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A Tendentious Game With An Uncanny Riddle

'A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder'

Most of the critics of James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* are inclined towards defining it as one of various combinations of two or more of the following genres: "Utopian satire . . . , exotic adventure story" (Kilian 61), "prose epic . . . exotically sentimental romance, . . . novel of ideas" (Woodcock 104), "pot-boiler" (Lamont-Stewart 1), and "*science fiction*" (Proietti 226). The widespread suggestion is that De Mille's novel appropriates the 'strangeness' its title safely assigns to the manuscript it is about, since it defies the attempt to make a single genre account for itself. This suggestion puts forward a view of the novel as a puzzle to be solved, which its apparent lack of closure, another strongly debated point among the critics of De Mille's novel,[1] can only strengthen. John Moss considers it "an inviting enigma" (Moss 61), and Camille R. La Bossiere focuses on "The Mysterious End of James De Mille's Unfinished Strange Manuscript" (La Bossiere 41). Finally, for Linda Lamont-Stewart, "this text is so riddled with ironies at every level that it seems . . . impossible to arrive at any satisfactory reading of it, even a partial one" (Lamont-Stewart 1)

The four intra-diegetic readers of De Mille's novel discuss Adam More's manuscript in similar terms. First of all, they try to decide whether it is "a transparent hoax" (SM 62), as Melick has it, or whether it is "a plain narrative of facts" (SM 226-7), as Oxenden argues later in the novel; Oxenden's view is implicitly shared by Dr. Congreve, who right away accuses Melick of being "a determined sceptic" (SM 67). Secondly, specific genres are taken

into account: Melick supports the view that More's manuscript is "a sensational novel" as well as "a satirical romance," while Featherstone asks whether it can be considered "a scientific romance" (SM 229). In the same chapter (26), other literary comments are made: for Melick, More's "plan is not bad, but he fails utterly in his execution" (SM 228), and therefore he considers More's manuscript "rot and rubbish" (ibid). For Oxenden, on the other hand, there's no "undercurrent of meaning" and More "had no idea of satirizing anything" (SM 227). The four yachtsmen debate all these views (and many more) without reaching a satisfactory conclusion—which, as we have seen, is also a charge laid by some critics against De Mille's novel. So it seems that the four yachtsmen's *fictional* disagreement over More's manuscript, which, in light of their eagerness to kill time is thus qualified as a riddle to be solved, is an uncanny anticipation of the similar scenario encountered *in reality* by *A Strange Manuscript.*

The very first comment on More's 'strange' manuscript is that of Featherstone:

> A deuced queer sort of thing this, too . . . this manuscript. I can't quite make it out. Who ever dreamed of people living at the South Pole—and in a warm climate, too? Then it seems deuced odd, too, that we should pick up this copper cylinder with the manuscript. I hardly know what to think about it. (SM 61, emphasis added)

Is Featherstone unsure of what to make of the manuscript, or does his puzzlement revolve around the fact that he and his friends have picked it up? It is tempting to consider that the latter possibility may be the cause of his slight annoyance ("that *we* should pick up this copper cylinder with the manuscript"), as if he realized that their act was already inscribed in the text they are reading. Then for Featherstone the question would be not so much whether the manuscript is a work of fiction or a truthful account of a real experience, but rather to what degree he and his friends can resist the (assumptions made by a) text that has already, and absolutely, drawn them into its self.

The four yachtsmen are irresistibly seduced by the manuscript's 'strangeness,' which not only depends on it being "no one thing" (La Bossiere 43), but also, and more importantly, on the effacement of "the distinction between imagination and reality" that it initiates. The latter quote, from Freud's paper on "The Uncanny" (U 367), introduces my attempt to interpret Adam More's obsession with the death images that pervade *A Strange*

Manuscript as the product of his repression of the fear of death—a fear that the four yachtsmen's induced leisure may have managed to render temporarily unfamiliar. Why on earth should they have such sad thoughts during their wonderful vacation? It is not surprising then that Featherstone, who has organized that vacation, should be upset if the paper-boat race, whose prospect he had so enthusiastically embraced as an excellent idea to kill time, ends up by bringing him upon an only too familiar scene, namely "the inevitable fate of every living being" (U 364). His annoyance is an anticipation of his final statement: "That's enough for today . . . I'm tired and can't read anymore. It's time for supper" (SM 269).

