction of the fantastic. Water functions as the structuring metaphor of, among others, Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986) and *Daughter of Elysium* (1993), Peter Watts's *Starfish* (1999), Kara Dalkey *Ascension* (2002), *Reunion* (2002) and *Transformation* (2002), Laurie J. Marks's *Water Logic* (2007), and M.M. Buckner's *Watermind* (2009). Fire structures Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Don Callander's *Pyromancer* (1992), Michael Burns *Hot Planet* (1994), Laurie J. Marks's *Fire Logic* (2004), and Todd Vanhooser's *Garden of Fire: The Laughing Moon Chronicles* (2009). Air controls Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* (1994), Richard Garfinkle's *Celestial Matters* (1996), Sherryl King-Wilds's *Daughter of Air and Storm* (2007), Simon Law's *Bringing Forth the End of Days* (2009), and Christian Cantrell's *Containment* (2010). Finally, the element of earth provides imagery for, among others, Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1993), Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Greg Bear's *Slant* (1997), Walter J. Williams's *The Rift* (1999), Laurie J. Marks' *Earth Logic* (2004), and James Rollins's *Subterranean* (1999). Speculative fiction often features also the so-called elementals, magical spirits which correspond to the four natural elements and either act on their own or are manipulated by their masters, benders or weavers. Examples of elementals appear in the fiction of such North-American writers as Roger Zelazny, Poul Anderson, Jo Clayton, Bradley P. Baulieu, Tanya Huff, Elizabeth A. Lynn, Phyllis Eisenstein, or Pittacus Lore.¹

Rikki Ducornet's "Books of Nature"

Elemental imagery permeates also the so-called "Books of Nature," a speculative tetralogy of novels authored by a contemporary American writer, poet and painter, Rikki Ducornet. Bound by the classical concept of the four elements, Ducornet's *The Stain* (1984), *Entering Fire* (1986), *The Fountains of Neptune* (1989), and *The Jade Cabinet* (1993) interpret reality in accordance with Gaston Bachelard's theory of the four elements, "classif[ing] various kinds of ... imagination by their connections with fire, air, water or earth" (3). *The Stain*, the first novel in Ducornet's tetralogy, is structured around the opposition between the earthly realm of nature and the sphere of spirituality. In the novel earthboundness is equated not only with the living natural world, but much more significantly, with everything material, physical and sensual. *Entering Fire*, on the other hand, analyzes fire as the symbol of both good and evil, light and darkness. Contrasting passion with various manifestations of hatred and revenge, the book demonstrates that flames are a synonym of emotions and urges which nurture but also (self-)consume. In *The Jade Cabinet*, the element of air functions as a multifaceted metaphor for various aspects of human disposition, but also for magic and illusions and for the boundlessness of human spirit and fantasy. A figurative meditation on the transient nature of language and memory, the novel reflects upon the subjectivity of its characters'

¹ For an in-depth analysis of elementals in speculative fiction go to Nikiel, Julia. "Elementals." *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*. Ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. 2014. 205-208. Print.

recollections and argues that far from describing reality, its narrative offers only a changeable, volatile translation of memories into words.

Whereas all three of Ducornet's novels use elements as their controlling metaphors, in "At The Heart of Things," interviewed by Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery, Rikki Ducornet confesses that it was in fact *The Fountains of Neptune*, the third book of her tetralogy, that made her fully appreciate how indebted she was for her "elemental fascination" to her readings of what she calls Gaston "Bachelard's great philosophical reveries on literature" (132). As she began working on *The Fountains of Neptune*, Ducornet turned back to *Water and Dreams*, the Bachelardian study of the ambivalence of water as the symbolic matter that reflects things off its surface and at the same time guards the mysteries of the abyss and of the deeply hidden, ongoing change. Inspired, Ducornet says, she "decided to convey all possible waters through *the* language, mood, and music of *the* [emerging] novel – salt and fresh, swift and still, calm and treacherous" (Gregory, McCaffery 132).

Below, I will endeavor to demonstrate that Rikki Ducornet's *The Fountains of Neptune* is metaphorically permeated by water both in the sphere of the themes it explores and on the level of the text's structure. Drawing on the theories of Gaston Bachelard and on the ideas proposed by, among others, Richard Martin, Allen Guttman, M.E. Warlick and Sinda Gregory, I will engage in a deepened analysis of Ducornet's *The Fountains of Neptune* and try to show the ways in which the novel *shows* rather than describes with words the story it tells; poetic, ambiguous, and complex, the images the novel projects crystallize and acquire meaning only when interpreted against the elemental symbolism of water.

