

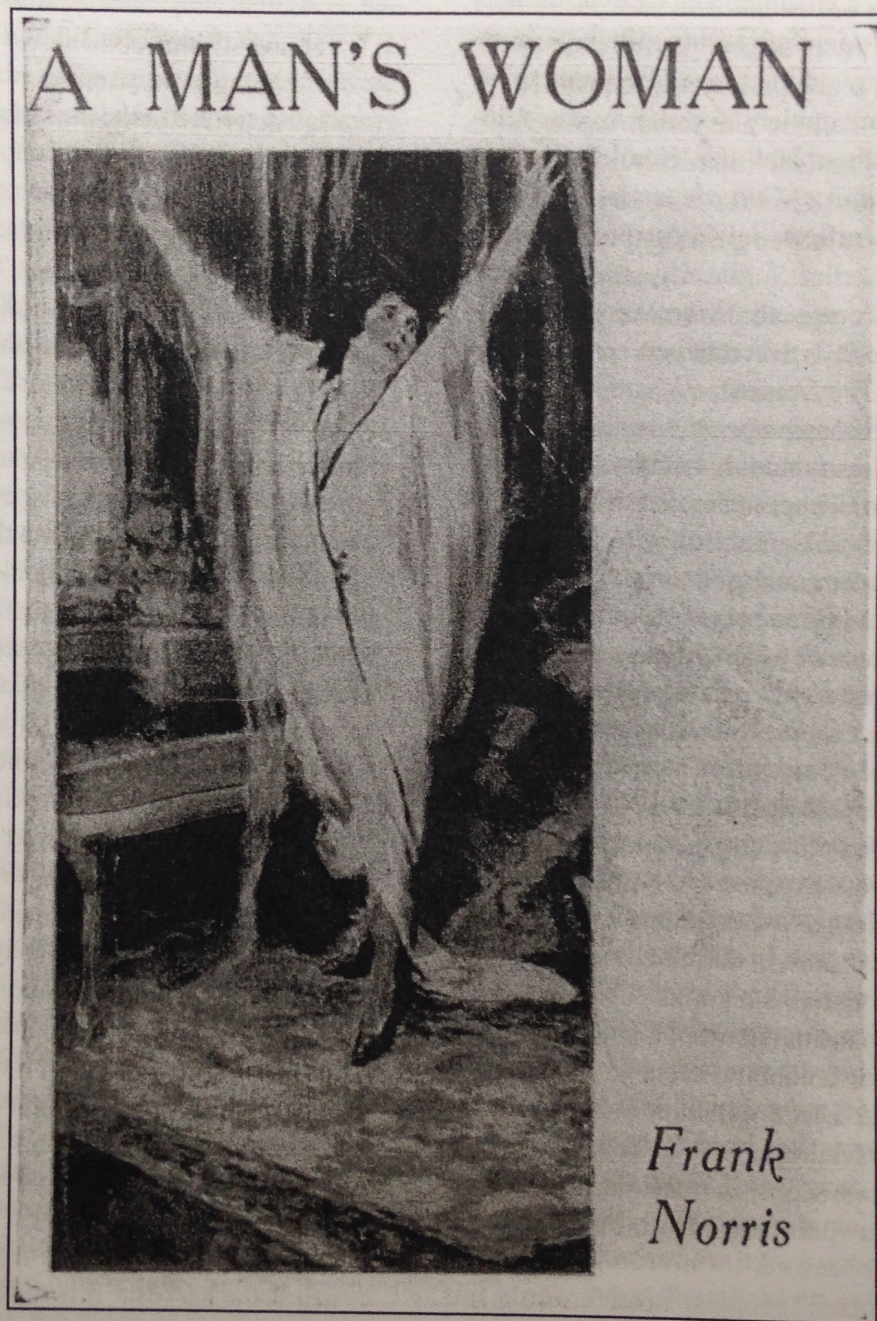
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## The Corrosive Glance from Above Social Darwinism, Racial Hierarchy, and the Portuguese in *The Octopus*

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Of all of Frank Norris's writings, *The Octopus* (1901) is perhaps where Norris comes closest to utilizing a post-colonial rhetorical framework that several contemporary scholars have noticed and applied to earlier works of literature. In this sense, the model that Homi K. Bhabha postulates in *The Location of Culture* can be applied to Norris's novel since it reflects how a dominant, mainstream culture has looked at a minority culture, more specifically that of the Portuguese. Moreover, a brief discussion of Bhabha's model will certainly reveal how easily it can be applied to *The Octopus*.

In his examination of contemporary Anglo-American nationalism, Bhabha argues that it is a form of political, economical, and cultural imperialism on the world and that stereotyping is the tool often utilized to keep the "colonized" peoples under constant control.<sup>1</sup> Although presumably referring to India and other countries formerly under British rule, much of what Bhabha argues about this matter can be applied to Norris's representations of the Portuguese in *The Octopus*. Bhabha's discourse on the "colonizer" and the "colonized" is, in fact, generalizable outside the colonial situation. It is a particular version of how a dominant culture has looked at its margins. In this novel, we are exposed to a particular angle of vision, one that belongs to the dominant, mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture and how it scrutinizes a group of Portuguese farmers living on its margins. Clearly, what can be grasped in this narrative is what Bhabha has defined as the objective of colonial discourse, namely to construe "the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction."<sup>2</sup> Such a viewpoint is evidently the mechanism which the "colonizer" resorts to in order to assert his power over the "colonized" peoples. In other words, this is the dialectics of a dominant culture when interacting with those whom it perceives as inferior and minor. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argues that this is a matter of literary representation, noting that

We have become very aware in recent years of the constraints upon the cultural representation of women, and the pressures that go into the created representations of inferior classes and races. In all these areas—gender, class and race—criticism has correctly focused upon the institutional forces in modern Western societies that shape and set limits on the representation of what are considered essentially subordinate beings; thus representation itself has been characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior.<sup>3</sup>

*The Octopus*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would certainly argue, is a fine example of "literary representation(s) of the dominant."<sup>4</sup> Without a doubt, economically and racially, Frank Norris was a privileged middle-class man of Anglo-Saxon stock.

*The Octopus* may have also been Norris's way of expressing his belief in Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. Such a rhetoric, however, should be seen in the context of the *fin de siècle* belief in social Darwinism, a doctrine which made its way well into the twentieth century. That this novel reflects the current ideological framework harbored in American minds is simply a given: while the Anglo-Saxon characters are seen occupying the top of the racial pyramid, the Portuguese are located at its very bottom. As we shall see, this is exactly how the Portuguese fictional characters who populate the San Joaquin Valley are portrayed in Norris's novel.

Perhaps the American mind of the *fin de siècle* is not so vividly exposed in any other work of fiction as in *The Octopus*. To read it is the equivalent of plunging into the dark side of the American psyche and, in particular, that of its author. Readers cannot help but ask why Norris had deliberately woven into the very texture of his narrative an undercurrent of racism and bigotry. None of the few ethnic groups clustered in the San Joaquin Valley is exempt from scrutiny by an omnipresent Anglo-Saxon eye. The plain truth, however, is that this racist eye is the most critical if not caustic when directed towards the Portuguese farmhands. In other words, the Portuguese are struck the hardest. It is difficult to ascertain the motive for such an attitude. Is Norris doing it for mere personal reasons? Are we now to dismiss him simply as the embodiment of nineteenth-century racism? Or is he using

his narrative as a vehicle to express the current Darwinian evolutionary ideology and the belief in the manifest destiny of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority? Most likely all. The emphasis ahead will first be put on the forces that shaped Norris and his contemporaries, namely the current evolutionary ideology, and his immediate embrace of such trends. We will then see *The Octopus* as a literary vehicle through which Norris unleashes his own racist beliefs deliberately aimed at the Portuguese.

