

Colonialist Discourse, Lord Featherstone's Yawn and the Significance of the Denouement in 'A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder'

The notoriously brusque conclusion to James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* is, in most instances, critically undervalued, slighted and derided. From the moment of its posthumous publication in 1888 to the more recent interest sparked by the 1969 New Canadian Library edition of the text and its subsequent promotion within the Canadian canon, *Strange Manuscript* has been considered structurally flawed, which partly explains why De Mille's novel is regarded "as a minor classic of Canadian fiction" instead of a fully fledged major classic and also accounts for the paucity of critical commentary on the novel.¹ Reviewers, academics, readers and students alike have been variously surprised, flummoxed, bemused, perplexed, disappointed and irritated by an ending generally considered inconclusive and frustratingly incomplete.

The conclusion is an obtrusive structural problem that all readers have to wrestle with. "Readings of *Strange Manuscript*," argues Patricia Monk, "therefore, must take into account the abruptness of the ending and its lack of formal closure."² Lord Featherstone's yawn, it seems, is no substitute for a cracking denouement. "What could be more provoking than such a conclusion as this?" asked an early reviewer of the text, dissatisfied with the sudden narrative closure.³ A similar complaint pervades recent criticism of

Strange Manuscript.⁴ “A writer as experienced in the craft of Victorian popular fiction as De Mille would not have deliberately made so lame an end,” writes George Woodcock, who proposes that the “disappearance” of Layelah and the Kohen Godol from the story and the absence of references “to the circumstances in which, after his escape from sacrifice, More writes his narrative” support a reading of the novel as incomplete.⁵ The view that *Strange Manuscript* is unfinished and its conclusion capricious, careless and clumsy is hardening into critical orthodoxy, a trend best exemplified by Monk’s comprehensive study of De Mille’s life and work, *The Gilded Beaver*. *Strange Manuscript*, Monk contends, “is a fragment, not a complete novel—a beginning without an end—albeit an intriguing fragment” (239). After analysing the text’s structure, action, symbols, themes, characterization and length, elaborating further on Woodcock’s comments on the disjointed nature of the sub-plots and demonstrating how the double narrative is “unbalanced” (240) and lacks resolution, Monk concludes her study with an unequivocal verdict: *Strange Manuscript* “is inarguably [sic] unfinished” (245). Amid Monk’s detailed textual analysis and tightly argued critical commentary a brief, bizarre and unsubstantiated explanation for the ending of the novel is advanced. In her zeal to claim an unfinished state for the novel Monk enters the realm of speculative conspiracy theory:

The pattern here is all too suggestive of outside interference: an ending cobbled together by someone who was unfamiliar with the manuscript and who, accidentally or on purpose, juxtaposed pages from drafts of separate chapters that had been left as they were when De Mille had either given up trying to revise the novel or had been prevented from finishing it by his sudden death. (241)

Regrettably, by intractably claiming an unfinished status for the text, Monk depreciates critical readings which either regard *Strange Manuscript* as textually intact or see its conclusion as calculated artifice. Such readings, according to Monk, are “on thin ice.”⁶

Monk’s forthright dismissal of the few critics who read *Strange Manuscript* as unabridged raises some interesting critical issues. At stake in the various readings of *Strange Manuscript* are questions relating to how meaning and value are produced. The critical position epitomised by Monk interprets, reads and values *Strange Manuscript* as an incomplete text; yet for all its incompleteness, Monk maintains that the text nonetheless possesses certain attributable values and is the origin of meaning. What I want to suggest, in contrast to Monk’s approach, is that the act of critical intervention is

responsible for producing the text's meaning and its condition (whether it be seen as complete or incomplete). The literary practice and theory that Monk brings to the text produces *Strange Manuscript* as incomplete. In *Formalism and Marxism* Tony Bennett argues that the "text is not the issuing source of meaning. It is a site on which the production of meaning—of variable meanings—takes place."⁷ *Strange Manuscript* is such a site. Value, like meaning, is also produced:

A work is of value only if it is valued, and it can be valued only in relation to some particular set of valuational criteria, be they moral, political or aesthetic. The problem of value is the problem of the social production of value; it refers to the ever ongoing process whereby which texts are to be valued and on what grounds are incessantly matters for debate and, indeed, struggle. Value is not something which the text has or possesses. It is not an attribute of the text; it is rather something that is produced for the text. (173)