Focusing first on the function of the sea as the almost animate, identity-bestowing space in which people's lives are anchored, I will proceed to analyze the concepts of surface and depth introduced in *The Fountains of Neptune* in connection with human emotions. To this end, I will examine the relationship between memory, past and the unconscious the novel introduces, showing that in the world Ducornet projects only by diving deep into the mind can one dissolve reality and salvage the forgotten and once drowned past. Subsequently, I will concentrate on the water's power of purification and its connection with innocence and (re)birth, stressing, simultaneously, the connection between water and femininity. Finally, I will investigate what influence water imagery and the notions such as formlessness or changeability have on both the language and the narrative flow of the novel. I will emphasize both the water's metaphorical potential and the inherent fluidity and mutability of literary language and demonstrate how the story in *The Fountains of Neptune* first meanders between narrators assuming as if a life of its own, and then explores the murky waters of the protagonist's damaged mind, in both cases effectively effacing the boundary both the characters and the readers draw between fiction and reality.

The Fountains of Neptune: A Summary

The narrative of Rikki Ducornet's *The Fountains of Neptune* begins in the 1960s, in a French recovery spa, where a postcomatose patient, Nicolas, is being treated by an elderly psychiatrist, "the world's only Freudian hydropathist" (121), doctor Venus Kaisertiege. Following the path of Nicolas's memories, the story drifts back in time to the years before the Great War and settles in a seaport village where young Nicolas is growing up under the care of his adoptive parents, Rose and Totor. Although it is never revealed what really happened to Nicolas's, or simply Nini's, biological parents, from the very beginning the story hints at their death being connected with some tragic event, which Nini does not remember, but which he witnessed as an infant and is now very eager to recall.

Believing that a good meal can compensate for every human misery, Nini's "Other Mother," Rose, spends most of her time in the kitchen, gorging Nini with food in an attempt to make him

fully forget his past. At the same time, Nini's adoptive father, Totor, takes him to local bars and taverns, where the boy is allowed to taste punch and listen to the old sailors' stories. It is in one of such pubs, the Ghost Port Bar, that Nini meets the old sailor and drunkard, Toujours-Là, and the mysterious storyteller and illusionist, Aristide Marquis. Throughout the novel, the fabulous stories told by Totor and Toujours-Là as well as the pantomimic "quiet play" performed by the Marquis continue to feed Nini's imagination and dreams. Whereas from Totor he learns about La Vouivre, a female sea monster whom sailors both love and fear, the Marquis teaches him that "[e]verything [in fact] is magic" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 37). However, it is Toujours-Là that introduces Nini to everything the boy is forbidden to know. He shows him the bar owner's wife committing adultery right under her husband's nose; on another occasion, drunk, he frightens Nini by violently killing the bar's pet monkey, Charlie Dee. Above all, however, it is Toujours-Là that tells Nini about the drowning of his mother, Odille, and about Nini's father's death by strangulation at the hands of Odille's lover, Thomash. The newly gained knowledge proves almost fatal to the nine-year old boy. In 1914, during a sailing trip with the Marquis, Nini leans over the side of the boat and sees the face of La Vouivre. Gradually, the face changes and in the reflection Nini recognizes Odille. Ready to forsake his life only to be close to his mother, Nini jumps into the water and drowns. Although he is rescued by the Marquis, he fails to wake up from what turns out to be a deep and prolonged coma.

The second part of *The Fountains of Neptune* details Nini's life after he awakens fifty years later deprived of both his past and any real knowledge about the present world. Living in a beautiful spa, with the help of his therapist, doctor Venus Kaisertiege, Nini attempts to gradually rebuild his past from the bits and pieces of memories he has managed to salvage. With Kaisertiege's help, he discovers the truth about Odille's promiscuity and the irresistible charm she held over sailors. He learns how his father's body was devoured by water, and how envious village women drowned Odille and then killed Thomash. When doctor Kaisertiege leaves for America, the Sandman, as Nini is now called, spends his mornings in the seashell-shaped bathtub, the Kaiser Milkshake, and together with his imaginary companion, Oliver, creates a dreamlike world, Kingdom d'Elir, whose safety he uses to rebuild his own life. Near the end of the book, village women invade the spa. Thinking of d'Elir as the devil's dwelling, they destroy it and force Nini and Oliver into the spa's garden, where they both stay until doctor Kaisertiege's return. Reunited with his therapist, the Sandman no longer needs Oliver's company and hence, the boy dissolves, leaving Nini and doctor Kaisertiege alone in the spa, working on *The Fountains of Neptune*, a book describing the Sandman's sleep and recovery. When Venus Kaisertiege dies, Nini continues living a solitary life, which he spends gardening, raking pebble paths and, above all wondering.