Norris's wholehearted belief in imperialism and racism seems to be the main personal trait that his biographer singled out. This emotional eruption, however, came to the surface precisely at the outbreak of the Spanish-American war in 1898. It was at this time that he could finally test the current if not his own belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon stock. When a Spanish fleet was destroyed in Manila bay, Norris is reported to have become "a cog in the machine, welcoming the advance of the skirmish line across the Pacific 'still pushing the frontier before it,' confident that the Anglo-Saxon was now 'to fulfil his destiny and complete the cycle of the world.'"<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the declaration of war, Norris signed up for a position as war correspondent in Cuba to write for *McClure's Magazine*. The urge to pack and head towards Cuba is proof enough that this war meant much to Norris. Support for this idea is the very fact that he totally abandoned his literary commitments. The heart of the matter is that *Moran* was then close to being published, *McTeague* was waiting for a publisher, and *Vandover* was practically outlined. He also had plans for a collection of short stories. His embrace of the Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest along with the belief in the manifest destiny of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority found its justification when the Spanish soldiers began to surrender. At the time, Norris is reported to have argued that

The war was not a "crusade," we were not fighting for Cubans, it was not for disinterested motives that we were there, sabred and revolvered and carbined. Santiago was ours—was ours, ours, by the sword we had acquired, we, Americans, with no one to help—and the Anglo-Saxon blood of us, the blood of the race that has fought its way out of a swamp in Friesland, conquering and conquering and conquering, on to

the westward, the race whose blood instinct is the acquiring of land, went galloping through our veins to the beat of our horses' hoofs. . . . We rode on there at a gallop through the crowded streets of the fallen city . . . triumphant, arrogant, conquerors.<sup>6</sup>

To Norris and his contemporaries, this episode meant that America was heading in the right direction—a new and vigorous country whose manifest destiny was to become a world power and its people heroic supermen. To the American mind, this conflict opened a new chapter in Western civilization. It simply meant that the "weaker" and older empires such as Spain (and by extension, Portugal<sup>7</sup>) were beginning to lose ground or were on the brink of total eclipse.<sup>8</sup>

Among other evolutionary ideas of the turn of the century, there was also the widespread belief that certain human beings would inevitably regress to a fundamental brutal nature. Life was then seen as an arena of struggle and survival and man a mere brutish and uncivilized being. This is precisely the snapshot we get in such works as Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, Norris's *McTeague* and, to a lesser degree, *The Octopus*. The farmhands working in the Quien Sabe ranch, nonetheless, are not immune to such a view. This is clearly illustrated by way of comparing their repulsive and beastly eating habits to those of wild animals. Although Norris simply refers to them as workers, one ought to bear in mind that the sting is deliberately directed towards the Portuguese, who outnumber every other ethnic group at both the Quien Sabe and Los Muertos ranches:

It was between six and seven o'clock. The half-hundred men of the gang *threw themselves* upon the supper the Chinese cooks had set out in the shed of the eating house. . . .

The table was taken as if *by assault*; the clatter of iron knives upon the tin plates was as the reverberation of hail upon a metal roof. The plowmen rinsed their throats with great drafts of wine and, their elbows wide, their foreheads flushed, resumed *the attack* upon the beef and bread, eating as though they would never have enough . . . one heard the incessant sounds of mastication and saw the uninterrupted movement of *great jaws*. At every moment one or another of the

men demanded a fresh portion of beef, another pint of wine, another half loaf of bread. For upwards of an hour the gang ate. It was no longer a supper. It was a veritable barbecue, *a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, Homeric.*

But in all this scene Vanamee saw nothing repulsive. *Presley would have abhorred it—this feeding of the people, this gorging of the human animal, eager for its meat.* Vanamee, simple, uncomplicated, living so close to nature and the rudimentary life, understood its significance. He knew well that within a short half-hour after this meal the men would throw themselves down in their bunks to sleep without moving, inert and stupefied with fatigue, till the morning. Work, food, and sleep, all life reduced to its bare essentials, uncomplex, honest, healthy. They were strong, these men, with the strength of the soil they worked, in touch with the essential things, back again to the starting point of civilization, coarse, vital, real, and sane [italics added].<sup>9</sup>

The point here is that we are in the presence of two conflicting approaches to this “primitive” banquet. The tension is highlighted by way of contrasting the Anglo-Saxon observer or commentator (Presley) with the non-Anglo-Saxon one (Vanamee).

It is clear from the excerpted passage that Presley—whom, as Franklin Walker observed, “many have considered to be a portrait of Norris himself, [and who] emerged almost entirely as a literary device without marked personality, an organism upon which to register impressions”<sup>10</sup>—is the voice through which Norris unleashed his own feelings on matters of race. On this issue, Lawrence E. Hussman notes in *Harbingers of a Century: The Novels of Frank Norris* that “Presley owes his makeup in part to traits in his creator. More than in any of his other fictions, Norris was able in *The Octopus* to mold separate sides of himself into subtle and complicated characters whose interactions deepen the work’s primary significance. This does not mean that the reader should, as critics have sometimes done, see Presley, or any other particular character in *The Octopus*, as a consistent representation of the author.”<sup>11</sup> Contempt is what Presley has to offer simply because, to his mind, these “uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers,

grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words. Never could he feel in sympathy with them, nor with their lives, their ways, their marriages, deaths, bickerings, and all the monotonous round of their sordid existence” (10-11). Annixter, too, gives vent to his own racist beliefs, although less explicitly when compared to Presley. He is reported to have once referred to Magnus Derrick’s cook as a “Chink” (90), but this evidently before espousing Hilma Tree. She somehow manages to purge his earlier belief in racism and misogyny, for all these personal traits vanish right after the wedding ceremony. In addition to the Chinese cook, there are references to Mexican and Spanish farmhands and to a certain “Swede” (98) working for Annixter. These men, however, are mere blotches in the entire narrative. In this novel, Norris seems to have deliberately cast the spotlight on the Portuguese. Although none of them—other than Montalegre (a foreman working for Annixter)—is ever given a Christian name, they are foregrounded in the novel. It is obvious that racism is directed towards practically all ethnic groups, but the weight in the scale falls heavily on the Portuguese. The aim here is to show this race in the very process of decline if not on the brink of degeneration.

It should be mentioned, by the way, that Norris never bothers to specify the regional origins of these Portuguese farmhands. His reference to them may lead us to believe that they came from the Portuguese mainland. This may have been the case with just a handful of people, but the demographic fact is that “most of the Portuguese immigrants to California, like those who settled in New England, came from the Azores; these, up to about 1900, were almost exclusively from the western islands of Pico, Fayal, São Jorge, and thereafter also from Terceira. They were augmented by small numbers of Madeirans and by groups of Capeverdeans as well.”<sup>12</sup> There is internal evidence in the novel of the presence of Madeirans in California, especially in the northern section of the Valley of the San Joaquin. When returning from their honeymoon, we are told that “Annixter, checking off the stations, noted their passage of Modesto, Merced, and *Madeira*” (291; italics added). As to the totality of the Portuguese from the various regions in Portugal then residing in California, Leo Pap observes,

In 1870 . . . California held 27.3 percent of the

total Portuguese immigrant population in the United States, and New England about 70 percent. In 1880, California's share had risen to 51 percent because during the 1870s some 80 percent of all new Portuguese immigrants to the United States settled on the West Coast. Thereafter, California's comparative position waned again; by 1920 it was down to 30 percent of the United States total of Portuguese-born residents.<sup>13</sup>

Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers also point out that from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards,

Fewer than 100,000 Portuguese, 98 percent of whom were Roman Catholic, came to the United States, but those who did gravitated mainly to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where the whaling fleets are docked, and to Rhode Island and California. In fact, about one third actually settled in the Golden State. Their focal point originally was the San Francisco Bay area but they spread out from there to the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys, and a number planted roots in Oakland. Many of those who were not seafarers became successful farmers. By 1950 most of those of Portuguese stock were in the rural areas of the state, and in southern California they ranked second only to the Dutch in the dairy industry. One Portuguese immigrant, J.B. Avida [*sic*; Ávila?], a native of the Azores, arrived in the United States sorely missing one of his favorite vegetables. In 1888 he bought acreage near Merced, California, and started cultivating it. His crop grew well and he sold it to restaurants wherever he could. The San Francisco restaurants served it first but then it made an impact throughout America. Soon Avida [*sic*] was known as the "Father of the Sweet Potato Industry."<sup>14</sup>