It can be argued that Featherstone's interruption, which sanctions the end of *A Strange Manuscript*, amounts to the repression of his on-going identification with More: rather than confronting the consequences of More's 'fear' of death, he chooses to stop reading a text that threatens to nullify the purpose of the vacation he has organized in order to escape the weariness of his life in England. As Camille La Bossiere has noted, "[e]nthusiastic for eating, drinking, and sport, the effete Featherstone is one who quickly becomes restive in the absence of some form of pleasurable stimulation" (La Bossiere 42). Then would it not be possible to imagine that Featherstone is in fact trying to escape the long continuance of his own indulgence in some terribly distressing thought? If Melick plays the role of sceptic as Dr. Congreve argues, that Featherstone almost invariably should play the role of moderator suggests his unwillingness to take any personal stand on More's manuscript, which provokes in his friends a contrary reaction. This response could be taken as a sign of his reluctance to take More's manuscript seriously, a prospect which would bring him to define it inescapably either as a fictional or as an autobiographical text. If the differing opinions of his friends are equally valid for him as long as they divert his attention from a possibly frightening subject, the 'strange' manuscript may be thought of by him more as the object of an entertaining but futile investigation than as the uncanny reminder of a familiar truth: namely, that one day his life will end too.

De Mille's novel systematically reverses its own narrative strategy, by polluting More's manuscript with the four yachtsmen's comments. In a way, More's manuscript may be taken as the pledge of his candidacy for the Russian formalist school, in so far as it embodies Viktor Shklovsky's theory of estrangement.[2] The latter writes:

> The purpose of art is to convey the impression of an object through its 'vision' rather than its 'recognition'; the device of art consists of the 'estrangement' of objects, as well as of the obscure forms which make perception more difficult and make it last longer. (Shklovsky 1965, 82, my translation)[3]

More's descriptions estrange what in the words of Dr. Congreve and Oxenden becomes clear and known again.[4] Obscure monsters are given their names. The strange "vegetable substance" upon which the manuscript is written is reassuringly reduced to "papyrus." Known currents are taken into consideration in order to explain More's peregrinations, which are given approximate longitude and latitude. The Kosekin people are traced back to the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, and their language to Hebrew, etc. Thus the two learned men make familiar what More made unfamiliar, in a movement that is reminiscent of Schelling's definition of the uncanny: "'*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light'" (U 345, emphasis provided). If by illuminating More's obscure description Congreve and Oxenden seem to illustrate the process that Schelling describes, it is clear that they are not the agents of the manuscript's uncanny effects, which rely instead on the defamiliarization techniques employed by More throughout his narration. In other words, More tries to keep hidden what Congreve and Oxenden will unveil so as to annihilate the uncanny effects of his monsters and rituals, but their learned revision is only partly responsible for the failure of his strategy of concealment, since it is his obscure descriptions that already, to a degree, bring to light what "ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden" (cit.), inviting the doctor and his friend to complete the job and erase the uncanny effects. Thus More's manuscript embodies at one and the same time Freud's idea of the uncanny and Shklovsky's technique of defamiliarization, as the latter is employed in order to repress the (cause of the) former.

On one level More's complicated imagery can be read as an estrangement performed for artistic reasons, quite apart from Melick's suggestion that More is pursuing a literary career. But at a different level his obscure form testifies to an attempt to distance himself again from something that was once known to him, that he had managed to repress into his unconscious, and that his contact with the Kosekin makes uncannily re-emerge into his consciousness: namely, his wish to die, as it is distorted into his fear of death. According to Freud, "distortion" is the overall effect of the dream-work, which transforms the latent dream-thoughts into "a manifest forma-

tion in which they are not easily recognizable" (Laplanche & Pontalis 124). Distortion operates mainly through "condensation" and "displacement." The first makes it possible for an idea to represent many associations of ideas, while the second transfers an idea's intensity on to other ideas, which were originally less intense. These operations, together with the dream's "secondary revision," allow the dream-thoughts to be effectively censored, in order for them to be acceptable to the ego. Given the fact that for Freud the "secondary revision" of a dream is the "reorganization of its elements by means of selection and addition" (Laplanche & Pontalis 412), the amazing events narrated by More, whose puzzlement is that of a dreamer witnessing the unravelling of the absurd scenes staged by his unconscious, may have been reorganized by his ego as he was writing them down, so as not to be annihilated by their uncanniness, which he safely refuses to understand because of its 'strangeness.' Thus his 'strange' manuscript amounts to the secondary revision of what has in fact all the elements of a 'bad' dream, whose uncanny effect is made apparent by Featherstone's conclusive decision.

The constantly re-emerging seam between More's manuscript and the interspersed commentary of the four yachtsmen has the uncanny effect of a return of the repressed distinction between the two narratives—which potentially stands for the distinction between life and fiction. The resumption of More's voice will obliterate that distinction once again, snaring the reader of *A Strange Manuscript* into a loop. As long as it is possible for her/im to keep the two narratives separate, s/he will be able to maintain a critical judgment towards the Kosekin's inverted values, on the one hand, and towards More's increasingly waning distance from them, on the other hand.

