

Frank Norris Studies

Edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

©1998, The Frank Norris Society

Frank Norris's "Dedication" in *The Pit*

Bruce Nicholson

University of California, Riverside

The ghost of Frank Norris has been unsettled for nearly a century. Not only did he—by modern medical standards—die unnecessarily; but, for almost one hundred years, publishers have been unwittingly transgressing his recorded intention as to how one important particular of his last-written novel was to appear in print. Since early 1903, when *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* first went on sale, the preliminary pages have included a dedication penned not by Frank Norris but by his not-so-talented and somewhat nefarious younger brother, Charles G. Norris.

While I was combing the Frank Norris Collection at The Bancroft Library with the hope of discovering traces of Norris's never-completed novel, *The Wolf*, I came across the mention of a set of handwritten notes concerning *The Trilogy of the Wheat*, described as inserted in a copy of *The Pit* that was in his own collection of books. I realized that these notes could not have been placed in the book by Norris himself because *The Pit* was available only in serial form at the time of his death on 25 October 1902. Indeed, the serialization had not yet run its full course. I was curious as to what these notes posthumously added to the volume could be and if they related to *The Wolf*; and so I requested that the book be brought down to Berkeley from the remote-storage facility at Richmond.

I was disappointed when it arrived. Between the pasted-down and free front endpapers were six leaves. On these pieces of editor Walter Hines Page's *The World's Work* stationery, Norris made it clear in his own hand how the preliminary pages were to be set in type and sequenced. The only mention of *The Wolf* was the already familiar one that appears on the page of *The Pit* describing Norris's plan for his trilogy, which had made its first appearance in *The Octopus*. Although they told me

nothing new, I requested photocopies of the manuscript pages, which I added to my ever-increasing pile of photocopies of Norris's letters, notes, and manuscripts.

It wasn't until I was much later flipping through the front of my 1903 edition of *The Pit* that I first registered the peculiarity of the first edition's dedication to Charles Gilman (rather than "Tilman") Norris. It reads:

DEDICATED TO MY BROTHER
CHARLES TILMAN NORRIS

IN MEMORY OF CERTAIN LAMENTABLE TALES OF THE ROUND (DINING-ROOM) TABLE HEROES, OF THE EPIC OF THE PEWTER PLATOONS, AND THE ROMANCE CYCLE OF "GASTON LE FOX," WHICH WE INVENTED, MAINTAINED, AND FOUND MARVELLOUS AT A TIME WHEN WE BOTH WERE BOYS.

What attracted my attention was its unusual length and detail. The dedications in his previous novels are considerably less prolix. They are, respectively, dedicated to:

CAPTAIN JOSEPH HODGSON
United States Life Saving Service

L.E. GATES
OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY

MY MOTHER

DR. ALBERT J. HOUSTON

MY WIFE

Moreover, one would think that Frank Norris had reason to offer more of a tribute to his mother than to his brother, and if not to his mother, then certainly to his beloved wife, Jeannette.

It was with this anomalous development in mind that I again looked at my photocopies of the holograph leaves in the Bancroft copy of *The Pit*. On page "V" I found something at least as dramatic as new information on *The Wolf*. Norris had not in fact dedicated his new novel to Charles but to his infant daughter, Jeannette Williamson Norris. Further, in keeping with the terse dedications of his previous novels, he had simply written:

Dedicated
to
My Daughter
Jeannette Williamson Norris.

When or how Charles intervened to replace the dedication with one to himself is a question now as unanswerable as that of what happened to Frank Norris's preliminary notes, outline, and sketches for *The Wolf*, which were reportedly found amongst his papers at the time of his death.

One might almost forgive Charles for exploiting the death of his brother on grounds of sibling envy, for Charles spent most of his adult life emulating his older brother, in a sick sort of shadow show in which he neither equalled Frank's achievement nor earned the respect Frank had commanded during his brief life. What is unforgivable, though, is Charles's corruption, the mean-spirited act of denying the daughter whom Frank adored the recognition he intended to give her and thus the identity in our cultural history that a dedication would have bestowed upon her.

One need not believe in the restlessness of unsatisfied souls to conclude that it is appropriate to pay respect to the spirit of Frank Norris, by restoring his intended dedication to his daughter in future printings and new editions of *The Pit*.