While a handful of Portuguese people residing in California were employed in the fisheries, the vast majority worked on the farms and in the dairy industry. Pap points out that some of the farmers who moved into the San Joaquin Valley during the 1880s "took up relatively large leaseholds of from 120 to 600 acres to grow field, feed, and grain crops; these were operating in companies of six to fifteen men, usually unmarried."<sup>15</sup>

In *The Octopus*, the snapshot of the Portuguese is simply far from being a favorable one. They are nowhere depicted as such honest, hardworking people. In this novel, there is no American dream for them. As a matter of fact, the entire texture of the narrative is pervaded with racial stereotyping. When alluding to certain hybrid Portuguese, Norris seems to argue that the original stock is somehow losing its genuineness or is on the verge of racial decline. This viewpoint comes across when we are told that "the priest [Father Sarria] had covered nearly fifteen miles on foot, in order to administer Extreme Unction to a moribund *good-for-nothing, a greaser, half Indian, half Portuguese*, who lived in a remote corner of Osterman's stock range, at the head of a canyon there" (145; italics added). To call him a "greaser" is the equivalent of saying that he can be easily taken for a native of Latin America, namely of Mexico. Norris's argument here is that the Portuguese, Mexicans, and Indians are alike in the sense that they are inferior when compared to the Anglo-Saxon stock. To the unmarried Annixter, this man is simply a lazy, violent thief: "A lazy, cattle-stealing, knife-in-his-boot Dago" (146). As if the reader may have missed the point, the narrator immediately insists that "This particular greaser was the laziest, the dirtiest, the most worthless of the lot" (146). When Annixter calls this particular "greaser" a "knife-in-his-boot Dago," he is voicing the American collective mind and its attitude towards Southern Europeans. In this particular instance, the word "Dago" refers to Italians or people with a Latin heritage. Not only the half-Portuguese but also the Portuguese themselves are essentially a bunch of violent criminals. After the barn shooting episode between Annixter and Delaney, the narrator immediately reminds us that "Father Sarria had more than once administered the sacraments to Portuguese desperadoes dying of gunshot wounds" (188).

In a letter addressed to Magnus Derrick, Gethings of the San Pablo ranch points out that "we number in our ranks many small farmers, ignorant Portuguese and foreigners" (323). To the Anglo-Saxon mind, the Portuguese are mere cretins. Another image meant to remain in the reader's mind is the reference to a group of Portuguese men who are simply incorrigible drunkards. The narrator tells us right before the rabbit slaughter scene begins, "Three of Broderson's Portuguese tenants and a couple of

workmen from the railroad shops in Bonneville were on the porch, already very drunk" (346).

When "a group of Osterman's tenants, Portuguese, swarthy, with plastered hair and curled moustaches, redolent of cheap perfumes" (170), arrive at Annixter's barn dance, the image is intended to provoke a certain feeling of disgust. In addition, the reference to "swarthy" may be seen as another punning. The point is that the Anglo-Saxon mind immediately associates these dark-skinned Portuguese with creoles or even blacks.<sup>16</sup> The image of the "Portuguese in brand-new overalls, smoking long thin cigars" (346) offers a clear-cut contrast with that of nineteenth-century tycoons smoking thick and expensive cigars. The perfumes and cigars may show some amount of pretentiousness, but the point is that this attitude also has a contrary effect: it clearly exposes their cheapness and vulgarity, especially to the Anglo-Saxon eye.

When Presley worries over Minna Hooven's loose behavior, somewhere in between the lines he seems to have struck on one of the Portuguese psychological traits. The point here seems to be that some of them tend to take advantage of what we now call "easy sex." In his mind's eye, Minna lowers her self-esteem when she deliberately "hangs out" with those whom he perceives as totally inferior beings. There is, nonetheless, a touch of jealousy in Presley's account for he cannot resist

wondering vaguely what would become of such a pretty girl as Minna, and if in the end she would marry the Portuguese foreman in charge of the ditching gang. He told himself that he hoped she would, and that speedily. There was no lack of comment as to Minna Hooven about the ranches. Certainly she was a good girl, but she was seen at all hours here and there about Bonneville and Guadalajara, skylarking with the Portuguese farmhands of Quien Sabe and Los Muertos. She was very pretty; the men made fools of themselves over her. Presley hoped they would not end by making a fool of her. (263)

This passage also suggests that marriage to a Portuguese man is a positive thing compared to her sexual licentiousness that will, we know, end in prostitution. In this sense, the Portuguese man can be seen as a potential savior of Minna. As to the type of work the Portuguese

farmhands are engaged in, it should be mentioned that it is simply dehumanizing. When Dyke is seen "Crossing the irrigating ditch further on," we are told that he "met a gang of Portuguese, with picks and shovels over their shoulders, just going to work" (240). This image clearly depicts them as typical mindless bodies. The rabbit hunt is meant to compare the Portuguese farmhands to wild animals, eager to jump on their prey. The point, however, is that the Portuguese rank the lowest when compared to the very dogs initially intended to slaughter the rabbits. Right after the rabbits are driven into a corral, the narrator tells us, "On signal, the killing began. Dogs that had been brought there for that purpose when let into the corral refused, as had been half expected, to do the work. They snuffed curiously at the pile, then backed off, disturbed, perplexed. But the men and boys—Portuguese for the most part—were more eager" (353). When the reader is told that the "Anglo-Saxon spectators round about drew back in disgust, but the hot, degenerated blood of Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniard boiled up in excitement at this wholesale slaughter" (354), this reference, once again, places the Anglo-Saxon stock at the very top of the racial pyramid and the Portuguese, Mexicans, and mixed Spaniard at the very lowest level. When writing about this episode, Hussman notes that

the young boys from the ranches club the thousands of corralled rabbits to a fleshy froth. Presley presumably shrinks in "disgust" from this slaughter, along with the other "Anglo-Saxon spectators," while the "hot, degenerated blood of Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniard boil[s] up in excitement" . . . . (This kind of regrettable stereotyping sprang from Norris's conviction that Latins were undisciplined, anticivilization, and lazy, all vices that contrasted with the devotion to the world's work that he had valorized as the greatest virtue in *A Man's Woman*.)<sup>17</sup>

The allusion to the "degenerated blood" further attests to the idea of moral and biological decline. Presley's heart is most certainly closer to the Anglo-Saxon stock, for his typical attitude is to put them on a pedestal. He does, nevertheless, acknowledge a certain frugality, industriousness, and beauty in most of these immigrants, but his

argument is that they cannot be left unchecked. Their fate, Presley argues, is to remain under the firm control of the Anglo-Saxons he extols:

Presley was delighted with it all. It was Homeric, this feasting, this vast consuming of meat and bread and wine, followed now by games of strength. An epic simplicity and directness, an honest Anglo-Saxon mirth and innocence, commended it. Crude it was; coarse it was; but no taint of viciousness was here. These people were good people, kindly, benignant even, always readier to give than to receive, always more willing to help than to be helped. They were good stock. Of such was the backbone of the nation—sturdy Americans every one of them. Where else in the world round were such strong, honest men, such strong, beautiful women? (355)

This passage also hints at the dangers Norris saw in Gilded Age civilization—that it might render men effete, weak, and worthless. These workers of his own racial background embody a primitive strength Frank Norris found admirable.

It should be mentioned finally that perhaps the fiercest irony in Norris's life is that Ernest Peixotto was possibly of Portuguese ancestry. Their friendship began in their art student days at San Francisco's School of Design and was to last until the very end of Norris's life. Peixotto was not only one of Norris's correspondents, but someone in whom he confided. It is now difficult to ascertain Peixotto's heritage, but the point is that the name (now spelled, Peixoto<sup>18</sup>) is a very common and typical one in Portugal.

