"Incongruities, mysteries": Freaks and Incongruous Wor(l)ds in Contemporary American Fiction

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1. Reading Ducornet and Eakins's fictions involves being faced with unusual and surprising characters. From the freaks under the tent that displays "[i]ncongruities, mysteries" in Ducornet's *The Jade Cabinet*, to the weird and shocking Exorcist in her novel *The Stain* (who transforms into yet other incongruous characters in *Entering Fire*, *The Fountains of Neptune* and *Phosphor in Dreamland*), and to Patricia Eakins's monstrous hungry girls who devour their way out of their mothers' bellies, or of Pierre-Baptiste, the protagonist of her novel, a man who gives birth to fish-men from his mouth, the reader stops and stares in wonder, amazement, and more often than not, in horror. These reactions are triggered by the incongruity of the characters: they are indeed very much "unusual or different from what is around or from what is generally happening".[1]

2. Those freaks, monsters and incongruous creatures put to the fore an uncanniness which is part and parcel of everything that is other, that stands at the margin in some way or another. But in spite of this, they appear in fictions which constantly remind the reader of the extra-fictional world through an amazing and complex web of historical, geographical and literary references. The narration thus places highly imaginative, uncanny and incongruous creatures in fictive worlds that the reader can recognize as his or her own; as a result, Ducornet and Eakins's fictions disturb the balance of the reader's familiar world, of its knowledge and culture, and of the subsequent expectations it creates. In other words, they question the existence of such thing as an unequivocal reality and shake up the reader's knowledge and understanding of the extra-fictional world by way of an incongruous fictional world, revealing the existence of multiple realities.

3. The breach that reveals the real's *unheimlichkeit* disturbs not only the reader's understanding of the world, but also meaning itself. In Ducornet and Eakins's fictions, new incongruous worlds go along with new incongruous words: they play with linguistic and lexical norms, with language, words and meaning.

4. This article aims at shedding light on Rikki Ducornet and Patricia Eakins's incongruous fictional representations, and on what they reveal about the nature of the extra-fictional world, fiction and language. For that purpose, this study will focus on Patricia Eakins's novel and collection of

1 Definition of the word "incongruous" in the *Cambridge Dictionary*.

short stories (*The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre-Baptiste* and *The Hungry Girls and Other Stories*) and on Rikki Ducornet's first five novels (*The Stain*, *Entering Fire*, *The Jade Cabinet*, *The Fountains of Neptune* and *Phosphor in Dreamland*).

Incongruous narratives

5. Patricia Eakins and Rikki Ducornet's fictions differ in many ways, but they are nevertheless bound by their highly imaginative and inventive depictions of incongruous stories. As Françoise Palleau-Papin explained about Eakins:

> Her tales deal with outlandish characters, remote in time and place, and sound like exotic fables from other days, yet they are strangely revealing of our own times. […] Mainly, the stories take place in a country of the mind remote enough to feel strange and yet close to our sense of actual history and culture. (Palleau-Papin 71)

This incongruous, unheimlich hybridity highlighted by Palleau-Papin is the keystone of Eakins's short stories. In "Milady's Ploy", set in medieval Japan, stags are declining because their antlers have grown so heavy that they cannot mate any longer; Lady Nakitan, a concubine, uses small red dogs ("Totojoni") to help them. "Salt" tells about what the reader guesses is an ancient tribe, whose life is made of the dreams of its successive chiefs. "Banda" rewrites *Hansel and Gretel* with a story in which the eponymous creatures warn children that a witch wants to eat them, and cry tears of honey when they don't pay attention to their words of caution. "Meat song" tells a legend-like story about the ancient times in which grass was taller than men, so much so that they used it to build houses. In "Oono", the main character leaves his body behind to go, in the form of a spirit, negotiate with the God-like first creature so that his people does not die of hunger, while his wife blows hot air through the scar of his belly button to keep his body alive. *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste*, Eakins's only novel, starts as would a slave narrative; however, in this story, the slave ends up being impregnated by a female fish and giving birth to fish-men creatures from his mouth, all the while losing his tongue. Rikki Ducornet's novels also depict incongruous stories: a man whose family has lost the ability to dream goes on a quest to find it back in *Phosphor in Dreamland*, a young girl called Etheria ends up vanishing into thin air in *The Jade Cabinet* while her father seems to be absorbed by the *Hungerkünstler*, a character who grows larger and larger as the novel unfolds, and Nicolas, the protagonist of *The Fountains of Neptune*, awakes from a thirty year-long coma and tries to remember his story by building a miniature kingdom called "D'Elir".

6. Of course, these incongruous stories feature many incongruous characters and creatures. In Rikki Ducornet's novels, the incongruity lies not so much in creatures as in the characters them-

selves. In *The Stain*, young innocent Charlotte stands out in the vicious, perverse, hypocritical and greedy world of adults she sees through her child's eyes, just like Etheria in *The Jade Cabinet*. In *The Fountains of Neptune*, Nicolas attracts attention because he woke up after thirty years in a coma, a child's mind in the body of an adult. Those three examples show how Ducornet uses incongruous characters: they are actually considered incongruous by the other characters, who as a consequence marginalize them. However, for the reader, the marginalized characters symbolize childhood and innocence; as a consequence, incongruity shifts and ends up defining the whole fictional world that surrounds Charlotte, Nicolas and Etheria.

7. In Patricia Eakins's short stories, the reader is confronted with many incongruous objects and creatures, as announced in the epigraph which is actually taken from the foreword to Jean Louis Le Montal's *Encyclopedia*:

> I give you here the flora and fauna of all the continents, beasts and vegetables, birds and fish, I have seen myself and heard reported. Mind there are many wonders under the sun. Which are God's creations? Which are men's? The truth is not always the likeliest story; thus I credit any careful account.[2]

These short stories will thus make the reader travel around the world to discover real or legendary creatures and objects.[3] Legends (etymologically, what must be read) and myths will blend with reality through "hungry girls" eating their way out of their mothers' bellies at birth, snake-like creatures called "Djitsis" raping the inhabitants of "Galub", "neones" (green mutant dogs born from nuclear tests) in "The Change", "Auravirs" (creatures which seem to be half-way between men and orangutans) or "Yiqh-Yaqhs", "dark and light horses with feet like goats and horns in the middle of their foreheads" (Eakins 1989, 85). The creatures invented by Patricia Eakins, of which only a few examples are mentioned here, are part of a wide fabulous bestiary composed of hybrid creatures[4] which culminate in the character of Pierre Baptiste, the protagonist of her novel, described as follows as early as the title page: "Pierre Baptiste, Father & Mother, First & Last, […] who established A REALM of Equality & Freedom & Bounty, in Which No Creature Lives from Another's Labor". Pierre Baptiste is the emblem of hybridity, one which gathers opposites, something which enables him to create a world of "Freedom": physical freedom, but also the freedom to create an unlimited number of creatures and objects which stand out as incongruous compared to the reader's world.

