

Rescued by Postmodernism

The Escalating Value of James De Mille's 'A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder'

Is James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* a serious novel of ideas in the utopian tradition, or is it simply another of the many "potboilers" produced by this prolific writer of popular fiction? Opinions as to the genre of this text and its aesthetic and intellectual value have changed markedly since the book was first published in 1888. An examination of the challenges the text presents to its would-be interpreters and of the critical strategies that have been deployed in efforts to make sense of it reveals less about the "meaning" of the text itself than about the transformations that have occurred within the field of Canadian literary studies in this century. Tracing the history of *Strange Manuscript's* critical reception demonstrates several distinct shifts in the criteria of literary value that have shaped critical judgment at various points in the development of the canon of Canadian fiction and its criticism.

James De Mille (1833-1880) had two distinct and very different professional careers. One was as an academic; he taught classics at Acadia University from 1860 to 1865, and history, rhetoric and literature at Dalhousie College from 1865 until his early death. Simultaneously, in order to cope with serious financial burdens, he pursued another career as a successful and very productive popular novelist. The dual nature of his working life immediately opens the possibility, even the probability, that his fictional works will ironically exploit the gap between their intellectual author and the popular audience he is addressing. The disparity between De Mille's status as a member of the cultural elite and his role as producer of popular literature has affected critical evaluations of his writing in different ways at different times.

At first glance, *Strange Manuscript* appears to be simply a popular novel of the adventure-in-an-exotic locale variety, which deploys various conventions of popular fiction. It contains a conventional love story, which includes a comically inverted love triangle and is finally brought to a happy conclusion. The story abounds with action, and suspense is maintained by cliff-hanger chapter endings. The text is, however, considerably more complex than this description would suggest. *Strange Manuscript* is riddled with ironies which render it thoroughly ambiguous and raise a number of questions regarding its genre and its thematic content.

Perhaps the most obviously problematic aspect of *Strange Manuscript* is that it is—apparently—unfinished. *Strange Manuscript* was found among De Mille's papers after his death and was first published anonymously eight years later. There is evidence to suggest that he wrote it as early as the late 1860s, and that he may have continued revising it—in particular, searching for a satisfactory ending—until shortly before the end of his life. Debate over the problem of *Strange Manuscript's* abrupt ending has been a constant factor in the critical literature.

The narrative structure of *Strange Manuscript* is that of a story within a story. The frame story has four characters. Lord Featherstone, a British aristocrat, has fled the boredom of society to cruise the south seas in his yacht. He is accompanied by Dr. Congreve, a medical doctor who is knowledgeable in such fields as geography, botany, and paleontology; by Noel Oxenden, a Cambridge scholar who is an expert on philology; and by Otto Melick, “a *littérateur* from London” (60). The four are becalmed in mid-Atlantic when they discover a copper cylinder containing a letter and a manuscript written on an unusual material which the doctor later identifies as papyrus. To while away the time, they take turns reading the manuscript aloud, pausing between turns to discuss its contents and debate its authenticity.

The letter accompanying the manuscript is signed by one Adam More, who identifies himself as an Englishman who has “been carried by a series of incredible events to a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave” (8). The manuscript tells the story of More's separation from his ship with a companion, their discovery of a strange race of human creatures who murder his friend, his being carried by an irresistible current through a subterranean channel and emerging into a continent at the south pole which is inhabited by flora and fauna which have survived from prehistoric times and a strange race of people who call themselves Kosekin, or “people of dark-

ness.” It is a topsy-turvey world: the Kosekin abhor light and life and worship darkness and death. Their values seem at first glance a direct inversion of those of nineteenth-century western society. More describes meeting and falling in love with the beautiful Almah, who has also come to the land of the Kosekin from elsewhere, and recounts their adventures and misadventures, from which they emerge, it seems, triumphantly. But the reading of the manuscript is abruptly cut off by Lord Featherstone: That’s enough for today,” said he; “I’m tired, and can’t read any more. It’s time for supper”(269).