Houghton, Mifflin's Rejection of *Yvernelle*

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

Florida State University

That the manuscript of *Yvernelle* was evaluated and declined by Houghton, Mifflin & Co. in late 1890 or early

1891 was inferred in "Frank Norris as an Aspiring Writer," *FNS*, No. 23 (Spring 1997): 7-8. We need no longer surmise that such was the case, however. For two other communications from that firm, also in the collection of Houghton, Mifflin papers at Harvard University's Houghton Library, confirm what was suggested by the letter to Norris dated 15 November 1890. Norris did thereafter forward the manuscript for evaluation, together with one dollar in the event that return postage would be required. Before the end of the year he was informed that he would have to search elsewhere for a publisher.

30 Dec [1890]

B.F. Norris Esq.
1822 Sacramento St.
San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir:

We have carefully considered the MS. of "Yvernelle: A Legend of Feudal France," by Frank Norris, but regret that we do not find it expedient to make you any offer for its publication. We therefore return the MS. at once by registered mail to the above address and remain

Yours very truly
Houghton, Mifflin & Co.
HRG

31 Dec. [1890]

B.F. Norris Esq.
1822 Sacramento St.
San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir:

When we wrote you yesterday we had not learned from the express company the amount of their charges on the MS. we were returning. We now have the figures, and inclose herein twenty-eight cents in stamps, balance remaining from the dollar received from you.

Yours truly
Houghton, Mifflin & Co.
HRG

"One Note of Color": The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris

Donna Campbell

Gonzaga University

In "His Sister," an ironic parable of authorship that appeared in *The Wave* on 28 November 1896, aspiring writer Conrad Strelitz reluctantly scours the streets of New York for a story, seeing only "hackneyed over-worked types . . . the dude, the chippy, the bicycle girl" and others who fail to stir his exhausted imagination. Admonished by his mother to "Think how close one may come to an interesting story and never know it" and to "find . . . a local color that you can observe much better than you can imagine," Strelitz ignores the advice and ironically misses a great piece of human drama—a reunion with his lost and "fallen" sister.¹ Unlike his reluctant author-figure Strelitz, the Frank Norris revealed in *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris* is a young writer who refuses to abandon the observation of "local color" for the solipsistic delights of pure imagination. The *Wave* local color pieces of 1896-1898, which range from simple reporting to "impressions" to stories, show a progression in Norris's work from adherence to the "topoi of travel writing" that Richard Brodhead describes in *Cultures of Letters*² toward a transcendence of this genre. These pieces range in tone from celebratory to sinister as some among them suggest their true subject: their author's eagerness to move from "apprenticeship" to being one of the "arrived."

The celebratory sketches echo "An Opening for Novelists" in announcing San Francisco's uniqueness of place and people. San Francisco is, Norris insists, "not a city . . . [but] several cities," just as "we are peoples—agglomerate rather than conglomerate" (2:210). Accordingly, like other local colorists, Norris celebrates eccentric characters; as other local colorists described for their readers an unfamiliar rural past, Norris sets out to defamiliarize and interpret the urban present. In addition to descriptive travel sketches such as "Italy in California: The Vineyards of the Italian Swiss Colony at Asti," Norris experiments with a sociological approach in articles like "A Latin Quarter Christmas." He at first appears to follow a well-established formula in writing an ostensibly objective but somewhat condescending description of a "curious

custom." Instead, Norris pierces his readers' sense of superiority to the "cheap toys [and] manikins of statuette vendors" that pass for religion among the Italians there by drawing parallels with his audience's enjoyment of the *Twelfth Mass* on the "great organ of St. Ignatius." He asks pointedly, "And after all, is there so much difference between you?" (2:218). This atmosphere of tolerance often yields, however, to a more traditional classification scheme based on race and ethnicity. Like the local colorists' interest in "old stock" gentility, Norris's approach to race, derived from nineteenth-century standards, causes him to fill these sketches with a cast of ethnic hundreds—Italians, Irish, Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese—who often remain undifferentiated except by nationality, as in "The Remarkable Confusion of Races in the City's 'Quarter'" or "Among Cliff Dwellers." They become types *en masse* as the "Types of Western Men" become types as individuals.

