

# **THE SÉANCE OF READING**

**Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing**



**THOMAS J. COUSINEAU**

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*For Charlotte, Sophie, Sebastien, Madeleine and Damien*



"A wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading."

-- Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*

"Ritual death produces a bodily change. The soul does not simply live inside the building; rather it is incarnated in it. As a result of the sacrifice – of the violent death – it continues to live here below in a new, architectural body much longer than it would have in its fleshly body."

-- Mircea Eliade, *Commentaires sur la légende de maître Manole*





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## Acknowledgements

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## **Introduction: The Manole Complex**

“Anything and everything, depending on how one sees it, is a marvel or a hindrance, an all or a nothing, a path or a problem”

-- Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

*The Séance of Reading* owes its origin to my discovery while teaching at the University of Bucharest several years ago of the Romanian folk-ballad "The Legend of Master Manole," in which a master-builder named Manole has been commissioned by Prince Negru Voda to build a monastery at Curtea de Arges. Try as they may, however, Manole and his fellow builders cannot prevent the walls that they construct during the day from collapsing at night:

But whate'er they wrought  
At night came to naught,  
Crumbled down like rot!  
The next day again,  
The third day again,  
The fourth day again,  
All their toil in vain!

The solution to their dilemma appears to Manole in a dream from which he learns that the walls will continue to collapse until he and his fellow builders

Make an oath to wall  
Whose bonny wife erst,  
Whose dear sister first,  
Haps to come this way  
At the break of day  
Bringing meat and drink  
To husband or kin.

Unfortunately for Manole, his pregnant wife Ana is the first to arrive that morning at the construction site. As was foretold by

the dream, the walls will now resist collapse but at the cost of Ana's life:

Her sweet voice alone  
 Came through with a moan,  
 "Manole, Manole,  
 Good master Manole!  
 The wall squeezes hard,  
 Crushed is now my heart,  
 With my life I part."

Prince Negru Volda, who beholds with delight the edifice that the sacrifice of Ana has made possible, asks Manole

"Can you build for me,  
 With your mastery,  
 Yet another shrine,  
 A cloister divine,  
 Ever far more bright,  
 Of greater delight."

When Manole – cheerfully but ill-advisedly – boasts that such an achievement is surely within his reach, Prince Negru -- presumably fearing that Manole will build an even more resplendent shrine for one of his rivals -- orders that the scaffold be removed, thus stranding Manole and the other builders on the roof. As a desperation move, they fashion wings from the roofing shingles and, attempting to fly, fall to the ground below. As Manole prepares to leap, he hears the plea of his wife Ana rising from the wall in which he had buried her alive:

"Manole, Manole,  
 Good master Manole  
 The wall weighs like lead  
 Tears my teats still shed,  
 My babe is crushed dead,  
 Away my life's fled!"

The ground on which Manole will, in his turn, be "crushed dead" becomes the site of a miraculous transformation:

There sprang up a well,  
 A fountain so tiny  
 Of scant water, briny,

So gentle to hear,  
Wet with many a tear.

\* \* \*

I had discovered the Manole Legend thanks to an exchange of emails with the Romanian scholar Gabriel Badea, from whom I also learned that Mircea Eliade had written a work entitled *Commentaires sur la légende de maître Manole*. I was particularly intrigued while reading Eliade's interpretation of this legend by his contention 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 (168; my emphasis). Likewise according to Eliade, husband and wife are united beyond the grave thanks to their violent deaths – an outcome that would not otherwise have been accorded 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 (167-8). I was especially struck by Eliade's coinage of the metaphor "architectural body" to designate the building into which a "fleshly body" is transformed 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" (169).