Strange Manuscript appears to be a work of popular fiction, but it is also a work which parodies and critiques its own conventions, particularly through the frame-story character Melick, the London *littérateur*, who is extremely sceptical of More’s manuscript’s authenticity, calling its writer a “gross plagiarist” (228). Melick is also very critical of More’s style, which “has the worst vices of the sensational school” (228). Melick’s negative critique may be a clever ploy by De Mille to anticipate and defuse criticism of his work, but this incorporation of critical commentary within the text also suggests an ironic awareness on the part of De Mille of superiority to the sensational genre in which he is working. Melick’s criticism, it should be noted, has some justification. More’s story is very repetitious, and at times becomes a quite ludicrous parody of the conventional adventure story.

Melick’s insistence that More’s manuscript is merely an inept fiction is countered by learned disquisitions by the doctor and the Cambridge don, who argue on the basis of scientific evidence for the manuscript’s authenticity. Dr. Congreve, for instance, provides extensive discussions of the flora and fauna described by More, identifying them as plants and animals known from fossil evidence. Noel Oxenden identifies the Kosekin language as a form of Hebrew as it might have developed in accordance with Grimm’s Law. The effect of this mass of erudition is to lend credibility to More’s manuscript. Yet we as readers know that Melick is right, that we are reading a work of fantasy. Thus generic instability is built into the structure of the narrative: are we to be persuaded by the learned apparatus into a suspension of disbelief, or to agree with Melick that More’s tale is a shoddy piece of hack writing?

A further level of generic instability is created by the satirical elements in the novel. Critics of *Strange Manuscript* generally agree that it is in some sense a satire. The problem lies in identifying its object.

Adam More, author of the strange manuscript, is an unreliable narrator, a

good-natured fellow who at times seems reasonably intelligent, and at other times appears almost deliberately stupid. He describes Kosekin society in profuse detail, but he is very slow in recognizing the significance of what he observes, and never seems to come to a real understanding of this strange people. Chapter 16 is devoted to More's description of Kosekin values and institutions. It begins,

These people call themselves the Kosekin. Their chief characteristic, or, at least, their most prominent one, is their love of darkness, which perhaps is due to their habit of dwelling in caves. Another feeling, equally strong and perhaps connected with this, is their love of death and dislike of life. This is visible in many ways, and affects all their character. It leads to a passionate self-denial, an incessant effort to benefit others at their own expense. Each one hates life and longs for death. He therefore hates riches, and all things that are associated with life.

He outlines a social structure which inverts the normal order of things, in which "the wealthy class forms the mass of the people, while the aristocratic few consist of paupers" who are "greatly envied by the others" (138). Life for the Kosekin is a constant struggle to divest themselves of wealth, and this struggle is reflected in their legal, political, and economic systems in comical ways. Workers, for instance, strike for longer hours and lower pay, to the frustration of capitalists who are thus forced to accept higher profits. Even at the end of his extended discussion of the Kosekin way of life, however, More seems as baffled as ever:

As to the religion of the Kosekin, I could make nothing of it. They believe that after death they go to what they call the world of darkness. The death that they long for leads to the darkness that they love; and the death and the darkness are eternal. Still, they persist in saying that the death and the darkness together form a state of bliss. They are eloquent about the happiness that awaits them there in the sunless land—the world of darkness; but, for my own part, it has always seemed to me a state of nothingness. (142)

Adam More is continually surprised and horrified at the actions and attitudes of the Kosekin, and utterly unable to comprehend them. The reader recognizes that his judgment is not reliable, but clues as to how the Kosekin world view is supposed to be interpreted are ambiguous.

The commentary provided in the frame story might be expected to shed some light on the meaning of Adam More's experiences, but ambiguities abound at this level too. The frame story is narrated in the third person, but most of it is dialogue, so we must judge the characters largely by their own words. Lord Featherstone appears to represent a decadent aristocracy—he

is self-indulgent, aimless, easily bored. Congreve and Oxenden can be seen as pompous long-winded pedants, although as noted previously their scholarship is sound. Melick's cynicism might be seen as satirizing critics, yet as remarked earlier, his literary judgment is quite acute. And, of course, the irresolvable debate between Congreve and Oxenden on the one hand and Melick on the other as to the authenticity of More's manuscript further complicates the question of its meaning.

