

Supernatural Naturalism: Norris's Spiritualism in *The Octopus*  
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... there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir.

—William James, "The Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher"

"I don't want her spiritualized, exalted, glorified, celestial. I want *her*."

—Vanamee to Father Sarria

On hearing Presley's recitation of "The Toilers" in *The Octopus*, the mystical shepherd Vanamee tells him, "in this poem of yours, you have not been trying to make a sounding piece of literature. You wrote it under tremendous stress. Its very imperfections show that. It is better than a mere rhyme. It is an Utterance—a Message. It is Truth."<sup>1</sup> He then encourages Presley not to publish it in the monthly literary periodicals, but in the daily press. Inspired by the people it should "go straight to the People," he argues.

Vanamee's reaction to "The Toilers" in many ways describes *The Octopus*. The novel is based on the Mussel Slough incident, and its long observed and long debated thematic inconsistencies do not obscure its social message. In fact, Norris critics have tended to locate the imperfections of *The Octopus* not in its lack of a message but in its apparently conflicting truths. The naturalistic main plot pits the ranchers against the railroad, which indifferently destroys anyone and anything that obstructs its unrelenting charge toward profit. The Manichean impulse behind the novel, as James K. Folsom describes it, casts the railroad and its officials as an inexorable evil, a malicious predator whose tentacles grow with its profit margin.<sup>2</sup> In assaulting the rancher's dignity, the mysterious Other who serves as the evil force of the Vanamee sub-plot is here embodied in inhuman iron and brutal methods. Norris's reformist message is primary. The perhaps too-obvious juxtaposition of the Hoovens starving in the streets of San Francisco and Presley attending the sumptuous dinner party at the P. & S. W. vice-president's home is but one of several indications of this. As observer rather than participant, Presley guides the reader's responses. The grim phenomena he encounters repeatedly contradict his desire to find the ideal in the real. As Charles C. Walcott points out, cruel determinism motivates the guilty reader, and in the case of *The Octopus* his touch-

stone Presley, to social action.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, June Howard demonstrates, "it is a very short step from naturalism's gesture of control to progressivism's, from the sympathy and good intentions of the naturalist spectator to the altruistic and ultimately authoritarian benevolence of the progressive reformer."<sup>4</sup> However, Presley's reformist gestures seem futile to him and he wanders in despair until infused by Vanamee's Pauline mysticism at the novel's close. And here is the crux of the critical controversy—the apparent incompatibility of the novel's social reformist surface and its lurking and ultimately concluding mystical subplot.

In a letter to Issac F. Marcossou, Norris wrote, "you will find some things in it [*The Octopus*] that for me—are new departures. It is the most romantic thing I've yet done. One of the secondary sub-plots is pure romance—oh, even mysticism, if you like, a sort of allegory—I call it the allegorical side of the wheat subject—and the fire in it is the Allegory of the Wheat."<sup>5</sup> These "new departures" generally have not pleased Norris critics. Rather, the Vanamee subplot with its mystical overtones has been viewed as a nagging flaw, a sentimentalization of the naturalistic theme, resulting in metaphysical vagaries or at odds with the clear implications of the empirical data that Norris presents. That Norris tries to impose Vanamee's romantic vision on his readers confutes his earlier efforts to puncture Presley's, and through him the reader's, illusion of the world. That Vanamee's thoughts, expressed through Presley, conclude the novel must be ironical, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. charges, "for only a madman and a chronic neurasthenic" can deny the book's tragedy and imagine triumph.<sup>6</sup> However true this may be on a pragmatic level and in light of the notion of novelistic integrity, a problem still remains. Norris not only chose to embody a mystical, or quasi-mystical view of things in *The Octopus*, he also chose to treat certain supra-rational developments *seriously*. For example, Norris is not ironic or skeptical when he describes Vanamee's summoning Presley in Chapter 1 or Father Sarria in Chapter 4 via mental telepathy. Later, Vanamee *does* summon the child of Angele Varian to him (2, 104):

It was a time for visions. It was the hour when dreams come true, and lying deep in the grasses beneath the pear trees, Vanamee, dizzied with mysticism, reaching up and out toward the supernatural, felt, as it were, his mind begin to rise upward from out his body. He passed into a state of being the like of which he had not known before. He felt that his imagination was reshaping itself, preparing to receive an impression never experienced until now. His body felt light to him, then it

dwindled, vanished. He saw with new eyes,  
heard with new ears, felt with new heart.

"Come to me," he murmured.

Then slowly he felt the advance of the Vision. . . .

