

Reading Frames of Reference

The Satire of Exegesis in James De Mille's 'A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder'

Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the Thousand and One Nights? Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote and Hamlet a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and try to understand, and in which they are also written. JORGE LUIS BORGES (196)

Pulled from the ocean of imagination, James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888)¹ fairly drips with the significance of exegesis. The novel's very title signals its tale-within-a-tale hermeneutic, its complex interplay between romance narrative (the strange manuscript transcribed by sailor Adam More) and frame story (the reading and interpretation of the found manuscript by Melick, Congreve, Oxenden, and Featherstone). From the outset of the novel, the romance and the frame become as irrevocably "stuck together" as the paper boats—one red and one white—that Melick launches, in search of amusement, from Featherstone's wind-abandoned yacht. If reinterpreted symbolically, the paper boat analogy begins to reveal the ambiguity of De Mille's pairing of frame and romance: one narrative movement is "red" (passionate, morally censurable), and the other is "white" (pure, morally ratified), but which is which? The critical spotlight has tended to focus on the romance, as if De Mille's satire were aimed solely at the piously cannibalistic Kosekin race nestled in tropical Antarctica, a society that is "at first glance better but ultimately as bad as actual Western society, or worse" (Parks, "Strange to

Strangers Only” 64). If the Kosekin world is morally censurable, however, surely Adam More is no white paper boat of morality within it: witness his pseudo-Christian cant, his inclination toward “downright bigamy” (*SM* 181), his hypocritical willingness at the end of the novel to become “‘Atamor, the Man of Light’” (*SM* 263) by assuming the unlimited wealth and power of the Melek class in Kosekin society. But neither can the moral centre of *A Strange Manuscript* be found in its exegetical frame story, which constitutes five of the novel’s thirty-one chapters. Moving in and out of focus to spotlight the action of the romance narrative, the curious frame does not “explain” More’s manuscript in any profound sense at all; nor does it provide a consistent moral ground of support for More’s outraged sensibilities in the cannibalistic land of the Kosekins. Three of the four men on the yacht are hopelessly superficial interpreters: the degenerate morality of Kosekin society is ironically accentuated by the silence of Congreve, Oxenden, and Featherstone on questions of Kosekin religion and values—conspicuous questions that do not cross the minds of these simple exegetes.² Readers of *A Strange Manuscript* thus search in vain for a white boat, a moral norm, with which to align themselves in order to feel superior to the target of the satire. Indeed, it is central to De Mille’s satiric design that although satire is evidently at work in the novel, the reader cannot dogmatically pin down the target of the attack.

The frame story, however, by virtue of the very inside-outside tensions that define it aesthetically as *frame*, does provide a clue to the “correct” moral response. A literary or pictorial frame not only differentiates realms but, as John Matthews states in his study of *Wuthering Heights*, it “enables a relation between differentiated realms (the reader and the author, the world and the artwork, reality and imagination, and so on)” (qtd. in Pearson 27). As the “permeable boundary between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of a work of art” (Macaskill 2500-A), the frame participates in both the fictional world of the novel and the “real” world of the reader. Otherwise put, the frame constitutes “the strategic locus of value in the literary text” because it “both constitutes and is constituted by an interplay between stylistic ‘insides’ and ideological ‘outsides’” (Macaskill 2500-A).³ De Mille’s frame, for example, is both an internal stylistic device and an external cautionary tale about the exercise of exegesis. As the latter, it tacitly reminds readers that they are exegetes of the novel just as surely as the foursome on board the yacht are of Adam More, and as More is, in turn, of the Kosekins.

Interpretation or exegesis thus unfolds itself in De Mille's novel in a series of—as Borges would have it in the above epigraph—metaphysically disturbing frames: the reader reading the readers of a reader of a strange land.

John Pearson argues that “[i]ntracompositional frames...bespeak a desire to integrate artist, art work and spectator/reader; they seek to bring creation, product and consumption within one frame that would not exclude or deny any part of the esthetic process” (16). I am taking some liberties with Pearson's notion in suggesting that *A Strange Manuscript* exhibits such a frame, since the literary works that fit his model are those with overt authorial prefaces (Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, or Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*). Although *A Strange Manuscript* has no such preface, its opening sentences distance the frame story from the reader by means of the narrative/authorial voice: “It occurred as far back as February 15, 1850. It happened on that day that the yacht *Falcon* lay becalmed upon the ocean between the Canaries and the Madeira Islands” (*SM*₁). The pronoun *it* refers to the frame story itself—ie., the event which is the finding and subsequent reading of the manuscript—and thus signals an authorial positioning of the frame within time, as does Hawthorne's “Custom-House” sketch (much more overtly, admittedly) in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Perhaps the most significant means by which De Mille's frame is “intra-compositional”, however, is in its fashioning of Melick, the sceptical *littérateur* on board Featherstone's indolent yacht. Melick, whose name echoes the class of Kosekins that is ironically—and, it would seem, symbolically—eliminated at the end of the novel, is the most self-conscious of several means by which De Mille pulls the “outer” world of the frame story into the “inner” world of the romance narrative, subsequently pulling the external reader into the novel's inner fictional world of reading and exegesis.⁴ Significantly, it is to Melick that the reader continually turns for some sort of normative reading—albeit sceptical, albeit outspoken—both of the manuscript and of the other exegetes on board the *Falcon*. Melick not only gestures to the exegetical process itself by continually revising his opinion/definition of the strange manuscript and by quoting other texts, but he also provides a continual comic corrective (and comic relief) to the welter of scientific jargon expounded by Congreve and Oxenden. As the locus of scepticism and comedy (and perhaps even authorial intention) in *A Strange Manuscript*, Melick seems to hold the key to a more comprehensive

critical assessment of this “most unjustly neglected novel in Canadian fiction” (Kilian 61), namely, the extent to which exegesis itself is the butt of De Mille’s satiric humour.