It seems impossible to isolate a specific object of *Strange Manuscript's* satire. Melick offers the opinion that More's manuscript is a satire "on things in general":

The satire is directed against the restlessness of humanity; its impulses, feelings, hopes and fears—all that men do and feel and suffer. It mocks us by exhibiting a new race of men, animated by passions and impulses which are directly the opposite of ours, and yet no nearer happiness than we are. . . . [the writer's] general aim is to show that the mere search for happiness per se is a vulgar thing, and must always result in utter nothingness. (226-27)

This view, however, seems too simplistic. Noel Oxenden takes up the religious implications of the Kosekin belief system:

... I sometimes think that the Kosekin may be nearer to the truth than we are. We have by nature a strong love of life—it is our dominant feeling—but yet there is in the minds of all men a deep underlying conviction of the vanity of life, and the worthlessness.... All philosophy and all religions teach us this one solemn truth, that in this life the evil surpasses the good. (236)

One could, of course, interpret the Kosekin contempt for the things of this world as an ironic comment on the materialism of the society of Adam More and the yachtsmen who find his manuscript. The text offers support for such a reading. More encounters an official called the Kohen Gadol who advocates "selfishness as the true law of life, without which no state can prosper" and who is secretly plotting revolution, planning to institute a regime based on the following oddly assorted doctrines:

1. A man should not love others better than himself.
2. Life is not an evil to be got rid of.
3. Other things are to be preferred to death.
4. Poverty is not the best state for man.
5. Unrequited love is not the greatest happiness.
6. Lovers may sometimes marry.
7. To serve is not more honorable than to command.
8. Defeat is not more glorious than victory.
9. To save a life should not be regarded as a criminal offence.

10. The paupers should be forced to take a certain amount of wealth, to relieve the necessities of the rich.

While some of these ideas seem eminently sensible, others are morally suspect and directly contravene Christian teaching, and the final one seems to contradict the Kohen Gadol's own commitment to selfishness. Adam More's description of his own society's values lends further support to the idea that the Kosekin religion is offered as a corrective to unrestrained materialism:

I told him that in my country self was the chief consideration, self-preservation the first law of nature; death the King of Terrors; wealth the object of universal search, poverty the worst of evils; unrequited love nothing less than anguish and despair; to command others the highest glory; victory, honor; defeat, intolerable shame; and other things of the same sort ... (170)

But if the Kosekin contempt for material prosperity compares favourably with the values Adam More attributes to his society, it leads not to spiritual enlightenment but to spiritual death. The Kosekin philosophy could be read as a critique of Christianity. It takes specific Christian values—selflessness, generosity, humility—to their logical extreme. But the Kosekin contempt for the life of this world leads to the worship of poverty, darkness and death, a worship enacted in horrific rituals of human sacrifice (considered a great honour by the victims) and cannibalism (the greatest honour is to be consumed after ritual slaughter—a grotesque perversion of the Christian eucharist). Furthermore, in their pursuit of poverty and privation, the Kosekin exhibit all the vices of the materialistic society which seems to be the opposite of their own, displaying greed, envy, and treachery in their competition to be the poorest and therefore the most honoured members of their death-worshipping society. Adam More, whose name in the Kosekin language is “Atam-or,” which means “man of light,” in the end becomes dictator over the Kosekin with the aid of his beloved consort Almah. He, who throughout his story has repeatedly expressed the most extreme horror at Kosekin customs, is finally content to rule over this perverse people. As a satire on Christian values, the narrative ironically undermines itself, turning into a critique of unChristian values.

S*trange Manuscript*, then, displays characteristic features of popular romance, but it also parodies the conventions of its genre, fails to satisfy the expectations of closure its form arouses, and resists

attempts to grasp its meaning. Nevertheless, it enjoyed considerable popular success from its serialized appearance in American, British and Australian periodicals in 1888 through several editions and reprints by American, British and Canadian presses between 1888 and 1910 (see Parks Intro 305-17). According to Patricia Monk, “The reviews that greeted the novel on its publication are mixed, but on the whole approving” (232), and she cites several positive assessments of the book by Canadian critics writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Popular success is of course no guarantee of critical approval; it is more likely to inspire critical contempt. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates in *The Field of Cultural Production*, the economy of the cultural field inverts the values which structure other fields such as business and politics, in which popularity sells products and wins elections. In the field of cultural production, interests are masked by the appearance of disinterestedness; the true literary artist is motivated not by crass materialism, but by dedication to his vocation. He produces his work not for the vulgar mass audience but for a small elite readership of other artists, academic critics, and others who possess what Bourdieu calls the “cultural capital” (education, social status, cultivated taste, etc.) which enables appreciation of works of high culture. The field of cultural production is “autonomous” in that it appears to be independent of economic and political determinants:

... the specificity of the literary and artistic field is defined by the fact that the more autonomous it is, ... the more it tends to suspend or reverse the dominant principle of hierarchization; but also ... whatever its degree of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit. The more autonomous the field becomes, the more favourable the symbolic power balance is to the most autonomous producers and the more clear-cut is the division between the field of restricted production ... and the field of large-scale production ... which is *symbolically* excluded and discredited (this symbolically dominant definition is the one that the historians of art and literature *unconsciously* adopt when they exclude from their object of study writers and artists who produced for the market and have often fallen into oblivion). (38-39).

The fiction of James De Mille, which comprises boys’ adventure stories, historical romances, and sensational novels, books clearly written in order to earn money, would appear to have little value within the economy of the field of Canadian literary production, and indeed, until the republication of *Strange Manuscript* in McClelland and Stewart’s New Canadian Library series in 1969, his work received little critical attention and less critical approval.

The first concerted efforts to define a canon of Canadian literature and to establish Canadian writing as a legitimate academic field were undertaken during the 1920s. From 1920 to 1930 a number of histories and handbooks of Canadian literature were published. Those that mention De Mille's work accord it little value, no doubt because the model of fictional excellence of the day was the nineteenth-century English realistic novel. To critics who sought serious representations of Canadian life, De Mille's sensational and humorous romances could only appear trivial and of little or no value in the construction of a national literature. J. D. Logan, in *Highways of Canadian Literature*, expresses very moderate approval: "De Mille was a prolific writer of mysterious, extravagant, and sentimental fiction . . . [He] certainly possessed a creative imagination . . . and had a distinct sense of dramatic values, which saves such an extravagant tale of adventure as his *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* from developing into the merely grotesque and sensational" (95). Archibald MacMechan, in *The Headwaters of Canadian Literature*, describes De Mille's novels as "facile imitations of the prevailing literary fashions," but defends him against excessively harsh criticism: "Only a gentleman and a scholar possessing something like genius could have written these light, amusing novels" (48). In *An Outline of Canadian Literature*, Lorne Pierce sees little of value in De Mille's fiction, finding fault with his style, his tendency to melodrama and his weak characterization: "None of his novels have a Canadian setting, nor any national point of view, and add nothing to the development of the novel in general or to the Canadian novel in particular" (165). V. B. Rhodenizer, in *A Handbook of Canadian Literature*, is particularly harsh in his assessment of De Mille's work: "In all of his fiction he stresses action and situation. Consequently there is much of caricature, farce, and melodrama, and at best only mild plausibility. He wrote to please not his artistic sense but public taste, and so fell short of greatness but attained wide popularity" (139). Rhodenizer's comment makes particularly clear the degree to which popularity devalues cultural products.

The dismissive attitude demonstrated by the critics of the 1920s persisted until the modern republication of *Strange Manuscript*. Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* ignores De Mille entirely. In his chapter on "Literary Activity in the Maritime Provinces, 1815-1880" in the *Literary History of Canada* Fred Cogswell notes "a waste of a very real talent in the work of James De Mille" (125). He complains of various weaknesses in

Strange Manuscript, but asserts that, “Despite these flaws, *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* is De Mille’s most original and powerful work and is by far the most interesting novel to be written in the Maritimes before 1880.” Cogswell suggests that the premise of *Strange Manuscript* has potential that is not realized: “His ingenious reversal of the values of contemporary Western life enables him to show human nature as a constant, independent of ideology, and he exploits with telling irony man’s tendency to reject the absolute in favour of conformity. Nevertheless, he sacrifices an idea that might have produced another *Gulliver’s Travels* for the sake of an adventure story” (127). Once again, De Mille’s concessions to popular taste render his work unacceptable.