The "sinister sketches" depict the same city and the same colorful mixing of races toward quite a different end. While in their drawing room dialogues Justin Sturgis and Leander debate endlessly about what constitutes a "good girl," a "fast girl," and a "California girl," their banter masks a residual anxiety over the dangers of lost or fallen women, or, more specifically, what happens to women when the blending of cultures moves beyond the colorfully picturesque to the frighteningly exotic. For example, in "Passing of Little Pete" of 30 January 1897, Norris describes a solemn, orderly Chinese funeral disrupted by "a shameless mob" of "red-faced, pushing [white] women" whom he describes ironically as "civilized" (1:242). Similarly, stories of "lost women" such as "His Sister" and "His Dead Mother's Portrait" demonstrate Norris's ability to portray the dark reality of women's lives underlying the Leander-Sturgis dialogues. In "The Third Circle," one of his most overtly literary treatments of this theme, Norris creates the Chinese tea-house setting (complete with marble-and-ebony stools, lacquered screens, and pickled watermelon rinds) that he later replicates in *Blix*. The exotic setting that brings Blix and Condy together, however, becomes for Norris's other young couple a site of horror as Hillegas's *fiancée* Miss Ten Eyck is abducted into a life of sexual slavery as Sadie, an opium-addicted prostitute.

Most overtly, local color's creation of a sympathetic narrative persona through which to mediate the

relationship between subject and audience becomes for Norris a means to explore the beginnings of his own profession of authorship. In their introduction to Volume 1, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burgess identify two such personæ, the "approachable innocent" of the interviews and the "critical thinker and arbiter of taste" who reviews books and plays (1:xxxv). To these may be added the sage interlocutor and keeper of San Francisco's secrets who knows more than he tells, a variation on local color's traditional teller of the frame tale. It is this persona who narrates the mystery of "The House with the Blinds," the white-slave narrative "The Third Circle," and one of the collection's most self-consciously literary stories, "The Drowned Who Do Not Die." In its basic outlines, this story tells of an elderly seaman named McBurney and his love for a drowned girl whom he saw once while diving to recover her body from a shipwreck. As he opens the door to her stateroom, her body in its "little smart chip hat" and "white muslin dress" moves toward him as she holds out her arms as if she were alive, suggesting to his mind "the old divers' superstitions about folk never really dying till they came up to the surface" (2:253). Faithful to her image, he never marries and lives out his life as a bachelor before joining her during his final dive.

Norris's story features a writer who draws out a taciturn old sailor, after which the sailor opens up and tells the story of his lost love, a love whose memory he carefully enshrines through domestic rituals such as tending flowers. The details are characteristically excessive in that the situation of the drowned girl strains credulity, yet the characters and situation resonate strongly in the tradition of local color fiction. As the introduction to Volume 2 suggests, McBurney "will stand favorable comparison with Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's superannuated bachelors and widowers" (2:xxiv); more specifically, for readers of New England local color fiction, the character also evokes the elderly seamen Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilley of Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*. Like McBurney, Captain Littlepage tells of a land where "there was neither living nor dead," a land of foggy shapes and a supernatural half-world that resembles McBurney's belief in a similar world under the all-preserving ocean.³ Norris's story also parallels "Along Shore," chapter 20 of Jewett's work, as the narrator waits to speak with Elijah Tilley, an "elderly, gaunt-shaped

great fisherman," and silently walks beside him until, by a subtle shifting of a fishing basket, she understands that her "company was accepted" (114, 118). During her visit, she sympathizes with his bereavement as he tells the tale of "poor dear," his wife who died eight years previously. After she has silently "read the history of Mrs. Tilley's best room from its very beginning" (124) and thereby come to understand its owner, the narrator and Elijah Tilley laugh together "like the best of friends" (127). Sympathy based on companionship becomes for Norris's narrator, as for Jewett's, both the subject matter of the tale and the impetus for its telling.

