

Book reviews

THE SÉANCE OF READING: UNCANNY DESIGNS IN MODERNIST WRITING, THOMAS J. COUSINEAU

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Abstract

“The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing” (2023), a book arising out of Thomas J. Cousineau’s long and fruitful teaching experience and his extensive engagements in Romanian academia as a Fulbright scholar, entices readers to appreciate key canonical works spanning American and European literature through the lens of the Romanian ballad “The Legend of Master Manole” and Mircea Eliade’s view of mythical creation by sacrifice. The aesthetic myth of master-builder Manole lends magnitude and resonance to nine modernist texts set in harmonious juxtaposition for the purpose of revealing and restoring the sacrificed textual elements within. Most valuably, the author makes the reader register the intricate relationship between the sacrificed protagonist and the architectural body of the literary monuments discussed throughout his book, which successfully brings together different literary genres, capitalizing on the scenario of death and ontological rebirth.

Keywords: The Manole Complex; sacrificial death; fleshly body; architectural body; literary modernism.

Grown out of a series of guest lectures delivered at various Romanian universities over several years, *The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing* (2023) by Thomas J. Cousineau, Professor of English (Emeritus) at the Washington College and Fulbright Scholar at the University of Bucharest, invites the audience into a reading experience at once familiar and strange. The author’s study is theoretically framed by the folk-ballad *The Legend of Master Manole* – revered in Romanian literature as a cornerstone of mythology and identity, offering insights into Romania’s collective psyche and encapsulating key themes of sacrifice, creativity, and the situation of the human being *sub specie aeternitatis* –, which provides fuel to spark unconventionally interpretive fires. Professor Cousineau redraws the canonical lines of nine texts – F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, James Joyce’s *The Sisters*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Emil Cioran’s *A Short History of Decay*, Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and William Faulkner’s *Light in August* – that have long entered the critical lexicon of American and European culture, performing a revivalist campaign on behalf of Mircea Eliade’s interpretation of the Romanian ballad in *Commentaires sur la légende de maître Manole* as the concealed reenactment of archaic building rituals.

On a primarily anecdotal level of “what happens”, the legend used as a point of departure in the book unfolds with Prince Negru Voda commissioning Master Manole to build a monastery at Curtea-de-Arges. Despite their utmost efforts and unmatched

craftsmanship, Manole and his fellow builders witness the walls erected during the day repeatedly collapsing at nightfall. In a dream, a pivotal revelation comes to Manole: the structure will persist only if the first wife to arrive the next morning at the construction site is immured within its walls. Thus, to ensure the enduringness of the construction, the repetition of a cosmogonic act – the divine sacrifice – must occur. Destiny cruelly brings Manole’s pregnant wife, Ana, who is then tragically sealed into the monastery. The imitation of the cosmogonic gesture indeed leads to the steadfast completion of the commission. In a twist of fate, however, Prince Negru Vodă, marveling at the splendid edifice now standing as a testament to Ana’s sacrifice, challenges Manole to construct an even more magnificent shrine. Overconfidently, Manole claims he can. Driven by the fear that the master might build a more glorious shrine for a potential rival, the prince strands him and his team atop the monastery by ordering the removal of the scaffold. In a desperate bid for freedom, the builders craft makeshift wings from the roofing shingles, which gives way to yet another tragedy. The reader is also informed that, as Manole readies himself for the desperate leap, the mournful voice of Ana resounds from her living entombment.

Each work discussed in Professor Cousineau’s book is linked thematically and structurally to Mircea Eliade’s exposition of archaic ontology: *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sisters*, *The Book of Disquiet*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Endgame*, *A Short History of Decay*, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and *Light in August* are all shown to embed an initiation into something artistically enduring. All the texts, the book reveals, challenge the line between fleshly body and textual body, between profane and transcendent space, man and divinity, form and content, action and movement, bursts of activity and inactivity, and above all, between the ephemeral spirit of man and the eternal spirit of artistic creation. The Manole Complex serves as an uncanny critical lens to reevaluate familiar literary works. It goes without saying that “uncanny” is used to stand for the unknown in its various forms, including what is known, but has not been yet brought to the surface. In other words, the study attempts to reveal what literature strives to conceal – the very rough edges and breaches, the eerie and the mystery of literature’s subconscious truths. It helps center what is marginal, concealed, and kept from sight but, nevertheless, made apparent to play havoc with the reader’s hermeneutic ability.

The book begins with an introductory chapter on the fore-structure of Professor Cousineau’s hermeneutics, offering a tempting glimpse of the Manole Complex at work in the novels of Thomas Bernhard, namely *Correction* and *The Loser*, both tackled by the author in previously published scholarship. The erudite, first-time reader of the book, having unhesitatingly absorbed the author’s assessment of the symbolic transformation of death into a form of creative, ongoing existence, is now ready to use the newly gained perspective. The analogical matrix which shapes the subsequent texts, the *Introduction* makes clear, is too complex, too rich, too subtle – in a word, too precious – to be given up. The juxtaposition of novels with short-stories and poems shows not only the desire to draw connections across different genres, but also the intention to make the reader see that each self-contained text works within the same allegory of artistic creation inseparable from (self-)sacrifice.