While one might view Vanamee with suspicion at the close of *The Octopus*, there is no question about the fact that earlier in the novel he possesses special powers which Norris seems to view as empirically real. Thus arises the question, what was a self-conscious naturalist, intent on describing nature as it is, doing when he brought in behaviors that have to do with what we would now term "supernatural"?

Zola's "Le roman expérimentale" imposes the scientific method on the novelist for truthfully depicting the operation of natural forces on man. In this sense, "experimental" is more properly understood as "empirical." How then can we reconcile spiritualist matter with an empirical method calculated to impel readers to social reform? Norris scholarship has taken major steps in this direction. Walcutt sets up an extra-empirical viewpoint with his *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*, and Warren French sees Norris as a descendant of the Transcendentalists.<sup>7</sup> By arguing for LeContean evolutionary theism as a primary influence on Norris, Donald Pizer puts him squarely in a metaphysical tradition with a scientific base.<sup>8</sup> In his insightful assessment of the Pauline references in the novel, Richard Allan Davison assumes leadership of the Vanamee vanguard by considering him as Norris's spokesman for a visionary point of view.<sup>9</sup> Another approach that I would like to suggest might be to put aside our biases against spiritualism and then to consider it in its context—a turn-of-the-century context, Norris's, in which those biases were not so numerous or quite so strong. By observing that *fin de siècle* naturalism and spiritualism (as well as transcendentalism) shared some of the same assumptions, we can see that the mystical subplot is not such a foreign element in *The Octopus* as often has been supposed and that Norris was not wholly abandoning common sense when conceptualizing it.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, spiritualism was a self-conscious movement intimately aligned with social reform and attempting to emulate the empirical method in order to popularize and democratize itself. Like American literary realism and naturalism, spiritualism asserted an affective purpose for a mimetic impulse. Describing the world accurately, whether spirit or mundane, knits together the brotherhood of men. Rather than an aberration, spiritualism was integral to Norris's milieu while he wrote *The Octopus*.<sup>10</sup>

San Francisco in the 1890s was replete with spiritualist concerns, a fact that Norris as a citizen and a journalist could not have escaped. His columns in *The Wave* were frequently surrounded by columns and advertisements dealing with mesmerism, spiritualism, and hypnotism. Public interest in Swedenborgianism grew with the construction of the Swedenborgian church in the city. Norris's close friend Bruce Porter, who claimed to possess telepathic powers and on whom Vanamee is modelled,<sup>11</sup> prepared the stained-glass windows for the church. Porter was also a

friend of Henry James and he later married William James's daughter. George du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894), in which the mesmerist Svengali plays a major role, was a popular success, as was the stage adaptation. Wilton Lackaye, who played Svengali, told a *Wave* reviewer that the stage adaptation sought to stir public interest by "making hypnotism the very essence of the play" (14 [5 October 1895], 7). Norris knew the novel well; so did his close friends. In a local performance of the dramatic adaptation, his life-long friend, Ernest Peixotto, played Little Billy. And "Little Billy" became a nickname for Peixotto given to him by Norris.

In 1888, Margaret Fox significantly deflated the American spiritualist movement when she announced to a capacity audience at the Academy of Music that the tapping and cracking of her toes and those of her sister Kate formed the repository of the otherworldly intelligence that had spawned four decades of investigation of rapping spirits. The skepticism that followed, however, was not new. Emerson had stated, "no inspired mind ever condescends to these evidences" which were "the rat hole of revelation."<sup>12</sup> Thoreau had responded to reports of spirit rappings at seances by vowing to "exchange my immortality for a glass of cold beer" should these rappings prove real.<sup>13</sup> Although attracted to Swedenborgianism, Henry James, Sr. rejected spirits as "so many vermin revealing themselves in the tumbledown walls of our old theological hostelry."<sup>14</sup> His son and namesake linked feminism to spiritualism in *The Bostonians* and condemned both.

Hawthorne's portrayal of Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables* is probably the best known example of the social reformer-mesmerist in nineteenth-century American literature. However, as his depiction of other spiritualists in his late romances, Emerson's denunciations, Twain's burlesques of seances and poltergeists, and Lowell's spoof of the Fox sisters show, many American writers had been critical although often fascinated with spiritualism.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Bayard Taylor's *Hannah Thurston* (1863) and James's *The Bostonians* (1886), the critique is associated with an attack on social reform. Indeed, in these two novels, Orestes Brownson's *The Spirit Rapper* (1854), and John Hay's *The Bread-Winners* (1884), spirit mediums are inevitably portrayed as aiding some radical social cause. Abolition forms spiritualism's primary antebellum social link while Darwinian metaphors strung to an evolutionary social meliorism were embraced in the latter part of the century.