I intend to read *Strange Manuscript* in relation to a "particular set of valuational criteria" and, in the process of social and critical re-articulation, produce post-colonial meaning and value, because *Strange Manuscript* is situated within a composite colonial history. The external narrative depicting a wealthy Englishman and his guests adrift is embedded in colonial history. The internal narrative (More's manuscript), which textually enacts the activity and discourse of the colonial encounter that precedes colonial domination, is read by beneficiaries of the colonial system. Secondary and tertiary details in both narrative frames place the story at a time when the English colonial system was quite robust. For example, Adam More is lost after transporting convicts to Van Dieman's Land, Australia. Reference is made to the Tasmanian Aborigines, with whom the Kosekin are unflatteringly compared. Some geographical details, Crawford Kilian argues, seem "physically similar to the Gulf of St. Lawrence" and "the Kosekin elite who dwell on the outer coast are analogous to Canadian Maritimers."⁸

Even without these sporadic flashes of descriptive geographical minutiae, *Strange Manuscript* is still about colonialism because Adam More's language and actions replicate the basic pattern and trajectory of colonial encounters. More's "account of [his] adventures" (25) can be read as an allegory of the colonial encounter and, intentionally or not, De Mille illustrates how discourse and its accompanying practice function in such a confrontation. When More confronts the Kosekin, certain discursive techniques and linguistic resources are deployed. As More acts, speaks, represents and calls the

unknown into being, the terribly familiar paradigms of colonial action, thought and discourse come into play. Through the continual assertion of his superiority and his decisive and timely application of the great Western technological pacifier, the gun, More maintains an opposition inherently colonialist in orientation and operation between himself and the Kosekin. By the novel's end he reaps all the rewards desired and imagined by the colonising West: power, love, wealth, the capacity to control and govern a foreign culture. This, though, is short-lived.

The external and internal narrative frames are juxtaposed: More's narrative is enclosed by the narrative of its discovery. We see how More discursively constructs the world and how the Englishmen respond and fail to respond to aspects of More's discourse. When considering More's representation of the Kosekin, the four Englishmen do not question the images that More produces, how language produces meaning, the implications of his narrative, the purpose and effect of his central tropes, or the relationship between language and practice. But as Edward Said makes clear: "The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original."⁹ What More's language, style, images and tropes do, in a disturbingly simple way, is prepare the way for More's eventual colonial rule. More's language clears the ground, so to speak, in readiness for his elevation as a supreme power. This literal and symbolic dispersal is accomplished with the application of the manichean allegory which contains, reduces and controls the alien world through the "coercive framework" of its representations.¹⁰ More achieves physical, moral, economic and political dominance by linguistically producing the necessary pre-conditions for that dominance.

Rather than see Lord Featherstone's yawn as arbitrarily positioned and a sign of the text's deficiencies and incompleteness, I propose to produce from the extraordinary suggestiveness generated by the abrupt ending a political reading, a critical intervention that relies on the text as it is and interprets *Strange Manuscript* as a critique of colonial non-discursive and discursive practices.¹¹ This paper will examine the political expediency of Featherstone's yawn, and its connection with the two levels of narrative—the external narrative pertaining to Lord Featherstone and his guests and the discovery of the mysterious manuscript, and the internal narrative detailing Adam More's experience among the Kosekin. To regard Lord

Featherstone's yawn as politically motivated, we need to consider its placement. His yawn terminates the text at a particular moment: the apex of Adam More's triumph over the Kosekin. This triumph I will argue is distinctively colonialist. Lastly, I will examine the incompleteness suggested by the yawn and the narrative absence between More's ascension to power and the prefatory letter that introduces the manuscript to the Englishmen. The lacuna between More's narrative, cut off by the yawn, and his preface suggests that there are potentially self-destructive and dangerous limits to colonial exploitation, development and growth.

The first narrative frame is remarkable for its air of lassitude and indifference. The atmosphere surrounding the *Falcon* contradicts any expectation the reader may have of speed, flight or movement intimated by the ship's name. Listlessness and inertia prevail. The *Falcon* is "becalmed."¹² The owner of the yacht, Lord Featherstone, "weary of life in England" (19), embodies a monied, social torpor. Featherstone is apparently burdened by the riches generated by imperial capitalism: he is "weary of the monotony of the high life, and like many of his order, was fond of seeking relief from the *ennui* of prosperity amid the excitements of the sea" (70). Featherstone's assorted guests and crew are lulled "into a state of indolent repose" (19). The "dull and languid repose" (19) experienced by those on board occurs as they return from a tour of colonial islands. Even the prospect of returning to the Mediterranean, the geographical centre and symbolic heart and mind of Western civilisation, fails to draw them on: the *Falcon*, a representative little England, is suspended in the middle of the nineteenth century (February 15, 1850), its progress thwarted.