Living Water

In Rikki Ducornet's *The Fountains of Neptune* water is alive. What is more, it also bestows life on the surrounding world. On the one hand, it represents the unpredictable and capricious power of nature. On the other, it acquires the animacy of its aquatic inhabitants and passes their teeming virility to the seamen, people with whom throughout centuries it has developed a symbiotic and almost mystic relationship. In doctor Kaisertiege's spa water is domesticated, "tamed in basins, bathtubs, and wells" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 12). Outside the spa, it remains fierce and changeable; the weather constantly shifts and the calm sea always precedes wild storms. Thus, in *The Fountains of Neptune*, the air is pervaded "with pounding rain, fog, slush, drizzle [and] snow, ... creating a 'port and sky and sea all smeared together like a jam of oysters, pearl-grey and viscous'" (Warlick). Crowding under the surface, sea creatures stir the water, making Nini wonder at how lively and riotous the water seemed to him when he was a child – "riotous with startled fish, mating fish, rampageous, irrepressible fish. There were plenty of bugs in the water, too," Nini remembers,

“water scorpions, waterfleas, boat flies with red faces, and oval beetles bright as lockets. It was good beyond words to be out on that living water” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 111).

This living water Nini describes influences people to such an extent (as if through osmosis) that they acquire its qualities, learning simultaneously how to treat it with respect and even make use of its changeability. The identity-shaping power of the sea can be best observed on the example of Totor, the book’s main sea dog, described as not merely a man, but rather as “the perpetual glamour of the sea made flesh. Master of foam, of fish, of dancing ships Totor was a wolf, a sea-wolf” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 15). Nurtured by the sea, Totor stands as the epitome of power, strength and traditional manhood. Nevertheless, he himself is well aware of the fact that, just like other people, he is nothing more but a “raft[...] adrift, ... splinter[...] on the sea” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 49), floating at the mercy of this sea’s unpredictability. While the sea, and by metaphorical extension also human life, may be calm and inviting, it may also become rough, lure men into whirlpools, freeze and flood. It may swallow up and thus possess just as it once possessed the whole land, sparing only those who managed to moor their boats. Interestingly, in *The Fountains of Neptune* people tend to moor mainly in the past, by means of fabulation exploring the imaginative potential that has been always said to dwell thousands of leagues under the sea. For who are “sailors? All sea-talkers. The sons of mermen, [who] stalk stories as ... octop[i] stalk prey” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 15).

“As Totor speaks,” Nini says,
curly bearded Odysseus lumbers into the room to listen, and sea elephants, and Sindbad –
the sinister Old Man of the Sea Many times do I, set float upon the pure waters of
Totor’s love ... I swear I hear the surf beating against the window-pane. I sleep in a room
carpeted with sand. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 16)

“[T]he sea is fabulous because it comes ... from the lips of the traveler” (Bachelard, *Water* 153). To the traveler, on the other hand, the sea remains the never-ending promise of both purpose and inspiration.

Drawing from the Well

From the very beginning of *The Fountains of Neptune*, water – the novel’s controlling element – structures literary reality and serves as both the reference point and the metaphor for human life. At the same time, acting as the *arche* of all things – “*Rejoice! All Things Are Born in Foam!*” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 27) – it functions,” As Linda Gregory rightly notices, “to evoke a series of associations concerning the origins of memory, ... dream, [and] the self” (120).