Eliade contends that the Manole Legend stages the return - in the form of a popular folk ballad -- of archaic building-rituals, a primitive practice of which I had not previously heard. After surveying a host of legends related to rituals in which the construction of a building necessitates a human sacrifice, Eliade concludes that "There is no important monument that does not have – whether in reality or in legend – a victim who has been buried alive" (70). I likewise noted several remarks in Eliade's *The Forge and the Crucible* that touch upon the relationship between

the Manole Legend and building-rituals, including his observation that this kind of sacrifice “introduces the idea that life can be engendered from another life that has been immolated” (31) 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*” (64; my emphasis). Eliade further argues that although these archaic building-rituals have been abandoned in actual practice, they nonetheless return in disguised forms: “Often times, the body in which the victim continues to live is so *camouflaged* that it is only with great difficulty that we recognize its role in assuring the latter’s survival” (194; my emphasis).

Eliade’s commentary on the Manole Legend reminded me of Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus Legend. 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.” 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 fulfillment of an incestuous longing or the construction of a building – 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.

Not long after reading Eliade’s *Commentaires*, I discovered on the internet the Moldavan painter Igor Vieru’s diptych “Legenda Mesterului Manole,” in which I immediately recognized a striking visual realization – thanks to Vieru’s use of form and color in such a way as to create a symbiotic relationship between Ana, Manole, and the monastery – of Eliade’s notion, now baptized the “Manole Complex,” of bodies that are *incarnated into* rather than simply *inhabiting* the buildings to whose construction they have contributed via their sacrificial deaths. Vieru’s painting reminded me soon afterwards of Samuel Beckett’s late play “Ohio Impromptu,” whose world premiere I had attended in 1981 at



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Ohio State University. In Beckett's play, as in Vieru's painting, the use of form and color in such a way as to "incarnate into" the stage itself the two characters who, at the same time, are "onstage" is immediately apparent. A surely unintentional – but nonetheless intriguing – illustration of Eliade's contention that Ana's soul passes from her fleshly human body into the stone of the monastery's architectural body occurs when we learn in the text that Beckett has written for them that the two characters, at the end of the play, "sat on as though turned to stone" (*Centenary Edition*, Vol. III o 476).

\* \* \*

With this newly formed concept of the Manole Complex in hand, I now found myself returning to some of the long-familiar "literary monuments" that I had been teaching for decades but now thinking of them for the first time as disguised stagings of archaic building-rituals. This "defamiliarized" way of rereading familiar literary classics took on an especially surprising turn when I directed my attention to the novels of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, about which I had published many years ago a book entitled *Three-Part Inventions*. I soon realized that, if I had known of the Manole Legend while writing the chapter on Bernhard's masterpiece, a novel entitled *Correction*, I would have immediately recognized its affinity with the Romanian folk-ballad.

In *Correction*, Manole becomes Roithamer, who, like his Romanian predecessor, is entirely identified with the art of building, which he describes as the highest of all possible human achievements:

To build is the most wonderful thing in the world, it's the supreme gratification, "supreme gratification" underlined. It's what everyone longs to do, building, but not everyone gets the chance to build, and everyone who does build gets this gratification out of it. Especially in building something no one has ever built before. It's the supreme gratification, "supreme gratification" underlined, to complete a work of art one has planned and built oneself. (200)

In its turn, the Monastery at Curtea de Argeș becomes the “Cone,” a building to whose construction Roithamer commits himself with single-minded devotion:

the idea to use his sudden windfall for building his sister a cone, a cone-shaped habitation, and not only that, but most incredible of all, to erect this giant cone not where such a house might normally be located, but to design it and put it up and complete it way out in the middle of the Kobernausser forest [ . . . ] all at once the road through the Kobernausser forest was actually being built, a road that would go to the exact center of the forest at an angle he had calculated for months, working nights, because he meant to build that cone in the exact center of the Kobernausser forest [ . . . ] (11)

The obstacle to the completion of the monastery caused by the nightly collapse of its walls returns in *Correction* as the entirely realistic resistance to Roithamer’s project by his brothers, who think he’s crazy:

to begin with, it was a rude shock especially to Roithamer’s brothers who had never dreamt that their brother’s crazy scheme could become a reality, made into a reality by the crazy Roithamer [ . . . ] they had tried to have Roithamer declared incompetent, they instituted a proceeding to have him placed under guardianship, but he was declared completely sane by a team of doctors, in any case the experts who had been hired and paid by Roithamer’s brothers remained in the minority against the experts who testified that Roithamer was sane. (13)