That Norris had little or no esteem for the Portuguese is simply a given. What is not is what, exactly, in his experience triggered his disdain; nowhere in the novel is there an underlying clue or justification for overt racism of such intensity. What is most challenging when reading *The Octopus*, one may argue, is finding such a hint somewhere in between the lines. Is it possible that *The Octopus* is meant to be a response to a nineteenth-century scandal involving any particular Portuguese community in the United States? Is Norris here reacting to an episode along the lines of the New Bedford Big Dan gang rape of the early 1980s, which literally shocked mainstream America? Or is it that in this novel he is a mere

mouthpiece for Social Darwinist discourse?

At a time in which Social Darwinism was sweeping through America and Anglo-Saxon writers were in control of the narrative, one cannot imagine Norris remaining indifferent to these realities. Back then, themes of the kind were also, so to speak, a sort of bread-and-butter affair, and in this sense writers catered to what really turned-on their audiences. But over a century has elapsed since the publication of *The Octopus* and, fortunately, writers have made enormous strides in terms of how they look at those minorities still living on the fringes of the American mainstream. A century later, those ethnic minorities Norris looked down upon are shaping American culture in ways that were unthought of back then. In the particular case of the silent Portuguese of a century ago, one needs only to look into the writings of Thomas Braga, Frank Gaspar, and Katherine Vaz for a portrayal of Portuguese-American life from those whose ancestors were located at the very bottom of the racial pyramid about which Norris so vividly—yet so corrosively—wrote.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 20.

<sup>2</sup>Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Location*, 70.

<sup>3</sup>Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 95.

<sup>4</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), xi.

<sup>5</sup>Franklin Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), 174.

<sup>6</sup>Walker, 199.

<sup>7</sup>The irony, however, is that in the case of Portugal, the independence of its overseas colonies occurred only after 1974 with the democratic revolution. It was on December 20, 1999, that the last remnant of the Portuguese empire, the territory of Macau, was finally given back to China.

<sup>8</sup>For more background on this discussion see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), especially chapter 9.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 97-98. Subsequent page references to this photo-offset reprinting of the first American edition (1901) appear in parentheses.

<sup>10</sup>Walker, 261.

<sup>11</sup>Lawrence E. Hussman, *Harbingers of a Century: The Novels of Frank Norris* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 128.

<sup>12</sup>Leo Pap, *The Portuguese-Americans* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 68. See also Manoel da Silveira Cardozo, *The Portuguese in America, 590 B.C.—1974: A Chronology and Fact Book* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana, 1976).

<sup>13</sup>Pap, 70.

<sup>14</sup>Leonard Dinnerstein, Roger L. Nichols, and David Reimers, *Natives and Strangers: Ethnic Groups and the Building of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 137.

<sup>15</sup>Pap, 142.

<sup>16</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Reinaldo Francisco Silva, *Representations of the Portuguese in American Literature*, Diss. New York University, 1998, especially chapter two, "Scientific Racism and the Origins of Anti-Portuguese Stereotypes."

<sup>17</sup>Hussman, 132.

<sup>18</sup>The root of the name is *peixe*, meaning *fish* in English.

## Victorian Contexts for Frank Norris's *Yvernelle*

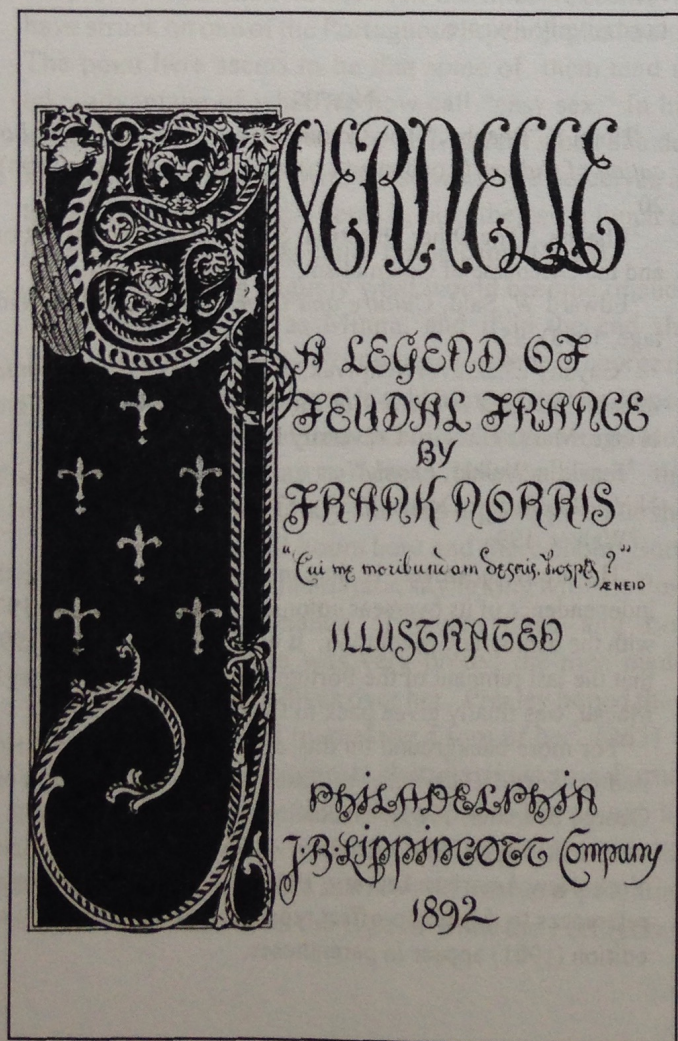
Benjamin F. Fisher

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Introducing the Penguin edition of *McTeague*, Kevin Starr observes that Norris's experiments in medievalism are not without point in his overall career, even though *Yvernelle* "obviously does not stand in any direct literary line to *McTeague*." Not surprisingly, he places Norris with other Americans of his era—architect H.H. Richardson, painter John La Farge, and historian Henry Adams—who were "discovering the power and directness of medieval art."<sup>1</sup> Froissart and Old French writers are the Europeans cited by Starr and others as giving impetus to young Norris, author of the lavishly formatted Christmas book brought out in late 1891 as *Yvernelle*. Although the poem has not captivated most readers, Norris's inspirations from and affinities with the British Victorians may constitute additional contexts for *Yvernelle*, and thence to his more emphatically designated "Naturalistic" writings. For such contexts I have previously argued in print, and below I turn to several more that seem to me too important to overlook.<sup>2</sup>

### I

Long ago, that formidable Americanist, Clarence Gohdes, remarked that the shadow of Poe seemed to hover over all later nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers of the macabre. I think that the shadow of literary medievalism, if not so melancholy as the shadow that many have seen descending from Poe, likewise had enormous outreach, especially throughout the 1890s, and, in the case in question, that Norris may have derived much from literary sources nearer home, so to speak, than we have previously realized.<sup>3</sup> The dedication of *The Pit* to his brother Charles, for example, alludes to their childhood creations of "Round (Dining-Room) Table Heroes." What more natural, we may ask, than that the budding writer Frank Norris was when he went to work on *Yvernelle* should aspire to produce what had won favorable responses from late Victorian readers? The "heroes" Norris mentions might well point to those in Tennyson's then vastly popular and admired *Idylls of the King*, which Norris knew because of his mother's readings from the





great Victorians to her children, and which resurfaces in *The Pit*—along with allusions to works by Robert Browning, George Meredith, and D.G. Rossetti—notably in the triangular love situation involving the Jadwins and Corthell. Another commonality with Tennyson's *Idylls* may be detectable in stanza 5 of the "Introduction" to *Yvernelle*, in which the knights' "wander[ing] wide" while in search of the Holy Grail (6:251) echoes Tennyson's version of the aborted quests for the majority of King Arthur's knights, who at first set forth zealously from Camelot.