In *Water and Dreams* Gaston Bachelard states that the “mirror a fountain provides ... is the opportunity for *open imagination*” (21). As discussed above, in *The Fountains of Neptune* this mirror seems to reflect the ambiguous surface of people’s existence where, as Ducornet writes, “[a]rm in arm, light and darkness dance upon the water” (*Fountains* 101), twitching around human rafts and splinters. According to Roch C. Smith, however, images born through reflection “are essentially visual. [T]hey create a serene world of surface contemplation. But it is in the tactile ‘heavy water’ ... that the real power of imagination ... is revealed” (83). It is this “heavy water” that offers what Bachelard calls “a deepened perspective on the world and ourselves. It allows us, to hold ourselves at a distance from the world. In the presence of deep water, you choose your vision” (*Water* 50). As the case of the Sandman seems to indicate, in *The Fountains of Neptune* vision can be regained only through one’s unconscious. Laden with the gravest experiences of one’s past, the unconscious seems to equal the heavy water, “the unsoundable source” (Caws 18) which has to be explored in order for a person to gain access to their self. This source in turn can be accessed only through dreams. Defined as tides of latent and deeply hidden emotions, dreams seem capable of

stirring one's subjectivity, washing away one's fear, and thus making it possible for the dreamer to put the waking world into a new perspective.

Living through something does not always imply direct participation. At times, to experience an event fully and to one's very core it is enough to simply witness it with one's own eyes. In "Optical Terror" Ducornet writes that "[v]ulnerable when open and closed, the eye is a paradoxical organ, ... it cannot give back what it has taken in. If a bad meal can be vomited or, with difficulty, digested, a horrific vision repressed, is made to fester" (23). In the light of this statement, it should come as no surprise that Nini's uncertainty about what happened in the past makes him deny the world he sees full optical clarity (Ducornet, *Fountains* 12). To use Guttman's words, "[w]ater takes the life of Nini's father. Water holds the secret of Nini's lost mother. In water, [thus], he seeks her – and very nearly loses his life in the effort" (187). As he allows himself to drown and subsequently plunges into a coma, Nini opens his mind to knowledge, to his drowned memories and to the answers which Totor and Other Mother have always concealed from him. After fifty years of struggling between "a desire for and a fear of consciousness" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 124), Nini wakes up not only able to access his previously submerged memories but most of all no longer terrified to do so. The power of dreams to unveil and heal is best explained by doctor Kaisertiege in a letter she sends to the Sandman. "The existential is always subjective," Kaisertiege writes, "All that is true is hidden deep in the body of the world and cannot be taken by force. It must be dreamed and attended and received with awe and affection" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 190). When all of this is done, the dreamer surfaces.

At a certain point of Ducornet's narrative, doctor Kaisertiege says that in order to "survive the world we must all be lucid dreamers" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 192). As suggested by Nini's long process of recovery, in *The Fountains of Neptune* the ultimate insight into the depths of one's unconscious enables one not only to surface, but also to see the world anew. As Nini recovers from his coma, "the smooth surface of [his] sleep is agitated, the stagnation of ... deep waters disturbed, ... muddy tides sparked with light" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 123). Nevertheless, the process of Nini's waking up is in fact never complete. Instead of fully entering reality, Nini chooses to remain only half-awake, suspended between reverie and nostalgia, a wanderer marooned in the imaginary Kingdom of d'Elir, a Froschlein (tadpole), as his doctor calls him, drifting between the past and the present. He calls himself a floater, and confesses: "I am only interested in the allusive messages of my dreams, the innumerable spaces of my memories, and the perpetual wanderings of my thoughts" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 219). The Kingdom of d'Elir seems to represent Nini's personal "attempt to embrace the entire world. To be at home everywhere at once" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 196). By bringing together reality and dreams, Nini begins to fully comprehend the fluid nature of time and history. This process of recognition is analyzed by Richard Martin, who at one point goes as far as to claim that in *The Fountains of Neptune* Nini's "juxtapositioning of dream-world and daily world result[s] in the literal ... liquefaction of the solidity of a past that has already been codified and should thus be unchangeable" ("The Tantalizing Prize" 198). It appears true that drawing on the analogy between water and various aspects of human consciousness, in her third elemental book Ducornet hints both at the immensity of the creative powers of human mind and at the considerable role the human unconscious plays in the creation of one's self-awareness.

In *The Fountains of Neptune* water acts, however, not only as a catalyst for accessing one's memory and identity but also as the agent of purification and rebirth. Half a century of dreaming allows Nini to recover his long forgotten past. It should be remembered though, that the protagonist's coma results from an urge to (re)connect with a very specific person – his mother, Odille. In this sense, Nini's leap into the water seems to represent his desire "to re-enter [Odille's] womb and become the alchemical homunculus. A tiny human fetus hidden in a jar behind the local bar mirrors [Nini's] desire to become the baby in the vessel The alchemical process suggested here," M.E. Warlick writes, "is that of *Albedo*, purification through an inundation of water that

clears all the blackness in the vessel.” Both his comatose sleep and the subsequent hydrotherapy that he undergoes in doctor Kaisertiege’s spa, and especially inside the shell-shaped womb-like bathtub, bring Nini back to the fetal state from before his birth, metaphorically immersing him in the amniotic fluid and (re)creating in this way the safe environment of the womb in which, by means of dreams, he can recover and cleanse himself of all he has lived through. “I want to reconstruct her [Odille’s] body,” Nini says,

to make a room which will be a tangible dream, her reflected memory. I want a room in which to sleep: white and black and quiet and perfumed. I want a sanctuary; I want to enter into the body of Odille. To sleep there as if suspended in water, my thoughts – water. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 205)

