

Water as Creator and Destroyer of Dreams and (Hyper)Realities: Hydro Symbolism in the Works of Roberto G. Fernández

By David de Posada

*Adivina adivinanza
qué quieren decir la fuente,
el cantarico y el agua.*

[Guess riddle / what is the meaning of the fountain,/ the jug and water.]
Antonio Machado

Roberto G. Fernández's narrative frameworks are rich in symbolism, water being not only one of the most recurrent symbols in his work but also one of the most allegorically significant. While Fernández employs wet or humid environments as Petri dishes for fantastic and nostalgic recreation and reinvention as an allegory for yearning, nostalgia and desire, he also uses water as a catalyst for destruction and disillusionment. Of equal importance is the author's use of water environments as reminders of a physical proximity to the object of desire and the frustration at the impossibility of a return. Water's duality and the recurrence of hydro symbolism support the portrayal of incongruence, confusion and delusion in the Cuban exilic experience, the first-wave Cuban exile community's desire to return to the island, and their failed attempts at assimilation in their adoptive environment.ⁱ

Fernández's use of water symbolism is prominently inherent in the titles of two of his works: *Raining Backwards* (1988) and his most recent collection, *Entre dos aguas* (2006) - titles that underline Fernández's recurrent themes of cultural, social and linguistic incongruence through allegorical water environments. The name of his first novel in English, *Raining Backwards*, an allusion to an impossibility, sets the tone for the author's use of symbolism to highlight his ironic, parodic and satiric representation of the Cuban exile community's penchant for hyperbolic recreations and the construction of hyperreal environments: realities that are not

simply imagined but rather simulated, recreated and ultimately fused with the real. Reality and hyperreality juxtapose to create a milieu where duality and paradox allow for subsistence. While the title, *Raining Backwards*, suggests a paradoxical angle, the author seems to employ water as a generative element and an ideal environment for recreation, transformation, renewal, and ultimately survival.

Although several critics have written extensively about Mirta's recreation of Varadero Beach in her bathtub in *Raining Backwards*, it is important to highlight that the symbolism of water and humidity --and by extension fertility-- in this scene, anchor the character's creation and recreation of memory and desire.ⁱⁱ This passage is key in understanding Fernández's use of parody to highlight both the comedic and the pathetic, thus supporting a system of duality that is recurrent in his work.

Revisiting Mirta's recreation of Varadero in her bathtub allows us to focus on the idea that time threatens to decimate memory, and with it, the essence of identity. It also captures the exilic theme of how subsistence is only possible through recreation, nostalgic revisionism, fantasy and reinvention. In this passage, Mirta has invited her friends to join her at a beach party she is hosting. The event, which no one attends, actually takes place in the character's bathroom and in her imagination: a private, confined space where recreation is possible, where pathos overshadows the ridiculous and the outlandish. After going to the local market and buying the necessary products, Mirta recreates Varadero, the Cuban beach, as she wants to remember it --an idyllic, tropical environment:

Mirta was finishing pasting the last strip of the wall-paper with coconut trees and sunrises . . . she began to grind the cat litter into fine dust . . . she covered her

bathtub with different depths of litter dust. Then she opened the faucet and started applying the blue-green dye to the water. To create the waves and the foam, she positioned the fan and put it on high and at the same time she dropped in four Alka Seltzer tablets. She then remembered that the breezes were always warm, so she placed the portable heater on top of the toilet. . . Mirta was happy . . . She looked around the beach and felt lonely. She reached for the cabinet drawers and grabbed a handful of tiny plastic people which she lay throughout the beach in different positions. (*Raining Backwards* 55-56)

Duality is key in this scene. The same way that Gaston Bachelard argues in *Water and Dreams* that the crossing of water could lead to death-- physical and psychological-- thus establishing the parallel between death and travel-- and travel and death-- while at the same time underlining water's maternal and regenerative symbolic powers (Bachelard192), Mirta's recreation of a lost time and place supports the idea of a regenerative cycle of death and renaissance.