Considerations of genre are not always relevant to the impetus of satire in a given work of literature; in De Mille studies, such considerations create an all too familiar critical conundrum.⁵ Nonetheless, Northrop Frye’s definition of Menippean satire⁶—or “anatomy”, as Frye prefers to call it—provides some useful insights into the way in which genre can elucidate both the satiric thrust and the frame of De Mille’s novel.⁷ The anatomy, the satire of “ideas”, contains by definition the seminal characteristic of each of the two narrative movements in *A Strange Manuscript*: namely, the “Utopian”⁸ construction of Adam More’s romance narrative, and the exegetical “symposium”⁹ of the characters in the frame story. Within the Utopian structure, says Frye, one often finds the *ingenu*: the “outsider” who “has no dogmatic views of his own, but...grants none of the premises which make the absurdities of society look logical to those accustomed to them” (232). In this regard, Adam More among the Kosekins comes readily to mind. The mutual misunderstanding between the two sides seems to occur as a result of irreconcilable differences in “intellectual pattern” (Frye 310); as becomes apparent in the romance-Utopia story, however, More and the cannibals ironically share many of the same motivations for their actions.¹⁰ Regarding the symposium structure, Frye cites the satirist’s predilection for “piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or...overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon” (311). De Mille accomplishes this in his rendering of Congreve and Oxenden in the frame: their cerebral interpretations of the minutiae of More’s adventure qualify as “masses of erudition” around the theme of exegesis; in the process, they become unwitting satiric “targets” for the mockery of Melick and the amusement of the reader. In both the romance and the frame, then, it is ultimately the idea of exegesis that is mocked. As such, De Mille’s frame not only constitutes one of two characteristic movements (ie., the “symposium”) in the anatomy, but also—by virtue of its metafictional nature, which casts into doubt the very process of exegesis and thus the novel’s meaning for the reader—it effectively particularizes or renames that anatomy as a comprehensive satire of exegesis. In other words, the frame is both component (in the undifferentiated genre of anatomy) and category. The frame is the satire of exegesis which is De Mille’s novel.

Inherent in the anatomy—precisely because it *is* the satire of ideas, fixed intellectual patterns, systems of reasoning—is “the constant tendency to self-parody” (Frye 234), satire’s wry defense against its own creation of fixed patterns or systems of exegesis. That De Mille himself was interested in the self-parody of metafiction is readily apparent. The majority of his novels fall into categories which he defines as either “sensation novel” or “satirical romance”—categories which poke considerable fun at the act of authorial creation. For example, *Cord and Crease* (1868; 1869) is a sensation novel which contains within it De Mille’s self-consciously ironic working definition of the sensation novel, disguised as a conversation between a Reverend Courtney Despard and a Mrs. Thornton:

...in each novel [says the Reverend] there are certain situations. Perhaps on average there may be forty each. Interesting characters also may average ten each. Thrilling scenes twenty each. Overwhelming catastrophes fifteen each...but where you read according to my plan you have the aggregate of all these effects in one combined—that is to say, in ten books which I read at once I have two hundred thrilling scenes, one hundred and fifty overwhelming catastrophes, one hundred interesting characters, and four hundred situations of absorbing fascination...By following this rule I have been able to stimulate a somewhat jaded appetite, and to keep abreast of the literature of the day. (qtd. in Monk 215)

In a letter to a Messrs. Harnes, De Mille explains his other favourite flavour of composition, the “satirical romance”, as follows:

The chief characteristic...is the union of sensationalism with extravagant humour: the most tragic incidents are brought forward only to be dismissed with playful mockery; the plot is highly elaborated, tragedy & comedy exist side by side, the prevalent [sic] atmosphere is one of mock seriousness; and the author while he freely uses the most startling and harrowing details never fails to turn them into ridicule, and thus appears to satirize and burlesque the whole sensational school of fiction. (qtd. in Monk 206)

And *The Dodge Club* (1869), which De Mille lists among his “satirical romances”, provides another interesting comparison with *A Strange Manuscript*. There, the third-person narrator “is frequently interrupted by the author who mocks what he is writing or introduces a digression” (Monk 204), whereas in *A Strange Manuscript* the frame story itself, with its obtuse exegetes, functions as the self-parodic element. We would search long and hard for a better critique of the “novel of ideas” than the undermining of the idea that ideas can be cogently explained. It seems likely that De Mille, a professor of rhetoric, classics, and English literature at Acadia and Dalhousie universities, also envisioned *A Strange Manuscript* as a send-up of

his own decidedly exegetical profession—perhaps even of scholarship in general. Such a satiric impetus might account for *A Strange Manuscript's* not having been released into the sea of publication during De Mille's lifetime.¹¹

No mere string of repetitions, as has been argued (La Bossière 44),¹² the narrative structure of *A Strange Manuscript* suits John Barth's notion of "digression and return...theme and variation" (237), the typical structure of a framed tale and one congenial to the satire of exegesis. This oppositional movement occurs in three different narrative sites in *A Strange Manuscript*: in the frame story, in the romance narrative, and in the interplay between the two. In the frame story, the movement consists in the intellectual chess game played amongst the exegetes: Melick's comic checkmating of his opponents signals the superiority of his scepticism over their haughty boredom (Featherstone) and passive anatomizing (Congreve and Oxenden). In the romance, the contradictory tensions are between movement and stasis, security and insecurity, escape and return—patterns that work themselves out structurally (as I demonstrate in the Appendix) in "set pieces" of narrated action that mirror and frame each other.¹³ In the interplay between frame and romance, the reader's experience of theme and variation is that of reading the outside against the inside: the exegetes against the manuscript, Melick the reader's ally against the Melek that Adam More becomes. This final category not only "frames" the other two in the larger narrative context but also signals that the relationship between the romance and the frame is an "associative or thematic"—or more specifically, a "cautionary or prophetic"—one, as Barth says (232), directed to the reader about the nature of exegesis.