Moreover, the publication of *Yvernelle* as a Christmas book bonds it with Tennyson's own early venture into Victorian medievalism and Arthurian legendry, "Morte d'Arthur," published first in 1842, later to be reworked and situated within *Idylls of the King*. That 1842 poem opens with the framing setting—"At Francis Allen's on Christmas Eve"—and swiftly moves into planes of the marvelous and supernatural, well-nigh melodramatic circumstances surrounding the legendary King Arthur, that hero customarily called to mind when romance of medieval or "medieval" types is the topic. The Christmas story, as it came to be envisioned during the later nineteenth century, was expected to incorporate supernaturalism, violence, and brutality. After all, Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), his last, uncompleted novel, was his final experiment with the type he had helped to initiate and develop years before, and it highlighted sadistic sexual fantasies, jealousies, violence and murder; or, at least, murderous impulses coursed not far beneath veneers of Victorian respectability, unemotionalism, and apparently satisfactory love relationships in that book. Many more later nineteenth-century writers took a leaf from Dickens, and writers such as Wilkie Collins, Amelia B. Edwards, Mrs. J.H. Riddell, as well as Frank Norris, to name a few, turned out some excellent tales for the holiday season, whether supernatural or not.

*Yvernelle* also pays respects to the interconnectedness of such unpleasant manifestations of emotions. Norris's knight-protagonist, Sir Caverlaye of Voysvenel, is initially no paragon of virtue, as is made all too clear in the presentation of his desertion of Yvernelle to enjoy an affair with Lady Guhaldrada, whose own urgent sexuality is likewise not minimized. Moreover, we might well recall, in this respect, another late Victorian quintes-

sential Christmas story, a drama of horrifying consequences of sexual repression and warped fantasies that culminate in tragedy, *The Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898.<sup>4</sup> I will return to this aspect of the contextualizing of *Yvernelle* after a survey of some other Victorian writers and their works, which offer relevancies to the overall topic.

Norris would not have had to move far from Tennyson's works to encounter other Victorianizings of medieval subject matter. He might have found inspiration for his poem, for example, in one of the Victorian best-selling *Ingoldsby Legends*, by Richard Harris Barham, "Patty Morgan the Milk Maid's Story," which carries comic allusions to Arthurian legends and persons.<sup>5</sup> These grotesque verse narratives, many of them concerned with "medieval" comings and goings, increased the cravings for wares from Barham's "Thomas Ingoldsby," whose popularity has continued from the 1830s into the twentieth-first century.

Additional Victorian contexts for *Yvernelle* are not hard to find. Norris's poem is in fact one of the many offspring of what has been called "Topsification," that is, the imitating of the verse of William Morris, nicknamed "Topsy," in choosing medieval subject matter for literary (chiefly poetic) treatment. The elements of viciousness, blatant sexuality and brutality in *Yvernelle* are reminiscent of those, say, in Morris's "The Haystack in the Floods," "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," or "Shameful Death." Morris's medieval verse devolves in its violence, cruelty and brutality in part from the poetry of Robert Browning, another favorite among the Norris household's readings during Frank's youth, and of Laura Jadwin in *The Pit*. The man who nicknamed William Morris "Topsy," D.G. Rossetti, is also remembered for his paintings and poems in the medieval vein, notably "The Blessed Damozel," "Sister Helen," "Rose Mary," "The King's Tragedy," "Stratton Water," and "The White Ship." These are all tales of blighted love or other varieties of tragedy, as, for the most part, is *Yvernelle*. An additional facet of Norris's poem, which he may have derived from medieval sources or from Morris's adaptations from medievalism in a work like "Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery," is the strong element of spirituality as a means of purification, both as it exists in *Yvernelle*'s own emotional composition and in Sir Caverlaye's eventual

turning from carnal Guhaldrada to the innocence and uplifting influence of Yvernelle.<sup>6</sup> The notion of marrying a good woman in order that she might guide him into realms more spiritual than those his bachelor life had offered, was, of course, a time-honored tradition cherished by many nineteenth-century males.

Another Victorian poet initially toyed with thoughts of Arthurian-medieval legendry for his contemplated epic—and then settled for contemporary domestic love as his epic theme in what became a best seller, *The Angel in the House*, which remained popular throughout and beyond the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> Although it is his best known work, *The Angel in the House* is not in the main representative of Coventry Patmore's interest in medieval subject matter; but several of his earlier poems bear earmarks of "Middle Ages" substance. Another associate of Rossetti and his circle, George Meredith, also experimented early on with medieval themes and forms in his verse. His fictional protagonists, too, were often portrayed as knights errant questing after spiritual fulfillment, though Richard Feverel, like Norris's Sir Caverlaye, temporarily indulged in a sexual dalliance along the way. Meredith's works also formed part of the readings conducted by Norris's mother for her family.

A great friend of Morris and Rossetti, A.C. Swinburne, also commenced his literary career by experimenting with medievalism, which he continued to employ, and his most substantial Arthurian poem in the 1890s, *The Tale of Balen* (1896), is another narrative of violence, heated emotions, and tragic death. One of Swinburne's greatest enthusiasms led to his planning a new version of the Tristram-Iseult legend, to counter what he considered deplorable handlings of that story by Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. Off and on from 1869 until a book-length poem was completed and published in 1882, Swinburne worked over his rendition of this great tale of tragic/disastrous love, which eventuated as *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

More than one passage in *Yvernelle* bears similarities to Swinburne's theme and to some of his technical achievements in his great poem.<sup>8</sup> The telling contrasts of the bright light illuminating Sir Caverlaye's countenance when he thinks of innocent, spotless Yvernelle, and Yvernelle's own aura of radiance deftly counterpointed by the dark hues that continually shadow tempestuously pas-

sioned, blatantly sexual Lady Guhaldrada as she becomes overwrought, remind one of Swinburne's or Tennyson's like alternations in imagery. Unlike Swinburne's, and others' treatments of legendary lovers, Norris's—doubtless in the spirit of romance that pervaded his literary productions, side by side with their less pleasant elements, in good *Jane Eyre* fashion—ultimately joins Sir Caverlaye and Yvernelle in what promises to be a long and happy marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Returning now to the manner of the illicit passion that enlivens the relationship of Sir Caverlaye and Guhaldrada, I cite repeated analogies between the fatal kiss that the spurned lady specifies as the means for wreaking her curse upon her quondam paramour, and much long-standing folklore concerning the perfidious kiss given Christ by Judas Iscariot. Legends that have grown up around the great betrayer magnify the sinister dimensions of that fatal kiss. In general, a love-hate attitude of Judas toward Christ emerges. The figure of Judas had a widespread interest for Victorian writers, ranging from several American mid-Victorians—William Gilmore Simms, who used the motif in his novel, *The Scout* (1841); Frederick William Thomas, in his novel, *Howard Pinkney* (1840), H. W. Longfellow, in his drama, *Christus, a Mystery* (1872)—through Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, more frequently in the verse of Robert Browning, on a few telling occasions by Swinburne, and even in "The Ballad of Judas Iscariot," by that finicking versifier, minor novelist and pretentious critic, Robert Buchanan, probably best remembered today for his pseudonymous maligning of Rossetti and Swinburne. During the 1890s the Judas figure sustained a popular, understandable literary resurgence, and fiction, poetry (notably Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and several of A.E. Housman's lyrics), and even a grotesque illustration by Aubrey Beardsley to accompany a frightening story of vampirism, "A Kiss of Judas," by one "X.L." (pseudonym for an American writer, Julian Osgood Field, whose fiction enjoyed a vogue during the 1890s), attest such resurgences. Marie Corelli's wildly melodramatic novels with Christian themes also reveal a predilection for Judas as a character. So Norris's Guhaldrada exemplifies a use of timely fare in the creation of his poem. The evil woman's curse stipulates, among the horrors to beset any lover other than herself for Sir Caverlaye, that that