To varying degrees and intensity Featherstone, Congreve, Melick and Oxenden are English literary critics, the readers and interpreters of a mysterious manuscript. The social relations that influence the reading process are important. A dilettante who listens to the various arguments going on around him "without saying much on either side" (153), Lord Featherstone nonetheless plays a crucial role in the dynamics of power that overdetermine who reads and who speaks. This seems odd, given his reading habits. In the opening scene he "was pretending to read" (19), later he admits that he is "an infernally bad reader" (79) and when he finally does read he declares that he "sha'n't be able to hold out so long" (226) as the other readers. In terms of reading time Featherstone reads the least (Melick reads

chapters 2-6 [27-70], Congreve 8-16 [80-142] before called to a halt by Featherstone's yawn, Oxenden 18-26 [154-214], Featherstone 28-31 [227-52]) yet he is the one who with a yawn calls the narrative to a close. He also decides who will read: "You, Melick, read" (26) and "Doctor, what do you say? Will you read the next instalment!" (79).

How, then, to account for Featherstone's role? The stream of mannerly genteel discourse conducted aboard *The Falcon* is reminiscent of the eighteenth century English coffee-house culture, a cultural and political milieu in which truth, rationality and reason rather than authority, domination and power supposedly defined the boundaries and operative conditions of discourse.¹³ Generally speaking, Melick, Congreve and Oxenden inhabit this world. Lord Featherstone, however, is the unconscious problematic of a reading process informed by a seemingly universal formulation of truth and reason. There is something more to reading than the ability to speak within the sanctioned boundaries of rational bourgeois discourse. While the conversation of Featherstone's "congenial friends" (19) appears to evidence the dissolution of social and political distinctions, their actions and banter suggest otherwise. Throughout *Strange Manuscript* they read and converse at the beck and call of Featherstone, a person of considerable wealth who makes the trip possible. His presence and status directly contradict the reading protocol of rational bourgeois discourse, its codes of rational enquiry and critical disinterestedness, yet he is tolerated. While Melick, Oxenden and Congreve attempt to prove themselves through discourse by using the "formal character of [their] discourse" as the measure of their achievements, Featherstone has no real need to prove himself because his political, cultural and discursive authority is derived from his "social title."¹⁴ To consolidate their bourgeois cultural, political and social positions, the three men do the bulk of the reading. Featherstone can pretend to read and boast good-naturedly about his poor skills because the middle-class will read and interpret on behalf of the propertied, upper class.

Discovered by Melick while looking for an object to which his paperboats can sail, the manuscript is the catalyst that inspires much debate. The moment of its discovery is illuminating. The description of the copper cylinder as "foreign work" (23) and the surprise they articulate when they learn that the manuscript inside is written in English is perhaps an appropriate image of most writing generated from colonies. The manuscript is written in familiar English, but at the same time it is "foreign work,"

metaphorically encased by an unfamiliar social, political, geographical and cultural context. The readers, though, assume that because the work is written in English it can be read and understood according to the familiar paradigms of knowledge, genre, reading practice, science, art, and so on. Any implicit critique of English discourse contained within such a “foreign work” is likely to be missed, particularly by an audience becalmed, adrift and out of sorts. One of the first things they do as readers is naturalise the work. Strangeness, they think, can be familiarised by “strategies of naturalization and cultural assimilation.”¹⁵ Once they ascertain that the casing is “foreign” work, the immediate point of reference is back to England and what is normal practice there. In assessing the significance of the cylinder, the men set England, the familiar, against the cylinder, the alien.

In the course of *Strange Manuscript* seemingly divergent reading strategies compete: the scientific rationalism or mimetic realism of Congreve, the stylistic and genre criticism of Melick, the philological treatise of Oxenden and the eclectic foppery of Featherstone. Yet for all the arguments over the manuscript, the various ideological positions of the readers, the degrees of polemic and the apparent differences these orientations embody, the assumptions that the drifting critics bring to bear on the text are inherently the same. They share a “predominantly mimetic view of the relation between the text and a *given* pre-constituted reality.” One of the problems Homi Bhabha identifies with mimeticism is that it revolves around “the classic subject/object structure of knowledge,” the methodology of which is based wholly on “the question of appearance and reality” or “knowledge as the *recognition* of given objects.”¹⁶

In the external narrative, the reading practices of Featherstone, Melick, Oxenden and Congreve, are challenged by the manuscript. The Englishmen’s quarrels over whether the manuscript is an accurate, representative reflection of the world solidifies the dialectic between the known world and More’s manuscript. They assign greater weight to what they understand as reality than to the specific discursive mechanisms of the text. There is an inordinate emphasis on the manuscript’s contents. “Let’s have the contents of the manuscript” (26) says Featherstone. The analysis of the manuscript that follows his request is considerably “content-oriented,” a critical orientation that refers back to the given reality predetermined and thoroughly mediated by England, its history, culture and language.¹⁷ They repeatedly evaluate the manuscript’s reflective and expressive correct-

ness. All that More says in the manuscript will be empirically related back to England or Europe. When they appraise the value of the text the “issue of mimetic adequacy” dominates their arguments to the exclusion of everything else. Bhabha explains the consequence of such a critical approach:

The ‘image’ must be measured against the ‘essential’ or ‘original’ in order to establish its degree of *representativeness*, the correctness of the image. The text is not seen as *productive* of meaning but essentially reflective or expressive . . . , neither a discourse nor a practice, but a form of recognition.¹⁸

Melick recognises the manuscript in relation to an emerging literary tradition that is poised to become dominant, Congreve according to historical and scientific reports about the world, and Oxenden to philological connections. Each reader attempts to reclaim the manuscript and invest it with meaning already known, as though by referring More’s narrative back to England and alluding to its Englishness it can be controlled.