It is Melick who navigates the reader toward the exegetical complexities in *A Strange Manuscript*. From the outset of the frame story, he is clearly an anomaly on board Featherstone's yacht. In the narrator's brief introductory description of the yachters, Melick conspicuously is *not* introduced as a friend of Featherstone's, although Oxenden and Congreve merit the respective epithets "intimate friend" and "friend and medical attendant" (*SM* 1). Melick is further distinguished from his companions by his activity: he is the only "energetic fallah" (*SM* 2), in Featherstone's words, aboard the metaphorically sleepy boat.¹⁴ Rather than participate in the "indolent repose", "the dull and languid repose" of the others (*SM* 1), Melick takes the initiative throughout the entire first chapter of the frame. Not only does he

concoct the paper boat race that finds the copper cylinder, but he fishes out the cylinder, breaks it open, and is the manuscript's first reader. Melick the *littérateur* thus literally engages the literary text.¹⁵ Haughty Lord Featherstone, by contrast, merely poses with "a novel in his hand, which he was pretending to read" (*SM* 1-2); he later admits, unsurprisingly, that he is an "infernally bad reader" (*SM* 71). Given the names of the ineffective exegetes—Featherstone the featherweight,¹⁶ Oxenden the pedantic "Oxford don" (Hughes 122), Congreve the purblind foil of his Restoration comedian namesake—and given the frame's reiterated connection between the Kosekin language and Hebrew, we must see Melick as further elevated amongst his peers by his name's Hebrew equivalent: *Melech*, king.

The very chapter titles in the frame story ("Scientific Theories and Scepticism," "Belief and Unbelief") draw attention to Melick, the sceptic who continually undercuts the insufferable anatomizing of Congreve and Oxenden. Melick emerges as the single challenger (other than the reader) to the Congreve/Oxenden system of intellection that seeks to use scientific knowledge to "accoun[t] for and thereby intellectually domesticat[e]" the "bizarre and implausible" details of More's manuscript (Kime 298). Fred Cogswell exposes Congreve's and Oxenden's dry-as-dust exegesis when he describes the frame commentary as "more boring than convincing" (113), a description that meshes with Sigmund Freud's observation that excessively pedantic "intellectual processes" are distinctly unfunny (283). Cogswell, however, goes on to criticize the "disproportionate number of pages" allotted to the frame tale (113), thereby ignoring what—in Henri Bergson's terms—might be called the "corrective" humour of Melick.¹⁷ Freud reminds us that the Congreve/Oxenden variety of pedantic "abstract reflection" can be shocked into comedy "when that mode of thought is suddenly interrupted" (283). Melick provides such interruption. His pushy humour takes both doggerel and sarcastic form, subverting the rational, adult world of the other exegetes with its seemingly childish delight in nonsense. He recites a "chicken and egg" rhyme in the midst of an evolutionist-creationist debate about eyeless fish. He offers Congreve a glass of wine with seeming solicitude: "After all those statistics...you must feel rather dry" (*SM* 67). He sings a drinking song in praise of the dodo that derails the doctor's careful ornithological distinctions. Exploiting Congreve's use of the word "calamites" in a particularly dense passage of scientific nomenclature, Melick sputters, "Talking of calamities, what greater calamity can there be than such a torrent of

unknown words? Talk English, doctor, and we shall be able to appreciate you” (149). In a brilliant jibe at the academic fervour to own ideas, Melick proposes two theories about the origins of the Kosekins and cautions “they are both mine and I warn all present to keep their hands off them, for on my return I intend to take out a copyright” (*SM* 153).

Although the other exegetes in the frame studiously ignore such quips, the reader nevertheless takes Melick’s satiric point: namely, that “there is no theory, however wild and fantastic, which some man of science will not be ready to support and to fortify by endless arguments, all of the most plausible kind” (*SM* 70). One of the jewels of Melick’s commentary is addressed to Oxenden, following the latter’s contorted reapplication of Grimm’s Law (in chapter 26, entitled “Grimm’s Law Again”) to the Semitic origin of the Kosekins. In one fell swoop, Melick manages to ridicule academic puerility, More’s incredible adventures, the idea of athelebs, and the existence of the Kosekins in general:

I never knew before the all-sufficient nature of Grimm’s Law. Why, it can unlock any mystery! When I get home I must buy one—a tame one, if possible—and keep him with me always. It is more useful to a literary man than to any other. It is said that with a knowledge of Grimm’s Law a man may wander through the world from Iceland to Ceylon, and converse pleasantly in all the Indo-European languages. More must have had Grimm’s Law stowed away somewhere about him; and that’s the reason why he escaped the icebergs, the volcanos, the cannibals, the subterranean channel monster, and arrived at last safe and sound in the land of the Kosekin. What I want is Grimm’s Law—a nice tidy one, well trained, in good working order, and kind in harness; and the moment I get one I intend to go to the land of the Kosekin myself. (*SM* 233)

The reader can only applaud Melick’s exposure of intellectual pedantry that cannot see beyond its own exegetical pen. Melick’s most stunning barb of sarcasm is received straight up by the bovine Oxenden:

What a pity it is...that the writer of this manuscript had not the philological, theological, sociological, geological, palaeological, ontological, ornithological, and all the other logical attainments of yourself and the doctor! He could then have given us a complete view of the nature of the Kosekin, morally and physically. (*SM* 238)

Oxenden plays directly into Melick’s exposure of academic elitism by subsequently attributing More’s manuscript deficiencies to his “simple-minded” and “emotional” sailor’s nature (*SM* 238). The comment recalls Congreve’s equally condescending assumption that More “has a decidedly unscientific

mind” (SM 144). The reader cannot help but join in the satiric joke against Oxenden and Congreve for their glaring errors in exegesis: their penchant for the passive elaboration of knowledge rather than its active interrogation; their desire to particularize knowledge rather than to contextualize it. For such reasons, Melick, the “professional cynic, sceptic, and scoffer” (SM 145), indeed seems our only reasonable ally in the frame.