As Linda Lamont-Stewart has suggested, such a position is well represented by the four readers on board the "*Falcon*," whose commentary "highlights the problems which confront anyone who undertakes textual interpretation" (Lamont-Stewart 16). This gives *A Strange Manuscript* some 'paradigmatic' value, in the sense put forward by Thomas Kuhn, for whom, according to Peter Steiner:

> '[t]he paradigm provides the scientific community with everything it needs for its work: the problems to be solved, the tools for doing so, as well as the standard for judging the results.' (Steiner 269)

For the first issue that Kuhn indicates, *A Strange Manuscript* prompts its critics to ask, as already shown, what genres it belongs to, and whether it is an accomplished work or not (in the two senses of 'coherent' and 'finished'). Critics also dangerously dwell on its author's alleged purposes (i.e., for De Mille to escape the boredom of an academic life and to make money are suggested among other possibilities). These are the questions that the four yachtsmen ask of More's manuscript. As previously indicated, they discuss it in terms of genres, and try to assess its literary value, although they *cannot* ask whether it is finished or not—which can be taken as a further illustration of that very question being asked of De Mille's novel. It is 'fictionally certain' that the four yachtsmen have not finished reading More's manuscript by the time De Mille's novel is over. Since this discrepancy is played against various occurrences of symmetry between More's manuscript and *A Strange Manuscript*, one can take it as the critical occasion for either enhancing or weakening the mirror effect mutually established by the two diegeses. In a logical extension of the external one, one could imagine the yachtsmen reaching the end of More's manuscript and deciding whether the question of it being finished or not is even an issue. That is to say: they may after all not have to ask that question, simply because it could be apparent to them that More's manuscript is finished. That they do not ask that question, then, can be taken as an illustration of *A Strange Manuscript*'s alleged lack of closure, since they cannot ask that question—*yet*. Featherstone and his friends, instead, ask themselves whether More's manuscript was intended to start the literary career of its implied author (as Melick argues), or whether More indeed wrote in order to be rescued by his father (a view shared by Dr. Congreve and Oxenden).

As for the second issue highlighted by Kuhn, on one level *A Strange Manuscript*'s apparent appropriation of the different genres that it can be measured against provides its critics with some 'ready' tools, just like the ones employed by the four yachtsmen while discussing More's manuscript. Both critical attempts can thus comfortably claim to find their interpretative devices in the text. At a different level, despite the fact that other critical strategies can be applied to De Mille's text which would not so precisely mirror those employed by the four yachtsmen, their discussions, in so far as they establish a critical distance from the object of their investigation, would still be representative of the dialogue a text initiates with its readers as they read it.

It is precisely such a dialogue that is liable to provide Steiner's "standard for judging the results" (cit.), an issue that is as apparent in De Mille's novel, as it is, in turn, in More's manuscript, in the critical material on De Mille's novel, and in this very paper. On the one hand, the degree to which each one of the above texts should be worth replying to will indicate its value to that same text's successive investigators, the ultimate, implicit definers of "a standard for judging the results" (cit.) that is as shifting as it is functional to whatever purposes such investigators have. On the other hand, in line with Kuhn's opinion that Max Scharnberg reports, namely that "a paradigm will leave a sufficient number of unsolved problems to keep future scientists busy with puzzle-solving" (Scharnberg 14), the definition of "a standard for judging the results" (cit.) implicitly performed by the successive investigators of a text will obviously have to take into account the balance between the solved problems and the unsolved ones.

To sum up: De Mille's novel seems to provide its critics with a number of problems that are characteristic of exegesis, that are mirrored by those encountered by the intra-diegetical readers of the manuscript it revolves upon, and that are in line with Kuhn's ideas of "paradigm" and "puzzle-solving."

That critics should pursue the attempt to assign De Mille's novel to various combinations of specific literary genres, an attempt that is mirrored by the four yachtsmen's commentary on More's manuscript, potentially indicates the uncanny effacement of the distinction between fiction and reality. Featherstone's puzzlement, together with his annoyance, threatens and 'entertains' (i.e. both 'amuses' and 'keeps in mind') at once, and respectively, the 'hypocrite lecteur' of *A Strange Manuscript* and the effacement of the distinction between the two narratives. As that reader is constantly reminded, this distinction stands for the one between reality and fiction. The threatening images of death instead urge her/im to repress such an awareness, in order to keep on reading what would be unbearable otherwise. This is why the readers of *A Strange Manuscript* can only welcome what is in effect imposed on their own reality, that is, the unappealing/unappetizing decision of Featherstone—one of the only four readers of the 'strange' manuscript who are fictionally entitled to take it.

Various elements of coincidence between the two narratives sustain, and at the same time paradoxically efface their distinction. For instance, More and Agnew are adrift in the Pacific on board the "*Trevelyan*," just as the four

yachtsmen are becalmed in the Atlantic on board the "*Falcon.*" Both images are images of death, as the calmness of the ocean reveals the two parties' common impotence. In this context, More's and Agnew's seal-hunt structurally occupies the place of the yachtsmen's boat race, as both endeavours are meant to be a diversion, just as More's 'strange' manuscript, as well as De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript*, can be safely assumed to be used as such by their respective readers.[5] Ultimately, More's manuscript may as well have been picked up by one of us, as long as we occupy the same reading position as the four yachtsmen: after all, 'we' are reading the manuscript that 'they' have picked up. Therefore we may share Featherstone's disappointment at the realization that his reading of More's manuscript is the fulfilment of its precondition, i.e. that somebody should read it. The 'mise en abyme' thus established ends up by drawing us into the same void in which More's manuscript involved Featherstone and company: as with the latter, so with us.