Swedenborg and the commentaries on him by Emerson and Henry James, Sr. in the 1840s helped to initiate the proliferating interest in spiritualism. Emerson went so far as to proclaim in his journals, "This age is Swedenborg's."<sup>16</sup> In 1856, Theodore Parker stated, it "seems more likely that spiritualism would become the religion of America than in 156 that Christianity would be the religion of the Roman Empire, or in 750 that Mohammedanism would be that of the Arabian populations."<sup>17</sup> In proposing a Hermetic system of correspondences between the material and spiritual worlds, professing a reverence for nature, and stressing the inner godliness of humans, spiritualism dovetailed with American Transcendentalism. Both had roots in Jacksonian democracy and

rejected the Calvinist tradition that had created a radical disjunction between immediate experience and some higher order. Spiritualists considered tangential movements which maintained occult traditions of secrecy, like theosophy, to be exclusive and elitist. They believed that illumination through mystical experience was available to everyone and that such experience could be empirically verified. In this vein, spiritualists, like American Transcendentalists, rejected the distinction between the natural and the supernatural worlds and insisted that spirit was a tangible presence in the everyday world.<sup>18</sup> Spiritualist inquiry could therefore employ the scientific observation of external facts. In doing so, it again mirrored Transcendentalism by dismissing miracles and promoting the inviolability of natural law.

Despite the blows to credibility dealt by the Fox sisters and the shift from reformism to a belief in gradual evolutionary progression, a shift which caused many reformists to leave the movement, spiritualism was still very much linked to science at the turn of the century. William James's interest in the American Society for Psychical Research was to culminate in his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh in 1900-01, later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. His focus on the ambiguity of the term "abnormal" was motivated by the work of Frederic Myers, who tied psychical research to the developing interest in the unconscious. Myers in turn was reacting to Pierre Janet's research on hysteria, and suggested that while pathological behavior might have an antecedent in a subliminal self, the disruption of normal behavior might also derive from some form of religious inspiration.<sup>19</sup> Despite his public proclamation that the future of psychology lay in Freud's work, James still privately viewed Myers's theories as more comprehensive.<sup>20</sup> The Freudian unconscious of repressed desires generally replaced that which psychical researchers contended reflected an intuitive access to transcendental knowledge. However, Freud himself once remarked that if he had his life to live again he would devote it to psychical research.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the development of psychology, advances in science in the 1890s lent credibility to the unseen and exploded previous paradigms of rationality. The invention of the X-ray in 1895 by Wilhelm Roentgen—*noted in The Wave*, 15 (15 February 1896), 5—made invisible forces an approved object of scientific inquiry. Transparent planes of X-rays would help to prompt Picasso's cubism and generally to extend rational inquiry beyond the immediately observable. In 1898, Max Planck's quantum theory proposed that the emission of energy caused electrons to leap from one orbit to the next without ever occupying the space between. The fundamental building blocks of the physical universe had been discovered to defy the fundamental laws of logic. Scientific attention was also fixed on the stars. While the foundations of astrophysics were laid in Germany around 1860, it flowered in the U. S. at the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, systematic astrophysical investigations of the planets were largely stimulated by debate concerning the existence of intelligent life on other worlds, particularly Mars (H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* was published in 1898). Norris, then, wrote at a time when it was difficult to know what to believe or

how to conceptualize the nature of the physical world, human nature, and the new forms of the "unseen" being postulated as real or possibly real by a steady stream of thinkers who viewed themselves as empirical in their mindsets.

Although spirit rapping had fallen into disfavor, interest in the mysterious and the otherworldly was bridging the gap between the scientific and the non-scientific in Norris's time, allowing him to endow Vanamee with telepathic powers just as he had earlier given McTeague a sixth sense and later invested Curtis Jadwin with near-intuitive powers in *The Pit*. Still it was a time of antitheses. The gyres that were beginning to turn in Yeats's mind in Ireland were spinning their antinomies like a cyclone through the American consciousness. While the pragmatism of Charles Pierce and William James was coming to dominate American intellectual circles, San Francisco became a Mecca for charlatans of the occult as well as for remnants of the American spiritualist and Transcendentalist movements. Theories of biological and social evolution clashed with *fin de siècle* decadence and with notions of millenarianism. The proletariat became the focus of fiction and of progressivist politics while industrialists evolved as the new ruling class. And naturalism and symbolism emerged as the two dominant and opposing modes of literature.