Additional parallels exist between Jewett's work and Norris's. Like Jewett's Elijah Tilley and the Milton aficionado Captain Littlepage, Norris's aged character, McBurney, the captain of a life-boat station, has "something Homeric" about him (2:251). He shares with McTeague and Vandover the trait of playing a few monotonous airs on a musical instrument, but unlike them, he is sensitive as well. McBurney tends a large geranium whose blossoms no one but he has ever seen, and Norris establishes early that the plant represents the romance of McBurney's life. Thus when the narrator advises McBurney to "get a new plant (2:252), his callousness leads to a momentary estrangement followed by a local color-style reconciliation. Invited for a walk along the sea "to a point where the land shrugged a bony shoulder out of the surf and shut out the wind," the narrator climbs with McBurney to a "certain level spot where . . . sometimes we found blackberries and blue iris" (2:252), much as the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* walks silently alongside Elijah Tilley and journeys with Mrs. Todd to another level spot "where pennyroyal grew" (46). After this peaceful interlude, McBurney, like Mrs. Todd and later Elijah Tilley, tells the narrator a story of lost romance that satisfies the narrator's curiosity about the "clue chapter," the "one note of color" that "bring[s] the whole scheme into harmony" (2:251). Like Jewett's Mrs. Todd, who entrusts her boarder with selling herbal remedies, McBurney makes the narrator an accomplice as well as a confidant: he asks the narrator to run the air pump during what proves to be the old diver's last descent into the wreck. McBurney's final trip to the wreck of the *Allouette* ends when the narrator pulls up the slack airline and realizes that McBurney has joined his drowned love at last. In

a supernatural touch that looks ahead to the story of Angéle and Vanamee in *The Octopus*, the once-bloomless geranium breaks into blossom, signifying the fruition of a union fulfilled only through McBurney's death.

By cutting this original by more than half for the third chapter of *Blix*, Norris transforms the tale's themes and significance. Gone is the deepening Jewett-like sympathy and building of relationships over time between narrator and subject as Blix and Condy Rivers casually visit the waterfront one day in search of a story. As a catalyst for storytelling, the natural symbol of the geranium gives way to a bit of realism, a photograph of the drowned girl whose resemblance to Blix inspires the telling of McPherson's story. Gone too is the romantic tale of the old diver's probable suicide and the narrator's unwitting complicity in it. Blix and Condy do not participate in McPherson's story, although they manage an adroit piece of matchmaking later in the book for another seagoing man, Captain Jack, and his encyclopedia-quoting wife. Finally, the romantic tale that McBurney told to no one except the narrator becomes McPherson's often-retold and equally often discounted "yarn about the girl who was drowned,"⁴ a cause for derision, not wonder, for others on the waterfront.

In *Blix*, Norris subtly shifts the emphasis from the local color tale to the writer's frame story because the subject of the book is, after all, Condy's apprenticeship as an author. Condy writes McPherson's story down directly as a piece of life, rather than inventing forced variations on real events, as he does when he transforms Captain Jack's stories into the elaborately plotted adventure novel *In Defiance of Authority*. Significantly, upon hearing McPherson's tale, Condy mutters, "Fine, fine; oh, fine as gold,"⁵ a comment both on the tale's quality and on the financial gain he hopes to realize from it. On another level, Condy, like Norris, rescues the story from a place where it is not valued and, through his imaginative transformation of the tale, allows it to circulate in a marketplace where it becomes literally "gold" for him. True to its purpose, the tale provides Condy Rivers with an entrée into the world of New York publishing and ensures his future. Having learned to use local color for his own ends, Condy of *The Times*, like Norris of *The Wave*, left the ranks of apprenticeship and joined the ranks of the "arrived."

Notes

A version of this essay was read during a session devoted to Norris's apprenticeship period writings at the 1997 American Literature Association Annual Conference.

¹*The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*, 2 vols. in one, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burgess (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), vol. 1, 185. Volume and page references are hereafter cited within parentheses in the text.

²*Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³*The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase (New York: Norton, 1981), 25. Page references are hereafter cited within parentheses in the text.

⁴*Blix* (1899); rptd. in *A Novelist in the Making: A Collection of Student Themes and the Novels Blix and Vandover and the Brute*, ed. James D. Hart (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 135.

⁵*Blix*, 134.