That Featherstone and his friends should read what we are reading—More's manuscript—is only the first image of the double in a whole series. For instance, consider Agnew, whose sacrifice anticipates the intended fate of his companion who barely escapes it; or else the first meeting of the two drifters with the ugliest representatives of the Kosekin, which anticipates More's own prolonged sojourn with them. Or else consider the two women that More finds in his path—Almah and Layelah, who are in their respective, different cases, the platonic objects of his love. That he has no apparent sexual encounter with either one despite numerous opportunities, can be taken as a sign of his "narcissism," that is "love directed towards the image of oneself" (Laplanche & Pontalis 255), as opposed to other people's images. In the light of More's obsession with double images, this hypothesis seems confirmed by what Freud writes on "The Uncanny":

> Such ideas [of the double], however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality [like in the case of Ancient Egyptians' mummification], it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (U 357)

Apart from the the various images of the double, including the identification of the readers of *A Strange Manuscript* with the readers of the 'strange' manuscript, other elements participate in the creation

of its uncanny atmosphere. More finds himself in the same narrative place again and again. This can be read as an instance of "the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes" (U 356), which for Freud indicates a compulsion to repeat, affirming the power of a death wish over the pleasure principle:

> It is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their demonic character . . . All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny. (U 361)

Indeed, if More's own fear of death is to be considered the cause of his curiosity regarding the details of rituals that he pretends to abhor, his mind may well be considered "demonic." On the other hand, that he should rely so unquestionably on his weapons at the first signs of danger, as if they were the pseudopodia of his mind, makes of him a primitive believer in the demonic 'omnipotence of thoughts.'

The following is only the first of More's numerous encounters with monsters of various, usually complicated forms:

> I heard quick, heavy pantings, as of some great living thing; and with this came the noise of regular movements in the water, and the foaming and the gurgling of waves. It was as though some living, breathing creature were here, not far away, moving through these midnight waters; and with this discovery there came a new fear - the fear of pursuit. I thought that some sea-monster had scented me in my boat, and had started to attack me. (SM 45-6)

His reaction is to shoot his rifle, which establishes a pattern for his future behaviour: whenever More is in trouble, he either thinks of firing his rifle, or he does so. This usually has stunning effects. The above monster is scared off; others are killed; and apart from one occasion (the natives he and Agnew encounter), More's trust of his gun's power is always reconfirmed by each and every shot, to such an extent that the Kosekin must share his on-going conviction that he is endowed with 'omnipotence of thought': for More only has to 'think' of his "*sepet ram*" and it will work wonders.

The same can be said of Layelah, who, upon More's threat to kill the athaleb if she does not turn back, challenges him : ". . . you cannot kill the athaleb. You are no more than an insect; your rod is a weak thing, and will break on his iron frame" (SM 216). More's self-indulgent comment anticipates both Layelah's bewilderment at the results of his uncomprehended action, and the eventual celebration of his narcissism performed by the closing scene—that,

as already indicated, not unsignificantly coincides with Featherstone's final yawn: "It was evident that Layelah had not the slightest idea of the powers of my rifle" (ibid). The latter is an obvious symbol of More's sexual prowess, which is never demonstrated, as it is sublimated in his seamanship and swiftness with guns; and yet it is his "*sepet ram*" that produces the collective stupor of the Kosekin who proclaim him at once "Father of Thunder", "Ruler of Cloud and Darkness", and "Judge of Death to the men of the Kosekin" (SM 264). Similarly Almah, having learnt how "to fire the pistol" (SM 263), is proclaimed "consort of Atam-or", "Co-ruler of Clouds and Darkness", and "Judge of Death to the women of the Kosekin" (SM 264). Thus the apotheosis of More's narcissism, signalled by his "damming up of the libido" (Laplanche & Pontalis 255) that detracts from his two amorous relationships and adds to his skill with firearms (which in its turn restores his child-like belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts), coincides with his 'never-to-be-consummated' matrimony and with his elevation to the status of ruler of "a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave" (SM 8).