2 Although this reference is presented as if it came from a real encyclopedia, it is actually fictive. This narrative play on the limit between the real and the imaginary makes the reference itself incongruous.

3 About the mythological creatures Eakins rewrites and those she creates, see Desblaches.

4 The bestiary was a "literary genre in the European Middle Ages consisting of a collection of stories, each based on a description of certain qualities of an animal, plant, or even stone", as defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This genre, at first used to "present Christian allegories for moral and religious instruction and admonition", has influenced literature through the ages, as "many attributes that have become traditionally associated with real or mythical creatures derive from the bestiaries".

8. In Eakins and Ducornet's fictions, incongruity lies in the stories, characters, creatures and objects they describe, but not only. Their works are remarkable for their exuberant and highly imaginative heterogeneity and variety – two words conveying another definition of "incongruous", namely "not in harmony, incompatible".[5] In their fictions, the reader is faced with multiple literary genres and historical, geographical and literary references which indeed seem to be incompatible: Ducornet's *The Stain* features superstition and religious beliefs, but also exoticism, grotesque and black humor, tragedy, nonsense and fairy-tale. *The Jade Cabinet*, located in England and Egypt, mixes archeology, magic tricks, freak shows, forced marriage, in a novel which pretends to be a memoir and sometimes looks like an epistolary novel. The spa, gardens, pubs and ships in *The Fountains of Neptune* are filled with sea legends, world war stories, pieces of psychoanalyses and museum visits. *Entering Fire,* historical when it tells about nazism, reads like an alchemical treatise on the verge of becoming an encyclopedia about orchids. All her novels feature a number of images, illustrations and poems, as well as many words in foreign languages and intertextual references. This heterogeneity is also characteristic of Eakins's fictions. Her short stories are set in varied historical periods and places: XIXth century France for "the Hungry Girls", XIIth century Japan for "Milady's Ploy", "The Change" happens in the Pacific during the Cold War, "Auravir" is located in Ancient Rome, "Salt" tells about a Nordic myth, and her novel happens in a French colony in the XVIIIth century. In her fictions, she uses many different literary genres (such as the fairy-tale, the myth, the fable, the slave narrative) and foreign words (from as many as eight different languages).

9. Their highly heterogeneous fictions, because they seem to gather the whole world in the restricted space of the text, become these cabinets of curiosities which are dear to Rikki Ducornet[6] and which she defines as follows:

> The enlightenment was preceded by the great voyages of discovery, which revealed a sprawling world, infinitely stranger than previously imagined. A World of Wonders reflected in *wunderkammern*, or cabinets of marvels in which the world's excess could be comfortably contained, as though as much savage and eccentric beauty—flamboyant birds, snakes broad as chimneys, pigs castellated with scales—could be assimilated in homeopathic doses only. (Ducornet 1999, 7)

The description of cabinets of curiosities and of the items they display perfectly fits her fictions and those of Patricia Eakins: the strangeness, the excesses, the "wonders" and the "savage and eccentric beauty" of the world delivered "in homeopathic doses" are as many manifestations of their multi-faceted incongruity, one which appears on several levels. First, they gather a multiplicity of different

5 *Merriam Webster Dictionary*.

6 All of her novels contain at least one cabinet of curiosities: the De Bergeracs's family wardrobe in *Entering Fire*, Nicolas's Kingdom of D'Elir in *The Fountains of Neptune*, Fantasma's collection of photographs (which the narrator likens to a cabinet of curiosities) in *Phosphor in Dreamland*, the jade cabinet and the office of Etheria's father in *The Jade Cabinet*, the odd shop in *The Stain*. The same can be said of Eakins's fictions, which also contain cabinets of curiosities, for instance Pierre Baptiste's encyclopedia in her novel.

and incompatible literary genres, historical and geographical references and languages; then, some places described in their fictions look like cabinets of curiosities and some characters name and describe *wunderkammern*. Lastly, specific linguistic tools are used to describe those cabinets: enumeration, asyndeton or polysyndeton and nominal sentences for example. Cabinets of curiosities then appear at the level of the structure of their stories, on the diegetic level and on the syntactic and microstructural level, a *mise-en-abyme* of many layers of cabinets of curiosities, of many layers of incongruities. After having described cabinets of curiosities, Ducornet then explains their function:

> Cabinets of curiosities, still popular well into the eighteenth century, provided a species of looking glass into worlds of wonder most often arranged in "ideal" and impossible configurations. Among the pieces of mummy and horned beetles are optical instruments, the microscope, for example, which revealed the unexpected monstrosity of such common things as the face of a fly or a flea. (Ducornet 1999, 19)

The role of cabinets of curiosities is then to reveal the incongruity of the familiar, everyday world; this is actually also one of the purposes of Eakins and Ducornet's fictions, something which can be better understood by having a closer look at Eakins's short story "The Hungry Girls" – maybe because the first object the reader encounters is the pharmacist's microscope: "The pharmacist had already been watching through the lenses of his shiny new microscope" (Eakins 1999, 13). This object is not as trivial as it may seem: it is an object of curiosity into which all the villagers want to peer, which invites the reader to pay close attention to objects and metafictionally metaphorizes the way Eakins focuses on the details in which the incongruous may lie.

10. What the microscope actually prepares the reader for is the appearance of the incongruous hungry girls, who are marginalized even before being named: "On a farm outside La Bouchoire lived Mathilde Sabot, the mother of the first hungry girl" (Eakins 1999, 14). The narration first mentions the place where Mathilde Sabot lived, creating the image of a geographical exile which is reflected in the structure of the sentence: although "Mathilde Sabot" is the semantic subject, it is placed at the end of the sentence in what seems like a syntactic exile. The reader then learns that she gave birth to the first hungry girl: exile then preceded the incongruous that was born outside the village. However, the village's name prepares the reader for the incongruous hunger since it suggests "la bouche", the all-devouring mouth of the hungry girls. Their exile is fake, the village where they go on the rampage is truly where they belong.