Nowhere does Melick’s scepticism show itself more metafictionally than in his insistence on the “fictional” nature of More’s manuscript. In his stubborn opinion that the manuscript is the work of an outside author/creator, the frame-bound Melick implicitly gestures beyond the fiction itself, toward De Mille. Unlike his companions who accept More’s manuscript at face value and proceed to their own exegeses on the premise of its truthfulness, Melick views the manuscript solely as a work of fiction. He becomes, in effect, a literary critic of More’s story, preoccupied with its genre and style and scornful of its clichéd lack of verisimilitude. In the manner of a responsible critic, however, his opinion of the manuscript metamorphoses from outright dismissal to grudgingly serious consideration. Significantly, the critical labels that Melick attaches to the manuscript as he revises his interpretations of it are De Mille’s own: the pejorative “sensation novel” (SM 61), and the more complex “satirical romance” (SM 226). Melick even attempts to define the “quiet satire” at work in More’s manuscript as “directed against the restlessness of humanity” (SM 226), a comment that at least one twentieth-century critic has appropriated to describe De Mille’s novel as a whole.¹⁸ Congreve and Oxenden, predictably, resist Melick’s scepticism. “For my own part,” says Congreve, “I feel like taking More’s statements at their utmost value” (SM 70). Oxenden, denying Melick’s observation that there is a “perpetual undercurrent of meaning and innuendo...in every line,” calls More’s account “a plain narrative of facts” (SM 227). Arguably, these failed attempts at definition (including Featherstone’s “scientific romance” [SM 226]) are intended by De Mille to serve as both advertisement and warning to the reader of his *Strange Manuscript*. But whether or not such an argument is convincing, it seems clear once again that Melick—who brings a fairly broad base of previous knowledge to bear upon his interpretations, including *Paradise Lost*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *Robinson Crusoe* (SM 228)—is emblematic of the comprehensive process of exegesis that rightly stands in opposition to the intellectual pedantry of Congreve and Oxenden.

Wayne R. Kime argues for *A Strange Manuscript's* power to transform the otherwise “passive” reader into an “enterprising...detective” who will effectively “undertake a scrutiny of More’s manuscript identical in aim to that being performed by the auditors on board the *Falcon*” (298-99). Such a statement is certainly true, as far as it goes. It doesn’t, however, go far enough. Kime’s own sense of the incompleteness of his model reveals itself in his footnoted suggestion that the frame story itself might merit a readerly interrogation.¹⁹ It is crucial that an interpretation of *A Strange Manuscript* take advantage of the exegetical double vision that the novel affords. The reader necessarily receives More’s strange reading of the strange Kosekins through the filter of the symposium on board the *Falcon*, itself a group that cannot claim immunity to satiric censure. Thematically and structurally the novel demands that the reader superimpose the two readings: read the romance through the frame, and subsequently re-scrutinize the frame through the romance. What does such a consideration reveal? How are the frame story and the romance narrative mutually informative? Read concurrently, the frame and romance reveal misinterpretations, omissions, discrepancies, unanswered or ignored questions. They reveal the impossibility of exegetical consensus and thus the impossibility of ending (an important issue to consider in relation to De Mille’s “unfinished” novel). Perhaps the inter-relationship of the two narrative movements is, simply, a moral one: a warning against the amorality of bad readers and their faulty exegesis; a warning against exegetical absolutism, or, as in More’s case, exegetical abdication. It is an inter-relationship specifically aimed at the reader, whose responsibility lies in seeing *A Strange Manuscript* as simultaneously a warning and an invitation: a warning about the difficulty of exegesis that nevertheless invites the reader to become an exegete in order to reach this conclusion.

Perhaps the most obvious discrepancy in the reader’s superimposition of frame on romance is the absolute omission, in all discussions by the exegetes on Featherstone’s yacht, of the “human interest” stories in More’s manuscript. Central issues such as cannibalism, Kosekin society in general, and the love triangle between More, Almah, and Layelah are left unexamined despite the fact that the structure of the novel provides ample opportunity for—and in effect seems deliberately to court—such discussion. Agnew’s death at the hands of the cannibals in chapter 4 is never mentioned by the exegetes in chapter 7, despite More’s reiterated sorrow about it. More

could not be more obvious about his horror at the Kosekin custom of cannibalism, yet not one of the exegetes—not even Melick—makes mention in chapter 17 of this central concern of More’s throughout chapters 9-16. Incredibly, cannibalism is altogether left out of the exegesis (unless one counts Melick’s chapter 26 listing of “the cannibals” as one of the Kosekin dangers escaped by More). This exegetical hole might not draw the reader’s attention were it not that the men on the boat make overt references to cannibalism and food on other occasions: Congreve is obsessed with the idea, in chapter one, that the copper cylinder might contain some sort of “meat” (*SM* 5-6); Oxenden makes what is both a joke and a racist comment when he suggests that the cylinder might contain “the mangled remains of one of the wives of some Moorish pasha” (*SM* 6); the exegetes regularly interrupt their reading of the manuscript in order to eat their own meals. In a similar vein, chapters 19-25 deal overtly with More’s dilemma of loving two women at the same time, yet it is athalebs and alphabets that preoccupy the exegetes in chapters 26-27. More’s inclination toward bigamy is never mentioned by the men on the yacht, and the irony of his morally unhealthy fear of what must be seen as female initiative is never exposed.²⁰

