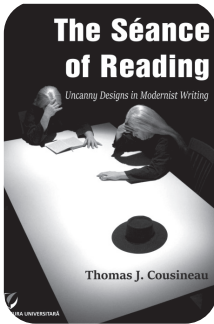


Thomas J. Cousineau, *The Séance of Reading. Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing*, Bucharest, Bucharest University Publishing, 2023



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## REREADING THE LITERARY MODERNIST CORE

In light of the revival of the theoretical, ideological and social debates of modernity and, by implication, modernism, World Literature becomes both a stage for canonical battles and a way to rethink the methods of comparative literature. While in *Combined and Uneven Development* (Liverpool University Press, 2015), the WReC bases its approach on the idea of a unique, but uneven modernity, arguing against the utopia of a World Literature without borders and (pre)judgments, other research links modernist literature to the field of Digital Humanities, such as the volume edited by Shawna Ross and James O'Sullivan, *Reading Modernism with Machines: Digital Humanities and Modernist Literature* (Palgrave, 2016), thus revitalizing an already classicized literature. Moreover, a relevant issue is the criterion according to which works are chosen for these studies, the canon often seeming immutable. Professor and scholar Thomas J. Cousineau's most recent volume, *The Séance of Reading. Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing* (Bucharest, 2023) explores nine modernist texts – novels, plays, short stories, and a poem – according to a criterion that highlights the fraught relationship between modernist writing and the protagonists who embody the text.

In other words, the specific narrative architecture of modernism is seen as a labyrinthine and mystical construction, which is not only a skeleton on which the story itself is embroidered, but which becomes, by virtue of the transfer of agency between characters and textual shape, an almost human body, immersed in a continuous

process of reincarnation. In fact, the book is based on an unusual principle: a Romanian myth, which Cousineau brings to the fore by commenting on this relationship between protagonists and the textual architecture which they belong to. Thus, his approach starts with *The Legend of Master Manole*, a builder who must wall up his wife, Ana, so that the monastery he is building with his workers stops collapsing. Therefore, the sacrifice of a living person for a work of art is both a condition of aesthetic success and a criterion connecting several works from different literatures in the following chapters. In the footsteps of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex and of Mircea Eliade's reading of the Romanian folk-ballade, Cousineau sheds light on what he calls the "Manole Complex": "Both of these complexes involve a violent act – the killing of a rival or the offering of a blood sacrifice – in order that a desired goal – whether the fulfilment of an incestuous longing or the construction of a building – be achieved" (Cousineau 2023, 16). Extended as a platform, the legend of Master Manole emphasizes the return of "archaic building-rituals" (Cousineau 2023, 17) in modernist literary works, thereby renewing the literary-centric understanding of the text as a sacred and multi-layered *monument*, composed on the renaissance paradigm as a perfectly functional and self-sufficient mechanism.

The first chapter examines the construction of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, starting with a small quantitative analysis, which reveals that the word "to fix" appears only twice. However, the idea of repair itself betrays a creative obsession that can be associated with postmodernist views of the textual body, since, as Cousineau

points out, "in order to achieve this transformation of Gatsby's mortal body into the architectural body of Gatsby, Fitzgerald invents a sequence of events suggesting that Gatsby's self-declared determination 'to fix everything just the way it was before' has surreptitiously passed into the hands of his creator." (Cousineau 2023, 31) In essence, the obsession with repairing the past by bringing people together underlies an obsession of the author to recover literary history. It is not by chance, Cousineau notes, that Fitzgerald resorts to the strategy of intertextuality, more or less obviously, to synchronize his own creative effort with myths, poems, narratives that, on the one hand, encapsulate a metamorphosis-like process designed to explain the oddities of textual construction as full synchronization between content and form. On the other hand, revisiting "several classics of western literature" raises the question of failure in terms of Fitzgerald's desire to align himself with a great literature, which, by recovering it through integration into a not exceptional theme, he rebrands by changing its function. For example, one of the architectural strategies Cousineau emphasizes is the conversion of Keats's "sensuous imagery" (Cousineau 2023, 39) into prose. The poetisation of narrative discourse, typical of high modernism, of the Virginia Woolf or Marcel Proust type, is a form of augmenting small existential "wonderings". Further intertexts with the Daedalus myth and Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* reactivate the monstrous, labyrinthine character of Gatsby's car on the one hand, and revisit the hegemonic, unjust relationship between Europe and Africa on the other. Finally, the intertext with Ovid reveals a mystical core of *The Great Gatsby*, namely,

beyond “literary glory” by incorporating “other forms” (*i.e.* bodies) of great, classicized, canonical literature, so Fitzgerald is seen to practice an exercise in detachment and *repair* of his identities.