Leaving aside the question of whether *A Strange Manuscript* as we have it is finished or not, why would More want to escape from his apparently enviable condition? It is in this respect that More's repeated horror at the Kosekin's supreme valuation of death acquires significance. Here is his description of the cavern where Almah daily performs her handmaid duties:

> Far above rose the vaulted roof, to a height of apparently a hundred feet. Under this there was a lofty half-pyramid with stone steps. All around, as far as I could see in the obscure light, there were niches in the walls, each one containing a figure with a light burning at its feet. I took them for statues. (SM 85)

At first, More's description of the "figures" sounds 'strange', which is in line with the mysterious, dark cavern; but it is precisely because the "statues" are perceived as 'strange' that they remind him of something very familiar, which makes him "recoil with horror" as he judges them to be "a hideous sight" (ibid). Thus his 'strange' metaphor is the precondition for the surfacing of the shocking realization that awakens him to full terror by making him aware of what he had unconsciously repressed: "It was no statue that I saw in that niche, but a shrivelled human form" (ibid). His horrific experience is sustained by his silence, as he gradually realizes that the Kosekin way of life is a celebration of death, and that their system is an economy of death, with rules that revolve around it and duties that are performed in order to proclaim its absolute priority:

> I said nothing, but followed and watched her, carrying the wreaths and supplying her. She went to each niche in succession, and after taking the wreath off from each corpse she placed a fresh one on, saying a brief formula at each act. By keeping her supplied with wreaths I was able to lighten her task, so much so that whereas it usually occupied her more than two hours, on the present occasion it was finished in less than half an hour . . . The number of those which had to be crowned by her was about a hundred. Her work was only to crown them, the labor of collecting the flowers and weaving the wreaths and attending to the lamps being performed by others. (SM 87)

More's eagerness to learn all the details of a ritual which occupies the whole community equals his pride in helping Almah carry out her own duties. That he should declare: "I was anxious . . . to forget it all" (ibid), then, comes as no surprise, as he would rather return to the previous belief that those "figures" in the niches were "statues," a belief which "reality testing", or else "the process postulated by Freud which allows the subject to distinguish . . . between what he perceives and what he only imagines" (Laplanche & Pontalis 382), had forced him to abandon.

Similarly, Featherstone would rather return to a more palatable occupation, and apparently he does so. For More, though, this is not such an easy task, as everything the Kosekin do uncannily reminds him of death and how much they praise it. While following the Kohen at a "sacred hunt," it is not long before he must face the fact that the usual carnivalization of values practiced by the Kosekin may have tragic consequences, as he finds out that his question about "what were the animals that [they] expected to kill" (SM 89) during the hunt is ironical, since in the Kosekin version of hunting the hunters are also the game.

At this point, More is still far from being fluent in the Kosekin language, and cannot make out Almah's explanations. In this context, it is significant that the first, full-size statement uttered by the Kohen during the hunt that is comprehensible to More is: "Atam-or . . . give me also the blessing of darkness and death!" (SM 92), because it signals his entrance into the Kosekin's symbolic world, and as such it is horrific, since it amounts to his acceptance of the Kohen's recognition of his capability of doing so.[6] If the reason why More is horrified by the Kohen's request is that by understanding it he implicitly comes to share the Kosekin's celebration of death which inscribes it, from a Lacanian point of view More's understanding of the Kohen's request amounts to his entrance into the Kosekin Symbolic.

For Lacan this is one of the three orders of experience accessible to (wo)man, the other two being the Imaginary and the Real. The Imaginary is the pre-verbal world accessed by the child through the mirror stage, a phase of the child's development that takes place between six and eighteenth months of age and is characterized by the child's (mis)recognition of her/is own image in a mirror. The as-yet-uncoordinated child identifies with the static image of her/imself reflected by the mirror, a totalizing image that constitutes her/im at once as an alienated subject. The child can then blindly indulge in her/is desire to be the exclusive object of her/is mother's desire, until s/he is forced to recognize her/is father's priority in the desire for the mother's desire, an event which mortifies her/im as it disrupts the empowering symbiosis s/he had envisaged with her/is mother by enforcing on her/im the Symbolic as a system of symbolic exchange, and ultimately language itself. As Madan Sarup puts it:

> In Lacan's view, the father introduces the principle of law, in particular the law of the language system. When this law breaks down, or if it has never been acquired, then the subject may suffer from psychosis. In order to escape the all-powerful imaginary relationship with the mother, and to enable the constitution of the subject, it is essential to have acquired the 'name-of-the-father.' This is a structure which lays down the basis of the subject's 'law,' in particular the law of the language system. (Sarup 108)

This in turn explains why More, in the eyes of the Kosekins, goes as far as being considered a bit 'strange,' but never 'mad' altogether, as he eventually, and literally, 'comes to his senses,' that is he recognizes the Kosekins' wish of death as the original version of his own fear of death, and avoids irrupting into the Real, "that which is outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic" and "has little to do with any assumptions about the nature of the world, with 'reality'" (Sarup 104), as he starts to 'make sense' to the Kosekin by adopting their language and its cultural values.