Cogswell’s remarks do, however, point towards the next phase of De Mille criticism. One way of rehabilitating De Mille was to redefine his work, finding serious themes in novels previously dismissed as mere popular fiction. De Mille was, after all, an academic; his popular fictions might well conceal serious themes. Efforts to rescue De Mille’s work from the devalued status to which earlier criticism had consigned it began with R. E. Watters’s Introduction to the 1969 NCL edition of *Strange Manuscript*, the only one of De Mille’s books in which at least some critics seemed to perceive at least potential aesthetic and intellectual value. Watters’s effort to insert *Strange Manuscript* into the canon of Canadian fiction appears to have succeeded; his edition initiated a new phase of critical discussion of the text. The novel’s canonical status was reinforced by the publication in 1986 by Carleton University’s Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts of the more authoritative edition, with full scholarly apparatus, edited by Malcolm Parks, and articles on De Mille continue to appear in Canadian academic journals.

In his Introduction to *Strange Manuscript*, Watters argues that the novel is fundamentally an anti-utopian satire exposing the inconsistency between social institutions and the value systems that they are supposed to represent and enforce. In the early to mid-seventies a number of essays appeared in which various critics attempted to construct coherent readings of De Mille’s text, and in particular to identify the specific object of its satire. What is most striking when one surveys these essays is the degree to which they contradict one another. George Woodcock, in “De Mille and the Utopian Vision,” disagrees with Watters’s classification of *Strange Manuscript* as an

anti-utopia, complaining that the novel fits no specific generic category, being neither a true utopia nor a true anti-utopia, but merely a satire of the “anti-vitalist” attitudes of Victorian society. In “The Cheerful Inferno of James De Mille,” Crawford Kilian takes a far more charitable view of the text. He analyses it as an example of what Northrop Frye calls “Menippean satire” or “anatomy,” and sees the target of the satire as “irreligion.” Kilian proclaims *Strange Manuscript* “the most unjustly neglected novel in Canadian fiction” (61), and makes quite extravagant claims for its aesthetic and intellectual value, speculating that Canada may have lost a potentially great novelist to the degrading demands of the popular market:

If De Mille was simply an industrious hack with the luck and wit to write one good novel toward the end of his career, well and good; it is still the best novel written in nineteenth-century Canada, and one of the best in all Canadian fiction. But if it was in fact written by a young novelist who was then compelled by financial need to waste his talent on potboilers, it could be said that the potential for a serious ironic tradition existed in Canadian literature over a century ago. (67)

Kenneth J. Hughes, in “A *Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*: Sources, Satire, A Positive Utopia,” is even more extravagant than Kilian. He argues that *Strange Manuscript* is a “positive Utopia” in which Adam More, whose narrative unreliability Hughes ignores, is a Promethean hero who brings renaissance enlightenment to the benighted Kosekin.

All of these critical essays seek to arrive at a single, authoritative reading of the text that unifies its disparate elements and identifies in it a central thematic statement. *Strange Manuscript*, however, resists such totalizing critiques. All of these readings distort the text to some extent by repressing some of its features and privileging others; Hughes in particular takes excessive liberties. The frustrations *Strange Manuscript* presents to the critic bent on achieving a comprehensive analysis is expressed forcefully by M. G. Parks, who, in “Strange to Strangers Only,” resorts to a biographical approach, citing evidence of De Mille’s religious beliefs to support a reading of the novel as a satire on religious extremism:

... De Mille has kept his own point of view so completely behind the scenes that he runs the risk of mystifying the reader or leading the critic into irresponsible interpretation. In both cases an appeal outside the literary work to the nature of the creator is the likeliest means of keeping one’s feet in the slippery mazes of ironies and counter-ironies. (76)

The culmination of efforts to rehabilitate De Mille's work in general, and *Strange Manuscript* in particular, would appear to be Patricia Monk's critical biography, *The Gilded Beaver: An Introduction to the Life and Work of James De Mille*. Throughout her discussion of De Mille's life she emphasizes his literary vocation, reversing the prevailing assumption that De Mille's primary career was as a professor, his writings merely a secondary, money-generating activity. Monk defends De Mille against accusations that he pandered to popular taste by pointing out that he "lived without a serious market for his work in his own country, and was, therefore, forced to conform to the standards and tastes of the United States," and that furthermore his full-time academic work absorbed time and energy that might otherwise have been devoted to writing: "His perseverance in continuing to write in these circumstances deserves applause, not the charge of being a hack who wrote only for mercenary reasons" (252). That an academic critic is prepared to de-emphasize De Mille's role in her own profession in order to enhance the value of his literary productions illustrates clearly the operation of the cultural economy as analysed by Bourdieu. In order to be acceptable as a legitimate subject of academic analysis, De Mille must be shown to be a victim rather than an exploiter of the market-place.