Frank Norris's Apprenticeship Writings and the Theatre

Richard Allan Davison

University of Delaware

Frank Norris's fascination with the theatre might well have begun *in utero* with the sounds and vibrations from mother Gertrude Doggett Norris's dramatic readings of Browning, Dickens and Shakespeare to his father. Gertrude continued to read to her sons from their childhood to well into their adult years; she even read to Charles and Kathleen every night of their two-week honeymoon. One can also imagine Gertrude regaling Frank and Charles with stories of her own premarital professional stage career at the McVickers Theatre in Chicago, where to great acclaim she had appeared in featured roles in such plays as *Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady*, *Pizarro*, or *the Death of Rollo*, and as Emilia in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Both Frank's and Charles's early exposure to all aspects of theatre profoundly affected both their apprenticeship writings and their more mature fiction.

Reports of Gertrude's dramatic reading ability make

clear that her sons were trained by an expert in both the interpretation and rendition of all forms of literature. A fellow Browning Society member responded to her textual exegesis and dramatic rendering of poetry, fiction, and drama by describing her "skillful-mannered approach, the careful, the almost scientific dissection and the immediate personal application of the work of a great teacher."¹ Son Charles recalled "her marvelous, modulated, trained voice" and "[how] often with an inflection she would point a poet's thought and give a significance to his lines that would frequently lead her listeners to believe she had added some word of her own to clarify [Shakespeare's] meaning."²

She also had a flair for theatrically appropriate costumes. According to Allie Norris, the wife of Charles's son Frank, "She used to sweep down Van Ness Avenue dressed in pantaloons, a cape and a large plumed hat on her way to conduct Readings [from Shakespeare]." The acting gene or love of theatre, not surprisingly, has remained a constant in the Norris family through several generations—carried from Gertrude to Frank and Charles (who acted in many plays, some with his wife Kathleen), to Frank's daughter Billie who "wore her hair in a 20s marcelled bob with a spit curl on her forehead [and with a fixed] black court plaster 'beauty spot' high on one cheek." She used to swim in the pool "with her head and her pearls safely out of the water." Even Billie's suicide was dramatically orchestrated: after taking an overdose of sleeping pills one night she "lay herself down on the pink, satin tufted bed and [left] a note on the black lace dress hanging nearby as a designated shroud."³ Nor did the flair for acting escape Frank's namesake, Dr. Frank Norris, whose every blustery entrance into a room was loudly orchestrated, or Frank's grandniece, Nellie Craven, who turned professional actress after raising four children and recently played Big Mama in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Gertrude started a theatrical tradition for the entire family; but her star pupil remains her favorite son.

Frank Norris acted to considerable acclaim at Berkeley in Skull and Key productions such as *One Bat*, a Low Jinks musical parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, Gilbert's "bright farce" *Engaged*,⁴ and Robertson's *Caste*. More importantly, his informed passion for theatre, for acting, actors and actresses galvanized many of his key contributions when serving his apprenticeship with *The Wave*, which in turn informed his post-*Wave* essays, literary

criticism and fiction. Some twenty-five pieces he wrote for *The Wave* crackle with Norris's expert knowledge of theatre. For *The Wave* Norris discussed or alluded to over forty theatrical figures, including Sarah Bernhardt, Elisa Félix Rachel, Henry Irving and Constant Coquelin. His actual interviews for *The Wave* included reactions to and from actors and theatrical personages as diverse as Alcide Capitaine, Gladys Wallis, Blanche Bates, Edith Crane, Elizabeth Irving, Wilton Lackaye and David Belasco.⁵

During Frank Norris's interview with producer, director, playwright Belasco, his subject "acted out each part" of the fourth act of his play *The Heart of Maryland* while he expounded theories of craftsmanship that sound much like what Norris himself was soon to articulate in his critical essays and practice in his fiction. Belasco talks of his painstaking preparation for a central effect: "It is the careful preparation that makes all the difference between melodrama and drama." He urges a "gradual, natural, leading up to [the effects], coaxing your audience step by step till you have them just where you want and then spring your effects and not until then."⁶ We remember Norris's admonitions in "The Mechanics of Fiction" that "all good novels" must have "the pivotal event" as "the peg upon which the fabric of the thing hangs" and that "the approach leading up to this pivotal event *must be infinitely slower than the decline*." Norris writes that "in a twinkling the complication is solved," that "the pivotal event fairly leaps from the pages," leaving the reader "stunned, breathless and overwhelmed with the sheer power of its presentation."⁷ Belasco claims to "write a play around either some central scene or some central idea," a play that must probe "great, strong universal passions . . . get at the heart of mankind, under its vest, as you might say, and find out the beautiful, true nobility that's there."⁸ Norris expresses a similar idea through the same metaphor in several of his essays. In "The True Reward of the Novelist" he urges the writer to approach human nature in such a way as to "see then the man beneath the clothes and the heart beneath both, and he will be so amazed at the wonder of that sight that he will forget the clothes."⁹ In "The Novel with a 'Purpose'" the writer who deals with "elemental forces" must "penetrate deep into the motives and character of type men, men who are a composite picture of a

