

## Book reviews

### THE SÉANCE OF READING. UNCANNY DESIGNS IN MODERNIST WRITING BY PROFESSOR THOMAS COUSINEAU

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#### Abstract

*Professor Cousineau demonstrates an impressive original scholarly kind of comprehension of modernist texts, submitting them under scrutiny with an archetypal critical lens and thus reveals “the uncanny return of the Manole Complex in nine masterpieces of literary modernism”. The intellectual spark that inspired Professor Cousineau was Mircea Eliade’s Commentaires sur la Légende de Maître Manole where Eliade’s claims that Manole’s wife does not actually die: “She is, rather, transformed; her soul leaves her body of flesh and bones and goes to live in the stone and plaster body of the monastery”. (Eliade, 1994, p.168) In each of the chapters of the volume under discussion, the author further elaborates on Eliade’s concept of architectural body, finding it under sundry metamorphoses in the iconic literary modernist works from Europe and USA.*

*Keywords:* Manole complex; architectural body; modernist literature; uncanny designs; intellectual thriller.

Before passing on to the subject matter of the book, we believe that a few details about the author of the book, Professor Emeritus Thomas Cousineau are necessary. Professor Cousineau taught at Washington College and also at Université de Paris-Sorbonne as a Visiting Professor and as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Bucharest. He edited the newsletter of the Samuel Beckett Society for several years and co-directed the *Présence de Samuel Beckett* conference at Le Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-La-Salle in Normandy.

Further works penned by him are: *After the Final No: Samuel Beckett Trilogy, Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement, Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction, Three-Part Inventions: The Novels of Thomas Bernhard, and An Unwritten Novel: Fernando Pessoa’s The book of disquiet*. To boot, Professor Cousineau is the recipient of the “Outstanding Title” citation from the American Library Association).

Writing criticism is as good and thorough an art & craft as writing a novel. Both are building symbolic edifices and bridges to Otherness. Criticism operates at a meta-level, but along the same guidelines in relation to Otherness. Professor Cousineau displays an original scholarly comprehension of the modernist texts submitting them under an archetypal critical lens. The author loves modernist literature and shows that he holds daunting and fruitful insights into the some of the iconic works of modernism from Europe and US. And on top of it, the author loves mystery and loves revealing it to our eyes agog with intellectual curiosity. Hence the adjective “uncanny”.

The following details provide an overview of the Manole Trilogy:

Volume I *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Writing*. University of Delaware Press, 2004.

Volume II *The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing*. Editura Universitară, 2023.

Volume III *To Double-Business Bound: The Symmetrical Imperative of Writing* (in progress)

As we have seen, the first volume deals with sacrifice and modernist literature. Under present critical scrutiny comes the second volume from his trilogy which discusses uncanny designs in modernist literature. Thus, we have before our eyes a maze-like series of essays bound together under the title *The Séance of Reading*. The third volume, which is underway, treats of the symmetrical imperative of writing.

The genesis of the trilogy grips us as it unfolds like an intellectual thriller. The author owns up to the fact that “The Séance of Reading traces back its origin” to his “discovery while teaching at the University of Bucharest several years before of the Romanian folk-ballad *The Legend of Master Manole*, in which a master-builder named Manole has been commissioned by Prince Negru Vodă to build a monastery at Curtea de Argeș.”

Professor Cousineau came across Mircea Eliade’s interpretation of the legend in *Commentaires sur la Légende de Maître Manole* [Commentary on the Legend of Master Manole], (1994) and confesses his attention was drawn to Eliade’s spin on the ballad’s plot claiming that Manole’s wife does not actually die: “She is, rather, transformed; her soul leaves her body of flesh and bones and goes to live in the stone and plaster body of the monastery” (Eliade, 1994, p. 168). This was the spark that set off the inward streak of criticism that has thrust through a whole array of modernist fiction, drama, and poetry.