In her chapter on *Strange Manuscript*, basing her analysis on evidence of the text's being unfinished, Monk argues that the novel's satire does have a specific object, the narration developing "towards an assertion that it does not matter what the value set is, the moral code will be inadequate to uphold it" (244). This assertion, says Monk, is never made explicitly, because De Mille never succeeded in finding a satisfactory resolution to the problems his story develops:

Having set up a satirical demonstration of the inadequacy of moral codes, he is without a mechanism to argue for the correction of human folly—at least, human folly defined (in the usual sense of the term) as a failure to adhere to a moral code. Given this technical dilemma and the spiritual bleakness of the notion that all moral codes are inadequate, the abrupt ending of both parts of the double narrative cannot possibly be considered as any form of closure, and the thematic pattern is as unfinished as the patterns of structure, action, symbol and characterization. (245)

Monk's argument for the incompleteness of De Mille's text is persuasive; however, her argument that the text is working towards a specific thematic assertion is less so, resting as it does upon a distinction between "values"

and “moral codes” which is not clearly articulated. Her thesis depends on a single inconsistency in the text’s apparent inversion of western values, but the coincidence that both western and Kosekin society forbid bigamy seems a rather frail thread on which to hang an argument for a coherent thematic statement in a text so full of contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities, especially when the thematic assertion inferred from this problematic text is, as Monk concedes, nowhere made explicit.

It would appear that the critical project of reconstructing De Mille as a fundamentally serious writer forced to demean his gifts by conforming to popular taste (and American popular taste, at that) could go little further, although Bruce F. MacDonald, in “*Helena’s Household: James De Mille’s Heretical Text*,” argues for a reading of De Mille’s romance of life among early Roman Christians as a subversion of the orthodox Christianity to which De Mille is generally presumed to have adhered. MacDonald, like M. G. Parks grappling with the ironies of *Strange Manuscript*, has to appeal to biographical information and speculation to support his interpretation.

One way to keep one’s feet in the slippery mazes of ironies and counter-ironies *Strange Manuscript* presents is simply to accept them as textual givens, setting aside the question of whether or not the text is complete and abandoning speculation about authorial intentions. One of the earliest critics to move in this direction was Wayne R. Kime, in “The American Antecedents of James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*. Although he does seem somewhat preoccupied with a desire to infer the author’s intentions, he focusses on De Mille’s appropriations and parodies of earlier works, commenting approvingly on De Mille’s “resourcefulness as an adapter of used literary material” and on the “pastiche” quality of his text.

Camille R. La Bossière, in “The Mysterious End of James De Mille’s Unfinished *Strange Manuscript*,” rehearses the problems presented by *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* in terms of genre, intertextuality and authorial intention, but focusses on De Mille’s use of repetition as a comic device: La Bossière suggests that de Mille has created a literary joke which places his narrator in a situation in which he is trapped between two extremes with no middle ground to stand on, and that the text’s abrupt ending reflects De Mille’s decision to quit while he was ahead, before the repetition became boring.

Kime’s focus on the parodic nature of *Strange Manuscript* and La

Bossière's treatment of it as a literary joke point in the direction of a post-structuralist reading of the text. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon distinguishes between "a *modernist* search for order in the face of moral and social chaos" and "a *postmodern* urge to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination" (2). Hutcheon is, of course, referring to fiction rather than to critical writing, but a similar distinction can be drawn between the aims of the formalist criticism that predominated in English Departments throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s and the poststructuralist criticism that has since challenged traditional critical assumptions. The criticism of *Strange Manuscript* cited above takes an essentially modernist approach, seeking to arrive at a single, authoritative reading that unifies the text's disparate elements. More recent readings of the text have tended to treat it as if it were a postmodernist fiction.