11. Similarly, the description of the hungry girls also exiles them, places them in a space which does not totally correspond to the norm and to the characteristics of human beings established by the villagers. They are "born with teeth" (14), "never learned to talk" (15), eat animals such as rats, cats and dogs (15), have "no internal organs" (16) and are amazingly strong, like Jeanne, the first

hungry girl, who "at the age of nine, […] took over the plowing from her father, driving straight and hard behind the ox, plowing in one day as much as her father could in a week" (15). As a result, the hungry girls are taken further and further away from the village and thus more and more marginalized, first "to a remote corner of the parish" (15), then "to the lunatic asylum at Anse-le-Marteau" (19) and finally away from the world itself as the pharmacist ends up killing them (21). However, they also look human as they are referred to as "human" babies (14) and children (15): the subtext thus shows that incongruity is a concept made up by society – the hungry girls are not mere freaks outside the main fray.

12. This description makes the hungry girls more and more incongruous as the short story unfolds, so much so that they even become monstrous. The difference between the incongruous and the monstrous is slight: like the first, the second refers to something which is out of place, but the notion of monstrosity adds in a sense of evilness, of malevolence due either to an exaggerated size or to a lack of morality.[7] In this short story, the hungry girls shift from incongruous to monstrous, first because each generation of hungry girls is bigger than the previous one: Jeanne was an "enormous girl" (15), her grandchildren were "larger than any hungry girls before" (18), and the last hungry girl who is described was so big that it contained "a stage coach […], six horses and a sizeable carriage with a great deal of baggage on top and six horses" (19). The hungry girls are also monstrous because they are described as evil: they are "thieves" (15), and even eat "the bodies of the dead, […] beginning with their own mother" (18). This monstrosity leads the pharmacist, at the end of the short story, to say that "These creatures are barely human" (21): "barely", so human, but not quite. As Michel Foucault explains, what makes the monstrous unsettling is the fact that it is similar to the group, but at the same time puts to the fore some differences which take the form of deformities or aberrations (Foucault 168-170). By highlighting the hungry girls' belonging to the village and the group, the subtext puts to the fore incongruity as a social construct: the girls' incongruity is not innate, it is not their nature – they are categorized as such by society.

13. The short story thus represents the hungry girls as both incongruous and monstrous, two concepts which are closely linked in this fiction. In spite of this, they are not the only characters the narrative voice represents in this fashion; the villagers also have their part of incongruity and monstrosity. Their own father treats them like cattle: "Robert kept them apart and fed them from separate boxes – hay and apple and dirt – and built a long shed with twelve stalls and a plank roof so the girls could find shelter from rain" (17), and their parents are saddened when a hungry girl dies because they lose not a child, but workforce: "Imagine the grief of the parents to find one evening their useful daughters flat on her back in the fields" (16). The first example establishes an ironical gap between the accumulation suggested by the polysyndeton which accumulates the conjunction

7 According to the definition of the *Cambridge Dictionary*.

"and", supposedly insisting on how good Robert is to his girls, and the way he actually treats them. The second example is quite ironical as well, through the discrepancy between the pain the parents feel and the reason of that pain: the usefulness of their daughter, convenient for hard farm work. Both passages show that if the short story does represent the incongruity and monstrosity of the hungry girls, it is only a reflector which actually sheds light on the real incongruous monsters: human beings.

14. This is emphasized at the end of the short story, which tells how, years after the last hungry girl died, tourists take a guided tour of the village:

> The tour guides who meets the busses laugh at the rumor that babies were born from some of the dead girls' bellies long after they were buried. […]
>
> "Food runs out, wherever one is", they say. "Money is spent and men disappear, along with teapots and platters. Can one really blame the hungry girls who are many feet beneath the grass?" (21)

The final paragraph reads like the moral of a fable and once again alludes to the genre of the bestiary, in order to shed light on the monstrosity and incongruity of the men who killed the hungry girls to punish them, when they were not responsible for all their hardships. Patricia Eakins actually draws on the literary tradition of novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where monsters end up revealing humanity's own monstrosity and incongruity.

15. Eakins's all-devouring hungry girls are intriguingly echoed by a character in Rikki Ducornet's *The Jade Cabinet*, the Hungerkünstler. Etheria and her father meet her under the tent at the freak show; she is then described as "the fair's one jewel" (Ducornet 1993, 67), a creature who "lives on air and converses with angels" (68) and is "white, perfectly white, the colour of sour milk; so white she [is] almost blue. Her hair [is] white, and her eyebrows and lashes; her lips so pale as to be nearly invisible" (67). Her incomprehensible language, her whiteness and the fact that she does not need to feed make her seem angelic, almost sacred. Etheria is the only one who sees her for what she is: "the faint smile which informed her face was coloured by bitter irony so black it caused Etheria to shudder" (68), and to hear her "hisses" (73). The black hissing creature becomes the snake in the garden of Etheria's home when her father, convinced that she holds the key to the origin of language, decides to bring her home. There she needs to be fed more and more, on "bonbon[s] glacé[s]" (73), "candied chestnuts" (77) and "pudding" (95), but not only. Etheria's father makes her numerous gifts such as "Japanese dolls of porcelain" (77) hoping that she will reveal him some secrets about the Adamic language, so much so that "nothing remain[s]" (95) in the house. Etheria's father becomes a "ruined man" (77), "sucked [...] dry" (95) by the Hungerkünstler – and he dies shortly after. The "creature" as Etheria calls her (81) is then taken to Egypt by

Radulph Tubbs, Etheria's husband. There she keeps eating more and more, becoming "fat" and "weightier" (95), devouring "priceless scarabs of opal, peridot, fayrûz, onyx, and coraline. Some had the faces of rams, others of bulls, others had human faces. All of these were swallowed and digested by the Hungerkünstler" (97), her bottomless hunger mirrored by the accumulation of objects enumerated in this passage, one which leads her to "expand to proportions altogether mythical" (120). But the Hungerkünstler does not only feed on food and objects; her "erotic voracity" (78) leads her to feed on her lover, Radulph Tubbs, who explains: "Another time she bit my tongue, necessitating three stitches. [...] Hungerkünstler bit my flesh, [...] she tore at my body with her teeth" (81). The "spidery Hungerkünstler" (77) becomes "a bloated, red spider, straddled his neck so tightly with her eight legs that he was barely able to breathe" (96): Tubbs is figuratively devoured by this creature which the narration assimilates to a black widow through the reference to spiders and sexual cannibalism. By devouring Tubbs and Etheria's father, and by killing Etheria herself at the end of the novel (151), the Hungerkünstler transgresses the limit between humanity and monstrosity, becoming indeed the monster Etheria said she was. Unlike Eakins's hungry girls, the Hungerkünstler is inherently monstrous: the religious subtext makes her stand out as a catalyst for greed, gluttony, lust, wrath, sloth and envy, six of the seven deadly sins – she is a mirror through which the other characters can contemplate their own flaws.