Congreve is the most visible offender. He desires to establish that the manuscript accurately reflects and is corroborated by a specifically European reality. Even the texture of the manuscript is subjected to the rigorous tests of mimetic accuracy. The manuscript is made from “actual papyrus” (72) Congreve asserts, basing his claim on the fact that he has “seen and examined” (73) two rolls at Marseilles. More’s descriptions and representations of his exile suffer a similarly reductionist fate:

[J]ust consider the strong internal evidence that there is to the authenticity of the manuscript. Now, in the first place, there is the description of Desolation Island, which is perfectly accurate. But it is on his narrative beyond this point that I lay chief stress. I can prove that the statements here are corroborated by those of Captain Ross in his account of that great voyage from which he returned not very long ago . . . I happen to know all about that voyage, for I read a full report of it just before we started, and you can see for yourselves whether this manuscript is credible or not. (73)

Congreve wants to verify the veracity of the manuscript and substantiate More’s account by referring it to a reliable factual and historical source. Convinced by More’s accurate description, Congreve believes that the manuscript reflects reality and, for this reason, he urges the others to “accept as valid the statements of this remarkable manuscript” (78). Significantly, Congreve prefaces his discussion of the manuscript by asking that they analyze it “in a common-sense way” (71), a coded way of invoking a seemingly non-theoretical and non-ideological reading position that will make the

manuscript intelligible, transparent and able to be understood as an objective reflection of the empirically knowable world.

Melick's vociferous, biting objections to Congreve's reasoning fail to obscure the similarities between them: he too attempts to authenticate the manuscript, although by a different yardstick. The manuscript is "a transparent hoax" and a rather crude attempt at "a sensational novel" (71). Expression, style, description, metaphor, dialogue, genre, narrative devices, plot—these are the things that Melick focuses on. "I simply criticise from a literary point of view" (75), he says, as if anything could be as simple as a literary point of view. Later on he calls the manuscript "a satirical romance" (215), but he is reluctant to incorporate it within the emerging literary canon. The jocularly sardonic Melick suddenly becomes seriously prescriptive:

In order to carry out properly such a plan as this the writer should have taken Defoe as his model, or still better, Dean Swift. 'Gulliver's Travels' and 'Robinson Crusoe' show what can be done in this way, and form a standard by which all other attempts must be judged. But this writer is tawdry; he has the worst vices of the sensational school—he shows everywhere marks of haste, gross carelessness, and universal feebleness. When he gets hold of a good fancy, he lacks the patience that is necessary in order to work it up in an effective way. He is a gross plagiarist, and over and over again violates in the most glaring manner all the ordinary properties of style. (216-17)

Putting aside De Mille's debt to Swift, the emphasis on propriety, literary standards, hierarchy, the generality of critical terms and Melick's disdain for work that fails to meet universal standards is, perhaps, a sign of the influence of Matthew Arnold on De Mille.¹⁹ According to Melick, the manuscript's style, intelligence, themes, metaphors and "the intention of the writer" (216) fail to measure up against the literary models he describes. In Melick's view, More violates literary standards, therefore his narrative is barred entry to the emerging and constructed literary canon. Confronted with an unknown text, Melick seeks the safety of the literary models known to him to master, control and overwhelm the manuscript.

The generic confusion surrounding More's manuscript (and, one could add, *Strange Manuscript*) is, however, an explicit challenge to expressive realist strictures and assumptions. "A deuced queer sort of thing this" (70) says Featherstone, and so it is. Melick argues that "it's not a sailor's yarn at all" but the work instead "of a confounded sensation-monger" (75). When Melick pronounces that it is a "satirical romance" Congreve immediately wants to know why it is not a "scientific romance" (215). Unswayed by these

two, Oxenden declares that it “is a plain narrative of facts” (216) and ridicules Melick’s literary analysis. Clearly, the manuscript doesn’t fit into accepted and traditional genres, nor does it accord with what authors are normally supposed to write about. De Mille draws attention to the way in which literature is not *given*, or *obviously great*, but *mediated*. As the men argue about the strangeness of the manuscript, its indefinability, we see how literature is assessed, discussed and judged. In the process of canon formation, a sophisticated form of intellectual colonisation, we see meaning and a hierarchy of values produced.