As Gaston Bachelard writes in *Water and Dreams*, “[o]ne dives into water in order to be reborn and changed” (144). When he eventually emerges, Nini not only remembers, but is also able to reconcile himself with what he experienced as a child.

Although water promises life and rebirth, it does in fact represent also the deathly allure of the bottomless depth, the abyss. Dualistic in its nature, water is the synonym of ambiguity, and as such remains in close relationship with the broadly understood feminine aspect of the world. In *The Fountains of Neptune* this association of water with femininity appears in connection with both Odille, who represents motherhood but also everything “beautiful, sexually-charged and dangerous” (Martin, “The Tantalizing Prize”), and the Vouivre, a man-devouring wyvern with a woman’s head and half the woman’s body. At a certain moment in the novel, Toujours-Là recalls a song devoted to Nini’s mother:

She was our sea of trouble
Our water of life
she was all our dirty weather;
everyman’s wife.
She was all our shipwrecks,
...
She drank us down like water –
our mischief was her cure; she!
Our mastaba and out lure!
O holiest of terrors –
Strongest drink and reddest meat –
the wasp’s nest of that woman’s sex
was sweet. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 155)

Years later, in her book entitled *The Fountains of Neptune*, doctor Kaisertiege quotes from *Virtuous Abyss*, a Gnostic text allegedly found in Syria in 1939:

Mistress of Archons, She
Delivers the world
from the filthy waters and
animates the mud.
She is the colour
of water, the
immortal, the immense
Humid Element.
She is Incorruptible Light.
Violent agitation.
Power, Chaos, and Plentitude.
The One Perfect Letter.
The Virtuous Abyss. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 169)

Comparing the two texts, Kaisertiege concludes that “the *Virtuous Abyss is no other than the female aspect of Neptune*” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 170) – the archetypal woman. “One might say,” Kaisertiege writes, “that the virtuous Abyss is Odille, all our Odilles: Goddess, Mother, Temptress. Her essential quality,” she adds, “is ambiguity” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 169). Nonetheless, to quote from Warlick, in *The Fountains of Neptune*, “Odille’s story is set in relief against the mythic tales of the *Ogress, La Vouivre, and Revelation’s Whore of Babylon*, all archetypes of feminine evil.” Of these, it is the water demon, La Vouivre, that has the most explicit affinity with the liquid element:

She’s amphibious She haunts the limpid eyes of the world ...: oceans, lakes, pools, ponds, and rivers. It is she you hear tapping at the window in the rain and breathing in the rushes by the river bank. She whispers in whirlpools and in the ooze of marshes, crouches in the shadows of drowned logs. . . . She is enchantment – a warm blooded aquatic animal. Crab and girl, serpent and siren. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 21)

La Vouivre is also the most dangerous of the female temptresses, for seen more than once she instantly punishes the sailor’s impudence with blindness, and enraged, she pulls a man in and drowns him in infinite depths. It should be noticed as well, that the seamen’s fascination with both Odille and La Vouivre seems to directly correspond with the relationship the sailors have with the sea itself. “What is the sea, for the man who has loved and left her?,” Ducornet wonders in *The Fountains of Neptune*, “She is fire-water, whisky, rum ... What is the ocean for the sailor who has loved and left her? The one lover who dissolves the night. A bottomless glass of moonshine” (15). Seen as a beautiful though capricious woman, the sea represents every sailor’s dream. At the same time, however, it devours and can be intoxicating to the point of becoming deadly.

Writing (into) the Water

“*The Fountains of Neptune* . . . is devoted to water, the element of deep emotions. [B]ecause water reflects, the novel is also about reflection and memory” (Warlick). Because water conceals and constantly changes, the novel talks about human deepest longings and about the fatal attraction of what can never be fully controlled. All the same, while water imagery and water itself clearly dominate the plot and the symbolic sphere of Ducornet’s novel, water’s status as the governing element in *The Fountains of Neptune* manifests itself also on the level of the book’s language and, even more conspicuously, in the book’s narrative structure and in the way this structure redefines the concept of fiction.