Roithamer also believes, doubtlessly with good reason, that his Austrian compatriots are themselves hostile to his pursuit. In his own words, anyone who attempts to assert his individuality “is chronically exposed to vulgar misunderstanding and vulgar vilification, sure to drive him to destruction and to his death and to the annihilation of his existence” (20-21). Such an individual must, for this reason, meet resistance with resistance by refusing

to recognize the norms or to meet the expectations of his community. Not to do so “would mean yielding to a weakness, nothing less than a deadly weakness, it would mean succumbing in a moment to the imbecility which I have so far managed to escape” (24). In a similar spirit, he affirms the necessity of “resistance to everything that might stand in the way” (27).

The chapter on *Correction* that appears in *Three-Part Inventions* contains a passage that points to the curious way that the behavior of Roithamer’s sister restages the passive acceptance by Manole’s wife of the sacrificial role that she will play in the construction of the monastery at Curtea de Arges:

Roithamer’s sister acquiesces to her brother’s leading her into the finished Cone. Such behavior is especially odd in light of the fact, as was noted earlier, that the Cone, which Roithamer assumes will bring her “supreme happiness,” actually inspires terror in her. She refused to take any part in the planning of the Cone and never, in fact, even visited the site while it was under construction [. . .] Oddly, however, she never voices any objection. Rather, she behaves like *the docile victim in a ritual ceremony* who is led uncomplaining to the altar where she will be sacrificed. (70-1; my emphasis)

Yet another echo of the Manole Legend emerges in the curious inversion whereby the obligation to immure Ana in the walls of the monastery at Curtea de Arges in order to *construct* it returns in the necessity of Roithamer’s sister dying in order to *complete* the Cone even after it has been built. Roithamer himself repeatedly alludes to the distinction between the construction of the Cone and its completion: “But the edifice as a work of art is finished only after the death of the person for whom it was built and finished” (257); “My own ideas had led with logical consistency to the realization and completion of the Cone, when my sister was frightened to death, the Cone was finished” (258); “To build an edifice for a person, the most beloved person, as a crazy idea and to destroy, to kill this person with the completion of that edifice, the Cone” (259).

As in the Manole Legend, the completion of the Cone (as distinguished from its construction) is only “finally” completed by the death of the builder: Manole falls to his death from the roof of the monastery and Roithamer hangs himself from a tree. The union beyond the grave that Eliade attributes to Manole and his wife returns in the narrator’s post-mortem uniting of Roithamer and his sister:

At the moment he had finished, perfected the Cone, he had put a period to his own life, with the Cone perfected, Roithamer’s existence had come to a close, that’s what he felt and that’s why he put an end to his life, with the perfecting of the Cone two lives had lost their justification, they had to cease, I said to Hoeller and looked again at the two death notices on the opposite wall to the left and the right of the door, the life of Roithamer himself and that of his sister, which he had uncompromisingly bound up with his own life” (103).

Finally, the comments that Roithamer makes about the intimate identification between his sister and the Cone that he has built for her “supreme happiness” recalls Eliade’s observation that Ana is “incarnated into” the monastery at Curtea de Arges rather than simply inhabiting it. He tells the narrator, for example, that its interior spaces “are designed to adapt themselves to whatever state of mind my sister finds herself in as she enters these spaces” (158). He then elaborates on this contention: “The Cone’s interior corresponding to my sister’s inner being, the Cone’s exterior to her outward being, and together he whole being expressed in the Cone’s character, the inside and the outside of the Cone are as inseparable as the inside and outside of my sister” (158-9); and further explains that it is “three-storied because a three-storied edifice accords with my sister’s character” (162), and that the identification between the Cone and herself is as perfect as is humanly possible: “it expresses her one hundred percent, or let’s say nearly one hundred percent, because a one hundred percent expression is impossible” (165).