Out of these whirling oppositions without a center emerged what may still be viewed by us as Norris's contradictory naturalistic allegory of the wheat. For I do not propose a resolution of the debate over the theme of *The Octopus* which has been going on since its publication in 1901. Although Vanamee's vision that "the whole is in the end perfect" (2, 345) may not be simply declared the theme of *The Octopus*, and although Norris's own point of view may be classified as moot still, the novel's flaws are not based in a discord between social reform and mysticism. In this respect, Norris reflected his times. The gap in perspective is more ours than his; and, if and when a critical consensus on *The Octopus* is achieved, one of the facts that must be taken into account is that Norris was not simply letting his imagination run riot when he developed the Vanamee subplot. He was working with data that was, for him, more empirical than might seem at first glance.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>*The Octopus* in *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928), 2, 90. *The Octopus* comprises volumes 1 and 2; subsequent volume and page references appearing within parentheses are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>"The Wheat and the Locomotive: Norris and Naturalistic Esthetics," in *American Literary Naturalism: A Reassessment*, ed. Yoshinobu Halkutani and Lewis Fried (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1975), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>*American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup>*Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup>*The Letters of Frank Norris*, ed. Franklin Walker (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1956), p.

67. <sup>6</sup>"Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: The Christian Ethic as Pragmatic Response," in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, ed. Don Graham (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), p. 143.

<sup>7</sup>Warren French, *Frank Norris* (New York: Twayne, 1962), passim.

<sup>8</sup>*The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), passim.

<sup>9</sup>"Frank Norris's *The Octopus*: Some Observations on Vanamee, Shelgrim, and St. Paul," in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, ed. Don Graham (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), pp. 99-115.

<sup>10</sup>See J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967); R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Burton Gates Brown, "Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1973).

<sup>11</sup>Charles Crow, "The Real Vanamee and His Influence on Frank Norris's *The Octopus*," *Western American Literature*, 9 (1974), 131-139.

<sup>12</sup>John B. Wilson, "Emerson and the 'Rochester Rappings,'" *New England Quarterly*, 41 (1968), 248.

<sup>13</sup>Brown, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup>"Spiritual Rapping," *Lectures and Miscellanies* (New York: Redfield, 1852), p. 418.

<sup>15</sup>Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature 1850-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

<sup>16</sup>*The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1909-1914), 8, 477.

<sup>17</sup>*Life and Correspondences of Theodore Parker*, ed. John Weiss (London: Longmans, Green, 1863), 1, 428.

<sup>18</sup>Moore, pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup>See Moore, pp. 149-151.

<sup>20</sup>*The Letters of William James and Theodore Flournoy*, ed. Robert C. LeClair (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 224.

<sup>21</sup>Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 3, 419-420; Moore points out that Freud was a corresponding member of the Society for Psychical Research, and that he wrote an article entitled "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy" in 1921 (165-66). His other studies in the occult include "A Premonitory Dream Fulfilled" (1899), "Premonitions and Chance" (1904), "Dreams and Telepathy" (1922), "The Occult Significance of Dreams" (1925), and "Dreams and the Occult" (1933). Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Stephen C. Brennan read an earlier draft of this essay and offered several helpful suggestions, many of which I have incorporated.

### *The Pit as a Play*

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Dramatic adaptations of popular fiction have long enjoyed great appeal. From the era of the early Gothics, during the 1790s when Mrs. Radcliffe's eagerly sought and much admired works were taken to the stage, on through the next century, many novels

on both sides of the Atlantic were remolded into productions for the boards. We might well recall that the "Father of American Drama," William Dunlap, refashioned Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* for the American theater, as *Fountainville Abbey*, and that "Rip Van Winkle" and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* later drew large audiences. No well-known novel, in fact, was proof against the alert dramatist.

One such enterprising playwright was Channing Pollock. His initiation into the reworking of novels commenced when the successful producer William A. Brady commissioned him to prepare a stage version of Frank Norris's *The Pit* (1903). Brady had secured the dramatic rights for this book, but his first bid, to Augustus Thomas, then an established dramatist, was turned down. Honored by such notice from one of the luminaries of the American theater world, Pollock fell to his task with enthusiasm. He completed his play within a fairly brief span, as certain parts of it but too obviously reveal. From this beginning, however, Pollock would go on to achieve many successes in attracting large audiences to his stage fare. He would also continue to turn other best-selling novels into plays for stage production.<sup>1</sup>