Mirta's bathtub becomes once again a fertile environment for creation in the chapter, "Retrieving Varadero," as the aging woman weaves her fantastic tales to maintain her teenage neighbor's interest in exchange for sexual favors. Not unlike Schehérazade in *Arabian Nights*, Mirta's confabulations buy her time and keep her from what could be a triple death of sorts: the end of her Cuban identity, of her youth, as well as of her powers of seduction. Varadero Beach becomes through her confabulation and narrativization a Mount Olympus for a Cuban nostalgic mythology:

Everyone knows that Varadero was the most beautiful beach, not only in the world but in the whole universe! . . . the water was always changing colors like a kaleidoscope. Each time the wind changed course, the water changed color. . . In all the beaches in Cuba the sand was made out of grated silver, though in Varadero it was also mixed with diamond dust. (*Raining Backwards* 9-10)

Our ocean was so delicious that even Aristotle, who is a very cultured gentleman, and who can't practice here because he never passed the bar, when he tasted a sip of our waters, he left all his knowledge aside and started shacking up with El Cid, who was this enormous black woman that sold coconuts carved in the image of Mary Magdalene, but had the faces made out of bread in El Cid's own image. (*Raining Backwards* 10)

While Fernández rarely touches upon Afro-Cuban religious lore,ⁱⁱⁱ it is interesting to note his parodic use of syncretism in the creation of Mirta's narrativization and to establish a parallel between El Cid, the "enormous black woman," and the Afro-Cuban deity Yemaya. Originally a river goddess of the Yoruba in Nigeria, Yemaya is perceived as a mother goddess, the goddess of home, fertility, love and family. Often portrayed emerging from the river bare-chested, her "breasts are full and large from birthing so many creations. It is said that Yemaya gave birth to all the world's water."^{iv} Like water, she represents both change and constancy --bringing forth life, protecting it, and changing it as is necessary. This reference clearly underlines the element of reinvention, adaptability and ultimately the essence of a motherland. All of these attributes coincide with Mirta's desires to maintain a fleeting identity, both as a Cuban and as an object of desire; her sexual desire syncretizes with a craving for nostalgia and a return to her lost paradise.

She seems unable to confer stability to her existence outside of her fabulist world, and her water environment serves to establish an association with the sea, a symbol of mystery and desire and a continuous quest that usually results in failure or disappointment.

The author crystallizes this syncretism of desire, nostalgia and rabid patriotism in the pornographic parody, "You Really Drive Me Wild, Baby," where Mirta, in a story she authors, describes a fictional sexually charged encounter with a handsome "freedom fighter:"

At that moment, the freedom fighter didn't care about the cause, the return to Varadero, the communists or the nuns. And MV [Mirta Vergara], who had never experienced the ultimate, remembered in her mind the royal palms, the smokestacks of her hometown sugar mill, the cathedral's spires . . . His floating loblolly entered the Suwannee river that was flowing from her thighs, and she shouted in the midst of her sighs, sobs, gasping, moaning and the palpitations of her womb: "Death to the communists! Long live free Cuba!" (*Raining Backwards* 107)

Fernández's use of water as a mystical element is again in evidence in "The Chain," another chapter from *Raining Backwards*. When Manolo receives a chain letter warning the receiver of the dangers of not continuing the chain, the self-proclaimed agnostic ("I wasn't religious or nothing like that," he explains "but . . . I made the first copies and sent them, not because I was afraid, but out of respect to the memory of my dead mother, who was so devoted to the Virgin, Our Lady of Charity" (*Raining Backwards* 73). It is unlikely a coincidence that the Lady of Charity, Cuba's patroness, a symbol of faith, and Cuban identity and nationality, is also

associated with water --the place of her first apparition.^v As Manolo continues his justification for his new found spirituality, he is thrilled to describe the restorative/regenerative powers of the family's bidet:

Anyway, what really made me a believer was what happened to Connie. As you know, since I told you, she was disgraced, and with her us-- don't tell anyone. Okay? Well last Sunday, while she was cleaning her parts in the bidet, she noticed a blinding light where the water usually spurts, and guess what? Her honor was restored! (*Raining Backwards* 74)

The restorative properties of water turn into punitive and destructive ones, however, when Manolo's son's friend, identified as an undesirable element, is transformed into a salamander: "Well, amigo, the final proof that the virgin was really looking after me came when Joaquin was put back on track. His friend was thirsty and drank from the public water fountain near the Freedom Tower and you know what happened to Rigo?-- that is his name. Well... he turned into a salamander, a nice looking one, but nevertheless a salamander" (*Raining Backwards* 74). The salamander, traditionally a symbol of enduring faith which triumphs over the fires of passion, is here given a more mundane and negative association to the mostly unpleasant amphibian creature that thrives in dampness, dirt and darkness to underline the sinuous nature of the character.

Both the bidet and the public water fountain could easily be linked to the symbolism of the fountain that Carl Jung associates with the anima as the origin of interior, original life and that of the land of childhood. If we consider Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, our "psychic inheritance" a kind of reservoir of our experiences as a species, a kind of knowledge we

are all born with but can never be directly conscious of --we begin to understand the power and relevance of water as a symbol in Fernandez's works. Without attempting a psychoanalytical connection or a discussion on Jungian archetypes, we can establish a parallel between the Cuban exile's longing for the motherland-- both at the conscious and unconscious levels-- and his resulting dichotomous discordant experience in exile.

While the fountain, with its flowing, ever changing water, is often used to symbolize a source of life and rejuvenation, water is also associated with temporality and the loss of identity-- again, another recurrent theme in Fernández's works. In *En la Ocho y la Doce (On Eight and Twelfth)*, the author revisits the image of the fountain in the short story "La gira" ("The Tour"), a post apocalyptic satire - most likely inspired by both the ubiquitous bumper sticker of the 80's "Will the Last American to leave Miami please bring the Flag,"^{vi} and by the blockade --the commercial, economic, and financial embargo imposed on Cuba by the United States. In this story, a group of picturesque Cuban exiles, now fully incorporated into society after having reached primacy and enjoying their majoritarian social status, decide to go on a mission tour of a reservation in South Miami. The so called reservation is the only Anglo sanctuary left in South Florida and the inhabitants, after being banished, are now living in impoverished conditions barely making ends meet. Each missionary is charged with taking a basket of food and snacks no longer available to this displaced group. The story contains several prominent water symbols including the enclosed dark damp space itself, a fountain, references to fishing for scrap metal and an aqueduct that is outside the walls of the reservation- another strong image of the loss of identity. All of these symbols reinforce Fernández's leitmotifs of nostalgia, recreation and reinvention. The fountain, however, is key since water is traditionally seen as mirror of the

fountain itself, representing a flow of memory, a reflection or representation of the original -- an allegory that readily supports the creation of simulated realities or hyperrealities.

All that exists within this enclosed reservation is the memory of a time and a life that used to be.: "Las primeras luces del alba aún no habían penetrado en aquella húmeda oscuridad. . . . Nada en aquel denso manglar proclamaba la presencia de seres humanos." [The early light of dawn had not yet penetrated the damp darkness . . . nothing in that dense mangrove announced the presence of human beings] (*En la Ocho* 91) . . . "La tenue luz de las estrellas cedió ante el sol y se escucharon cantos de seres humanos que se dirigían a la fuente, cargando sus garrafones para llenar" [The faint starlight gave way to the sun and the chanting of humans was heard as they walked toward the fountain carrying jugs to fill] (*En la Ocho* 91).^{vii} The symbolism of cyclical darkness, the empty jug and the trail to the fountain for refilling, clearly suggests a depleting existence that requires constant regeneration to avoid extinction. The author also uses a well-known Negro spiritual as a referent to the African Diaspora. With this transposition, he is successful in conveying the image of disappointment and longing paired with one of understated hope -- transposed to Anglo characters but ultimately echoing the Cuban exilic experience: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home and thirsty . . ." (*En la Ocho* 91). These last two words, "and thirsty," are not part of the original song and may have been added by the author not only as part of his parodic appropriation but also to underline the lack of a life element and the thirst for identity:

--Dicen que tienen sed.