From a Lacanian point of view, then, More's understanding of the Kohen's request to kill him sanctions his recognition of the 'Name-of-the-Father' and his Law, which in More's case is the Law of Death, and therefore his entrance into the Kosekin culture as a moribund participant. Considering that he is first introduced to that culture by Almah, their encounter can be read as that of the child who recognizes her/is own image reflected by a mirror, the central event of that "fundamentally narcissistic experience which [Lacan] calls *mirror stage*" (Laplanche & Pontalis 256, emphasis provided):

> She stood with her face looking at me full of amazement; and as I caught the gaze of her glorious eyes I rejoiced that I had at last found one who lived in the light and loved it—one who did not blink like a bat, but looked at me full in the face, and allowed me to see all her soul revealed. (SM 74)

Almah's amazement equals More's own amazement at recognizing that her being different from the Kosekin amounts to his being similar to her. Such a realization triggers off a regression to a state that is similar to the one experienced by the child who is learning to speak: "It was necessary to go back to first principles and make use of signs, or try to gain the most elementary words in her language" (SM 75).

Having understood the Kohen's request to give him "the blessing of darkness and death" (cit.), More can have extensive conversations with Almah; during one of these, she explains the Kosekin way of life:

> It is so with this people; with them death is the highest blessing. They all love death and seek after it. To die for another is immortal glory. To kill the wounded was to show that they had died for others. The wounded wished it themselves. You saw how they all sought after death. These people were too generous and kind-hearted to refuse to kill them after they had received wounds. (SM 93)

By paraphrasing Freud, one could say that More's following "perplexity" (ibid) is 'the token of his repression'; he does not understand Almah's explanation—i.e. it sounds 'strange' to him—because understanding it would amount to recognizing what he already knows unconsciously: namely, that he is as attracted to the idea of death as the Kosekin are.

It is during the ceremony of the dark season, when human sacrifices take place, that he realizes it:

> There was a horrible fascination about the scene, which forced me to look and see all. The Kohen took the victim, and drawing it from the altar, threw it over the precipice to the ground beneath. (SM 106)

Such a fascination is the beginning of his acceptance of the Kosekin reversal of values. He lets his own valuation of darkness over light escape the net of the secondary revision that constitutes his manuscript in the following passage, which is worth quoting in full:

> The dark season had now begun, which would last for half the coming year. Now the people all moved out of the caverns into the stone houses on the opposite side of the terraces, and the busy throng transferred themselves and their occupations to the open air. This with them was the season of activity, when all their most important affairs were undertaken and carried out; the season, too, of *enjoyment,* when all the chief sports and festivals took place. Then the outer

> world all awoke to life; the streets were thronged, fleets of galleys came forth from their moorings, and the sounds of labour and of *pleasure,* of toil and of revelry, arose into the darkened skies. Then the city was a city of the living, no longer silent, but full of bustle, and the caverns were frequented but little. This cavern life was only tolerable during the light season, when the sun-glare was over the land; but now, when the *beneficient and grateful darkness* pervaded all things, the outer world was *infinitely more agreeable.* (SM 109, emphasis added)

This is clearly meant to be More's 'uncommitted' report of the Kosekin's point of view; and yet one can read between the lines his fascination with darkness, which is associated with "enjoyment" and "pleasure", and, above all, which is said to be "beneficient and grateful", as well as "infinitely more agreeable." This is why the starkly official remark that follows such a revealing passage sounds like an attempt to recuperate the lost ground:

> To me, however, the arrival of the dark season brought only additional gloom. I could not get rid of the thought that I was reserved for some horrible fate, in which Almah also might be involved. (ibid)

It seems to me that More's "horrible fate" is as strongly and consciously resisted as it is unconsciously invoked, and that the obsessive fear he displays towards his insistently announced and repetitively deferred end, is a sign of his secret and unacceptable wish for it. He admits:

> The stain of blood-guiltiness was over all the land. *What was I, that I could hope to be spared?* The hope was madness, and I did not pretend to indulge it. (SM 110, emphasis added)

Even at the beginning of his descent into hell, while drifting off the Kosekin land together with Agnew—whose hope accompanies him till the very end—More had already made clear how far from hopeful his inclinations were. The two companions also differ in their reaction to the natives, who are treated with friendliness by Agnew, whereas More, who thinks that they are "animated mummies" (SM 32), inevitably fires his gun so as "to inspire a little wholesome respect" (SM 31). Quite apart from the fact that More's behaviour proves wiser in the end, it is perhaps worth noting how the same situation and the same people should provoke such opposite reactions. This may substantiate the impression that More is in fact always already obsessed with death, so that the first 'strange' event, and the first 'strange' people that he encounters, do not fail to trigger what he had repressed, each one in its turn to become a "harbinger of death" (U, cit.).

In other words, More's readily available and constant hopelessness can be

considered a sign of his melancholy, described by Freud as a process which "borrows some of its features from mourning, and the other from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism" (MM 259). Given the mirror-stage scene that occurs between More and Almah, then Layelah's judgment of the latter as "cold and melancholy" (SM 178) may as well be referred to More, who acts as if he were already mourning himself, in a wishful anticipation of his consciously abhorred fate.