16. This character is the only monster per se created by Ducornet in her novels, however she does invent incongruous characters which reveal the monstrosity and uncanniness of the extra-fictional reality and of human beings. To give but a few examples, she denounces the hypocrisy and perversity of religion through Charlotte in *The Stain*, the nefarious consequences of extreme political thoughts through Septimus in *Entering Fire*, and the evils of capitalism and industrialization by way of Etheria in *The Jade Cabinet*.

17. This overview of the different forms the incongruous takes and of its role in Patricia Eakins and Rikki Ducornet's fictions shows something which is common to both authors: even though incongruity is not always represented in the same way in their fictions, it is used to reveal the incongruity of the extra-fictional reality, of the reader's world.

In the reader's world(s)

18. Ducornet and Eakins produce incongruous fictive worlds which are, paradoxically, firmly grounded in the reader's extra-fictional reality through a complex, heterogeneous and limitless web of historical, geographical and cultural references. Eakins's stories mix incongruous fictions with

real elements,[8] but what is all the more striking is that they never give any narrative hint that would help the reader make the difference between the real and the fictional. In "The Hungry Girls" for instance, the reader recognizes historical figures – such as Louis Philippe (14) – and real historical events – like the potato famine in Europe in the 1840s – however some fictive elements are intertwined with them, for example villages names (Lamouset, Brosse-les-Bains, Dix-Poulets, Anse-le-Marteau) or characters (Mathilde Sabot and Docteur Couviard). It is worth noting that the fictive elements are nevertheless based on real words, in French because the short story takes place in France. The process is similar in all the other stories of the collection: in "Snakeskins", the Parsee people does exist but not the "Galubi" merchants or the creatures called "Djitsis". "Daddy's Ibbit Wife" features Native Americans but also fictive "Ibbits". Tibet appears alongside fictive "Thok Nang" and the "Urdhiar" people in "Yiqh-Yaqh". In "Oono", the reader recognizes the Arctic continent, but the "Ooni" and the "Ignook" are fictive. However, these words denote the real, with the double "o" which reminds the reader of the word "igloo". This short story is the last of the collection, which is very significant as it directly highlights the impossibility to distinguish between fact and fiction when the narration asks, almost at the end of the story: "Who knows whether it is true?" (136). This question is left unanswered, which either shows that the answer is not important, or that the question itself is not relevant: the real and the fictional are put on the same level in order to reveal the incongruity of the reader's world.

19. It is all the more obvious when Eakins mixes historical data with elements which seem to be out of place, incongruous. Her novel is divided into two parts: the first tells the story of Pierre Baptiste, a slave in a French colony. This part reads like a slave narrative and is deeply rooted in history, which makes it realistic. At the end of this part Pierre Baptiste manages to escape, and lands on a desert island; this is where the second part of the novel starts, and where the story definitely moves away from the realism of the first. This division is very clear to the reader, however it is undermined by some passages of the first part. For instance, Pierre Baptiste describes himself as "a chattel-servant escaped of a sugar-cane plantation of Saint-Michel, of the French Anduves" (3), and then as an "Anduvean" (67, 243). The place he mentions never existed, and neither does the word "Anduvean": even though the incongruous imaginary story develops only in the second part of the novel, it was already foreshadowed in the first part through the incongruity of the intrusion of an invented word in an otherwise realistic story.

20. This insertion of incongruous fictional elements in a realistic historical background is also used in Ducornet's fiction, especially in *Entering Fire* – since most of this novel is about World War II. First of all, the very chaotic timeline of this novel blurs chronology and history. Then, Ducornet uses – like Eakins – both real historical or cultural figures (Henry Ford, Pedro II, Sarah Bernhardt,

8 It is something Marc Chénetier also noticed in the introduction of Palleau-Papin 5-9.

Xavier Vallat, Pétain, to quote but a few) and fictional characters. Finally, some real events which appear in the narrative also figure incongruous inventions; all the elements telling about the German soldiers taking the city of Angers on June 19th 1940 are historically true, but there is no trace of soldiers named "Roll" and "Möpse". The insertion of fictive characters in a historical environment is a literary legacy inherited from the XIXth century, one which Ducornet appropriates by drawing the attention of the reader to the construction of these fictive characters by way of incongruous names. "Roll" and "Möpse" can only bring rollmops to mind, an incongruity which aims at ridiculing the nazi ideology through satire. As Raymond Leslie Williams remarked:

> Ducornet […] make[s] a playful farce out of rewriting history. […] One important role of the writer is to recoup, with a fiction that is more real (as well as sometimes more unreal) than classical historiography, the supposed truth of history. […] Ducornet is fascinated with the playful possibilities of perverting history and historiography. (Williams, 181)

This quote equates fiction with historiography, and even questions the truth of history: here is the consequence of Ducornet's mixing of history and fiction, without ever distinguishing between the two. It puts to the fore the fact that history, as Hennig Schmidgen explains, is an "interpretation" of the truth because history books reflect the subjectivity of their authors: the selection of facts undermines the possibility of objectivity (Schmidgen 342). The impossible subjectivity of history was also studied by Roland Barthes, who drew an interesting link between history and imagination:

> [L]e discours historique est essentiellement élaboration idéologique, ou, pour être plus précis, imaginaire, s'il est vrai que l'imaginaire est le langage par lequel l'énonçant d'un discours (entité linguistique) « remplit » le sujet de l'énoncé (entité psychologique ou idéologique). On comprend dès lors que la notion de « fait » historique ait souvent, ici et là, suscité une certaine méfiance. […] [L]e discours, chargé seulement d'exprimer le réel, croit faire l'économie du terme fondamental des discours à prétention « réaliste », celui de l'histoire ne croit ainsi connaître qu'un schéma sémantique à deux termes, le référent et le signifiant […] ; le discours historique est un discours performatif truqué, dans lequel le constatif (le descriptif) apparent n'est en fait que le signifiant de l'acte de parole comme acte d'autorité. […] En d'autres termes, dans l'histoire « objective », le « réel » n'est jamais qu'un signifié informulé. (Barthes 174-175)

History, being a discourse, can then only be an ideological construction and is, as a consequence, always connected to imagination and never objective. When Ducornet and Eakins play with history and fiction, history vanishes, leaving multiple stories – or multiple realities – in its wake, revealing the uncanniness and the incongruity of the belief that such thing as an unequivocal reality exists and can be put to words.