In his article on De Mille in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, George L. Parker notes that De Mille referred to his novels as "potboilers," and remarks that the books "were often parodies of the fictional conventions of his day." In her remarks on De Mille in both "Three Writers of Victorian Canada" and *A Purer Taste*, Carole Gerson points to the self-reflexive strategies his work deploys. Commenting on *Strange Manuscript* she says, "this book contains ironic commentary on both the kind of sensational adventure fiction that De Mille himself wrote and the pretentious literary critics who belittled it, thereby allowing the author the delicious experience of having his cake and eating it too" (*Taste* 55). In *A History of Canadian Literature*, William New describes *Strange Manuscript* as an "anti-Utopian novel [which] combines an attack on an unadulterated view of progress with a satiric send-up of academic discussion," but he also points out the text's self-reflexivity, noting that "the author's focus shifts from the narrative itself to the processes of constructing narrative, and the equally problematic processes of interpretation" (104).

The impact of the burgeoning of critical theory becomes increasingly evident in De Mille criticism. Richard Cavell presents a theory-based reading of De Mille's comic travel narrative *The Dodge Club* in "Bakhtin Reads De Mille: Canadian Literature, Postmodernism, and the Theory of Dialogism." An explicitly poststructuralist reading of *Strange Manuscript* is offered by Janice Kulyk Keefer in *Under Eastern Eyes*. Keefer describes the novel as "strange indeed: a reactionary but radical Victorian text which is bizarrely

post-modernist in technique and conception” (130). She suggests that *Strange Manuscript* might best be described as an “untopia,” and concludes that “What De Mille indisputably achieves in his strange fiction is a demolition of our generic and aesthetic expectations, and a deconstruction of those possibilities for imagining radical or alternative mindsets and models which the narrative first seems to create” (137). My working paper, out of which the present essay developed, was motivated by fascination with the “bizarrely post-modernist” qualities of De Mille’s Victorian novel, and attempts not to construct a coherent reading but simply to trace the play of irony throughout various levels of the text. Julie Beddoes offers a different kind of poststructuralist analysis in

“Inside Out: Finding the Author in James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*.” Beddoes focusses on how Malcolm Parks’s CEECT edition of *Strange Manuscript* repeats both “the book’s own problematization of chronology” and “a discussion that takes place in the book as to the source and authorship of the strange manuscript” (1), demonstrating that the context of reading determines the construction of the author figure and critical assumptions about authorial intention. Most recently, Kenneth C. Wilson has argued, in “The Nutty Professor: Or, James De Mille in the Fun House,” for a rereading of De Mille’s fiction in terms of postmodernism: he suggests “that the dominant academic taste culture has to be modified somewhat—perhaps by a cultural-materialist attention [to] the importance of popular writing, or by a postmodern emphasis upon self-reflexivity, parody, and play—before De Mille’s work can be fully appreciated” (129-30). Wilson points to the disparity between De Mille’s high-culture status and the taste culture of his popular audience as the source of the postmodern-like qualities of his writing and suggests that the affinities of his work to postmodernist style could be “suggestive of the ways in which De Mille’s fiction might have subverted the dominant literary taste culture in Canada during the nineteenth century” (146).

I would suggest that the modification of the dominant academic taste culture Wilson advocates has already occurred. The various postmodernist/poststructuralist readings of De Mille cited above indicate that the modernist quest for a coherent reading of De Mille’s fiction has been overtaken by a postmodernist impulse to celebrate the self-reflexive, parodic, elusively ironic qualities of his work. The question posed at the outset of this essay has become, if not irrelevant, displaced. To the critics of the 1920s

who were seeking to establish a canon of serious Canadian fiction, De Mille's work was popular and therefore without value in the field of Canadian literary production. To those of the 1960s-70s, who sought to expand the quite recently established national canon and to discover in it "classic" works which could be demonstrated to have value within the context of a modernist aesthetic, it was imperative to treat De Mille's work as serious. *Strange Manuscript*, with its utopian/dystopian elements and apparent satirical intent, is the most amenable of De Mille's fictions to analysis as a novel of ideas. With the advent of a postmodernist aesthetic and a host of new theoretical tools for the analysis of literary texts, *Strange Manuscript* in particular, and De Mille's work more generally, acquires greater cultural and academic value, offering an expanded body of material upon which criticism can work. The problem of whether *Strange Manuscript* is a serious novel of ideas by a nineteenth-century Canadian intellectual or a hack work of vulgar popular fiction produced for strictly mercenary reasons ceases to be a problem. The gap between author and audience becomes an invitation to investigate questions of cultural production, and the text's troublesome generic instability becomes, ironically, the primary source of its aesthetic and intellectual value.

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