Although *The Pit* is in central focus here, two other dramas devolving from Norris works may briefly engage our attention. The first, a one-act piece by "Christopher St. John" (pseudonym for Christabel Marshall), takes liberties with the text of Norris's short story, "The Guest of Honor." This playwright perhaps thought that audiences would not respond well to the supernaturalism Norris engages in his story (where a man meets Death at the last in a series of formal dinner parties at which a place has been reserved for him as the guest of honor). Whether to cater to the Age of Realism or no, St. John's addition of a clumsy love interest to the play actually diminishes dramatic force in her work. The play seems never to have reached the stage, nor was it published; a typescript is held in the New York Public Library. A second Norris story was slated for the theater. We read in the *Kensington News*, of London, a notice that, as one of two "Dramatic Plays," "'The Third Circle,' adapted from the work of the late FRANK NORRIS," would be offered on 16 February 1914, for the "Touchwood Dramatic Society inaugural Presentation," Christ Church Hall, North Kensington. No additional remaining files of the *Kensington News*, nor any other solid evidence to indicate the outcome of the performance or possibilities of a surviving manuscript, seem to be extant. Like these short plays, Pollock's *The Pit* (performed often during 1903 and 1904) was never published. A typescript survives, though, in the Harvard Theatre Collection, a gift from Robert Gould Shaw. It consists of 132 leaves, typed in violet ink, rife with misprints, and bound in sturdy covers. We find that the novel of 421 pages has been condensed to one-third its original length for dramatization—or less if we consider the large quantities of blank space within scripts for plays.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, some of Norris's overall effect disappeared or was altered as *The Pit* was turned into a play.

Norris's *The Pit* lent itself readily for dramatic adaptation. The novel opens with a theater scene, at an opera, and later episodes involve the rehearsal for

an amateur play production, the theatrical propensities of Laura, and many allusions to theater and to acting. Furthermore, Norris's reviewers were quick to point out the "flesh-and-blood characters" in *The Pit*, a novel, as some saw it, of "truer insights into the hearts of his fellow men" than Norris had previously achieved. Others remarked the "whole drama of the wheat problem"; the "dramatic developments" that intensify after Jadwin's obsessive speculation threatens his marriage, motivating Laura to turn toward her former lover, or would-be lover, the appropriately named Corthell; two "tragedies" then impend upon the great "Bull": that in his home and that in the pit. Overall, to epitomize the reviewers' attitudes, *The Pit* embodies "more dramatic" elements than any of Norris's earlier novels had.<sup>3</sup> Pollock, of course, hoped to capitalize on this.

In addition, Pollock's conception was that a good dramatist should emphasize social themes (p. 128); and he worked at his material with that thought uppermost. Responding to Pollock's obvious intent, however, the then influential critic William Winter later found "nothing in the play but the scenes of business strife and tumult," adding that such plays had by this time become commonplace. Brady had foreseen that "more love" was essential if the play were to succeed, and so Pollock at his behest also attempted to serve up what he supposed an audience might applaud. One might mention in this connection how the young actor filling the role of Landry Court—who in Norris's novel combined business shrewdness with a lover's traits—later achieved more than modest success in lovers' roles. His name was Douglas Fairbanks.<sup>4</sup>

Pollock's personal outlook as to the proper function of a dramatist may also have sustained a beating in this venture because "you can't dramatize descriptions of office buildings at night," as Augustus Thomas put it when refusing to adapt *The Pit*. Interestingly, the otherwise hostile William Winter found value in Pollock's "photographic portrayal" of the forces opposed in the stock market. Such pictorializing, of course, was one of Norris's major techniques in his novel. He was, after all, an heir to the great Victorians, admiring their poetry (as *The Pit* attests) in particular. Laura's reading, for example, included Tennyson and other Victorian poets (as well as Dickens, "Ouida"—and she doesn't want to admit to knowing that writer—Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and Poe). We don't merely overhear a listing of Laura's books; she actually engages Browning and Meredith's work in one episode, and in another Corthell reads to her from Rossetti's poems. Tennyson's verse receives several citations, or it is quoted, once in a tellingly illustrative discussion of *Enoch Arden*, that poem about a love triangle wherein one lover journeys far distant from the girl he loves in order to make his fortune. Those "wonderful word pictures," which the *Theatre* critic found so admirable in Norris's novel, could not be so subtly reproduced in the stage version. Although he artistically interwove such pictorial substance with business themes, Norris during this blending never sacrificed his creation of character—and thus he achieved a decided advance over the deficiencies discerned by some readers of *McTeague* and *The Octopus*. Pollock's scaling down of

the bulk in Norris's book took away from the very texture of that fiction, as several examples should make clear.

First, Laura is presented in terms that are simultaneously pictorial and dramatic. Her hair and her manner actually recall those of the dark-haired ladies in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. In fact she is described such that, to me, she suggests Jane Burden, often a model for Pre-Raphaelite painters and ultimately the (unhappy) wife of another member in those circles, the exuberant William Morris—who was evidently wanting as a lover. Laura's "pallour was in itself a colour . . . a tint rather than a shade, like ivory; a warm white blending into an exquisite, delicate brownness towards the throat." Her "deep brown eyes glowed lambent and intense. . . ."