--¿Y aquí no hay agua corriente? --intervino el señor de la panza.

--Sí la hay --replicó Manolo--. Recuerde que lo dijeron en las clases de orientación. Pero temen que los tratemos de envenenar ya que el acueducto está del lado nuestro de la muralla. [--They say they're thirsty.

-- And there's no running water here? -- intervened the man with the belly.

-- Yes, there is -- replied Manolo--. Remember what they told us during orientation. But, they fear being poisoned by us since the aqueduct is on our side of the wall.] (*En la Ocho* 92)

These references to the other side of the wall again capture the idea of memory and loss of identity as the aqueduct, the flowing water, the symbol of life and change, is in close proximity but unavailable and unattainable. The story concludes with a powerful image of desire and memory where rummagers in the reservation collect every trace of debris that will link them to a culture and past that constantly requires re-membering.

For every representation of hope, creation and fertile environments, the author seems to counterbalance stability by underlining the precarious link to an unstable system of identity construction generating a paradoxical and antithetical structure of creation-destruction. The destructive properties of water, as well as the author's bold underlining of how the manufacturing of false identities leads to disaster, are prominently represented in Fernández's second novel in English, *Holy Radishes!* In this work, two of the main characters, Nellie, a Cuban who has fabricated an Italian persona and believes to have been born in Italy, and Mrs. James B., her American neighbor, coworker and friend, find themselves in an awkward place between peaceful coexistence and the constant discordant notes produced by their cultural and social disparities. Both in desperate need of anchoring identities and facing unemployment, they embark in a joint venture. The women decide to disguise common animals as exotic creatures and open a zoo.

After an initial success and great turnout, the fabricated exotic display and the resulting deception come to an abrupt end after an unexpected torrential rain falls on the creatures as a disappointed and irate crowd watches them morph back into ordinary animals. If we consider Fernández's penchant for underlining social and cultural displacement, the exotic zoo could easily be perceived as an allegorical representation of reinvention, simulacra and ultimately, the failed attempt to deceive the hegemonic culture. The author also seems to take this opportunity to end this episode with a strong social critique against consumerism, American superficial values and excesses with a parody of the Great Flood:

. . . Mrs. James B. was running from cage to cage in a futile attempt to save the creatures from further deterioration. The waters were rising by the minute, but by the time the big entrance sign started floating with the current, she had gathered most of her metamorphosed species and placed them on top of a picnic table. The board began drifting with the deluge, the flood that ultimately drowned her American dream. (*Holy Radishes* 63)

The deluge scene in *Holy Radishes!* seems to evoke a cleansing of the earth by God and a return to an ontological essence-- not unlike the destructive water environment in Fernández's short story, "Kon-Tiki,"^{viii} included in the author's most recent work, *Entre Dos Aguas*, where the emphasis is once again on the dangers of fabricated identities and cultural incompatibility. The title itself is enigmatic and presents a translation challenge. Literally "Between Two Waters," it also may lend itself to a more evocative translation such as "Between Two Currents" in order to capture the metaphor of sea as both separator and agitator, a reflection of inner turmoil and a source that anchors the idea of faraway lands and that of the unreachable and unattainable. An

alternative translation, "Between Two Shores," may better capture the idea of separation and highlight the lack of physical solidity but deemphasizes the essential element of conflict, cultural instability and disorder. Ultimately, the various possible translations support the author's design for enigmatic representations of the exilic angst and a language of contradiction and confusion that echoes the Cuban exile's experience.