hapless female would become "abhorred of her own mind, / Her name a byword to mankind; / And, like that born of Judas' breath, / Be it the herald of her death" (6: 255). These lines certainly suggest a dire ending for innocent Yvernelle, which, however, does not finally transpire. The kisses she and Sir Caverlaye enjoy are more nearly reminiscent of the spiritual, uplifting ones bestowed upon and given by Galahad in Morris's poem mentioned above.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Let us now look at the role of *Yvernelle* in the Norris canon itself. Like Tennyson's *Idylls*, as well as the Tristram story, or the vignette of the rejected aspirant for Honoria's hand in *The Angel in the House*, or the hapless Tannhauser in Swinburne's "Laus Veneris," *Yvernelle* unfolds Sir Caverlaye's wrestling with love and lust, with personal pleasure on one hand, duty and spirituality on the other. The knight's lust and passion for Guhadrada engender mutual woes, but his ultimately transform into joy when, his lust slaked, he forsakes all that (symbolically) dark Guhadrada represents and returns to (symbolically) fair-complexioned, innocent Yvernelle and her aura of light and purity. Guhadrada's disgrace, after the death of her brother, who died from wounds inflicted by Sir Caverlaye when the young brother attacked the knight on behalf of his sister, leads to her isolating herself from all humankind, finally to haunt her last home, which had previously been a holy hermit's cottage, causing people to avoid that locale. Here we may perceive another identification with Judas, who bought land that became known as the Field of Blood. In *Vandover and the Brute*, initially composed not long after *Yvernelle*, the naïve young Vandover seesaws between his love for Turner Ravis and the satisfaction of his lust with Flossie, the prostitute, just as he later struggles with waning artistic abilities consequent upon the inroads of syphilis, contracted during his assignations with Flossie. In like fashion, Tennyson's (and a host of antecedents') King Arthur and company disintegrated because the brute beast—i.e., selfish, fleshly gratification—eventually undid spiritual values in the kingdom. Spirituality and sexuality have a long history of combat in Victorian literature, and Norris's poem squares unerringly with that context.

In *Moran of the Lady Letty* we also witness a conflict

between the pseudo-refined world of San Francisco and that of the primitive natural being, as Ross Wilbur from the former discovers when he meets, then falls in love with and comes to be loved by the Scandinavian Moran, a woman of Amazonian proportions and outlook. Like Yvernelle, Moran is blonde, blue-eyed and wholly pure—although Moran's purity suggests to Wilbur that of "primeval glaciers" (3:261). Moran resembles those mythological females, Diana, Atalanta and others: all wonderful physical specimens, all compelling attractive, all inviolably chaste, and all trouble for any male who contemplated entering into a relationship with any one of them.

From Moran in Norris's first published novel we take no taxing steps to meet Blix, Hilma Tree, Lloyd Searight (although she's one of the red-haired derivatives of the Pre-Raphaelite woman), or, for that matter, Trina Sieppe (modeled upon the "other-side-of-the-coin" Pre-Raphaelite female, her head graced with amazing quantities of raven-hued hair, which is well nigh snake-like in its coiling abundance). All of these women are pure, pleasant (at least initially as regards Trina), and physically attractive. Each finds the experience of her first kiss from the man she eventually marries to be disquieting (to understate), and the men's responses mirror this discomfort. Annixter and McTeague, in particular, similar in kind to, if different in degree from, Sir Caverlaye, are tormented by conflicts between physical lust and idealistic love. Annixter's proposal that he and Hilma live together without benefit of marriage mightily affronts her. Like Vandover, McTeague is depicted in animal terms when he becomes sexually aroused. Marriage eventually softens Annixter; McTeague's negative primitive elements are brought to the fore by his ill-fated marriage; Ward Bennett remains essentially a loner, marriage to Lloyd notwithstanding, in keeping, perhaps, with his animal elements. Only Condry and Blix seem destined to enjoy a long, happy marriage—and thus Grant Richards's subtling the British edition of *Blix* a "Love Idyll" may not have been so off the mark as Norris himself thought.

Yvernelle heads the line of Norris's female characters who represent "a man's woman," completed by Lloyd, Blix and Hilma, with Moran, perhaps, standing slightly to one side of that line. They are true to their men, nurtur-

ing and admiring them. These women, however, excepting Trina for a time, do not turn slavish in their relationships with their men, nor do they grow annoyingly sentimental, as so many other heroines in nineteenth-century literature did. Granted, Yvernelle's being rescued from taking a nun's vows occurs just in the nick of time (suggestive of the conclusions in many old Gothic romances), but her hearing Sir Caverlaye's approach serves to reawaken her inner forces, which had never been wholly subsumed by the prospects of entering a convent to become a celibate bride of Christ. Trina at first seems to have a kindred positive relationship with her husband, but her greed soon leads to her downfall and deadens her sexual responses to McTeague. Like Yvernelle, too, Lloyd Searight finds Ward Bennett's mind and his sexuality appealing (6:148).

Embryonic though they may be, the psychological upheavals in *Yvernelle* anticipate what Norris handles with greater artistry in his novels. Sir Caverlaye's momentary impulse, upon his return to Yvernelle's home, to confess to her and her guardian, old Sir Ragueneil, the circumstances of his affair with Guhadrada and the nature of her curse upon any other woman who dared to love him, are reworked to advantage in chapter 7 of *A Man's Woman*, wherein Lloyd suffers guilt and remorse for deserting her patient, the dying Ferriss. Like Sir Caverlaye, Lloyd maintains silence in regard to a nefarious action, and so for a time her leaving her post is misinterpreted much in the manner that Henry Fleming's real acquiring of his "red badge of courage" is misunderstood by his comrades. Lloyd's subsequent relief, through a burst of tears, is another example of plausibility. Vandover's traumas also bear kinship to those endured by Sir Caverlaye and Guhadrada.

### III

To conclude. From the situations of turbulence in love relationships, of violence, brutality, and cruelty, balanced by sustaining, charitable endeavors, a reassertion of domesticity as virtuous, of the triumph of the pure fair woman over the dark, sensual, but destructive type—perhaps, too, in overarching good dramatics—*Yvernelle* leads the way to much that takes place in Norris's novels, those works that have traditionally attracted the lion's share of his critics' attention. In *Yvernelle*, as

several reviewers pointed out long ago, Norris deftly handled narrative. Subsequently, in his long fictions he correspondingly achieved poetic feats of no mean degree. Although he never returned to the writing of verse as a mainstay, and although, like Poe (who deprecated *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as a "silly book" several years after he published it), Norris minimized his accomplishments in *Yvernelle*, perhaps in response to his fraternity brothers' jibes, we can now take a clear, more dispassionate sighting on Norris's first book.<sup>11</sup> That he did not need to look so far back in time as either Sir Walter Scott or medieval French romances, when numerous Victorian inspirations were closer at hand as he came to the writing of *Yvernelle*, has been made apparent above, I trust. Whatever its weaknesses, this poem indeed repays scrutiny as offering greater significance, along the way to *McTeague*, and as regards its impact upon the Norris canon overall, than others have been wont to suggest.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kevin Starr, "Introduction," *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (New York: Penguin, 1982), xii. Norris's other texts are quoted from the *Complete Works of Frank Norris*, 10 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), with volume and page numbers appearing in parentheses. I thank Professor Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., for giving me a forum to present my ideas regarding *Yvernelle*, in a somewhat different form, during a session sponsored by the Frank Norris Society at the American Literature Association convention in 1998.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., offers the long-standing viewpoint that Norris's inspirations emanated from his reading of Froissart; see *Frank Norris Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 8. Jesse S. Crisler mentions Scott in *Frank Norris: Collected Letters* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1986), 24. S.N. Verma—in *Frank Norris: A Literary Legend* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986), 10-11—ranks *Yvernelle* as an "immature composition of the Middle Ages," adding, however, that the poem revealed Norris's ability for narration and talent for concrete description. See also my "The Pit as a Play," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 4 (Autumn 1987), 4-7, and "Frank Norris Parodies Anthony Hope," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 15 (Spring 1993), 17-20. For numerous references by Norris to Victorian writers—e.g., Dickens, Browning, Thackeray, Hardy, Meredith, George Eliot, Anthony Hope, Blackmore, Carlyle, "Oudia," Kipling and others—see *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954).