If the chapter on *The Great Gatsby* claims an obsession, the fixing of things, the third chapter, devoted to James Joyce’s short story “The Sisters” investigates a human character trait, associated here with patristic authority: scrupulosity, which Cousineau extends to the condition of the artist (writer). In a dialectical manner, involving dualities such as priest v. artist or corruption v. construction, Cousineau explains the mirroring effect that these equations embody through reflection in the construction of the narrative. Again, it is the narrative scenario that, in keeping with the Flaubertian model, becomes an obsessive concern. In Joyce’s words, “No, I have the words already. What I am seeking is the perfect order of words in the sentence. There is an order in every way appropriate. I think I have it.” (Cousineau 2023, 46) The consequence of this artistic imperative is to be found in the way the characters’ manner of confession is improper, Joyce staging a dislocated, obscure, almost apocalyptic confession. Not coincidentally, Peter Adkins remarks in the introduction to his study *The Modernist Anthropocene. Non-human Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes*: “It is a scene that offers a further example of what Colebrook describes as how the apocalyptic tone we find in modernist texts such as Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, ‘anticipate[s] twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic narratives’ (Adkins 2022, 9). Indeed, the apocalyptic tone comes in the case of “The

Sisters” short story also from the sacrifice of morality that patristic conduct presupposes, hence the term simony, which, transferred to the creative logic, Cousineau explains, is a form of playing a role that is impossible to carry through to the end – that of the simoniac: “the artist as a successful simoniac” (Cousineau 2023, 58). Scrupulosity, a symbol of both stylistic and didactic-patristic order, becomes a pretext for the exchange of power between the boy and Father Flynn: while for the latter, “the duties of the priesthood was too much”, for the boy “the duties of the artist” are fully claimed.

If, for Joyce, Dublin is a backdrop in “The Sisters”, for Pessoa, in *The Book of Disquiet*, Lisbon is a super-character, a city-monument that Cousineau illustrates from two parallel points of view: the eye of Soares, who incorporates himself into the buildings and landscapes that shape the city (like Ana in the wall of the Curtea de Arges monastery), and the cicerone’s gaze from the Pessoa’s guidebook: *Lisbon: What Every Tourist Should See*. Actualising a sensorial geography, not just a territorial one, Cousineau analyses how Lisbon is transformed along the length of two different gazes; hence, the sacrificial act that reappears as in Joyce, where morality is sacrificed in the name of a transfer of creative power: “The sacrifice of the beautiful things with which the cicerone regales the visitor to Lisbon and their return as visitations of the sublime in *The Book* will emerge if we first notice the frequent allusions to Portuguese royalty that we find in Pessoa’s guidebook” (Cousineau 2023, 66). On the other hand, Soares’s vision is transformative, since according to a logic that moves from the beautiful to the sublime,

Lisbon becomes a pictorial space, similar to an “impressionist painting” (Cousineau 2023, 71), but it also becomes itself a state of mind, invading its visitors. The space-human relationship is determined in Cousineau’s analysis by several elements: materiality (buildings, squares, museums, tombs of important Portuguese), death, and time. If the first element is the strong point of the tourist guide, a standard book with a pragmatic purpose, death and time are two of the leitmotifs of Pessoa’s book. Reinforced by aesthetic pleasure as well as by the famous *unease*, death and time embody the city’s state of grace.

Following the same approach, one of the chapters of Cousineau’s book is dedicated to the Romanian-French philosopher Emil Cioran, more precisely to two of his works: *Transfiguration de la Roumanie* and *A Short History of Decay*. For Emil Cioran the problem of space is ideological and, implicitly, national, identity-related. Central to these two books, the concept of transfiguration exposes variations of the utopia of the rebirth of the native country: “In *Transfiguration de la Roumanie*, this takes the form of an explicitly promoted prophetic dream of transfiguring his country; in *A Short History*, he implicitly transforms this dream of a prophet into the craft of an anti-prophet.” (Cousineau 2023, 121). In short, Cousineau investigates five ways in which Cioran’s dream of transfiguration manifests itself. The first is the transfiguration of the self, the shift from assuming the position of prophet to that of anti-prophet, and the exploration of “metaphorical suicide”. The second transfiguration is linguistic: from Romanian (“an extremely elastic language”) to French (“straight-jacket language”). The