S*trange Manuscript* is no exception to Bakhtin’s axiom: “The idea of testing the hero, of testing his discourse, may very well be the most fundamental organizing idea in the novel.”²⁰ In the internal narrative, Adam More’s decidedly colonialist values, practices and discursive strategies are rigorously tested when he confronts the Kosekin. Language has an ideological function and with More’s narrative we see a relationship between colonialist discourse and practice. More’s narrative of his life with the Kosekin embodies all the textual strategies and “interchangeable oppositions” so characteristic of the manichean allegory, which Abdul R. JanMohamed defines as the efficient and effective “central trope” that dominates and overdetermines the relationship between coloniser and colonised.²¹

In the internal narrative of *Strange Manuscript* Adam More uses the dominant tropes of colonialist discourse when he meets the Kosekin. The first meeting between More and Agnew and the humans they espy is a physical and discursive encounter. Based only on what he sees of the people on the shore, More decides that it is his best interest to fire his gun, a non-discursive colonial response to the unknown. To Agnew’s cry of “Why,” More gets straight to the point: “I only mean to inspire a little wholesome respect” (45). “A little wholesome respect” euphemistically refers to a relationship based on coerced deference, wherein a series of exchanges based on domination and subordination take place. The gun presages More’s eventual colonial dominance. Surprisingly, the fired gun does not achieve the required response. The natives defy More’s expectation that they would run away by sitting down. Momentarily stumped, More nonetheless is comforted by the fact that he “had another barrel still loaded and a pistol” (45). The weapons overdetermine More’s “state of mind” (45) when he lands: he

is ready to use the guns to achieve power, “a little wholesome respect.” After he is made aware of their ritualised cannibalism, More’s response is an elaboration of colonial practice: “I felt sure that our only plan was to rule by terror—to seize, to slay, to conquer” (50). This, strangely enough, is what he eventually gets to do: rule and conquer. The coupling of discourse and practice eventually results in power, a power premised on what seems to be profound moral, social and cultural differences; differences which in turn justify his power. One of the disturbing elements of More’s accession to power is that he makes it appear as though he is symbolically sacrificing himself for the good of the Kosekin.

Colonialist discourse plays an important role in *Strange Manuscript*. More’s colonialist language shapes the tenor of the engagement irrevocably, constructing as it does a situation whereby the use of a gun is normalised. The Kosekin, as depicted by More, bear no relationship to civilised humanity. He prefers the terrors of the “river of death” to meeting the human figures, who are characterised as “strange” and potentially dangerous “creatures” (43). As the lost Westerners float closer to these creatures, More’s discourse, in terms of its disdain and fear, intensifies. There is also a corresponding increase in the repetitiveness of his choice of words and images to describe the unknown people. The very act of reiteration, the deadening mantra-like quality of More’s banal and limited description, invariably prefigures a justification for violence and results in the acquisition of power and, ultimately, in his deification. Repetitive discourse, in this instance, functions as a means of control: it subjugates, objectifies and colonises. Consider More’s opinions of the “creatures” as he gets closer to them:

They were human beings, certainly, but of such an appalling aspect that they could only be likened to animated mummies. They were small, thin, shrivelled, black, with long matted hair and hideous faces. They all had long spears, and wore about the waist short skirts that seemed to be made of the skin of some sea-fowl. (43)

More continues in this style and discovers that the longer he looks at them “the more abhorrent they grew” (44). The people he describes remind him of another colonial context where the indigenous inhabitants are renowned for the horror and disgust they inspire:

Even the wretched aborigines of Van Dieman’s Land, who have been classed lowest in the scale of humanity, were pleasing and congenial when compared with these. (44)

When Agnew persuades More that they should go ashore, More consents for two reasons: they are armed and the natives “made no hostile demonstrations” (44). As they approach the shore More’s descriptive language registers his revulsion:

the crowd of natives stood awaiting us, and looked more repulsive than ever. We could see the emaciation of their bony frames; their toes and fingers were like birds’ claws; their eyes were small and dull and weak, and sunken in cavernous hollows, from which they looked at us like corpses—a horrible sight. (45)

More’s descriptions intensify as he nears the people:

their meagre frames, small, watery, lack-lustre eyes, hollow, cavernous sockets, sunken cheeks, protruding teeth, claw-like fingers and withered skin, all made them look more than every like animated mummies, and I shrank from them involuntarily, as once shrinks from contact with a corpse. (46)

This disgust, More says, is spontaneous, unconscious, instinctive; in other words, natural. Further on they are “human vermin” (46), the children “little dwarfs,” the women “hags” (47), their language primitive gibberish. “The vilest and lowest savages that I had seen were not so odious as these” (49). His observations, labels and descriptions, hardly neutral, culminate with this:

They had the caricature of the human form; they were the lowest of humanity; their speech was a mockery of language; their faces devilish; their kindness a cunning pretence. (50)

Aside from the repetition of certain adjectives, nouns and phrases, the major point worth noting about More’s language is it degrades and dehumanises the people he encounters. Such pejorative projections, inevitability fatalistic, encourage a relationship determined predominantly by the European that is based on superiority and inferiority, one that posits a distinction between the practices of the civilised and those of the barbarians.