More's unsuccessfully repressed 'fear' of death haunts him throughout his manuscript—and even leaks out of it to induce Featherstone to 'yawn it off.' Again in the following passage, while More is anxiously waiting for Agnew's return, his 'fear' of death is re-converted into its genuine form, i.e. its invocation:

> [T]hough I longed to fly, I could not for his [Agnew's] sake. The boat seemed to be a haven of rest. I longed to be in her once more, and drift away, *even if it should be to my death.* Nature was here less terrible than man; *and it seemed better to drown in the waters, to perish amid rocks and whirlpools,* than to linger here, amid such horrors as these. (SM 36-7, emphasis added)

If More's preferred choice of death sounds vaguely Romantic, perhaps this is because death by water is also the fate of his prototypical forerunner, i.e. Narcissus.

Given the fact that for More learning the Kosekin language amounts to absorbing their way of life and participating in their culture in the ways that have been indicated, the following passage's final remark, tainted as it is by More's son-like gratitude towards the Kohen/Father, acquires the value of a further admission:

> The Kohen was untiring in his efforts to please. He was in the habit of making presents every time he came to see me, and on each occasion the present was of a different kind; at one time it was a new robe of curiously wrought feathers, at another some beautiful gem, at another some rare fruit. He also made incessant efforts to render my situation pleasant, *and was delighted at my rapid progress in acquiring the language.* (SM 110, emphasis added)

Here again More's linguistic progress equals the Kohen's recognition of him as one of the Kosekin, whose language More can feel proud of learning, as long as he pretends that his linguistic advancement has no bearing on his assessment of the Kosekin culture. In this way, More can still consciously oppose it while being unconsciously attracted to it, as long as that culture proves to be functional to what can be called his 'narcissistic indulgement.'

If his disinterest in having sex with women who want him is a sign of his narcissism, the latter can also account for his fear of death, once such fear has been reconverted into its original form, namely the wish to bring his life to an end, which in turn is a sign of his melancholy. From this point of view, then, More's endeavour is to oppose the Kosekin fascination with death consciously enough so as to be given the excuse to use his "weak rod" in the pretense of his own defence, a stratagem which will proclaim him absolute ruler, something which should prove good enough for his narcissistic demands, and which will also, and inescapably, bury him in the (water)land of the Kosekin.

More becomes curious, he is eager to learn every detail of the Kosekin's ceremonies, and asks Almah how long it takes to embalm the corpses she attends to; he wants to know "what will they do with them" (SM 110). He feels "a great interest" in the "Feast of Darkness" and states that "there seemed something of poetic beauty in this mode of welcoming the advent of a welcome season" (SM 111), thus revealing the amount of influence that his exposure to the Kosekin culture has already produced. Almah, who is aware of such a risk, wisely suggests that he stay in his room "till the fearful repast is over" (SM 112). As More will find out, the central event of the feast "is awful, tremendous, unspeakable", and "too terrible to name" (SM 115). That he should unquestionably accept the Kosekin "Mista Kosek" as the name for what eventually he will have to recognize as "cannibalism" (SM 180), shows how 'More-as-artist' puts into practice Shklovsky's theory of estrangement once again by refusing to call "a thing by its name" (Shklovsky 1990, 6). For 'More-as-self-censor,' on the other hand, such a refusal amounts to giving up his moral stand against what he can still pretend to judge as horrific by accepting a 'strange' name for it—which shows how familiar that concept is to him. By endorsing their word for an event he refuses to name in his own language, he is in fact erasing the difference between his own conscious morality and that of the Kosekin's, and that is why he is terrified. Eventually, he will confess:

> 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.* (SM 179-80, emphasis added)

Because his narcissism directs his love towards himself, as opposed to external objects, More can in fact eagerly welcome and fully appropriate the

Kosekin idea of "unrequited love," together with what he significantly recognizes as their "passion" for death.

That he is gradually accepting the Kosekin way of life is apparent to the Kohen, who later on tells him:

> You are growing like one of us . . . You will soon learn that the greatest happiness in life is to do good to others and sacrifice yourself. You already show this in part. When you are with Almah you act like one of the Kosekin. You watch her to see and anticipate her slightest wish; you are eager to give her everything. She, on the other hand, is equally eager to give up all to you. Each one of you is willing to lay down life for the other. You would gladly rush upon death to save her from harm, *much as you pretend to fear death.* (SM 158, emphasis added)

When More admits that indeed he would gladly give up his own life for Almah, the Kohen exclaims:

> Oh, almighty and wondrous power of Love! . . . [H]ow thou hast transformed this foreigner! Oh, Atam-or! you will soon be one of us altogether . . . Almah has awakened within you your true human nature. (ibid)

Finally, when More tells Layelah "I will stay and die for Almah" (SM 182), his acceptance of the Kosekin reversal of values is complete. He has virtually become a Kosekin, so much so that he is now ready to become their ruler, and more than ever indulge in his narcissistic impulse which has driven him towards Almah—whose eventual disappointment at her newly-wed husband is foreseeable from what More tells Layelah:

> Marriage—idle word! What have I to do with marriage? What has Almah? There is only one marriage before us—the dread marriage with death" (SM 181).