De Mille implicitly uses the progress of More’s narrative to fashion a concurrent moral/exegetical critique against his symposium of readers. High on the list of omissions in the frame is Christianity, the implicit but absent moral referent that is obliquely brought to the reader’s attention again and again. More’s tale is replete with Biblical echoes, almost all of which occur ironically, yet no mention is made of them. More’s Christian name “Adam”, for example, is never interpreted symbolically by the exegetes despite the fact that “Adam More”—with its allusion both to the pre-lapsarian Adam and to the Renaissance man Thomas More, author of *Utopia*—seems a particularly reader-friendly detail. Adam More himself, who constantly cribs Judaeo-Christian diction, explicitly aligns himself with the Biblical Adam sentences before the novel’s close: in an ironic comment that places him firmly in a post-lapsarian Eden, he claims that he must be “the only man since Adam that ever was married without knowing it” (*SM* 269). The self-reference here betrays on More’s part at least a passing familiarity with the Bible, and thus necessitates a re-scrutiny of the earlier Biblical echoes in his manuscript. Examples include More’s essentially pantheistic praise to the elements (“falling on my knees I thanked the Almighty Ruler of the skies for this marvellous deliverance” [*SM* 49]; “Light had come and we rejoiced and

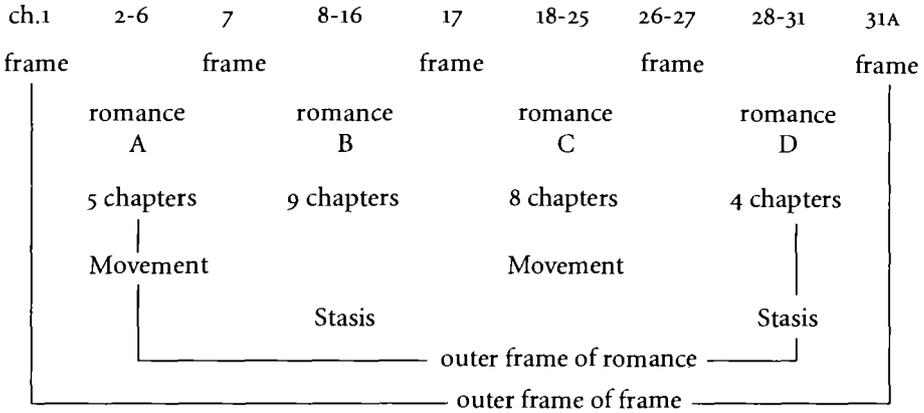
were exceeding glad" [*SM* 204]); his Genesis-like rendering of his escape with Layelah during which "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*SM* 220); and his ultimate declaration of himself "Atam-or, the Man of Light", a symbolic rival to the self-proclaimed Light of the World, Jesus Christ, the sinless second Adam of St. Paul's letters. Moreover, it does not take a particularly perceptive reader to note that the Kosekin ideal of right living is an extremist version of Christ's Beatitudes, yet the exegetes aboard the yacht (like More himself) never acknowledge this "principal subtext or conceptual referent" for the romance narrative (La Bossière 47). Similarly Oxenden's "sermon" in chapter 27, undertaken to justify the "truth" of the Kosekins' love of death, could not be more classically ironic in its non-reference to Christianity. In it, Oxenden speaks of the vanity of life with reference to every religion (Buddhist, Hindu, Chinese, Japanese, ancient Greek) except "the one most obviously being invoked by De Mille" (La Bossière 47). Displaying his prowess as a philologist, Oxenden defines the Kosekins as a Semitic race (*SM* 150-52) yet never bothers to fit them into Jewish history²¹ or to point out—never mind ponder—the ironic import of the Hebrew-based words "Kosekin" (*cosek* = darkness) and "Kohen" (*cohen* = priest) (Watters xiii, fnt 5).²² Readers who are aware that De Mille was "an accomplished linguist" (Watters xiii, fnt 5) can readily see that Oxenden's linguistic myopisms and the novel's hidden etymologies display further calculated attempts by De Mille to satirize the murky business of interpretation.

It is true, as R.E. Watters maintains, that misinterpretation of the "other" is a consistent thematic thread between the frame and the romance narrative. Just as the readers of the manuscript talk at cross-purposes in the frame,²³ Adam More and the Kosekins in the romance assess each other according to their own circumscribed understandings of "human nature" and thus are soon frustrated by the other side's inability to conform. It cannot be subsequently true, however, as Watters contends, that De Mille's central theme in *A Strange Manuscript* is the validity of each and every individual interpretation or attempt at exegesis.²⁴ Surely accuracy counts for something. Surely More's view of the Kosekins must be tempered by the reader(s)'s view of More himself—a character blind to the simple truth that Kosekin motivations, values, and practices are merely a half twist in perspective from his own, or at most, the logical extreme.²⁵ Surely, in turn, the pedantic Congreve and Oxenden and the bored Featherstone deserve less exegetical weight, in the final analysis, than the sceptical Melick—a charac-

ter whose indispensable quality of textual interrogation seems symbolically in danger of elimination in a critical climate where Mores/mores can usurp Meleks in the twinkle of a gun blast.

If the “theme” in *A Strange Manuscript* is exegesis, then its “variation” (to use John Barth’s terms) is also exegesis—from a slightly different angle. From a different frame of reference. *A Strange Manuscript* is an anatomy poking fun at the subject of anatomies, an idea making a “mockery” of itself, to borrow one of Adam More’s favourite words. But above all, perhaps—and ironically rather than satirically—*A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* is (un)finished. Critical debate continues,²⁶ yet the simple truth about the end of De Mille’s novel is that it is finished in its incompleteness, it is completely (un)finished. Had Featherstone’s announcement of yet another dinner break preceded yet another exegetical session instead of ending the novel, exegesis itself would still have been under satiric fire, and the responsibility of reading would remain both a necessity and an impossibility. “An extraordinary number of great satires,” says Frye, “are fragmentary, unfinished, or anonymous” (234). The frame story in *A Strange Manuscript*, seemingly cut off in mid-exegesis, reminds us that limits are arbitrary, that our reading life is too short for the book we live, that we ourselves must be held up to ridicule—as Melick holds up his peers, as someone may hold up this article—if we smugly refuse the perpetual call to read. We will always be incomplete readers of readers, and we will always (incompletely) be read. To think otherwise would be like looking at Degas’ *Tête-à-tête dîner*, “where the frame cuts off half of the man’s face” (Frow 30, fnt 15), and not recognizing that the missing half is our own.