Whenever More loses power or feels threatened he resorts to the familiarity and comfort of colonial discourse. When he is confined with the Chief Pauper and the recipient of the best of the Kosekin world (imprisonment, poverty, darkness, certain death), More is being endowed with gifts that are the inverse of the dominant Western values and practices. Isolated and intimidated by the loss of power, More uses colonial discourse with a punitive vengeance. Thus the Chief Pauper is “a hideous wretch, with eyes nearly closed and bleary, thick, matted hair, and fiendish expression—in short, a devil incarnate in rags and squalor” (232). He is “an object of never-ending hate,

abhorrence, and loathing” (233). Consider, too, More’s crescendo of anxiety when he contemplates Almah’s fate, surrounded as she is by “hags.” Such is More’s ranting that it is hard not to consider it as some form of libidinal dread:

The women—the hags of horror—the shriek-like ones, as I may call them; or the fiend-like, the female fiends, the foul ones—they were all around us . . . A circle was now formed around us, and the light stood in the middle. The nightmare hag also stood within the circle on the other side of the light opposite us. The beams of the lamp flickered though the darkness, faintly illuminating the faces of the horrible creatures around, who, foul and repulsive as harpies, seemed like unclean beasts, ready to make us prey. (237)

Having established the Kosekin’s inferiority, More’s own measure of self-worth rises inestimably. This is brilliantly ironic, considering how obtuse More is. More’s sense of superiority is based on his interpretations of the actions of the Kosekin as deferential gestures of respect and acknowledgements of his preeminence. Upon seeing the Kosekin prostrate themselves before Agnew and himself, More assumes “that they regarded us as superior beings of some sort” (46). Unable to comprehend the excessively generous actions of the Kohen and others, More again fancies himself as being revered “as some wonderful being with superior powers” (67). The less than demure Layelah’s adoration for him excites strong feelings of emotion from More. Once again, his interpretation of the situation rests heavily on feelings of importance granted largely on race and language:

She evidently considered me some superior being, from some superior race; and although my broken and faulty way of speaking was something of a trial, still she seemed to consider every word I uttered as a maxim of the highest wisdom. (168)

By the narrative’s end, having avoided sacrifice and at the height of his power, More believes that the multitude beneath him regard him not as a sacrificial victim but “as some mighty being—some superior, perhaps supernatural power, who was to be almost worshipped” (246). What is most extraordinary about the various usages of the word “superiority” is the escalation of its significance. First, it applies to More as an individual, then it refers to his race, culture and language. Before long it refers to his divine status as a transcendent deity. In his transformation as a god, More, admitting that he is nonetheless “a weak mortal” (246), determines “to take advantage of the popular superstition to the utmost” (247). The projection of this largely imagined superiority puts More in a position where he is able to exploit the Kosekin.

The purpose of the colonialist discourse wielded by More is to construct the Kosekin as savage and evil so that their savagery appears self-evident. Discourse rationalises colonial subjugation and exploitation, paving the way for More's eventual arrogation of power and his deification. The ingenious deflection of materialism (power, wealth, land) in favour of something abstract (civilising savages) is a characteristic manoeuvre of colonialist discourse. More masks his power by letting it be known that it is a burden, an onerous weight reluctantly shouldered by a simple Englishman. In other words, his power is selfless, not selfish. More believes that any material benefit he gains is of secondary importance to the principal objective of reforming Kosekin values and behaviour, bringing them into alignment with English values and behaviour.

More's notions of superiority and the outcome of the sacrifice whereby he and Almah, outsiders to Kosekin culture, achieve dominance, are analogous to colonial conquest. More capitalises on "preexisting power relations of hierarchy, subordination, and subjugation within native societies", and this is made possible in part by "the technological superiority" of the gun, a metonym for European military force.²² In fact, More assumes "the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native."²³ Through the deployment of colonial discourse, More constructs a series of oppositions which allow him to stigmatise the values, practices and mode of production of the Kosekin.