multitude of men."¹⁰ In "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" Norris calls Romance "an instrument with which we may go straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of the flesh, down deep into the red, living heart of things." For "to Romance belong . . . the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."¹¹

Norris's interview with Wilton Lackaye deals more directly with the performance aspects of theatre as Lackaye reveals a blend of acting styles that first informed Norris's own stage performances and then served as a coda for Norris's own creative process which in turn informed his novels. The Lackaye interview is an ingenious blend of detailed physical description of Lackaye in his dressing room, transforming himself (before Norris's and the reader's eyes) into Dr. Belgraff (the title character in Charles Klein's 1897 *Dr. Belgraff*) with a running report of Lackaye's explanation of his acting theory. Norris records Lackaye's disquisition when the famous actor applies his makeup, false nose and costume as a show-and-tell illustration of the theory he is expounding—a disquisition that ends seconds before his cue to go on stage. Lackaye discusses the diverse acting styles of the meticulously detailed Constant Coquelin and the more melodramatic Henry Irving. Norris records Lackaye's argument for a blend of what seems similar to the present-day method and technique schools of acting:

" . . . There are two theories of acting. . . . There is the actor who says, 'It will be all right on the night,' and one who relies upon the 'hysteria'" — note that Mr. Lackaye calls it hysteria—that's a curious word in such a connection—"the hysteria of the occasion to carry him through. They call it inspiration. Maybe it's inspiration. I've nothing against it.

"And there is the other kind of actor" (the false nose made his tone a little nasal) "who relies almost entirely upon the careful manipulation of his mechanical effects. . . . But they make the mistake . . . of supposing that one must exclude the other . . . now I hold that the two methods should go together, first your detail, your mechanical effects and makeup; then the fine frenzy is right enough when it comes."¹²

The French actor Coquelin (whom Lackaye touts, along with Irving, to the young Norris) wrote a manual for acting in 1880 urging "the need for authenticity in performance and stress[ing] that the actor must always be in control of his means and leave nothing to chance. For him the voice was fundamental."¹³ He was close to what we now call a technique actor (such as Lord Laurence Olivier). The English actor Henry Irving, Coquelin's contemporary, loved parts that "would startle audiences" and was praised for his "angular eccentricity."¹⁴ He seems to have been closer to what we now call a method actor (such as Dustin Hoffman). Norris's decision to record Lackaye's anecdotal use of such diverse acting styles may be as revealing of Norris's own aesthetics as it is of Lackaye's impetus for acting.

Reports of Frank Norris's acting style speak to Lackaye's argument for a blend of the best of Coquelin and Irving, though some of the reviewers who praised Norris's acting give little specific detail. For his *Skull and Bones* performance in *One Bat*, the *Wave* reviewer wrote on 20 May 1893: "Frank Norris acted the part of the brainless English swell to perfection and everybody applauded him to the echo. He said he was nervous, but he didn't show it at all and his mother was awfully proud of him."¹⁵ Recorded on 19 May 1894 in *The Wave* is the reviewer's enthusiasm for the production of Gilbert's *Engaged*, "where the boys made their own costumes with marvelous results in lace and dazzling effects in embroidery. . . . Frank Norris [as a woman] was a tremendous success and blushing responder to innumerable calls. . . ." ¹⁶ But, according to the more detailed description in *The Wave* on 6 March 1897, his performance in Robertson's *Caste* would have done Wilton Lackaye proud: "Mr. Norris, as Sam Gerridge, astonished his friends a good deal. His makeup was so accurate that he might have stepped out of a south-of-Market-street plumber's establishment and been taken for one of the journeymen."¹⁷ The reviewer seems to be describing a blend of Irving's "hysteria" and Lackaye's "careful manipulation of mechanical effects."