In "Kon-Tiki," a group of illegal immigrants from various Latin American countries, all living in fear of being deported to their respective countries, join forces to craft a plan to fool the American authorities and remain in the United States through the "wet-foot dry-foot policy."^{ix} Their very intricate ruse requires that a Honduran, a Haitian, a Mexican and a Colombian adopt Cuban identities, to reinvent themselves and become perfect copies of Cuban refugees through imitation. Unfortunately for this group, things go terribly awry when their raft capsizes and their adoptive identities betray them. When intercepted by the coastguard, the illusion is so complete, so real, that as "wet feet" they are sent back to Cuba.

Failure and disappointment coexist with the ironic twists of fate in Fernández's writing to both punctuate the impossibility of a return and to underline the Cuban exile's cultural, social and linguistic incongruence. In the chapter "Raining Backwards," Abuela, a desperate elderly woman convinced of her imminent death, enlists her grandson in a mission to help her return to Havana to find her resting place next to her deceased sister. Along with her fear of eternal loneliness and the impossibility of a return, she seems to perceive the host country as a Purgatory of sorts -- a transitional space that perpetuates disconnection and keeps her from her Paradisial recovery:

I no want to be bury in this country. I will be the first one here and who knows where the next one will be, dead and all alone! . . . The whole world gets scatter in America, even dead people. . . (*Raining Backwards* 132)

This archetypal character captures the common belief of the first-wave Cuban exiles that their stay in the United States is transitory and temporary and that the impending end of the dictatorship will permit their return to the island.^x In this castaway mentality, assimilation and acculturation is not deemed necessary since memory, recent or transferred from generation to generation, will offer the necessary sustenance until their imminent return. This is the same premise that allows for confabulation, fantasy and the creation of hyperreal environments.

The idea of the impossibility suggested by title is directly linked to the desire of a return to the motherland. Abuela, has convinced her grandson Michael, to help her carve a boat from a tree to allow the gulf stream to carry her back to the island. Unfortunately, she expected the current to flow south and it was not till years later that her grandson consulted the navigational chart he had stolen from the library during the initial phase of the plan, only to find out that "the arrows indicating the direction of the current were pointing northeast, not south..." (*Raining Backwards* 138).

Conversely, in this author's design is a message of hope that parallels his idea of the Cuban exilic experience. He sprinkles his works with an optimism that echoes that of the community he very sympathetically portrays. The role of water as a mystic magical element that facilitates dreams is explored in the chapter "Gulf Stream" from *En la Ocho y la Doce* where a boy, in a story inspired by the Elian Gonzalez episode,^{xi} is saved from drowning by fantastic creatures to become a new Messiah. Fernández's prose takes a very lyrical turn to support the oneiric, fantastic quality:

"Las procelosas aguas se calmaron y el niño se encontró solo en la noche, en el medio del mar... Comenzó a llover y sacó la lengua con rapidez para ver si podía burlar las gotas que caían de las nubes que habían velado las estrellas... Cuando el

viento cambió de dirección y la luna iluminó la noche, el niño vio como sus piernas dejaban una estela de espuma.... [The tempestuous waters calmed down and the boy found himself alone in the night, in the middle of the sea... It began to rain and he swiftly stuck out his tongue to see if he could make fun of the drops that fell from the clouds that had veiled the stars... Once the wind changed direction and the moon lit up the night, the boy saw how his legs left a trail of foam.] (*En la Ocho* 149)

This episode is crucial in consolidating the multi faceted aspect of memory, creation and recreation, reality and hyperreality that as Guillermo Irizarry underlines, "brings to the surface a layering of temporal planes whereby individual time (the story of a boy) is transformed into political time (the history of nations and conflicts between ideological projects). All, however, are transformed into mythological time (Elián becomes the Messiah) and the history of a singular incident (transformed into a communal and transcendental event) disappears from memory as geological time makes political and individual time impossible to record" (Irizarry 607-608). This idea clearly articulates and supports a generalization of the Cuban exilic experience where the past and present fuse to create new equivocal identities and realities.