In *The Fountains of Neptune* water implies resemblances and analogies. It awakens multilayered associations and encourages the fluidity of meanings, functioning in this way as the source of multiple conceptual metaphors the book employs. When on Saturdays, Nini and Totor move around seaside bars, they say they “leap from one aquarium into another” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 23). When they finally settle, they “are marooned. The Ghost Port Bar . . . become[s] their] island” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 29). Similarly, Rose goes to the port church not in order to prey, but “for the salty taste of gossip she gets after” the service (Ducornet, *Fountains* 20). In times of historical unrest “war is brewing” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 55). The lack of experience on somebody’s part is described idiomatically as the state of being “still wet behind the ears” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 57) and Cod’s wife’s infidelity does not just enrage, but rather liquefies her husband with fury (Ducornet, *Fountains* 69).

In addition to directly controlling the book’s figurative level, water affects the language of *The Fountains of Neptune* also by pervading it with ambiguity and fluidity. The former becomes discernible in the suggestiveness of the names Ducornet gives to her characters, and the latter reveals itself through the often comical linguistic cacology. While doctor Venus Kaisertiege dwells in her spa just like the mythic goddess Aphrodite did in the sea, the significance of La Vouivre

fluctuates between “the voeu ivre, the drunken vow, the promise given under intoxication, and the accusation, vous ivre” (Martin, “The Tantalizing Prize” 199) [you drunk!]. Nowhere else, however, is the complex nature of the names used by Ducornet more evident than in “the nickname of Nini’s foster father, Totor,” a nickname which, according to Richard Martin,

calls up echoes of various French words and phrases: *toto*, the louse, *le toton*, the small top inscribed with letters which can form random messages, *le taux tort*, the false rate subverting the exchange of communication, and, finally, *le taud tort*, the twisted tarpaulin, the nautical covering which denies its promise to grant shelter. (“Telling” 198-199)

Ducornet’s language can be ambiguous, it can be also fluid with one word freely replacing another so that the original meaning mutates unpredictably. In *The Fountains of Neptune*, this mutability of language is characteristic of the language Rose, Nini’s Other Mother, uses. Rose “speaks in malapropisms. [S]he met her husband at a fair, ‘in that insomnic device the ferret wheel’” (Guttman 185), where she was “courted and sedated” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 19). According to her, La Vouivre can make a man “[b]lind as an old puss!” (“Blind as Oedipus, Rose, but never mind”) (Ducornet, *Fountains* 22) and when she condemns Odille’s relationship with Nini’s father, she call’s their love ‘Peruvian,’ her mistake, Martin argues, being “a particularly felicitous coinage [since it] brings together ‘pernicious,’ ‘spurious,’ and the exotic overtones of ‘Peruvian’” (“The Tantalizing Prize” 200).

“Water is the mistress of liquid language,” Bachelard writes, the mistress “of smooth flowing language, of continued and continuing language, of language that softens rhythm and gives a uniform substance to differing rhythms” (*Water* 187). Water is definitely a model for the language of *The Fountains of Neptune*. It is also the model for the novel’s structure. Multilayered, freely floating between two complementary parts – the shared narrative of the past and Nini’s personal story of recovery – the book appears to be a text whose elements move freely past one another provoking associations, welcoming multiple readings and hinting at the novel’s structural fluidity. Whereas the book is consistently narrated by its protagonist, the main narrative embrace other stories. As Martin observes, “the novel thus becomes a tale of embedded fictions and ... within the context of the book’ governing metaphor, water, tales told by sailors of the sea become insiders’ voyages through the oceans of the world of fiction” (“The Tantalizing Prize” 198).

Although at times the novel does give the reader a false impression of linearity, the truth is that in the first part of the novel the narrator not only constantly switches the perspectives from which s/he is telling the story, but also consciously blurs the fuzzy boundary between reality and fabulation. With each of the storytellers, the flow of narration is slightly altered, modified by the particular teller’s partial ignorance, intoxication (Totor), or amnesia (the Sandman), reluctance to reveal shameful secrets (Rose), or their innate tendency to fabulate (Toujours-Là, the Marquis). Therefore, upon entering the story “the reader is [instantly] confronted [with] the stressing of what Martin calls “th[e] fluid frontier between the narrative and its context, between the worlds of narrator and reader, of contrived fiction and accidental fact” (“The Tantalizing Prize” 202). Although Nini’s memories and Rose’s abrupt deflections effectively intensify the mysteriousness of the story, it is “[t]he trinity of tellers Ducornet employs” – Totor, Toujours-Là and the Marquis – that “cover a whole range of possibilities governed by the watery metaphor,” building “a fluidum of stories which, once told, elude retention” (Martin, “The Tantalizing Prize” 198).