<sup>3</sup>Clarence Gohdes, "The Reputation of Some Nineteenth

Century American Authors in Europe," *The American Writer and the European Literary Tradition*, ed. Margaret Denny and William H. Gilman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950), 120. See also Debra N. Manicoff, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend through Victorian Eyes* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), and my "King Arthur Plays from the 1890s," *Victorian Poetry*, 28 (Autumn/Winter 1990), 153-76.

<sup>4</sup>Two notices, admittedly by admirers of Norris, nevertheless represent early positive comment about the blendings of medievalism and the holiday book element in *Yvernelle*. Thomas S. Molloy, "Delta Xi," *Phi Delta Gamma Quarterly*, 14 (January 1892), 58, tersely commending *Yvernelle*, also noted that Norris had published a "French legendary story" in the Christmas number of *The Wave* ("The Jongleur of Taillebois," 7 [19 December 1891], 6-9). Norris evidently knew well, even at this early stage of his career, the Christmas market for literary publications. A longer, unsigned notice was also complimentary, commenting that *Yvernelle* was a "holiday publication," noting particularly Norris's handling of emotion, and concluding: "Charming nature painting shows genius of a rare order, for which we can predict wide appreciation from the world and new laurels to Brother Norris" ("Phi Gamma Delta in Literature," *Phi Delta Gamma Quarterly*, 14 [April 1892], 116-17). The abilities singled out in this review are indicative of Norris's descent from Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, also word-painters, and his affinities with their heirs, such as Laurence Housman (see Pizer, 9, 20), as well as of what he would go on to produce in like vein in his future work. I am grateful for the kindness of Professor Jesse S. Crisler in passing these two notices on to me. For additional information on Christmas Story literature, see my *The Gothic's Gothic: Study Aids to the Tradition of the Tale of Terror* (New York and London: Garland, 1988), 198-211, 254ff., 274ff., 394-98, and 440.

<sup>5</sup>*The Ingoldsby Legends; or, Mirth & Marvels*, ed. D.C. Browning (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), 10.

<sup>6</sup>On Morris's nickname and "Topsification," see Rikky Rooksby, *A.C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), 53-54. Cecil Y. Lang, editor of an excellent anthology of Pre-Raphaelite materials, addresses the senses of medieval barbarism in his overview of *The Defense of Guinevere and other Poems* (1858), that "first (as well as the most) Pre-Raphaelite volume of poems published" (*The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975], 507-8). On Morris's affinities with and modifications of medieval substance, see Catherine Stevenson and Virginia Hale, "Medieval Drama and Courtly Romance in William Morris' 'Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 38 (Fall 2000), 383-91. Their analyses might well apply to technique and theme in *Yvernelle*.

<sup>7</sup>*Poems by Coventry Patmore* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), vol. 1, 2. See also John Maynard, "The Unknown Patmore" and my "The Supernatural in Patmore's Poetry," *Victorian Poetry*, 34 (Winter 1996), respectively 443-55 and 546.

<sup>8</sup>In "Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* in Process," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (Fall 1972), 508-28, I treat Swinburne's intricate imagination and technical accomplishments.

<sup>9</sup>For Norris's awareness of Charlotte and Emily Brontë's writings, see the two-volumes-in-one *Apprentice Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burgess (Philadelphia: The American Philological Society, 1996), vol. 1, 26; see also Pizer, 123.

<sup>10</sup>On the Wilde-Judas connection, see *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 756, where Wilde refers to Robert Ross's idea that Judas turned from Christ when John emerged as the Master's favorite; and 863, for Wilde's comment that Judas always writes a person's biography. See also Christopher Ricks, "A.E. Housman and 'the colour of his hair,'" *Essays in Criticism*, 47 (July 1997), 240-55, especially 250-54; and *The Poems of A.E. Housman*, ed. Archie Burnett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 476, n. 4. I am preparing a study of the Judas legend to continue the work of Paul F. Baum, early in the twentieth century, whose interest centered in older legendry. See "The Medieval Legend of Judas Iscariot," *PMLA*, 31 (September 1916), 481-632. See Stevenson-Hale, cited in n. 6 above, for information on kisses that spiritualized rather than destroyed.

<sup>11</sup>For Norris's own dismissal of *Yvernelle* as juvenilia, see *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*: 24-27. Norris's opinion was echoed by Franklin Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), 47ff., 51, 53, 67, 68 n. 70, 81, 287; Walker deplors the work as poetry but commends the plot construction. Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 97, remarks Norris's later desire to repudiate such "aesthetic flourishes" as this book represents. More recently, Barbara Hochman, in *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), 40, credits Norris with possessing a keen awareness of the power of words as early as the composition of *Yvernelle*, especially as words in their ambiguities can create destructive situations.



## Review

### *Neutral Ground: New Traditionalism and the American Romance Controversy*

by G. R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link

Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xvi + 267 pp.

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*Neutral Ground* readily evokes three expressions: *Norris*, *jeremiad*, and *Manichean*. As the centenary of Frank Norris's "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" is upon us, G.R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link draw on Norris to help answer their decidedly *fin-de-siècle* question: "why, in the closing years of the twentieth century, should teachers and scholars of American literature care about the novel/romance distinction *per se*?" (176). True, Hawthorne had used these two terms as if *his* contemporaries would readily recognize the difference, but have they not long since completely blurred together? Novelist Tom LeClair seems to think so, judging from this explanation in "As the *Pequod* Sailed," *Nation*, 269 (13 December 1999), 44: "As you can see from this partial outline of events, [Sena Jeter Naslund's] *Ahab's Wife* is what Nathaniel Hawthorne, who appears briefly in the novel, called a 'romance,' a narrative full of sometimes Gothic and somewhat improbable occurrences."

In "Coming to Terms," their final chapter, Thompson and Link raise the question that I quote above, and in their book's conclusion they furnish their most succinct answer. Because the traditional distinction between novel and romance is so fundamental, they insist, our caring about that distinction is a form of caring about tradition itself: "A major current in our cultural development, the romance tradition deserves continued inquiry . . ." (193). Their study of that "current" progresses chronologically, going back even before Sir Walter Scott to William Congreve, "A year before the Salem witch trials" (79), and building on Henry James's reference, in 1884 in "The Art of Fiction," to "the celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance" (qtd. 68). In their final chapter Thompson and Link quote from Norris's August 3, 1901, "Weekly Letter" in the *Chicago American*: "And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the

school of Naturalism . . . ?" (qtd. 139). By that point in their study, Thompson and Link have thoroughly historicized that tradition—and have positioned themselves unmistakably on one side of the phenomenon that their book's subtitle describes as "the American Romance *Controversy*." The emphasis in those italics is mine, reflecting the frequently distracting tendency of this book to add emphasis in much the same way that, a generation or so earlier, Richard Chase had done throughout his *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Indeed, much of *Neutral Ground* is a defense of the American Romance Thesis, which they accurately associate with Chase and with a number of his fellow New Critics, as in this warning about the New Americanist project we associate with Donald Pease *et al.*: "for Pease, apparently, *estrangement* equates merely with *escapism* and social *evasiveness*" (43). The controversy grows out of Pease's willingness to offer what Thompson and Link describe as "reductionist caricatures of Chase, romanticism and romance, formalism in general, and New Criticism in particular" (43). These crucial passages from *Neutral Ground*'s first chapter, "Twentieth-Century Bearings: Romance, Counter-Romance, and Anti-Romance," describe what Thompson and Link believe to be the New Americanists' false jeremiad. *Neutral Ground* is in turn, then, a *jeremiad on jeremiads*.