And all this beauty of pallid face and brown eyes was crowned by, and sharply contrasted with, the intense blackness of her hair, abundant, thick, extremely heavy, continually corruscating with sombre, murky reflections, tragic, in a sense vaguely portentous—the coiffure of a heroine of romance, doomed to dark crises.<sup>5</sup>

Here Laura resembles indeed another raven-haired "heroine of romance, doomed to dark crises," Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation-novel protagonist, Aurora Floyd. Moreover, though well-bred and mannerly, both heroines could unleash violent streaks—Aurora in horsewhipping an errant groom and Laura in passionate, wild dancing—when occasion warranted. These outbursts manifest inward turmoil, much better portrayed by Norris than by Braddon, for whom the psychological novel was not a great forte. Pollock's rendition of such personality traits in Laura dwindles into a mere stage direction: "20, tall, slender, dark hair and skin"—a meager presentation and not true to Norris's characterizing description.

Second, Landry Court, early classified by Norris as "clean within as without," and whose development of maturity we see unfolded gradually, is brought on rather more rapidly by Pollock, to the detriment of depth in his character. On stage, Page springs to Landry's defense soon after Act I opens: "He's not a flirt. He's a MAN. He WORKS for a living. He doesn't spend all his time painting windows. What's the sense of painting windows anyhow?" In this comparison of Court and the artist Sheldon Corthell, we discern a deliberate playing up to sympathies likely to be prevalent among American audiences in 1903 and 1904, i.e., to their interests in "getting ahead" and their admiration for those who worked at utilitarian occupations. Just as deliberate may be a slap at the aesthetic movements of the later nineteenth century, as yet another appeal to the practical-minded playgoers. Unfortunately, none of Landry's more humane qualities, as Norris depicts them, such as his impulse to assist Jadwin in the disasters closing in upon him, are given scope in the play.

Third, Laura and Curtis Jadwin in Pollock's hands are cast quite obviously for stage purposes, and they are much more like figures in melodrama than Norris had conceived them. Norris's Laura genuinely

grows up, chronologically and personality-wise. That maturity is attained, moreover, in despite of Laura's "actress" instincts, which had "fostered in her a curious penchant toward melodrama" (pp. 212-13). Norris, significantly, alludes to her "three selves"—the third based upon compassion and empathy, in contrast to the frivolous actress or to the selfish-being aspects that alternately hold sway in her. Such a multi-faceted personality reveals an advance in fictional characterization during a period when double selves were yet but imperfectly comprehended. Interestingly, in this context, Landry Court manifested a "double personality": that of a seemingly incompetent business person contrasted with the attentive, clever inhabitant on the floor of the Board of Trade (p. 92). Laura, fittingly, possesses greater depths than Landry because she is undeniably the figure of central interest and importance in Norris's novel.

Norris's Curtis Jadwin is also a complex being too simplistically reduced in the play. No typically insensitive businessman (albeit he temporarily falls into that role), as was often found in American literature of that day, he is capable of deep feeling and kindness. His wish to corner the wheat market is an all too plausible human aspiration. Perhaps his ever-present cigar symbolizes in its phallicism a very human sexuality lurking within him; but even the great "Bull" (another sexual implication, despite the usual meaning of the term?) is given balancing characteristics. His liking for simple, homey music provides a foil for Laura's predilections for more intense choices, often of decided sensuality. Her musical tastes are perhaps reinforced by her fondness for Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, that great poem in which increasingly unbridled sexuality destroys positive ideals. Both Laura and Curtis suffer the tragedy of having to learn (with horrendous consequences involved) much about the nature of mutuality. That mutuality Jadwin, at least implicitly, learns by the close of Norris's book. The expansiveness typically found in a novel permits us to observe his shifts in mood, as is not the case with what comes to us via the terseness, comparatively speaking, in Pollock's play. The stage Jadwin, in contrast to Norris's, is one-dimensional because he is presented in simplistic male-chauvinist terms. He is unswervingly "manly," in all the negative traditional senses of that word, no doubt to maintain the attention of playgoers eager for immediate entertainment instead of psychological subtleties inherent in a fully developed, rounded "character."