21. With postmodernism came a certain suspicion, not to say mistrust, of the expression of unequivocal truths: interpretations became partial, diverging and multiple (David 13). This is what

Brian McHale explains in *Postmodernist Fiction*: when the essential feature of modernist fiction was epistemological (because it sought to provide answers to questions about knowledge), that of postmodernism was, on the contrary, ontological: it questioned the world itself and the possibility of its existence (McHale 9-10). McHale first underlines the existence of plural universes, among which those created in fictional works, which he calls "heterocosms" (27). As a consequence, reality becomes a vast construction,[9] a collective fiction: fictional worlds mix with reality to create worlds, realities, "worlds in the plural" (37). Because the world became associated with the idea of multiplicity,[10] it contained unlimited possibilities.[11]

22. The idea of multiple realities and multiple worlds, which emerged from the postmodernist movement, deeply influenced Ducornet and Eakins's fictions; both authors use specific tools and a particular poetics to express this multiplicity, namely the enumeration of multiple possibilities, embedded narratives and polyphony.

23. In Eakins's novel and short stories, the narration very often offers several possible interpretations of a fact with the words "some said... others said". For instance, Pierre Baptiste does not know what happened to his father and explains: "Some say Jolicoeur hung himself, others he simply stopped coming by, still others he had sold himself" (Eakins 1999, 38). Later on in the novel, the narration comes back again to the uncertainty of Jolicoeur's situation: "Some said he succeeded in running away and reaching the maroons. And some said he hung himself with a rope he had made by tearing his smock into strips" (57). This type of sentence structure is typical of Eakins's fiction and can be found in all of her short stories as well. The enumeration of multiple possibilities by a narration which does not provide the reader with any clear answer participates in breaking up reality into multiple realities.

24. This process is also characteristic of Ducornet's novels, although it mainly takes the form of embedded narratives.[12] In *The Jade Cabinet* for instance, multiple stories are told by different characters who become as many narrators: stories told by Charles Dodgson (Ducornet 1993, 15, 25, 52), Etheria's father (13) and Radulph Tubbs (25), quotes from other texts (9) as well as words written by Etheria (18, 21) are embedded in the main narrative told by Memory, Etheria's sister, who writes her story by gathering pieces from her sister's diary and Tubbs's memoir. It is however in *Phosphor in Dreamland* that this *mise-en-abyme* of stories reaches a climax as Sinda Gregory explained: "There are in fact literally hundreds of stories told there – 'micronarratives' that appear briefly in virtually every paragraph of the book, introduced in bits and pieces that the reader is invited to complete" (Gregory, 123-124). The story of Phosphor, the eponymous protagonist, seems to be the main

9 About reality as a social construction, see Berger and Luckmann.
10 About how the world became multiple in contemporary thought, see Nancy and Barrau.
11 Tanner explains that this is not specific to the American novel, but it is one of its characteristics (42, 230-231).
12 Richard Martin makes an interesting in-depth analysis of embedded narratives in *The Fountains of Neptune*.

narrative of this novel, but the reader quickly realizes that it is merely a story among many others, a "micronarration" which, by itself, does not mean anything. It is only by piecing together all the stories of the novel that the reader can access its meaning. The correspondance between Ved and the main narrator, Phosphor and his inventions, Birdland and its inhabitants, the fabulous lôplôp, Fogginius the mad scientist, the Inquisition, the love story between Phosphor and Extravaganza, Fantasma's quest to be able to dream again are but a few examples of the many stories embedded in the main narrative level of this novel: as many truths, as many realities, to make a world.

25. Multiple stories are also embedded in the main narrative of Patricia Eakins's novel: Pierre Baptiste's mother tells about her life until she was separated from her son (40-44), Rose tells the legend of "Fait-Tout", (49-52) Squint tells the stories of the "'rago" (134-135) and the "jitseys" (160-166) which rewrite two of Eakins's short stories, and at the end of the novel, Pamphile tells Pierre Baptiste about the French Revolution (219-230). These characters, along with Pierre Baptiste, all have stories to tell, and once put together they build the founding beliefs of Pierre Baptiste's people but they also contribute to building his own narration and his encyclopedia.

26. As Tony Tanner wrote: "If one voice prevailed then one version of reality would prevail" (Tanner 123): the multiple narrators in Ducornet and Eakins's fiction are as many voices which represent different realities: polyphony contributes to creating worlds. Mikhail Bakhtin explained that polyphony was a tool that helped reflecting the complexity of multiple social and human realities, and as a consequence it became deeply characteristic of novel-writing.[13] Brian McHale used the word "heteroglossia" after Bakhtin to refer to the multiple voices which are necessary to describe the multiple realities brought to light by postmodernism: "Heteroglossia is used here as an opening wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse" (McHale, 167). A number of literary theorists have studied the concept of polyphony in fiction: it is by no means something Ducornet and Eakins invented, but they nevertheless reappropriate this process and use it in an uncommon way.

27. Here is a passage of *The Fountains of Neptune*, where Rose (Nicolas's adoptive mother) starts telling a story:

> The cook had told her a dreadful story:
>
> "Oh, far too dreadful to repeat. And I wouldn't want to ruin your lovely lunches! But a scandal, I assures you. Why, it's set me all aflutter. I hardly taste the pâté – and no, I can't let you in on it, well, maybe later... To tell the truth my heart feels like a hen on a hot griddle!"
>
> Just then I heard someone behind me say:

13 See especially the section entitled "Le plurilinguisme dans le roman" in Bakhtin 122-151. He calls polyphony "plurilinguism" (89), "plurivocal language" (150), "polylinguism" (155) or "galilean linguistic conscience" (226).

> "I've blue feet!" Impatient with Rose's coy mysteries, I turned and tried to get a look at the man who was talking, but all I could see was the back of his head.
>
> "I can't figure it out", the stranger said. "You'd think it was – "
>
> "In pieces!" Rose threw her arms up in the air.
>
> "A sort of – "
>
> "Dead body!"
>
> "Inside too! All the organs: BLUE! You should have seen me in a mirror! You would have said – "
>
> "Her corpse!" Rose whispered.
>
> "They stuck in so many needles, my arse was red!"
>
> "You put a bucket down the well", said Rose, "it came up red!"
>
> "Blue!"
>
> "And they still don't know who did it!" Rose quivered with excitement. (Ducornet 1997, 108)

This passage features two narrators: Rose and a stranger, who tell two different stories of which pieces are heard by Nicolas, the narrator of the main diegesis. What is interesting here is that even though both narrators tell different stories, they seem to complete each other's words and their stories end up forming a coherent heterogeneity. The structure of this passage reproduces on the micronarrative level what happens on the macronarrative level, namely in the structure of the novel itself. Chapters one to eleven tell either about Nicolas's childhood with Rose and Totor, or about his adulthood in Doctor Kaiserstiege's spa; these two storylines meet up in chapter twelve, which explains the link between the two. This process shows that several stories, several realities, are associated and connected to create fictional worlds.