I started this paper by individuating in genre-assignment the critical strategy employed by most of the critics of James De Mille's novel. I argued that this strategy responds to a view of the novel as a riddle to be solved, which is based upon the widely shared opinion that no one genre is capable of exhausting it. Such a view, together with the strategy it prompts, is also that of the novel's intra-diegetic readers with reference to the 'strange' manuscript the novel revolves around. As a consequence, I considered the interpretative problems that are posed by *A Strange Manuscript* as 'paradigmatic' of textual exegesis, in the sense proposed by Kuhn in his discussion of the social and physical sciences, and as exemplified by the genre-assignment as a strategy that establishes a critical distance from the text it dialogically confronts.

In a successive gesture, I first took the 'strangeness' of More's manuscript as an exemplification of Viktor Shklovsky's theory of estrangement, and then I considered it in the light of Freud's theory of the uncanny as More's attempt to repress his unconscious attraction to the Kosekin's appreciation of death, which he consciously pretends to fear. As such, 'strangeness' is not restricted to More's manuscript, since various elements of coincidence between the latter and the meta-narrative it is constantly placed against make it possible to extend such a qualification to De Mille's novel as a whole. I suggested that the 'strange' manuscript's relation to the meta-narrative of the four yachtsmen at once creates and puts into jeopardy "the distinction between imagination and reality" that Freud writes of in his paper on "The Uncanny" (cit.), threatening and at the same time entertaining the reader of *A Strange Manuscript*. I argued that the obsession with death images that pervades More's manuscript leaks out of it to induce Featherstone to stop reading it, as he cannot face the risk of an effacement of the distinction between reality and fiction that a prolonged reading would force upon him. I suggested that such a risk is also run by the reader of *A Strange Manuscript*, in so far as s/he is not able to keep separate the two narratives that constitute it.

Finally, I proposed an interpretation of More's personality as "melancholic" in order to claim that his sexless relationships with Almah and Layelah are "narcissistic," using such terms in the sense put forward by Freud in his papers "Mourning and Melancholia" and "On Narcissism." I showed how More's endeavour in the land of the Kosekin is directed at exploiting their reversal of values for his own purpose, namely to indulge in his own narcissism, which will amount to bringing about a version of that death which he pretends to abhor. In a Lacanian gesture, I read More's meeting of Almah as the event that signals his Kosekin mirror stage, previous to his entrance into the Kosekin Symbolic that is marked by his understanding of the Kohen's request to kill him, which amounts to his recognition of the Name-of-the-Father and his Law of language. I argued that, since More's comprehension is inscribed into the Kosekin's celebration of death which he comes to share by understanding what the Kohen wants from him, the Law of language that he thus subscribes to becomes a Law of death, and that is why the Kohen's request to kill him horrifies him, as he realizes that he only pretends to fear what the Kosekin wish, namely to die. I described More's gradual acceptance of the Kosekin values as it culminates

in his elevation to the position of their ruler, allowing him to indulge in his narcissism undisturbed, which amounts to burying himself in "a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave" (SM, cit).

I have shared the same critical anxiety that is shown by the four yachtsmen and by the critics of *A Strange Manuscript* when I employed the theories of Freud, Kuhn, Lacan, and Shklovsky to confront its 'strangeness' and render it familiar. In this sense, it is as if I sought a kind of death for a text that is capable of defying its exhaustion by means of its 'strangeness.'[7] The degree to which my own attempt at solving the riddle posited by *A Strange Manuscript* shares the anxiety of its critics determines to what extent my endeavour is the expression of a view of exegesis as the defense mechanism that allows the reader's, as well as the text's, survival.

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NOTES

1 For instance, George Woodcock argues that "a writer as experienced in the craft of Victorian popular fiction as De Mille would not have deliberately made so lame an end, which even as an anti-climatic device is ineffective" (Woodcock 100). Conversely, for Kenneth J. Hughes "when the main sources of the work are revealed, the ending of *A Strange Manuscript* is not, as Woodcock argues, a lame one" (Hughes 111).

2 I am indebted to Roberto Bedini who first suggested this connection to me.

3 The English translation reads somehow less satisfactorily: "The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (Viktor Shklovsky 1984, 6).

4 While, as it has already been indicated, Melick and Featherstone concern themselves with playing down More's manuscript in their own respective ways.

5 The mirror effect of SM has been persuasively commented upon by R.E. Watters in his "Introduction" to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel.

6 That he will eventually consider himself fully capable of killing is shown by the hilarious offer he will make to the Chief Pauper when the latter tells him:"'I have poverty, squalor, cold, perpetual darkness, the privilege of killing others, the near prospect of death, and the certainty of the *Mista Kosek* - all these I have, and yet, Atam-Or, after all, I am not happy. [. . .]' To this I had no answer ready; but by way of saying something, I offered to kill him on the spot" (SM 249, emphasis provided).

7 This interpretation of my critical attempt has been graciously put forward by Patricia Cormack.

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