third issue involved is the manner of re-inventing terms which, once they appear in *A Short History*, “their original prophetic implications become anti-prophetic” (Cousineau 2023, 125). Key words used in *Transfiguration* such as Ardor, Cosmic, Destiny, Ecstasy, Glory, History, Prophecy, Rupture, Saved and Solution are taken up in an apocalyptic fashion, in *A Short History*, underpinning not only the existentialist direction of Cioran’s thought but also a reaction to unsettled modernity. To give just one example, the term destiny is initially linked to national identity: “Having acquired an ethnic identity, the French people crossed the threshold of history. This I show it is with every people who possess a destiny” (Cioran apud Cousineau 2023, 127). Then the term actually activates its opposite, the idea of not having a destiny, of being in a state of non-anticipation, in which identity is reduced to a minimum: “Decomposition presides over the laws of life: closer to our dust than inanimate objects to theirs, we succumb before them and rush upon our destiny under the gaze of the apparently indestructible stars.” (Cioran apud Cousineau 2023, 127) In the logic of the criterion that Cousineau uses to link the nine texts, the fourth side of transfiguration is a more materialistic one: the process of passing from the prophetic to the antiprophet, monuments, “created by major cultures”. In this case, the materiality-man dialectic questions modernity as a period par excellence of human exclusion from the world. The last aspect is technical, but also ontological at the level of Cioran’s thought: Cousineau observes that, in fact, “*Transfiguration* is itself transfigured in *A Short History* into a kind of prose that adopts at times the techniques

of poetry". (Cousineau 2023, 131). Thus, "the mortal body of *Transfiguration*" had to be sacrificed in the name of the next book, which would itself become "a monument," creating the sensation of permanence, but a permanence in nothingness, decay, and suffering.

By re-ordering, the next chapter looks at Samuel Beckett's best-known play, *Waiting for Godot*. Cousineau highlights several "telltale tingles" moments, as Nabokov calls them, that the play provoked in him. Exploring the forms of "doing it on purpose" in the Irish-born writer, Cousineau traces an interesting dynamic between what is *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* to waiting, noting, in the footsteps of Roger Blin, Beckett's technique of pausing. Again, the textual body of the play itself incorporates the characters' expectation not only formally (through many suspension points), but also actively, insofar as the stage movements become vectors of the expectation as a *perpetuum mobile*. In Cousineau's words, "We learn, further, that Beckett designated two different types of movement - 'little turns' and 'approach by stages' - under the heading 'recurrences' in capital letters." (Cousineau 79, 2023). Moreover, Cousineau's comment claims Emil Cioran's distinction regarding *Waiting for Godot*: "It's not tragedy, but misery" (Cioran apud Cousineau 2023, 81). In other words, the state of misery not only "had not yet been transformed into tragedy", but is amplified by the choir, which functions as a scenic catalyst, but also as a way of prolonging the waiting, of creating a particular catharsis: carrying on an endless waiting that nevertheless sustains existence through two interdependent elements: "the negation and the negation of the negation" (Cousineau 2023, 88).

Since Beckett returns in Cousineau's project, I will discuss the type of reading he practices for another play by the writer above mentioned: *Endgame*. As in the previous case, "mortal bodies" pass "into the architectural body of a theatrical work" (Cousineau 2023, 102). What is important to outline is that Beckett translates his own play from French into English, a difficult process which generates significant changes in the textual body amidst "linguistic violence," as Sean Waller and Dirk van Hulle state. So, the English translation is an aggressive act, which makes the belligerent state that the two characters Hamm and Clov establish even more prominent. Beckett's construction is based on an ideal of *symmetry*, which in fact overshadows the text, since, thanks to the music, its tonalities, "the war-like interdependence" becomes "the cantata-like interdependence" (Cousineau 2023, 104). The musical form transgresses the textual form originally established, which enhances the ritualistic, enchanting function of modernist writing.