28. Patricia Eakins's novel uses polyphony on many occasions, and unlike the passage of *The Fountains of Neptune* which has just been quoted, the reader sometimes does not know who is speaking or telling the story. This very often happens in Eakins's novel, in which even Pierre, the extra-diegetic narrator, uses either a first-person or a third-person point of view, thus splitting his own voice, which becomes quite incongruous when he does so in a short paragraph:

> Here, Kind Reader, I beg you consider the LONELY DISCOMFITURE of a derelict, who has hitherto marked the vicissitudes of his existence but in relation to others. Thus he has made the maps by which he knows himself. The peril I had escaped notwithstanding, I longed for company. […] "What cosseted individual", cried Pierre. (182)

In this passage the pronoun "he" refers to Pierre Baptiste, just like "I" in the third sentence and the name "Pierre" at the end of the extract. But the reader might wonder who the first occurrence of "I" refers to: is it another narrator adopting a heterodiegetic status, an intervention of the author, or even Pierre, who would speak of himself with an indefinite article ("a derelict")? This uncertainty about who the narrative voice belongs to is characteristic of Eakins's novel and it is never clarified, letting the reader free to draw any conclusion, faced with multiple possible realities.[14]

29. Ducornet and Eakins describe multiple possibilities and use embedded narratives and polyphony in their fictions in order to reveal the existence of multiple realities, which shakes up the reader's knowledge and understanding of the extra-fictional world. In other words, the reader's world becomes unknown, out of place: incongruous. The fictions studied in this article disturb the balance of the reader's familiar world by shattering it into unlimited possible worlds, unlimited possible meanings, and creating these new incongruous worlds implies forging new incongruous words.

New incongruous words

30. The incongruous fictional worlds created by Patricia Eakins and Rikki Ducornet are told by way of an incongruous language and of incongruous words: Eakins metamorphoses or invents words to describe incongruous creatures, and Ducornet plays with the meaning of words through malapropisms. Both authors use uncanny word associations as well to reveal the incongruity of language.

31. Françoise Palleau-Papin studied how the figure of the simile runs through Eakins's short stories (Palleau-Papin 1997), showing that in her fiction similes shed light on an enigmatic, hard to define referent; the similes then metamorphose into metaphors, which makes the latter the keystone of Eakins's short stories. This is actually also the case in her novel, as will be best shown by studying it along with the incipit of her short story "Djitsis":

> The young of this serpent are hatched from a mother's mouth like so many words, to shed her quick upon entering the world, a habit they continue in shedding their own skins, at every turn, streaking out of their past lives faster than you can pull your foot from your stocking. (Eakins 1989, 25)

The serpent's shedding introduces metamorphosis on the thematic level, while language also metamorphoses: the similes introduced by "like" and "faster than" imply a transformation of words into images, and the polyptoton through which "shed" turns into "shedding" changes words themselves. The first simile suggests that the young of this strange serpent are born from their mothers' mouths,

14 About the splitting of the narrative voice in Eakins's novel, see Cazé.

like words: the figure of speech reflexively points at the act of writing itself, but it is also foreshadowing Eakins's novel when Pierre Baptiste feels something in his mouth and explains: "By careful feints with the finger, I counted four – dare I call them infants? Two in each pouch" (Eakins 1999, 196). His children are then born from his mouth, like words, a process which leaves him speechless, as if words had literally been taken right out of his mouth. Pierre then transforms into a hybrid creature, both father and mother, "Papamam" (247) as his children call him. Pierre is metamorphosed, which was announced earlier on in the novel by the multiple similes he used to describe himself: "I strutted like a cock" (5), "Like a turtle, I withdrew my head into my shell" (155) for example; Pierre is indeed a "changeling" (23). Pierre's language is also influenced by metamorphosis, for instance when he describes the hybrid creature he encountered on the desert island (that which impregnated him) and describes her feet: "Her feet had been changed to frog's feet!" (178). He notices a change in her appearance, a transformation which then insinuates in the adjectives he uses: "her froggy feet", "those amphibolous feet", "her flippered feet". Words metamorphose into other words, until they become new ones: "amphibolous" does not exist, but the reader understands its meaning because it sounds like "amphibious".

32. In her novel, Eakins invents new words on many occasions; creating new names enables her to reveal the incongruity of the creatures she invents, which is particularly the case in this passage, where Pierre Baptiste's children discover new creatures:

> And so Pierre's young, having observed with him the common thrasher and the oven trush and the spackled beater-wing, did then plunge into the element of their greatest affinity, the sea, and commence to record the habits and proclivities of layfish and puffers; grunts, wasses, and tallywags; surgeonfish and triggerfish; parrotfish and snappers. And not only these fish, well known to the denizens of Saint-Michel, […] but other fish, quite unknown, that lived far down. And among these the whipperlux and needlenose, the whiskered grumpkin and rainbow skate – for so we have named them.
>
> And not only fin-fish, my offspring observed, but shellfish, pearl-oysters, limpets, slippersnails, murexes; and scuttling hard-skins, viz., the crab. Of the latter my offspring discovered several varieties that lived very far down, which shattered when brought to the top, which we called the glass-skins, viz., the glass-skin blue, the glass-skin double-claw, the glass-skin mottle. And further down than the glass-skin crabs, peculiar creatures, very tall columnar jellies with rootlike toes grasping the rocks on the floor of the sea. They have no arms nor any discernible motility, yet though they take in water and release it again, their bodies swelling and sagging. And with these columnates on the ocean floor, shellfish as large as houses, which very rarely close their doors, but constantly expose their meat to the watery element, for they have no enemies there at the fundament. (213-214)

The beginning of this extract lists already-existing creatures, before moving on with "but other fish" to creation through nomination. The repetition of the verb "observe" in this passage, always at the