This discussion of acting technique also smacks very much of Frank Norris's own definition of Literary Naturalism: "And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and the Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the school of Naturalism, which strives hard for accuracy and truth?"¹⁸ Although he concludes

his definition with praise for the author of *La Débâcle*, it is the Frank Norris of *The Octopus*, not Zola, who has succeeded best in achieving the alchemistic blend of accuracy and truth. Norris's blend of accuracy and truth in his novels is best realized in theatrical terms. As actor, literary theorist and novelist Norris is all one.

Although Mac in his foray into the theatrical world has trouble getting beyond the drama of the ticketbooth, Norris builds each scene and the structure of McTeague as a whole with the touch of a playwright. It is the powerful dramatic world of the opera that for a time restores Vandover's desire to create art. Norris himself called *The Octopus* a "big, Epic, dramatic thing" and announced that he would even "insert a list of dramatis personae."¹⁹ In a key scene he gives us the specifics of the claustrophobic environs of the leading actress's faded, sachet-ridden dressing room to reveal the heart of Magnus Derrick in the heat of his humiliation. In *The Pit* he uses the theatre and the theatrical both literally and figuratively to probe the hearts of Laura Dearborn and Curtis Jadwin. Both the specifics of her passionate dancing, dressed as Bizet's cigarette girl, and his bull-like charge onto the crowded floor of the stock market arena resonate with the truths of their respective beings.

Frank Norris's sophisticated knowledge of the theatre first nurtured by his mother remained a creative influence that he employed with increasing effectiveness until the curtain fell on a career that was so cruelly and abruptly terminated.

Notes

This commentary on Norris's drama-related writings for *The Wave* was delivered at a session dedicated to Norris's apprenticeship period writings during the 1997 American Literature Association Annual Conference.

¹See my "Gertrude Doggett Norris: Professional Actress, Dramatic Reader and Mother of Novelists," *The Book Club of California Quarterly Newsletter*, 56 (Winter 1990): 15.

²See *Certain Poets of Importance: Victorian Verse Chosen for Comparison*, compiled by Hattie Hecht Sloss (New York: Dutton, 1929), xxvii-xxviii.

³Letter, Mrs. Alice Norris to Richard Allan Davison, 29 April 1980.

⁴See Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., "Frank Norris: Biographical Data From *The Wave*, 1891-1901," *Frank Norris Studies*, No. 10 (Autumn 1990): 3.

⁵See *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris*, 2 vols. in

one, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burgess (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996).

⁶*Apprenticeship Writings*, vol. 2, 111.

⁷See *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1928), 114-15.

⁸*Apprenticeship Writings*, vol. 2, 112.

⁹*Responsibilities*, 17.

¹⁰*Responsibilities*, 22.

¹¹*Responsibilities*, 163, 167.

¹²*Apprenticeship Writings*, vol. 1, 192-93.

¹³See *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham (New York: Cambridge, 1995), 244.

¹⁴*Cambridge Guide*, 522.

¹⁵"Frank Norris: Biographical Data": 3.

¹⁶"Frank Norris: Biographical Data": 4.

¹⁷"Frank Norris: Biographical Data": 6.

¹⁸See *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1141.

¹⁹See *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, ed. Jesse S. Crisler (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986), 75, 124.



Professor Benjamin F. Fisher, University of Mississippi, is the Society's program chair for the 1999 American Literature Association Annual Conference. Please direct to him queries about the session(s) devoted to Norris. His address is Box 941, Oxford MS 38655.



Frank Norris Studies is published twice per year for the members of the Frank Norris Society. Dues of \$10.00 are payable each November. Submissions—on diskette in WordPerfect and in one printout—should be addressed to the Society at Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1580. Please make the endnotes section a part of the continuous text rather than use the program's footnote or endnote function.

Editorial board members are: Robert C. Leitz, III, Louisiana State University in Shreveport; Donald Pizer, Tulane University; Jesse S. Crisler, Brigham Young University; Charles L. Crow, Bowling Green State University; Richard Allan Davison, University of Delaware; and Benjamin F. Fisher, University of Mississippi. The Assistant Editor is Laura Fletcher, Rice University.