Channing Pollock's Laura spends altogether too much time in arguments with her sister. Thus Laura's envisioning of love, in Norris as if she were Marguerite or Juliet, in the play seems rather more like that of a heroine in a sleazy story than that within an imposing literary work. Pollock did not capture Laura's complexity—credibly rendered in the novel. Just so, the dialogue during her meetings with the adeptly named CortHELL is expressed so that it does more to titillate an audience eager for excitement of that variety than for portraying dramatic conflicts among fully realized characters. The return of Jadwin at the conclusion of one of these encounters (which in the play seems much more

like an actual assignation) is another obvious theatrical ploy; he does not so clumsily come in upon the CortHELL-Laura meetings in the novel. Thus, those encounters seem less like mere luridness-for-luridness's-sake than those devised by Pollock do. Throughout the play, Jadwin is drawn as far more of an absolutist figure, as a "heavy," who would more properly inhabit a world of outdated melodrama than that of unfolding character.

Maybe at the urging of Brady to incorporate more love into the play, Pollock fashioned the dialogue toward the close of Act I between Jadwin and Cressler, his long-time friend, to make the already married man offer rather condescending, sexist advice to the would-be victor for Laura's hand. All the timeworn clichés of the initiate versus the experienced surface here. They add little more than poor humor and the length requisite to flesh out a five-act play. Since an audience at a theater could in no way engage the dialogue effected by Norris for the untangling of complicated emotions, all that he achieved in subtlety of character turns into cloying situation and stagey speeches in Pollock's play.

Pollock's successes, ironically, seem to be with minor rather than major characters. His device of opening by sending a newspaperwoman into the theater, and thus affording us essential exposition as she engages first one figure and then another in conversation, is sound technique. In aiming to bring onto stage the large gallery of characters from Norris's novel, Pollock attempts no mean feat. His portrayals of Calvin Hardy Crookes (another transparent name) and his associate, Sweeny, plus a third stereotype figure from the business world, the rakish Scannel (replete with a consort of doubtful repute, Mrs. Ferguson), are doubtless constructed to give to contemporaneous audiences certain type-characters who frequently appeared in the American theater during the early twentieth century, namely stereotypes, as they were then depicted, of the Jew, the Irishman, and the unsavory businessman with his tart (a Willy Loman in the making, as it were). In the true spirit of melodrama, Crookes in Act I is rapidly designated as Jadwin's "greatest opponent" and the "biggest rogue on the Stock Exchange," traits that did not become evident until much later in the novel. Scannel, also true to type, is middle-aged, large and red-faced; Mrs. Ferguson, about forty, is "large, hair bleached, loudly dressed, apparently a woman of little breeding." Just how this last stage direction was to be conveyed is a mystery akin to some of those requested by G. B. Shaw. Other Pollock touches are Crookes's suggesting that he and Jadwin become partners in controlling the wheat market, and the near-fight that looms because Jadwin will have none of that "dirty business." Jadwin's punch, however, is deferred only until they meet once more, when, leering at the great Bull's ruin on the floor of the Board of Trade, Crookes taunts him with a dollar bill. Any or all of these features would have been customary stage fare during Pollock's time.

That the play did sustain a popular run—seventy-seven nights at New York's Lyric Theatre alone, and bringing to Brady most of the more than half-million dollars in profit mentioned by Pollock—reveals the desire of audiences for melodramatics linked with

worlds of high finance and related concerns, like the grain industry, which understandably may have affected their lives. Both Brady, whose canny sense secured the dramatic rights for *The Pit*, and Pollock knew how to turn a successful novel into an appealing play for their times. Whether either cared much for Norris's epic vision or his aim after plausible characters within that framework, is moot. Although lines were lifted from novel into play, vastly more important elements were overlooked. We do not get any sense from the play, as we do from the novel, that a literary outlook midway between that of Whitman and either Sherwood Anderson or Carl Sandburg was at work. Nor do we gain the impression of epic tragedy, learned by Norris undoubtedly from Tennyson's *Idylls*, that ties the great world of the grain trade to the personal one of love in disasters and near-disasters.<sup>6</sup>

Gone too from the play is Norris's epic drawing together of widely separated regions of the world. Laura, Page and their father, and the Cresslers come from Barrington, Worcester County, Massachusetts. Laura's mother comes from North Carolina, Jadwin from Michigan. Moreover, what all good Americans in the era of Norris and Pollock would have readily labeled "foreigners"—represented by such types as Crookes, Sweeny, and the Europeans repeatedly connected with the wheat—linked Jadwin with the humble Italians so desperately needing bread. In terms of one American dream—that of the infinite possibilities in self-realization by means of the land—the Jadwins after Curtis's financial downfall go West to recoup their fortunes. Just before they depart, they receive a communication from Page and Landry, now married and honeymooning in New York, that great metropolis of the eastern U.S.A. All in all, this bringing together of the opposite parts of the country as the novel closes (and behind these four in their respective regions lie, implicitly, greater numbers of people and their indigenous geographies) constitutes a good Norrissian epic wind-up. Such technique is in no way matched by Pollock.