start of a paragraph, underlines the primary role of observation in a complex process of identification of objects. Only a careful attention will be able to see all the diversity of the world, a diversity highlighted by the polysyndeton and the many enumerations. Pierre's children start a methodical and meticulous observation which progresses on a vertical axis (as revealed by the downward gradation from "far down" to "very far down" and lastly "further down") and also on a horizontal one, since all the species they discover on the different levels under the ocean are always classified into different sub-species or expanded to nearby species. Eakins draws the reader's attention to words and to the objects and creatures they create by multiplying nominal sentences, insisting on the all-powerful nature of these creations and the futility of their actions. The absolute attention paid to objects reaches its height in the invention of vocabulary which finds its place among existing words. The first paragraph illustrates a movement from the known to the unknown with the passage from "common" and "well-known" to "other fish, quite unknown". The word "other" is of paramount importance: it reveals that Eakins's interest does not lie in common, everyday objects, but rather in strange, incongruous, unidentifiable ones: objects that are other. As the text goes deeper under the ocean, the creatures become stranger and unknown and the narrative voice invents new words for them: "whipperlux", "whiskered grumpkin", "rainbow skate" and the varieties of "glass-skins" remind of Lewis Carroll's neologisms (for example the "Jabberwocky", with the accumulation of plosive sounds and double consonants), and as they create a world they also reflexively point at fictional creation. Pierre Baptiste clearly indicates that these words have been invented: "so we have named them", he explains. The reader does not know the referent of these new words, so the narrator needs to compare them to existing ones, for instance with formulas such as "viz., the crab". To that extent, the passage from a heterodiegetic narrator using the past tense at the beginning of the excerpt to a homodiegetic narrator using the present tense breaks up the distance between the narrator and the diegesis on the one hand, and between the reader and the narration on the other hand. This is especially relevant here as the beginning of the passage, which describes common creatures, uses a temporal and narrative process of detachment, one which paradoxically disappears when the narrative starts describing unknown, incongruous creatures. Everything is set in place to create a proximity between these strange creatures and the reader's world: incongruous new worlds are integrated to the reader's world by way of incongruous new words.

33. Unlike Patricia Eakins, Rikki Ducornet does not play as much with neologisms as she plays with the meaning of pre-existing words, as is revealed in this passage of *The Fountains of Neptune* in which Aristide Marquis visits Rose and Totor (Nicolas's adoptive parents) to tell the boy a story and comfort him:

> "I'm fine!" I yell, suddenly better. "Come up! Come up!"

> "The poor sausage can't sleep", says Rose as she leads the Marquis up the stairs. You men have behaved unseasonably. I've never seen Nini so commotioned, and I swear—"
>
> "Aristide".
>
> "I swear, Archimedes, he's not going back there, not ever, not after this! *Not over my dead body!*"
>
> "Oh stop that!" Totor is exasperated. "Stop this talk of dead bodies. You sound like a Yankee funeral parlour!" Rose has never heard of such a thing.
>
> "A place", the Marquis explains, "where they keep the corpses tidy".
>
> "Where's Toujours-là?" I ask.
>
> "In the arms of Morpheus". Rose frowns at this indiscretion. […]
>
> "[On Easter Island] there were plenty of baked chickens – the Easter Islanders wrapped them in nice new banana leaves and cooked them in deep holes filled with burning stones".
>
> "That's no way to cook!" Rose is scandalized. […] "You come here this Sunday for supper, Aquarius", says Rose, her vanity piqued, "and I'll show you what I can do with a chicken. And I assures you, Aladdin, I don't need a hole […] You like pepper?" He nodded. "It entrances the flavour".
>
> "I am entranced", the Marquis beams. (Ducornet 1997, 45-47)

This passage is an example of the way Ducornet uses malapropisms to convey humor, something which is in this novel characteristic of Rose. As early as the second line, she uses the word "unseasonably" instead of "unreasonably". This malapropism makes Rose's character humorous in two ways: first, she unintentionally uses the wrong word, but the reader is aware of it, which creates a discrepancy between the reader's knowledge and that of the character. Then, "unseasonably" recalls the verb "season", which announces the "pepper" Rose mentions at the end of the passage and also shows that cooking, the only thing Rose does seem to master, literally "spices" the words she uses. The malapropisms continue with Nicolas, who is "commotioned" according to Rose, even though this word is a noun and not a verb so it cannot have a past participle. Rose even uses malapropisms for Aristide's name: "Archimedes", "Aquarius" and "Aladdin". The comical effect resides in these names she seems to randomly give to Aristide. When he answers that he is "entranced" and repeats the word Rose misused in a malapropism (she uses "entrances" for "enhances"), he willingly pushes the reader to pay attention to this word. A bound is created between Aristide and the reader: both know she used the wrong word, and both laugh together at Rose. However, Rose's limited knowledge of language is not revealed only through malapropisms: when she hears that Toujours-Là is "in the arms of Morpheus" and "frowns at this indiscretion", the narrator hints at the fact that Rose understands only the literal meaning of words and not their figurative meaning. In this passage,

Rose stands out because all the characters, as well as the narrator and the reader, understand what she doesn't. As a result, she becomes incongruous, an incongruity which contaminates the language she uses and makes her very words incongruous.

34. When Ducornet writes, in *Phosphor in Dreamland*: "Fantasma, suffering from cataracts as well as delusions" (Ducornet 1995, 155), and when Pierre Baptiste in Eakins's novel explains: "I […] had drunk with my godmother's milk the stories of the INJURED DEAD" (Eakins 1999, 68), the narration uses zeugma, a figure which creates an unexpected connection between two radically different referents. Indeed, the words "cataracts" and "milk" belong to the field of the concrete and are tangible, whereas "delusions" and "stories" are totally abstract since they refer to Fantasma's illusions and to the fictions Pierre Baptiste heard. The zeugma in both examples draws a close link between these very different words by giving them the same syntactic function: "cataracts" and "delusions" are both direct objects of the verb "suffering", and "milk" and "the stories of the INJURED DEAD" are direct objects of "had drunk". The zeugma could be said to be the figure *par excellence* of incongruity, one which organizes words in an uncanny, unusual and surprising way by playing with and distorting their meaning.

35. It should be noted that Ducornet's use of incongruous word associations is more often than not linked to specific characters in her novels. Such is the case in *The Stain*, her first novel, with the character of the Exorcist who never stops speaking and rarely does so in a meaningful way: from nebulous scientific theories to incongruous comments about his environment, language turns into logorrhoea, especially during the lunch organized by Edma, Charlotte's aunt:

> 'Freed from the grip of Appetite, Spirit flies, the tongue transcends itself. Did not St Anthony himself savour with that exalted particular the Devil's own provender transmuted to sanctity in the athanors of monasticity?'
>
> 'Oh!' breathed the Mother Superior, 'How well you expressed that!'
>
> '*Ingenio formae damna rependo meae*,' he replied: 'My spiritual gifts are recompense for my lack of beauty.' And breaking bread into his dish and eagerly watching as it floated upon the surface of the broth, he added: 'And so it swells.'
>
> 'Yes?' wondered the Mother Superior.
>
> 'The bread! So it swells in broth! As, Madame, my heart swells in the mere contemplation of this beautiful soup. Indeed, as does my soul, wallowing (so to speak) in such felicitous odoriferosity!' (Ducornet 1997, 75)

Using words "so to speak", the Exorcist does not associate words together for their meaning. The sentence about St Anthony is rather vague and hard to understand, as highlighted by the Mother Su-

perior's incomprehension. What holds this sentence together only seems to be the rhyme between "sanctity" and "monasticity": style and form prevail over meaning, as highlighted again when the Exorcist lovingly contemplates his soup and its "odoriferosity", a neologism invented for the sake of its rhyme with the previous "sanctity" and "monasticity". The Latin sentence he uses then needs to be translated into English: he chooses words not for their meaning, but in order to look grandiose and to show off his supposedly unlimited knowledge. Because the narrator adds that the Exorcist "delight[s] in his rhyme", and because the Mother Superior flatters his eloquence, the narration draws the reader's attention on language and ironically mocks both characters. Similarly, when the Mother Superior congratulates the Exorcist for his "verbosity" in the next page, without understanding the negative connotation of this word when the reader does, the narration puts to the fore the excesses of the manipulative words used by the exorcist through the use of a highly ironical word.