A structural detail that establishes the chapters’ emotional and intellectual climate is given by the use of prefatory mottoes, which act as thematic pointers in the adoptive texts, penned by Professor Cousineau. The mottoes never fail to contain the *animus* of the chapters to which they are prefixed, radiating outward in the text, far from their local area of reference, to connect with the book as a whole. They either provide oblique commentary on the uncanny design of the text under discussion or directly let the reader know that the choice of chapter titles – and, for that matter, the choice of source material – is not arbitrary. The author engages the primary texts and such concepts as creation, sacrifice, and transformation

in mutually reinforcing relationships. This meaningful bringing together of otherwise disparate canonical texts conveys, upon reexamination and rereading (at its core, a reflective, interpretive act) from an entirely new perspective, the sense of freshness usually associated with first readings (by definition, linear and curious). In this sense, Thomas J. Cousineau's book postulates not only a reader but a re-reader sensitive to unpredictable intertextual associations. For this reason, *The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing* is not just an academically dense, carefully researched and constructed book meticulously guiding the audience's discovery of already known texts from a different vantage point and intertextual frame, which indeed facilitates the harmonious convergence of folklore and modernist literature. It is, above all, an invitation to close reading and rereading.

Within the bulk of the first chapter – *Fixing Things in "The Great Gatsby"* – the author combines theoretical sophistication and critical acumen to show how the form of Fitzgerald's novel mirrors its content. The sacrifice of personal identity and values for the illusory achievement of the American Dream is reflected by plot manipulations and the rewriting undertaken by the premier chronicler of the Roaring Twenties. The activity of "fixing" – an essential tool for the reenactment of the archaic building-rituals inscribed in the Manole Legend – becomes the be-all and end-all of the novel: on the one hand, the characters are bent on duplicitous self-fixing and concealment; on the other hand, the Jazz Age storyteller's own latent, hidden sources (John Keats's poetry, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) endow the text with a symbolic-intertextual dimension that enriches and anchors – or "fixes", as it were – the narrative and, ultimately, Fitzgerald's own life, as the chapter aptly shows. The second chapter, titled *Being Scrupulous in "The Sisters"*, uncovers the secrets or quasi-secrets hidden in plain sight in James Joyce's short story, by the author's own admission. The Manole Complex has become yet again a thematic and structural device. The analysis is clustered around the word "scrupulous", which transforms the work into a "pretext" for exploring Joyce's own scrupulousness – his own meticulous search for the "mot juste" and the perfect word order. The lexical item ambivalently embodies both affliction and technique. This interplay between personal affliction and authorial technique, as the author explains, emerges in the use of three Joycean lexemes – *paralysis*, *gnomon*, and *simony* – which help the reader understand Father Flynn – and Joyce, by extrapolation – in a less arcane, impenetrable way. What is "uncanny" about Father Flynn becomes "uncanny" in a larger sense in the narrative. The chapter does not fail to mention that Joyce involves the reader in a similarly agonizing ritual: reading is always an assembling of clues. From this standpoint, *The Sisters* is a parable twice over: not only does it have secrets, but it uses secrecy – at least insofar as secrecy and the convergence between corruption and construction coincide – as its main organizing factor. The third chapter deals with Fernando Pessoa's literary monument, *The Book of Disquiet*, coupling it with another stand-in for Mircea Eliade's "mortal body" endowed with a "soul" through sacrifice – namely, the guidebook *Lisbon: What Every Tourist Should See*.

The subsequent chapter offers the reader an exploratory expedition into Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a staple of world theater and college literature classrooms. The relation between dramatizing and performing, on the one hand, and fiction, on the other hand, takes center stage here. The author, updating the flourishing school of Beckett criticism, describes his own encounter with a German production of the post-World War II play under discussion, in Paris, 1976. The transformation of waiting – a personal plight – into the theatrical technique of pausing not only informs the essay but energizes it. The whole section celebrates the tension between purposeful doing undertaken by the characters and purposeless doing staged by the actors, between activity and inactivity, and between extrinsic and intrinsic expectations of reward in *Godot*. Beckett's characters are shown getting into shape,

as it were, for the biggest wait, the perfect doing, contending with an indifferent God who may or may not reward them for their service. In the absence of grand actions sweeping across the stage or the script, *stasis* looms large in *Godot*, illuminating the encounter with nothingness and muteness out in the void. The combination of narrative subservience and performative autonomy becomes clearer still when readers explore the Beckettian landscape, situated between two poles: waiting versus doing while waiting. The latter is mainly a staging area, an antechamber between the main space, devoted entirely to the interminableness of waiting, which recreates the ontological position of humankind. Overall, the chapter allows the author to examine the transformative and sacrificial nature of creative endeavor in a play about a seemingly uneventful “waiting”. Cousineau skillfully shows that the play is not a static construction but a masterful orchestration of movements. Meaning results from the semiotic properties of the theater, the language of the characters, the dramatization of the interactions. The interplay between action and its deferral, suspense and its interruption become the focus of attention. This is what Professor Cousineau is *doing* for the readers who approach the play with an essentially literary sensibility in *Doing It in “Waiting for Godot”*: he sets the fictional and the real apart, theatricalizing *Godot*, uncovering its rhythm and choreography, its movement and gestures, illuminating the use of both language and silence, movement and stillness. The framework announced in the *Introduction* becomes apparent again: when the shield of language gives way, silence ensues. Language becomes a sculptural act by which stillness and pausing are alternately contained and liberated.