Appendix



The romance narrative of De Mille’s novel provides a highly complex structure of inter-episodic framing, or *encuadramiento*, that seems designed to bring the careful exegete’s attention to “the contrast or relation between characters or thematic messages” (Medina 27). Just as More’s papyrus manuscript is framed by its copper cylinder which is in turn framed by the larger incident of the cylinder’s discovery by the boat(s),²⁷ so the episodes within the romance find themselves framed and mirrored by other episodes. These framings are best appreciated visually (see above chart), but their articulation is important, if only to uncover the way in which their structural trajectory validates the success of Adam More in the romance. Such structural validation, albeit buried in the text, adds another layer of difficulty to the reader’s process of interpreting *A Strange Manuscript*, given that the fictional exegetes themselves (as I have elaborated above) do not interrogate More’s moral ambiguity.

Simply put, then, the romance divides itself into four episodes of movement and stasis, organized, in both mirror images and frames, around the centre point of chapter 17. These episodes, which I alphabetize for ease of reference, are the following: (A) Chapters 2-6, a movement section that details More’s journey from his sailing ship to the land of the Kosekins; (B) chapters 8-16, a stasis section that treats More’s arrival among the Kosekins until his departure for the sacrifice at the amir; (C) chapters 18-25, a movement section that dramatizes More’s voyage to the amir, his escape, and his subsequent recapture; and (D) chapters 28-31, a stasis section that describes

More's imprisonment and almost accidental escape from death. (A) mirrors (C) (both are movement episodes) and together their respective chapters form a section of thirteen chapters; likewise, (B) mirrors (D) (both are stasis episodes) and together their respective chapters form a section of thirteen chapters. The inner frame of the romance, (B)-(C), is a stasis-movement progression (*from* life among the Kosekins *to* escape from it) that is a negative mirror image of the outer frame (A)-(D). This latter, the outer frame of the romance, is a movement-stasis progression (*from* More's old life as a sailor *to* his subsequent achievement of permanent Melek/king status in the new land of the Kosekins) that validates the entire structural trajectory. Whereas (B) describes a stasis that quickly passes from security (life with Almah) to insecurity (news of the impending Mista Kosek), (D) describes a stasis that passes from insecurity (imprisonment, unrequited love, and impending death) to security (wealth, requited love, and life).

The (D) section is privileged not only because it provides structural closure to the romance story but because the (A)-(D) frame provides a thematic circularity to More's tale: whereas the nightmare hag kills Agnew in (A), More both avenges Agnew's death and saves Almah's life when he shoots that same nightmare hag in (D).²⁸ Marianne Torgovnick defines circularity's relation to closure thus: "When the ending of a novel clearly recalls the beginning in language, in situation, in the grouping of characters, or in several of these ways, circularity may be said to control the ending...A familiar and obvious kind of circularity is the 'frame' technique common in narratives" (13). Torgovnick goes on to state that "[a] circular ending may suggest growth and change in a character by showing him behaving differently in a situation similar to that which begins a novel" (199). More can thus be seen to have "grown" symbolically by the end of the novel because whereas in (A) his passive flight had permitted the murder of Agnew, in (D) his active murder saves Almah. Structurally, then, More becomes a hero.

As irrefutable as this structural trajectory is, it is also highly ironic in context, given More's less than heroic character. And, of course, herein lies the exegetical dilemma for the reader of De Mille's romance narrative.

NOTES

- 1 James De Mille, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, ed. by Malcolm Parks (1888; Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991). All subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically, with the designation *SM* appearing where necessary.
- 2 The term “exegete” is ironic when applied to these three figures, given the ancient Greek definition of the word as recorded by the *OED*: “At Athens, one of those three members of the Eumolpidae whose province it was to interpret the religious and ceremonial law, the signs in the heavens, and oracles.” Congreve, Oxenden, and Featherstone are as imperviously uncurious about the mysteries and profundities of religious ceremony and morality as can be imagined.
- 3 John Frow points out that the frame is unitary, neither inside nor outside, and this distinction of levels must be seen as a convenient fiction to express the frame’s dual status as a component of structure and a component of situation. For a literary text, it works both as an enclosure of the internal fictional space and as an exclusion of the space of reality against which the work is set; but this operation of exclusion is also an inclusion of the text in this alien space. The text is closed and suspended, but as a constructional element the frame is *internal* to this closure, and through it the text signifies *difference*, signals what it excludes. (27)
- 4 De Mille’s repetition in his frame of a compositional element (Melick, the Meleks) echoes, no doubt unconsciously, the framing experiments of late nineteenth-century painters. John Everett Millais’ *Convent Thoughts*, for example, “repeats the lilies in the painting on the vertical panels of the frame.” Dante Gabriel Rossetti not only inscribes two explanatory sonnets on the frame of his *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848) but also decorates the frame “with symbols identical to those on the canvas, thus extending the composition and explaining it in the same intermediary space” (Pearson 20, 21).
- 5 *A Strange Manuscript* has persistently eluded consensus as to the generic category that best contains its satire. R. Watters, for instance, locates the novel within “the genre of utopian fiction combined with an imaginary travel narrative,” yet also argues that the work simultaneously manifests all of the various internal definitions tendered by the frame story’s exegetes: sensational novel, satirical romance, scientific romance, satire on humanity, and plain narrative of facts (viii, xvii). George Woodcock sees the novel as a “hybrid” of “the prose epic, the exotically sentimental romance, and the novel of ideas” (104). Wayne R. Kime declines to assign a specific genre to the novel: “The book is a generic non-descript, a pastiche of fantastic adventure, implicit social satire, intellectual puzzles, and parody” (302). Kenneth Hughes, in what is surely a colossal misinterpretation (ie., giving Lord Featherstone disproportionate symbolic weight in the text), dubs De Mille’s novel “a positive Utopia which satirizes an aristocratic class that serves no useful social function” (123). M.G. Parks maintains in 1976 that the novel is “squarely in the ‘classic’ line of English anti-Utopias” (“Strange to Strangers Only” 64); ten years later, he modifies his opinion slightly to include the “romance of adventure” (“Introduction” to *SM* xxxix). Camille La Bossière claims that although the novel “is no one thing [ie. genre],” it is certainly “not a positive utopia...[n]or an anti-utopia” (43, 44). John Moss’s *Reader’s Guide* claims the novel to be a fusion of “fantastical adventure yarn” and “seriously conceived satire,” where the target of the latter is “marvellously ambiguous,” satirizing variously “Christianity, British society, the aristocracy, the new age of science, Darwinism, or all of these—or something else entirely” (91). Moss is one of the few critics to acknowledge that the exegetes in the frame story “become as much the butt of De Mille’s satire as