36. The Exorcist in *The Stain* actually seems to metamorphose into other characters in Ducornet's following novels, as Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery remarked (Gregory and McCaffery, 136). These characters, namely Septimus in *Entering Fire*, Tubbs in *The Jade Cabinet* and Toujours-là in *The Fountains of Neptune* all suffer from one form or another of excessive verbalization and words become vague in their mouths, not only for the other characters but also for the reader. The last and most striking of the Exorcist's metamorphoses is Fogginius in *Phosphor in Dreamland*: "Fogginius's conversation was so congested, infrangible, and dense that, had he wanted to, Fantasma would have been hard-pressed to stick a word in, even edgewise" (Ducornet 1995, 72). The words Fogginius pronounces, even more excessive and incongruous than those of the Exorcist, almost become a tangible shapeless mass which figuratively oppresses the other characters, and literally compresses Fogginius's body as he grows thinner and thinner, "so thin as to be made of parchment" (107), before imploding: "Even his skull imploded like the thin shell of an egg on the fire. Fogginius' jaws, which for several instants appeared to work in the air, also turned to dust" (107). It is significant that the narrator should choose to compare Fogginius to a piece of parchment: this metatextual comment reminds the reader of the fictionality of this character, literally made of words. But the words have become so substantial that they have become able to influence matter: the reader understands that they killed Fogginius, when his jaws keep moving after his death, a comico-sordid, incongruous illustration of the nefarious consequences of his logorrhoea.

37. Through these characters, the reader realizes that words and meaning are not always connected, as though there were indeed, as Tony Tanner argued, "strange relationships between the provinces of words and things", and also a "problematical position of man, who participates in both"[15] (Tanner, 21). This generates fictions like those of Ducornet and Eakins, in which meaning is

15 This distance between word and meaning is also explained by Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*, and by Burgos in *Pour une poétique de l'imaginaire*, where he writes about "cette distance entre le signe et l'objet" (Burgos 24).

set aside to focus on something else; in the case of Eakins, the focus is more often than not on sounds, as illustrated in this passage of her novel:

> The press-down kettle weight the fly-stuck eye the skull they think cover all is grass, is grass, and smoke groan over the paving stones they have vaunted up – HA! I am patience, circle-hawk the coop, the chickens egg-cracked. So be. So. World spider come to us with tongue-twisted gut rope, smoke-red eyes – I will not be daunted down, I will not be flaunted round. You cannot come without say-so. Who say so? Me. In my place, chink-spying all the sky say cry, cry, cry, that ember in the stubble. Cinder and ash have whited him, but blow a little past his heart, he catch, he catch, and glow red and black. My talk falls one word dropping after another, rain blurring light. *Iroson*. Still all is rain. (Eakins 1999, 88-89)

This passage happens right after Vérité, Pierre's wife, tells him about the terrible life she had as a slave. It is part of a longer passage between inverted commas, which might at first let the reader think her words are being reported; however it is not the case, what is reported here is not her speech but her thoughts, in a sort of interior monologue. Only two sentences have a clear and explicit syntax in this excerpt: "I will not be daunted down, I will not be flaunted round" helps the reader understand the subject of the passage, namely the slaves' thirst for freedom and rebellion. The second, "My talk falls one word dropping after another, rain blurring light" gives the reader a key to decipher the whole extract: words accumulate at random, and their meaning is less important than the images they give birth to, like the image of rain blurring light.

38. What matters in this passage is less meaning than forms and sounds. Syntax can be ambiguous and evacuates the possibility of unequivocal meaning altogether: the amphibology "smoke groan over the paving stones they have vaunted up" does not elucidate the grammatical category of "groan", which could be either a verb (without the final "s", a grammatical syllepsis characteristic of this passage) or a noun, which would give the sentence another meaning. The reader is thus left with two possible interpretations of this sentence, but the point here could well be to push the reader into a new reading posture. Reading usually implies understanding the meaning of words, but what if the point of the narration in this passage was to change the reader's habits? Maybe the purpose here is to make the reader see, hear and feel this groan, to create a sensory reading. To further debunk the usefulness of meaning in the act of reading, multiple anacoluthons reveal unusual syntactic constructions, for instance in the first sentence in which a conjugated verb follows another ("think cover"). Parataxis erases punctuation, asyndeton suppresses logical links, many pronouns are empty of any referent, neologisms are used to create compounds, as many elements which make this passage sibylline, forcing the reader to pause, wonder, decipher and, above all, feel the powerful incongruity of words. The semantic ambiguity is perfectly illustrated in the passage: "You cannot come without say-so. Who say so?" with a paronomasia which enables the narrative voice to play with

two similar-sounding expressions, the noun "say-so" and the predicate "say so", thus creating an antanaclasis. The troubled, incongruous syntax does not imply a complete loss of meaning, however some words seem to have been selected only for their sounds. The text is rife with repetitions of words ("cry, cry, cry"), predicates ("is grass, is grass") and propositions ("he catch, he catch"), paronomasia ("daunted down" and "flaunted round"), and segments which accumulate plosive sounds: "circle-hawk the coop, the chickens egg-cracked", to convey all the horror of Vérité's story not through meaning, but through the violence of sounds.

39. The link between words and meaning, and especially between speech and meaning, is undermined in Eakins and Ducornet's fictions. When Pierre Baptiste loses his tongue, his slave narrative turns into a fabulous tale. When Charlotte in *The Stain* eats glass and loses the ability to speak, she has an epiphany. When Etheria stops writing in *The Jade Cabinet*, she vanishes into thin air and escapes her violent husband. Words do not always mean. Eakins and Ducornet use incongruous characters and stories to reveal the incongruity of the reader's world and the incongruity of reality. Above all, they push language and words at their most extreme limits to reveal their incongruity, that of books written with meaningless words, and of a silence which enables words to turn into images and sounds.

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