The fifth chapter focuses on T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Here Cousineau identifies a mechanism specific to Eliot's intertextually rich poetry. The intertextual concealment, like in Dante's *Inferno*, is doubled by the personality of Prufrock, the character whose "personal past" is the platform for uncanny phenomena. In other words, the literary past, the text weaving, intersects with a personal past, but still a "biographia literaria", which generates a dialectic between what is *permanent* and what is *temporary*, translated as a dialectic between the *personal* and the *impersonal*. While the obscurity of Prufrock's (perhaps Eliot's) personal past will persist, the unclearness of the intertexts is

only temporary. The mechanism of temporalities is connected to T. S. Eliot's poetic technique, so that the indeterminacy implied by the phrase "the Eliot way" underlies the idea of a return to literary tradition ("towards a much-desired meeting with his literary predecessors", Cousineau 2023, 101), which T. S. Eliot also develops theoretically in his famous essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*.

Given the under-representation of women writers in the modernist canon, several studies have been published in recent years aimed precisely at highlighting the work of women authors, placing on the "world map of letters" names that the canon has either excluded or treated superficially. One such endeavour is Jody Cardinal, Deirdre E. Egan-Ryan, and Julia Lisella's *Modernist Women Writers and American Social Engagement (Innovation and Activism in American Women's Writing)*, which "it is a petition for broadening the boundaries of modernist studies, and it is a testament to how women's literature itself has become critical to the ambitiousness of the new modernist studies" (Wagner 2019). Incidentally, Cambridge University Press had published a consistent and recuperative book in 2010, *The Cambridge Companion of Modernist Women Writers*.

While Cousineau has so far focused on male authors, Chapter Eight departs from the rigid, male core of literary modernism a little by discussing a short story by Flannery O'Connor: "A Good Man is Hard to Find". Although it cannot be taken as an attempt of gender balance, it is worth to point out that the modernist canon deserves to be revisited by virtue of other criteria, such as this one – an old building ritual turned into a legend. As

in previous analyses, Cousineau points to the details of narrative architecture and the ambiguity of characters, which Frederick Asals calls "an aesthetics of incongruity" (Cousineau 2023, 133). There is a metafictional dimension to this short story, where one of the characters, self-called The Misfit, translates O'Connor's elliptical and symbolizing narrative technique. She revisits a world in demolition, modernity lacking spirituality, challenged by death and conflict with the medieval world. Basically, the grandmother, the book's protagonist, ends up being murdered by The Misfit, an escaped prison killer. The paradox, however, lies in this man: "she adds the misfit between The Misfit's cruel order for the disposal of the grandmother's corpse and the solicitude that he displays towards 'Pity Sing', the family's cat" (Cousineau 2023, 141). O'Conner transfigures this man's bizarre, problematic behaviour into narrative architecture that incorporates the grandmother's "dead body," for whom "a misfit is a predicament" (Cousineau 2023, 145), but for the text, the misfit becomes an ordering principle, being on the basis of incongruities.

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to a famous novel, *Light in August* by William Faulkner. This time, the focus of Cousineau's demonstration is the frame, *i.e.* the way Faulkner arranges the episodes, thus overcoming the weakness of time: "Faulkner also creates an effect of aesthetic framing by narrating in close proximity to each other certain episodes that are widely separated in time." (Cousineau 2023, 157). The symmetries between events that happen in different temporalities, such as "the birth of Lena's baby with the birth of Joe Christmas, two events that occurred more

than thirty years apart”, the juxtapositions between dead bodies create a *mirroring effect*, of perfect synchronization, through the process of embodiment of the state of being of the characters, with a (dis)functional body, in the monumental state of the book, with a body rearranged through the act of framing.

Thomas J. Cousineau’s project is in line with what the Romanian-American theorist Matei Călinescu discusses in his book *Rereading*. The works that Cousineau has chosen have certainly had their share of interpretation and comparisons to highlight their innovative character. As I said in the beginning, the founding legend of the Master Manole serves Cousineau as a principle for “ordering” the texts collected in this book. Last but not least, in recent world literary studies, the method of *close reading* is seriously contested by what Franco Moretti and his followers call

*distant reading*. Cousineau is registered in a well-established tradition of a very subtle reading, where the architectural details of the texts generate that revelation, called by Nabokov “telltale tingle”, which Thomas J. Cousineau highlights through the charactering of the specific design of each of these texts. Perhaps the close reading method can become redundant, but in this case, it actually operates with details that, while dismantling the narrative architecture, bring out rituals, correspondences, symmetries and paradoxes of the writing scripts. Basically, Cousineau makes a plea here for writing as a mystical, transformative, sacrificial, and therefore foundational act. But also, for a *method* of analysing the creative mechanisms behind harmoniously functioning textual constructions. Re-reading the ‘foundation’ also means reconditioning texts that are essential to world literature in a more or less different way from before.

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