Both Totor’s and Toujours-Là’s stories are being told mostly under the influence of “the hot ice of *eau-de-vie*” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 54) – alcohol. At one point in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, dwelling on the fabulating qualities of alcohol, Bachelard remarks that “[t]he alcoholic unconscious is a profound reality. ... It incorporates itself, so to speak, with that which is striving to express itself. It enriches the vocabulary and frees the syntax” (87). In *The Fountains of Neptune*, it is punch that unbridles imaginations and transforms the narrators’ tales into journeys through the lands of the

past and present – at one point, remembering his moments spent with Toujours-Là, Nini says: “[a]lthough I sensed that the mad steersman was about to ferry me across the starkest latitude of his imagination, already my own darkest waters were rushing out to meet his” (Ducornet 55).

The intoxicated mind tends to wander far beyond the truth, making it impossible to distinguish between what is and what could be – “‘Hah! My truth,’ Toujours-Là insists, ‘is whisky’s. [M]y brain is yellow like Hook Head in the moon and not always navigable. My tales ... are born in puddles of rum’” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 34). Hence, in *The Fountains of Neptune*, Rose scorns Totor for filling Nini’s mind with bogus nonsense and even the drunkard Toujours-Là pleads with Nini not to be frightened by what he is mumbling, because his stories are nothing but “the fault of Master Punch and no reality” (Ducornet 33). At times also, the stories become so suggestive that they astonish even the storytellers. When after Nini’s accident doctor Kaisertiege visits Totor, she finds him in pain and completely terrified by what happened, because over the years, “in his mind, Odille had grown into mythical proportions, Ogress and Vouivre combined” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 147). “In other words,” to quote from Martin, “what began for the teller as a fiction to frighten the listener has [in the end] become the narrator’s own horrifying obsession” (“The Tantalizing Prize” 199). Thus, mixing truth with lies, storytelling in Ducornet’s water novel bewitches reality. Moreover, whenever the Marquis dominates the scene, reality seems to morph into pure magic and the narrator turns into an illusionist who brings the world from underneath the surface where it lies hidden and expecting:

[B]ending over imaginary oars, the Marquis rows himself right out of his chair and around the room in an invisible boat which dips and rises, dips and rises, dips and topples over. Holding his nose, he tumbles extravagantly into deep water, and sinks. He surfaces, spitting, and shading his eyes as if from the sun, peers about until he sees me. When he does, he waves madly and paddles over to my chair. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 37)

[H]e places his naked feet down upon the floor, and as the air turns into thicker, mutable stuff, he grows grills, webbed fingers, and fins. Slowly, slowly he wades across the deepening waters of my room, first up to his ankles, then his knees, his loins, his heart. When the waters reach his chin, the Marquis, . . . tosses back his head and sinks beneath his hallucinated ocean to explore those subaqueous cities Totor has described to me so many times, springing the captive spirits I know are always there waiting. (Ducornet, *Fountains* 47)

The Marquis’s silent non-narratives introduce delicate changes into the rhythm of Ducornet’s story. Proving how easy it is to shape perceptions and transform the reader into the viewer, they appear to illustrate what Charlotte Innes calls “a deep, oceanic, open-ended feel” (810) of *The Fountains of Neptune*. All in all, every story is a procession of images which reach as far inside the imagination as they are allowed to.