are the values of their world, which the Kosekin so dreadfully distort” (91).

The composition history of *A Strange Manuscript* is yet another critical minefield. The question bears upon the ugly charge of plagiarism often levelled at De Mille’s novel by critics who set its composition date in the late 1870s, late enough to make the novel “a mere imitation” of the works of H. Rider Haggard, Samuel Butler, Jules Verne, Bulwer-Lytton, W.H. Mallock, and others. Critics such as Fred Cogswell, George Woodcock, and Kenneth Hughes have argued this position. The influence of Haggard, at least, was in 1969 soundly ruled out by Watters, who pointed out that De Mille was two years dead by the time Haggard’s first novel appeared in 1882 (viii). The most recent scholarly work on De Mille upholds a composition date of “the mid- to late 1860s” (Parks, “Introduction” to *SM* xx), although Crawford Kilian offers that the novel might have been begun as early as the 1850s, a suggestion based on evidence from Douglas E. MacLeod’s unpublished 1968 M.A. thesis on De Mille’s life and work (66-67).

- 6 This form of satire, says Frye, “deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes,” “present[ing] people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” (309). Frye divides his complex discussion of satire into the two defining categories of *mythos* (structural principal or attitude, as it appears in any art) and *form* (genre, specific to literature). According to Frye’s six-phase structure of categorizing the *mythos* of satire, De Mille’s novel would seem to correspond to “quixotic satire,” second phase satire of the low norm (230). (The “low norm,” says Frye, “takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable” [226].) The *mythos* of quixotic satire—whose theme is “the setting of ideas and generalizations and theories and dogmas over against the life they are supposed to explain” (230)—thus corresponds to the *form* of Menippean satire.
- 7 George Woodcock’s assertion that “the novel of ideas remains and is our reason for continuing to read *A Strange Manuscript*” (104) seems rightly to validate De Mille’s orientation towards the anatomy—a satiric form that expresses itself by means of an “intellectualized approach”: “dissection or analysis” (Frye 311-12). This highly intellectualized genre, however, has not been without its detractors. Frye could be discussing De Mille’s *Strange Manuscript* when he notes that the anatomy has perpetually “baffled critics”, and that fiction writers deeply influenced by the genre (Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Voltaire in *Candide*, Butler in *Erewhon*, Huxley in *Brave New World*) have often endured accusations of “disorderly conduct” (313). The earliest review of *A Strange Manuscript* was the *New York Times*’ contention in 1888 that the novel displayed a “reckless prodigality of invention” (qtd. in Monk 232). And in 1965, Fred Cogswell found De Mille’s novel deficient “because its author attempted in its composition to do too many things at once” (114). As Crawford Kilian suggested in 1972, however, *A Strange Manuscript* reveals much when considered under the rubric of Frygian anatomy (62).
- 8 Anatomies, says Frye, can swing flexibly to an extreme of fantasy (as in the Alice books or *The Water-Babies*) or morality. The latter type “is a serious vision of society as a single intellectual pattern, in other words a Utopia” (310).
- 9 Frye: “The short form of Menippean satire is usually a dialogue or colloquy, in which the dramatic interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than of character...Sometimes the form expands to full length, and more than two speakers are used: the setting then is usually a *cena* or symposium” (310).