Contingent historical, cultural, economic and political forces are responsible for constructions of race, gender, class, ethnicity and so on. Kohen Gadol, the most despised person in the Kosekin social order, reveals the importance of socialisation in conditioning attitudes and preconceptions. Shipwrecked at an early age, rescued and taken to an environment beyond his own, Kohen Gadol is inculcated with different values during his formative years: "I learned their language and manners and customs, and when I returned home I found myself an alien here" (165). Values, ways of seeing and interpreting are neither universal nor natural, but specific and socially constructed. Almah, for example, refuses to eat lobster because of a particular cultural prejudice instilled in her a long time ago:

She could not give any reason for her repugnance, but merely said that among her people they were regarded as something equivalent to vermin, and I found that she would no more think of eating one than I would think of eating a rat. (197)

It is worth noting that “vermin,” used to designate something repugnant, is also used by More to describe the Kosekin. What More considers “natural to a seafaring man like myself” (210), is, from another point of view, “a thousand false and unnatural habits, arising from your strange native customs” (156). More’s values, assumptions and practices appear organic, instinctual and normal. Thus More’s abhorrence when he meets the people is “immovable” and “something that defied reason” (50). What defies logic is a cultural prejudice so deeply ingrained that More’s hostility appears to be natural, spontaneous. Like his readers, More is constrained by the inherent assumptions and attitudes of his world and by the images his language produces, which he recognises and attributes to cultural conditioning: “The fact is my European training did not fit me for encountering such a state of things as existed among the Kosekin” (187). Cultural conditioning overdetermines, constrains and limits one’s behaviour and perceptions. It also overdetermines the discourse one uses when engaging with the world. Cultural prejudices inaugurate a particular vocabulary.

By the end of Adam More’s narrative it appears that Western technology, morality and discourse triumph. Through the timely discharge of his gun and his and Almah’s manipulation of existing power relations, More becomes the apotheosis of power, granting himself the authority to perpetually subordinate the Kosekin. In the process he gains immense riches for himself and Almah, wards off the possibility of miscegenation and wields immense power over the Kosekin, a power that operates within a colonialist dynamic. The Kosekin, interpellated as colonial subjects, recognise More as the ultimate leader and are gratefully subservient to his rule. Selfishness masquerades as selflessness. More’s victory over the Kosekin is a celebration of wealth, power, domination, the individual. And then Featherstone yawns.

The yawn silences the narrative. The chasm between the Featherstone’s decisive yawn and the conclusion of More’s inner narrative (signified, perhaps, by an imaginary “The End”) is the source of trouble for many critics. A rude anti-climax and an inexplicable strategy for terminating the adventure narrative, the yawn, George Woodcock argues, denies readers access to the circumstances in which More produces his text. Some critics see the yawn as conclusive proof of De Mille’s inability to finish the *Strange Manuscript*. To concentrate on De Mille’s boredom, forgetfulness or the demands of earning a living to account for the novel’s incompleteness,

however, is to see the author as the sole repository of meaning. It is also to read the text in a certain way.

Critics to date have regarded the yawn as the end of More's narrative, without considering what the placement of the yawn does to the internal narrative. Featherstone halts the narrative just as it simultaneously fulfils a Western colonialist fantasy of triumph and power and endorses a self-interested materialism. For the narrative to be yawned off at this point is, however, particularly appropriate, especially when the one doing the yawning is wealthy and powerful. Just as More's colonialist discourse has an ideological function and practical application, so too does Featherstone's yawn. It stops, for example, the other Englishmen from questioning the character of their society, the nature of progress and the assumptions upon which the colonial empire is built.

The English readers of More's manuscript, and the readers of *Strange Manuscript*, read the constituent parts of More's narrative in a particular order, and that chronology affects interpretations of the text. The structural order More's narrative is read in helps create a sense of resolution or incompleteness. In structural terms, More's narrative consists of three parts: the letter, the manuscript and an absence. Read in that order, an unfinished text is produced because the narrative appears structurally incoherent. The colonialist momentum of More's narrative is disrupted and left conclusion-less. However, by re-structuring the order of More's narrative, a conclusion based on the allusions in More's preface to the manuscript is manifest. Read in this way—manuscript, absence and letter—More's narrative is, in an odd way, complete. Its completeness, though, depends upon an important absence, a lacuna which marks the decline of colonial power. The ellipsis between the point at which More's narrative is yawned off and the prefatory note accompanying the manuscript cannot be subjected to critical speculation, critical production. The implied uncertainty generated by the narrative absence is provocative because it insinuates, through absence, More's decline, which, analogously, is the decline of colonial power. Perhaps this is what Lord Featherstone does not wish to read or have read to him. Hence, the denouement, which many have found unsatisfactory, is more than appropriate.