The next chapter casts light on J. Alfred Prufrock’s turning back to his personal past, which functions, as in previous chapters, as a window into the poem’s symbolic-intertextual dimension. The text exploits two complementary impulses: the return to one’s personal memories as a prerequisite for a return to literary tradition. The author clarifies that T. S. Eliot displaces the mortal body of his human fellow – the Prufrockian type – into the architectural body of a work of art. The chapter also discusses the Dantean and Shakespearean allusions, which furnish an essential fiber of significance in Eliot’s poem, set in turn-of-the-century Boston. The chapter – and, for that matter, the subsequent ones – succeeds in making the reader conscious of the “library” in the poem, of the intended and unintended wealth of intertextual material contained. A careful reading of T. S. Eliot’s poem within the frames of Dante’s *Inferno* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* will certainly lead to the discovery of interpretive possibilities that a first reading, by hypothesis unaware of the intertexts, would have missed. *Turning back* to literary ancestors to weave them into new textual tapestries is, thus, another example that can profitably be (re)read with the Manole Complex in mind. Once again, a personal predicament is used as a wellspring of creative imagination. The next four chapters also cleverly suggest that the architecture of the text becomes, in a sense, inexorably expansive.

The sixth chapter focuses on another “literary monument” – *Endgame* – where Beckett, as in *Godot*, transforms the “war” in which the characters are involved into the “cantata” performed by the actors, delving into the meaningful moves made by the absurdist dramatist to create the illusion of control. A different chapter is subsequently concerned with Emil Cioran’s assimilation of the sacrificial pattern in *A Short History of Decay*, in which the Romanian-born philosopher converts the prophetic dream of transfiguration announced in *Transfiguration de la Roumanie* into an anti-prophetic approach, signifying a move from a nationalistic focus to a larger, existential contemplation. Chapter 8 addresses the uncanny design of another piece of modern literature capitalizing on the dynamics between violence and ultimate grace, between earthly death and divine creation – Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find* – to describe yet another transformation of personal predicament (being a misfit, a bad seed) into the architectural body of a masterpiece. The keyword “misfit” not

only acts as a defining feature of the Misfit himself, but as an interpretive paradigm of the “telling of the tale”, a compass for navigating the multiplicity and complexity of the story. Professor Cousineau highlights the presence of incongruities and ironies in the narrative, both of which create “unbridgeable” discrepancies. The final chapter, where the author comes full circle to his opening gambit, has William Faulkner’s *Light in August* joining the tail end of the queue of sacrificial reenactments. To examine the character of Joe Christmas is to make sense of his creator’s arrangement of episodes and the network of voices embedded in the novel, all attempting to define him. The central figure of *Light in August* – whose life is constantly *framed* by inputs from Faulkner (or, more accurately, the novel’s ambiguous authorial voice), the reader, and the character himself – is sacrificed so that the static structure of the novel is celebrated – or, better, reborn – as a frame-tale. Framing within the novel is, thus, transformed into an aesthetic technique.

Thomas J. Cousineau is able, in a search for hidden, tantalizingly elusive forms of post-existence resulting from actual physical death, to open up the nine masterpieces of literary modernism revisited in his book to the seductive charm of what he terms the return of the “Manole Complex”: the death of literary protagonists or ancestors is always linked to a second, non-physical birth ritually created by the artist. This is the aesthetic link that chains a literary work in relation to both its predecessors and its creator. The author’s probing of sacrificial acts for the sake of artistic creation in the context of American-European interaction plots a path through a refreshing tangle of inter- and cross-cultural cues. Examining the presentation of aesthetic myth against the backdrop of literary modernism, Thomas J. Cousineau shows that key canonical texts spanning American and European literature incorporate sacrificial metaphors and the ritual transformation of characters into architectural elements. Serving, as it does, both specialists and non-specialists, *The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing* is aimed at all readers of literature. However, since the book is an innovative reading of texts targeting most concern, on the one hand, on overt and covert parallels between literary works and past tradition and, on the other hand, on the artifice that turns death into rebirth through a confrontation with ritual, it will prove particularly valuable to students and scholars of modern and comparative literature, as well as to aficionados of symbolic anthropology. Undoubtedly, *The Séance of Reading* lends itself to multiple pedagogical agendas. Most importantly, nevertheless, this intriguing book can be read for mere pleasure. The reader postulated by its author is invited to take stock of one of the major - if often ignored - possibilities opened by the text: death is inconceivable if it is not related to a new form of non-being, to a creative spirit that lives on. Death is not an abyss but an initiation into a cosmologically enduring existence.

References:

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