- 10 Watters makes this point elegantly in his 1969 Introduction to *SM*: Not at all “opposite” are the passions and impulses which animate the Kosekin, since they are such familiar ones as selfishness, envy, love of power, and kindness, self-denial, love of good. What differs is not the inner prompting, so to speak, but rather the objective result, the specific or substantial meaning assigned to abstract terms of value. Their goals are not ours, but only because they define those goals differently.” (xviii)
- 11 *A Strange Manuscript* was not published until 1888, eight years after De Mille’s death. See note 5 for a summary of the critical debate surrounding the novel’s probable composition date.
- 12 La Bossière’s argument that *SM* is “extraordinarily repetitive” (44) is made strictly on the basis of the romance narrative; the frame is never brought into the discussion. Such an argument does not include the full aesthetic space that is De Mille’s novel and thus cannot be considered comprehensive. As John Pearson remarks, “compound esthetic structures are created when frame and art work remain intact; the art work without its frame must be considered a different semiotic field” (25).
- 13 Because these patterns are best appreciated visually, because they are not absolutely central to my argument, and because any discussion of framing in *A Strange Manuscript* would seem to me to be incomplete without them, I have relegated a discussion of them to the Appendix.
- 14 If the *Falcon* is to be interpreted as a “ship of state” trope, it is best seen as a ship of readers (and thus, by extension, as a potential ship of fools) rather than as a ship of “Britain itself,” as has been argued by Kenneth Hughes (122).
- 15 *Le petit Robert* cites two definitions for *littérateur*. The first, an archaic usage, is “Humaniste” (in the old style sense of a master of Greek and Latin languages and literature). The second definition, a modern usage, is “Hommes de lettres, écrivain de métier.” Interestingly, however, this latter definition is designated as “souvent péjoratif.” We have no way of knowing in which sense De Mille wished Melick to be viewed: as a humanist, as a rather poor writer who nevertheless writes for a living, or simply as an author (*Le petit Robert* does offer *Auteur* as a potential synonym). In any case, Melick is overtly associated with literature in a way that none of his companions are. Writers (though the supposition is not always true) are usually careful readers; thus we can safely impute good reading skills to Melick, despite not knowing exactly how best to classify his occupation.
- 16 George Woodcock sees the name as connoting “light-brained,” and dubs it a “typical Peacockian nam[e]” indicating Featherstone’s “humours” (110).
- 17 In his seminal work *Le Rire*, Bergson writes:
 Le rire est, avant tout, une correction. Fait pour humilier, il doit donner à la personne qui en est l’objet une impression pénible. La société se venge par lui des libertés qu’on a prises avec elle. Il n’atteindrait pas son but s’il portait la marque de la sympathie et de la bonté. (150)
- Wylie Sypher reprints the following standard translation of this passage:
 Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (187)
- 18 In the *Canadian Bookman* in 1922, R. W. Douglas stated (in language unintentionally

- echoing Melick) that De Mille's impressive *Strange Manuscript* was "a biting, blistering satire on the restlessness of humanity" (qtd. in Monk 234).
- 19 "A *Strange Manuscript* invites one to adopt not only the role of detective, but in addition that of judge. The reader is placed in a position as potential evaluator of the several interpretations of More's narrative put forward by Featherstone and his companions" (Kime 305, fnnt 29).
 - 20 One of the best indications of More's skewed priorities (and De Mille's comic sense) is More's description of his discomfited masculinity following Layelah's proposal of marriage:

I had stood a good deal among the Kosekin. Their love of darkness, their passion for death, their contempt of riches, their yearning after unrequited love, their human sacrifices, their cannibalism, all had more or less become familiar to me, and I had learned to acquiesce in silence; but now when it came to this—that a woman should propose to a man—it really was more than a fellow could stand. I felt this at that moment very forcibly; but then the worst of it was that Layelah was so confoundedly pretty, and had such a nice way with her, that hang me if I knew what to say. (*SM* 179-80)
 - 21 Following Oxenden's linguistic speculations, Melick identifies the Kosekins as "the Lost Ten Tribes," but only as a means of ridiculing Oxenden and "the writer of this yarn, whoever he may be" (*SM* 152). Never one to pass up an opportunity, Melick revises his hypothesis about the Kosekins almost immediately, in order to capitalize on the comic opportunity of labelling them the descendants of Noah's son Shem who were transported to the South Pole via the Ark (*SM* 153).
 - 22 Watters provides other useful etymologies for the proper names in the romance world of *A Strange Manuscript*: 'Adam' is Hebrew for 'man'; 'Layelah' is derived from the Hebrew word for 'night'; Almah, who is not Kosekin but belongs to "another South Polar people," may have a name based on "the Latin *alma*", which translates to "such English equivalents as 'bounteous,' 'fostering,' 'gracious,' 'kind,' etc." (xiii). The symbolic naming of More's murdered companion 'Agnew' (from the Latin for 'lamb') is obvious, given his plainly sacrificial death that saves More himself from falling victim to the cannibals of the outer sea.
 - 23 A perfect example of such deadlock of opinion occurs in chapter 26, as Melick and Oxenden hold firmly to their beliefs regarding the authenticity of More's manuscript:

"[More's] father!" exclaimed Melick. "Do you mean to say that you still accept all this as *bona fide*?"

"Do you mean to say," retorted Oxenden, "that you still have any doubt about the authenticity of this remarkable manuscript?"

At this they looked at each other; Melick elevated his eyebrows, and Oxenden shrugged his shoulders; but each seemed unable to find words to express his amazement at the other's stupidity, and so they took refuge in silence" (*SM* 229).
 - 24 "Every reader, like the four who retrieved the manuscript, may readily discover his own interests and values reflected in the *Copper Cylinder*" (Watters xvii).
 - 25 La Bossière (51) concurs with Parks ("Strange to Strangers Only" 76) that the romance tale of *A Strange Manuscript* is "an assault upon extremes of opposite kinds." Crawford Kilian notes that the symposium of readers on board the *Falcon* misses the point of its analyses, namely, "that if the Kosekin are our spiritual cousins, and have simply pursued our common heritage to its logical extreme, then we shall have to re-examine the Judaeo-Christian foundations of our present values to see whether they, or we, have been found wanting" (65).
 - 26 Patricia Monk and Camille La Bossière epitomize the two poles of critical thought on the ending of *A Strange Manuscript*. Monk, arguing on the basis of comparisons with De

- Mille's other novels, claims that the novel is indubitably unfinished. Her rather weak position depends entirely on structural deficiencies that she attributes to the frame story (240-43). La Bossière, by contrast, argues (not unconvincingly, and in the playful spirit of the text) that the apparent abruptness of De Mille's ending is the function of a deliberate rhetorical strategy of repetition; thus, by its end, this "novel of ideas ha[s] played itself and its author out" (52).
- 27 The incident of the paper boats' finding of the manuscript is, of course, a vignette within the larger frame of the yacht's finding of the manuscript (the yacht itself being a "paper boat" in the sense that it exists only on the paper of De Mille's novel).
- 28 "[T]hey were all around us; and one there was who looked so exactly like the nightmare hag of the outer sea that I felt sure she must be the same, who by some strange chance had come here...And so here she was, the nightmare hag, and I saw that she recognized me" (*SM* 252).

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