The author of *Waverley* is "the most obvious place to begin a history of discussions of the modern romance in English," according to Thompson and Link (73), who repeat the point in their Conclusion: "And while there is no single romance form, we have seen that one of the most pervasive ideas in the Anglo-American tradition was in fact the dialogically defined novel / romance distinction as acknowledged and described by Sir Walter Scott and other Anglo-American writers and critics. That basic distinction had existed for more than a century before Scott wrote about it; and it existed as a pervasive construct in America not only prior to and immediately after Scott but throughout the century, having been negotiated and renegotiated both prior to and long after the American Civil War" (192). The theoretically informed critics operating under the banner of the New Americanists have, according to Thompson and Link, "made statements on the inadequacy, irrelevance, or indeed malignancy of the

Romance Thesis [and] may be characterized as holding an *Anti-Romance* position (often also holding strong antiformalist attitudes, especially toward New Criticism). Others, whether evincing healthy skepticism or merely questioning the 'centrality' of romance, may be better described as taking a *Counter-Romance* position" (20). Pease, Walter Benn Michaels, Russell Reising, Philip Fisher, Jane Tompkins, and Gregory Jay, among others whom Thompson and Link accuse of being in the former group, are part of the revisionist movement that has characterized American Studies throughout the past decade and a half—a revisionist movement whose momentum shows no sign of diminishing despite the warning that *Neutral Ground* conveys. As Thompson and Link point out, Frederick Crews applied the expression "New Americanists" to Pease *et al.* in a 1988 review essay in the *New York Review of Books*, which Crews then converted into a portion of *The Critics Bear It Away*. Pease proceeded immediately to appropriate the label, and Duke University Press initiated its New Americanists Series by publishing, as monographs, the two special issues of the journal *boundary 2* that Pease assembled: *Revisionist Interventions into the American Canon* and *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, both 1994. While Thompson and Link do not zero in on Philip Fisher, he makes a point in the Introduction to his collection of essays from *Representations—The New American Studies* (1991)—that helps contextualize the revisionism that Thompson and Link find so unsatisfactory: "One way to characterize this new generation of American studies would be to say that interest has passed from myth to rhetoric" (vii). That generational metaphor figures in Crews' first discussion of these New Americanists; while Thompson and Link address the metaphor, they go to great pains to avoid the trap of simply siding with an older, presumably less hip if not downright fuddy-duddy perspective. They do, however, very clearly take sides—*against* Pease.

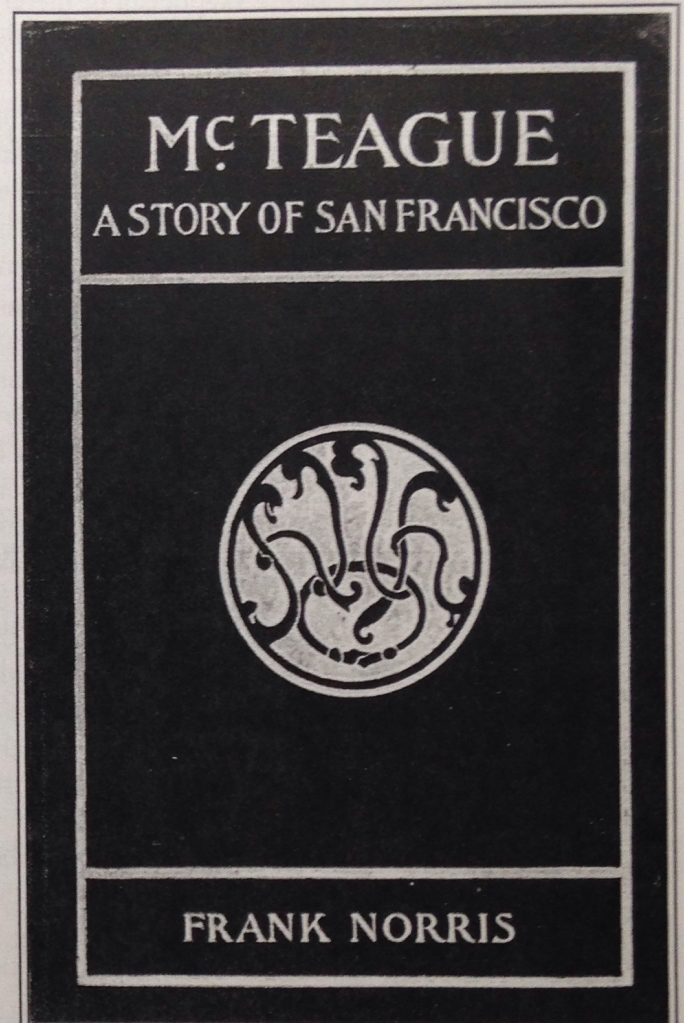
Their analysis rests, then, on a view that is at least as Manichean as anything Chase had found underlying the American novel (in their second chapter, "Modern Inventions and the Genealogy of Romance," Thompson and Link refer to Chase's having explained the American romance tradition in terms that included "the Manichean subtext of American Puritanism" [59]). In one of their

closest brushes with the *ad hominem* approach, they refer again to Puritanism, but this time as if it has become unsavory: "whereas Pease purports to be writing cultural analysis and history in the rhetoric of rational discourse, he is really continuing a romance tradition deriving from a transubstantiated Puritanism. His is a messianic rhetoric of moral assertion based on ideal vision and the obligation to 'witness'" (168). As the opening sentence of the book's Conclusion reveals ("In our critique of current presentist revisionism . . ."), a central part of the problem is what they see as Pease's ahistoricity: "When there is an abundance of what Hayden White calls the 'chronicle,' we should require ourselves to be educated by it. Literary scholars need to ransack the past for information (data) in the way that careful historians do. In that sense the question facing us is a matter not of absolute truth but of literacy" (188). For some readers that passage will sound almost elegiac in its patient willingness to point out the foibles of others; some readers will, however, most certainly recognize a thread that runs throughout *Neutral Ground*, namely an impulse toward pontification.

While some of their pronouncements are downright tantalizing—"Beloved is an African American version of the Great American Novel as the Great American Romance" (181)—many others have a cloyingly patronizing tone, as in "The better we understand the past, the better we can stake a claim for a better future. To be ahistorical is self-defeating" (162). While Thompson and Link occasionally insert passages that draw on postmodern literary theorists, they take pains to distance themselves not only from Pease but from *Theory* per se, as in this breathless passage at the heart of their "Coming to Terms" chapter, a passage that evokes Laurence Sterne's expression *hobby-horse* in the magnificent *Tristram Shandy*: "Theory would become, as it were, the new fiction, the new poetry. Would it be *more true, more real* than the old myths, allegories, and romances? Would cultural critique and theory become the Great American Novel? New Americanists appear to think so" (171). Half a dozen sentences later, Thompson and Link assert that "we find ourselves defenders of the historicity of the Romance Theory . . ." (171), and within a page they have descended into a defensive response to what they clearly consider rampant political correctness: "If one admires the artistry of Hawthorne and Melville, does that mean

that, because they are part of an established canon, one is ipso facto a political reactionary and male chauvinist?" (172). While they refer to "our debate with the New Americanists" (171) and their extensive Acknowledgments section begins with the sentence "This work is a controversial one" (xv), it hardly appears that Pease *et al.* are themselves cranking out pamphlets to defend their own position against these attacks.

In prescribing the necessary antidote—the "New Traditionalism" of their book's subtitle, "a treatment fashioned on the dialogical plane of an intellectual neutral ground of traditionalism *and* revisionism"—they distance themselves from "the faddishness of the various newisms" (173). This construction brings to mind the question that the founder of New Historicism poses and then answers in the Introduction to his 1990 collection of essays *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. Is *new historicism* "a completely empty term," asks Stephen Greenblatt, a term whose "relative success [is] due entirely to the felicitous conjunction of two marketable signs: 'new' and 'ism'?" I think not, though it will not do to exaggerate its coherence (nor am I overly sympathetic to calls for its systematization) . . ." (3). Systematizing is what Thompson and Link do want to achieve. They hope to construct this edifice New Traditionalism squarely on the terrain that they associate with the expression *neutral ground*. In historicizing that expression—showing that Hawthorne used it in "The Custom-House" in much the same way Sir Walter Scott and William Gilmore Simms, among many other Anglo-American writers, had long been using it—Thompson and Link are quite convincing. Their frequently strident tone makes their overall argument less convincing, however, at least for a reader who finds it finally impossible to focus on the historicizing they do, minus the polemic that appears to be at the heart of *Neutral Ground*.



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