The letter attached to the manuscript is, in a sense, More's full stop, "The End," even though it occurs, paradoxically, at the beginning of his narrative. Although a preface introduces a work it is usually written retrospectively in order to assist readers, to allude to the general theme and tone of the writing

that follows, to give some sense or shape to the whole. In this work, then, the letter functions as a conclusion. The letter bridges the void signified by Featherstone's dismissive yawn and offers a tantalising though sombre finale. More's prefatory note is reminiscent of Kurtz's exclamation of horror in another text that probes the limitations and consequences of colonialist discourse and practice.²⁴ All is not happy, the power that comes with exploitation and acquisition is fraught with danger and for More "escape is as impossible as from the grave" (25).

Fundamentally transformed by the system he established and prevailed over, More desires to be released from a hell produced by colonist discourse and practices. In the letter he appeals for mercy. Despite his position of authority he appears to have had little success in transforming the Kosekin world into what he considers a civilised society: "I have written this and committed it to the sea, in the hope that the ocean currents may bear it within reach of civilized man" (25). The covering letter can be read as an oblique critique of society; not the Kosekin society that More rules over, but the European society that furnished him with the discursive and non-discursive methods that he used to gain power. In its call for compassion and its tone of despair, More's letter signals the failure of his colonialist appropriation of power and foreshadows the limits of colonial discourse. It is a pitiful contrast to the supposedly triumphant ending of the internal narrative, evoking the horror implicit in the colonialist acquisition of power and suggesting that there are limitations to this power. The text has not concluded at the height of colonialism: the letter accompanying the manuscript is its coda. What More has gained—wealth, power, authority—has a dark underside. The letter suggests that More's final conception of power contains within it the micro-organisms of its corruption and decline, the very fall of Empire.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

When I arrived in Canada Richard Cavell urged me to read *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*. For that, and our discussions on De Mille, I'm extremely grateful.

NOTES

- 1 M. G. Parks, "Strange to Strangers Only," *Canadian Literature* 70 (1976): 61. The 1969 New Canadian Library edition provided the impetus for a brief but much needed flurry of scholarly activity devoted to the novel. See Crawford Kilian, "The Cheerful Inferno of

James De Mille," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 1:3 (1972): 61-67; George Woodcock, "De Mille and the Utopian Vision," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 2:2 (1973): 174-79; and Wayne R. Kime, "The American Antecedents of James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*," *Dalhousie Review* 55 (1975): 280-306.

Since the mid-1970s, however, academic interest in the novel has been sporadic. Notwithstanding the publication of the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts (CEEET) critical edition of the novel in 1986 and Patricia Monk's full length study of De Mille in 1991, the novel continues to receive meagre notice. Richard Cavell is alone in ranking De Mille "as one of our most important novelists on the basis of *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*," see "Bakhtin Reads De Mille: Canadian Literature, Postmodernism, and the Theory of Dialogism," in *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian literature*, ed. John Moss (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1986) 206.

- 2 Patricia Monk, *The Gilded Beaver: An Introduction to the Life and Work of James De Mille* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991) 239.
- 3 Quoted in Monk, 238.
- 4 An early exception to this complaint is Archibald MacMechan, who considered *A Strange Manuscript* to be his "most careful novel." See "De Mille, the Man and the Writer," *Canadian Magazine* 27 (1906): 415.
- 5 Woodcock, 174.
- 6 Monk, 239. Readers longing to examine examples of "thin ice" criticism should read Kenneth J. Hughes, "A Strange Manuscript: Sources, Satire, a Positive Utopia," *The Canadian Novel: Beginnings: A Critical Anthology*, ed. John Moss (Toronto: New Canadian, 1980): 111-125, and Camille R. La Bossiere, "The Mysterious End of James De Mille's Unfinished *Strange Manuscript*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 7 (Winter 1983-84): 41-54. For Monk's discussion of these articles see *The Gilded Beaver*, 238-39.
- 7 Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979) 174.
- 8 Kilian, 65.
- 9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; Ringwood: Penguin, 1991) 21.
- 10 Said, 237.
- 11 That the ending could have a political function is something not considered by Monk. For an example of criticism that does consider the political dimensions of the novel, see Janice Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987): 130-37.
- 12 James De Mille, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969) 19. All references are to this edition.
- 13 Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984) 17.
- 14 Eagleton, 15.
- 15 Homi Bhabha, "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism," *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton: Harvester, 1984): 98-99.

- 16 Bhabha, 99.
- 17 Bhabha, 100.
- 18 Bhabha, 100.
- 19 Interestingly, *A Strange Manuscript*, said to have been written in the mid to late 1860s, is tantalisingly bracketed by Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* (1865) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Melick's literary values predate the essay that would go on to influence and, some would argue, shape English and North American literary taste and values, *The Study of Poetry* (1880).
- 20 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 388.
- 21 Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1985): 63, 61.
- 22 JanMohamed, 62.
- 23 JanMohamed, 63.
- 24 "In a perverse way," writes Kulyk Keefer, "*Strange Manuscript* reads like an anticipatory parody of *Heart of Darkness*" (131).