As he unravels the mysteries of the Cuban exilic community, the existentialist castaways, Fernández's recurrent use of water symbolism supports his leitmotif of social and cultural incongruence and disconnect through a system of dualities. If we turn to the unique property of water, an element that takes the shape of that which surrounds it, but never possesses a specific shape by itself --like the individuals Fernández portrays who find a certain adaptability but never their own identity, we come closer to understanding the Cuban exilic experience. The Cuban exile is incapable of granting stability to his existence and the ambiguous symbolism of water

evokes his indefatigable desire to recapture a lost identity, his disconnectivity and the inexorable passage of time. The first-wave Cuban exile, often portrayed as a dreamer, is always searching for the unattainable -- the Paradisial recovery. In the process, and before the impossibility of a return, he finds himself caught between a dream, a new found freedom and ultimately disillusionment.

NOTES

ⁱ The first-wave of Cuban exiles , also known as Historical Exiles, refers to those Cubans who came to the U.S. between 1960 and 1973 (the end of the Cuban Airlift) fleeing the Castro regime. All references to Cuban exiles in this paper refer to this particular group.

ⁱⁱ Including William Deaver, Jorge Febles, Henry Pérez and Mary Vásquez, mostly focusing on the parodic and the nostalgic elements, and by Arlene Guerrero Watanabe and my own work exploring the postmodernist concept of simulacra and incongruous environments where these characters exist.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joaquín (Quinn) in *Raining Backwards* is a "santero" who eventually becomes Pope.

^{iv} From a mystic and devotional site devoted to Yemaya and her healing powers:
<http://www.orderwhitemoon.org/goddess/Yemaya.html>

^v A popular image of Our Lady of Charity includes a banner above her head with the Latin phrase "*Mater Caritatis Fluctibus Maris Ambulavit*" [Mother of Charity who walked on the road of stormy seas].

^{vi} Used by Fernández as an epigraph in *Raining Backwards* (p. 8).

^{vii} All translations by D. de Posada.

^{viii} "Kon-Tiki" originally appeared in *Caribe: Revista de Cultura y Literatura* (2004) and in Cuba in "La Gazeta de Cuba" (Sept-Oct 2004). This short story also exists in an unpublished English version, "The Augustflower." While there are significant differences between the Spanish and English versions-- "Kon-Tiki" contains lexical variations in character speech to establish their various places of origin, underline the fabrication of new identities, and enhance the outlandish elements of imitation --all quotations in this essay are from "The Augustflower," in order to use the author's original language.

^{ix} The "wet-foot dry-foot policy" is an accord written in 1995 during the Clinton administration, as a revision of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 stating that if Cubans touch U.S. soil, they are allowed to stay in the United States; however, if they are intercepted at sea, they will be returned to Cuba or to a third country. Those who make it to U.S. soil would qualify would qualify to apply for "legal permanent resident" status and eventually for U.S. citizenship.

^x In a 1998 interview published in *The Madison Review*, Fernández discusses his understanding that his stay in the United States was temporary, an idea shared by many First-Wave Cuban exiles: "We came to the United States on

July 3rd, right before the 4th of July in 1961 . . . We thought we were going back to Cuba in February." He later discusses his experience arriving and entering the sixth grade: "Since I knew I was leaving in February, I didn't care, you know? So, I thought, well, o.k., I'll go back to Cuba soon . . . and I guess people thought I was mute, because I didn't say much, I didn't want to bother. I knew English only the way that people know Spanish here, just a little bit. I had no interest, since they said I was leaving." (66-71)

^{xi} Elián Gonzalez, was the subject of a heated controversy in 2000 involving the governments of Cuba and the United States. The boy, who was seven years old at the time and found floating on an inner tube, was rescued by two fisherman after his mother drowned while attempting to come to the United States. The custody battle that ensued between his relatives in Miami, who wanted him to remain in the U.S., and his father in Cuba dominated the news for several months.

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