In “Land of Delirium and the Elect,” Richard Martin rightly observes that in the second part of *The Fountains of Neptune*, the process of Nicolas’s waking up and the “narrative of his return to the ‘real’ world [invariably] absorb the reader in a self-contained universe of the mind” (23). Whereas, the Totor’s stories become Nini’s daily bread and the tales of Toujours-Là’s teach him to expect even the least unpredictable, it is the recollection of the Marquis’s silent pantomime that helps Nini understand that there is no such thing as illusion and that reality is always subjective. As “his dreamed life eclipse[s], [the Sandman] [i]s seized by vertigo. The fertile island of the mind g[ives] way to a barren and incomprehensible reality” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 131). In order to reconcile these two realms, the Sandman endeavors to rebuild his past, thus making his first-person singular narrative move erratically between letters, readings of the books he finds, splinters of his dreams and the bits and pieces of memories he begins to recognize. Finally, he begins his adventure in the Kingdom of d’Elir and his story instantly turns into “a liquescent narrative of the unstable

invasion of the everyday world by the realm of fantasy” (Martin, “The Tantalizing Prize” 198). As reality once again merges with dreams, the Sandman becomes the estranged “floating monster, both of the world and not of the world” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 220), his past and present both anchored in his own psyche.

Conclusion

For Rikki Ducornet, images are elemental. To capture them, McRandle writes, means “to capture the constant flux of a volatile world.” Invoked and contrasted, images allow meanings to emerge and truth to reveal itself – to see is to understand. Whereas on the canvas images materialize through colors and forms, in a novel they surface through figurative language which, charged, textured and agile, reflects all the turns and twists of the human mind. As language translates the world into images, it animates and seasons the reality it reflects with polysemy, ambiguity and considerable doses of bias, construing a narrative which assumes the role of a distorting mirror, mirror that simultaneously hyperbolizes and deludes. Asked by Geoff Hancock about the importance of symbolism in writing, Rikki Ducornet remarks:

I would say that books are mirrors – mirrors of the world, mirrors of ink. There are infinite meanings to be ferreted out. ... What makes [a] story ... interesting is ... the fact that so much is *hinted* at, so little actually *said* ... there are visions of distant horizons shifting, crevices and crags, unusual botanical specimens to be uprooted for a closer look.

According to Ducornet, the literary mirroring of reality leads to the construction of a fictional reality that arouses interest and invites the hunt, the *ferreting out* of implied meanings. “I don’t think that [image and meaning] can be separated,” Ducornet adds further in the interview with Hancock. “Once [Eve had] taken a bite all images were at once steeped in meaning. Isn’t that what *consciousness* is all about?” (Hancock), she asks. Without meanings, images are empty. Meanings, in turn, are bound to articulate themselves only through conscious reflection.

In “An Alchemy of Dreams and Desires,” M.E. Warlick writes that in Rikki Ducornet’s Tetralogy of Elements images “flow together like the molten surface of an anamorphic portrait that comes into focus only on its perpendicular reflective device.” The anamorphosis Warlick mentions concerns the fact that the images projected in *The Stain*, *Entering Fire*, *The Jade Cabinet* and *The Fountains of Neptune* can be fully understood only when analyzed in the context of Gaston Bachelard’s law of four elements, which ties literary language to the four classical *archai*, the fundamental forms of matter. As Gaston Bachelard claims in the introduction to *Water and Dreams*, the symbolism of each *archai* is linked with a specific kind of imagination and oneirism (5) which, when applied to literature, induce poetic images consistent with the chosen element’s symbolism. Reading Ducornet’s tetralogy, one reads (into) the four elements. Whereas each of Ducornet’s four novels develops a different, self-contained story, each is also anchored in an elementally imprinted environment and each uses an element as its concertizing poetic pattern, associating it with the abstract concepts of faith, love, imagination, memory, or language.

In *The Fountains of Neptune*, Rikki Ducornet translates the world into water. In so doing, as often happens during the process of translation, she comes up with a whole new world of meanings and contexts. Focusing upon the sea, endowing it with almost animate qualities and drawing on the frequently made association between water and life, *The Fountains of Neptune* investigates both the sea’s (life’s) surface and its depth, depicting the unpredictability of human life as well as the profundity of people’s inner world and emotions. Delineating the connections between dreams and memories, the novel points towards the intricate nature of the unconscious mind and at the same time demonstrates that only by acknowledging the past can one really rebuild one’s “world-self” (Ducornet, *Fountains* 216). The novel reestablishes also the symbolic connection between water

and femininity, likening a woman to a bottomless, irresistible abyss of ambiguity. The fact that water constitutes the centering metaphor of *The Fountains of Neptune* is discernible also on the linguistic and narrative levels of the text. Ducornet's ambiguous literary language and constant changes of the flow and even of the rhythmic structure of the book's story blur the distinction between reality and fiction, till they threaten to engulf one another. "Dew to dew," states one of the books protagonists, "All things dissolve" (Ducornet, *Fountains* 75).

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