Eliade goes on to claim that Manole and his wife, Ana are united beyond the grave because of their **violent** deaths, an end that would not otherwise have been granted to them: “Not simply dying, but **dying a violent** death, permits him – now transformed into the fountain that sprang up on the spot where he had fallen – to remain with his wife and, more precisely, to exist at the same cosmic level as herself” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 16).

The key term that has caught the attention of the author is Eliade’s coinage. In order to spell out this archaic symbolic ritual, Eliade introduces the concept of “**architectural body**” defining an edifice into which a “fleshly body” is made over by its ritual death: “Thus, ritual death produces a bodily change. The soul does not ‘live’ inside the building; rather, it is incarnated into it. As a result of the sacrifice – of its violent death – it continues to live here below in a new, architectural body much longer than it would have in its fleshly body”. (...) “There is no important monument that does not have – whether in reality or in legend – a victim who has been buried alive” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 15).

Another work by Eliade *Forgerons et Alchimistes* [Blacksmiths and Alchemists], (1956), further elaborates on this idea connecting the Manole Legend and building-rituals, remarking that this ritual “introduces the idea that life can be engendered from another life that has been immolated” and that “The soul of the victim changes its fleshly envelope: it changes its human body for a new ‘body’ – a building, an object, even an operation – which it makes alive or animates” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 16). The return pattern used by the author may draw on another seminal work by Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: Le Mythe de L’Éternel Retour* [The myth of eternal return], (1966), or *Cosmic History*.

Professor Cousineau thinks of two analogous roads leading to the creation of two complexes that involve violence and disguised forms: the Oedipus complex set forth by Sigmund Freud and the Manole complex discussed by Mircea Eliade. Professor Cousineau argues that: “where Freud saw Sophocles’ Oedipus the King as revealing infantile psychic impulses, for which he coined the term the “Oedipus Complex”, Eliade found in the Manole

legend the expression of archaic building rituals that we might, in turn, call the “Manole Complex” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 16).

Both of these complexes involve a violent act: the killing of a rival or the offering of a blood sacrifice in order for a desired goal, whether the fulfilment of an incestuous longing or the construction of a building, to be achieved. Likewise, Eliade’s belief that “building rituals return in disguised forms in the various projects that we pursue in our waking lives is analogous to Freud’s discovery of the return in disguised form of the repressed Oedipus Complex in our nocturnal dreams” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 16).

Following the thread of evidence left behind by the Manole complex, the author embarked upon a journey of discovery retracing his steps towards long-familiar “literary monuments” that he had been teaching for years, but only now did he start “thinking of them for the first time as disguised stagings of archaic building-rituals” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 15).

In his introductory chapter, the author follows the construction of the architectural body in the legend of *Meşterul Manole* (Master Manole) and retrieves it symbolically from the novel *The Loser* by Thomas Bernhard. Bernhard has his three protagonists sacrificed both as musicians and as writers and thus he smooths out the way for the “soul” of music and writing to slide into the architectural body of *The Loser* (Cousineau, 2023, p. 21).

In the nine chapters Professor Cousineau pulls off a tour de force revealing “the uncanny return of the Manole Complex in nine masterpieces of literary modernism”.

Let us dig into the link between myths and uncanniness or mystery. According to Mircea Eliade, in his book *Mythes, Rêves et Mystères* [Myths, dreams and mysteries], myths uncover structures of reality and lay bare sundry modes of existence. This proves why myths set up models for human behaviour as they recount true stories. But there can be no myths if there is no revelation of some mystery, i.e. of some original occurrence which should underpin some structure of reality or some kind of human behaviour. Myths always hark back to some collective event and appeal both to human intelligence and imagination and represent the human being in a holistic way. Mircea Eliade remarks that, when not looked upon as a kind of revelation, myths risk of becoming incomprehensible.

Each time there is a clue, the title chapters of the present book under scrutiny are meant to alert the reader to the covert ways in which the “fleshly body” of a protagonist who the author symbolically sacrifices is changed into the “architectural body” of a work that he both “inhabits and is incarnated into” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 15).

In Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Thomas Cousineau uncovers an uncanny return pattern exactly in Jay Gatsby’s determination to “fix everything” and finds that it is ultimately to blame for his death. The author sees this determination returning uncannily as Fitzgerald’s determination “to fix every detail of his novel” and not shrinking back from the painstaking description of dodgy events which lead up to Gatsby’s death and Fitzgerald’s having Nick Carraway to utter “fixed” eulogizing words about Gatsby, all being set “to produce a literary triumph” (Cousineau, 2023, p. 29).

As for Joyce’s short story *The Sisters* from *The Dubliners*, Professor Thomas Cousineau spins Father Flynn’s slide into senility and his demise narrative as being brought on by Father Flynn’s being “too scrupulous always” when going about his pursuits whose elements Joyce changed into the obvious “writerly triumph” as he carried out this skilful narration of events with “scrupulous meanness”, in the exact wording of Joyce (Cousineau, 2023, p. 58).

The chapter on Pessoa tackles the topic of architectural sights that Fernando Pessoa boasts of in his early piece describing Lisbon: *What Every Tourist Should See* in the “architectural body” of his later masterpiece, *The Book of Disquiet* (Cousineau, 2023, p. 59).

The author ponders on an uncanny return to the archetype of the protagonist as sacrificial victim in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and shows how "the purposeful ways of doing undertaken by the four principal characters", (Cousineau, 2023, p. 75) which fail to reach their goal, undergo a change throughout the play into the covert action of what one dubs "purposeless doing" that is unfolded by the actors who play their roles.

In his modernist masterpiece, T. S. Eliot shows J. Alfred Prufrock's returning to hamstrung personal reminiscences as he has them covertly doubled throughout his love song. Here T. S. Eliot's steps in as an author and has recourse to "the impersonal cultural past" of mankind, lacing his poem with unforgettable echoes from Dante's *Inferno* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Another Beckett play, *Endgame*, comes under critical scrutiny here as Professor Cousineau finds that this work evinces an ambiguous play 'to two forms of interdependence' (Samuel Beckett's word for what his play was about) and further elaborates that "on the one hand, it designates what Beckett described as the "war" waged by Hamm and Clov and, on the other, the "cantata for two voices" into which "it is transformed by the actors" (Cousineau, 2023, p. 102).

Like with Fernando Pessoa, in *A Short History of Decay*, Emil Cioran has his ideas anticipated by an early work *Transfiguration de la Roumanie* [The transfiguration of Romania], and similarly, "it replaces the protagonist as the "fleshly body," and the unattained yearning for transfiguration in Cioran's early work which resurfaces "in a camouflaged way in the crafting of transfigurations in the 'architectural body' of Cioran's masterpiece" (Cousineau, 2023, p. 26).

Professor Cousineau remarks the return of the archetypal figure of the main character as the sacrificial victim in Flannery O'Connor's short story, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. The author accurately points out that the word "misfit" refers not only to the deportment of the Misfit himself (from whose cruelty he can derive no pleasure) but this word reveals Flannery O'Connor's employment of misfits as a narrative technique and quotes Frederick Asals' opinion regarding the authoress' "aesthetics of incongruity" from which Flannery O'Connor herself "obviously derived immense pleasure" (Cousineau, 2023, p. 139).

"La pièce de resistance", the novel *Light in August* by William Faulkner, allows Professor Cousineau to discuss the concept of frame in narrations. He claims that "the telling of stories designed to frame Joe Christmas as a "nigger", (Cousineau, 2023, p. 147) leading up to his lynching towards the end of *Light in August* takes place in a novel where story framing constitutes the staple narrative technique. And Professor Cousineau finds that this happens as Faulkner uses comic frame tale to girdle round the tragic main story.

The critical skills of Professor Cousineau from this volume prove him to be a restless and relentless pursuer of modernist designs across a maze of modernist writers from Europe and USA. The nine masterpieces of literary modernism are the research fields where Professor Cousineau uncovers archaic building rituals at the symbolic level drawing upon the trail-blazing work of Mircea Eliade in the domain of myths and especially on the Manole legend.

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