What, then, might we conclude after looking at stage versions of Frank Norris's works? First, his stature was sufficiently great to attract enterprising dramatists and producers whose awareness of their market would have precluded use of unfamiliar novels or novelists in this way. Second, Norris's literary art encompasses much more, and much more densely textured, dramatic underpinnings than he has customarily been credited with creating. This fact is most notably relevant to *The Pit*, which Norris filled with dramatic tropes. Third, his own tight rein on melodrama loosened in the hands of adapting playwrights; again, this method is most clearly demonstrated in Pollock's *The Pit*. Finally, even if stage adaptations of Norris evince in themselves no great art, they furnish implicitly an image of Norris the writer that offers a new approach to his work proper.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Channing Pollock, *Harvest of My Years: An Autobiography* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), pp. 73, 80, 127-30, 163-64; Kenneth A. Lohf

and Eugene P. Sheehy, *Frank Norris: A Bibliography* (Los Gatos, California: Talisman Press, 1959), pp. 43, 53.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Katz, "The Shorter Publications of Frank Norris: A Checklist," *Proof*, 3 (1973), 155-221 (especially 191). We can ascribe no certain dates of composition for the short plays; both short stories on which these plays were based appear in *The Third Circle* (1909). I am grateful for courtesies tendered by Jeanne T. Newlin, Curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection, in regard to Pollock's *The Pit*, in particular for permission to quote from the manuscript. Debra Nir, Membership Coordinator of the Dramatists Guild, Inc., also provided assistance. The kindness of Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Jesse S. Crisler brought recondite materials to my attention. A somewhat different version of the present essay was presented to the Frank Norris Society, December 1986, at MLA.

<sup>3</sup>Contemporaneous comment about Norris's works is conveniently marshalled in Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Katherine Knight, *Frank Norris: The Critical Reception* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1981); that on *The Pit* proper appears on pp. 184-89.

<sup>4</sup>Winter's review appears in the *New York Tribune*, 11 February 1904, p. 11a. An American play about the business world that he mentions in rather more praiseworthy terms is Thomas Q. Seabrooke's *The Speculator*, performed 18 April 1896. Another, likewise hostile review appears anonymously in *The Theatre*, 4 (March 1904), 57-58. This notice praised use of native materials on American stages—an acclaim that had long enjoyed currency in circles of American dramatic (and other literary) critics; see Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War* (New York and London: Harper, 1923); *A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day* (New York: Crofts, 1943); Walter J. Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). Yet another reviewer, who is in the main hostile to Pollock's play, calls particular attention to graphic elements in life in Chicago as it is depicted by the playwright: *Life Magazine*, 43 (25 February 1904), 188. I thank Robert C. Leitz, III, for calling my attention to this review.

<sup>5</sup>I cite Norris's *The Pit* in the Grove Press/Evergreen edition (New York and London, 1956), here, p. 4, with subsequent references noted parenthetically in my text. See also p. 155.

<sup>6</sup>An interesting point in comparative aesthetics might be observed here. Norris's *The Pit*, as is well known, was to have been part of an epic trilogy dealing with the wheat. His novel is filled with dramatic metaphors. Tennyson's *Idylls* emerged after he experimented with dramatic and epic methodology: see Paul F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1975), pp. 176-213. Further study will doubtless reveal additional affinities or influences in what Norris owed to Tennyson.

Review: *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*  
Compiled and edited by Jesse S. Crisler (San  
Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1986), 238  
pp. \$85.00  
Richard Allan Davison  
University of Delaware

Considering the steadily increasing critical and scholarly interest in the life and works of Frank Norris, as well as in his family and friends, the timing of Jesse S. Crisler's meticulously edited and beautifully printed edition of *Frank Norris: Collected Letters* could not be better. And the high quality of Crisler's work is an appropriate showcase for the 124 letters and 41 inscriptions included, most of which are from the most creative years of Norris's professional life. He has admirably succeeded in at once meeting the considerable need for information about Norris and whetting the appetite for more.

Turning up 25 new letters and 30 new inscriptions, Crisler has increased the available Frank Norris correspondence by one third. He has expertly incorporated the work of previous editors of Norris's letters, notably Franklin Walker's, whose notes and introductions to the 1956 *Letters of Frank Norris* form a sturdy foundation for the present volume. In his own introduction and notes to the individual items Crisler has also fused scattered information and brought many facts together with grace and good purpose. He has chased down the noteworthy implications of the most arcane of allusions, both consolidating and increasing the available data surrounding Frank Norris's life and art.

What comes across in the *Collected Letters* is a man of many voices, among them the dutiful reporter of fraternity news, the courteous charmer of women, the name-dropper, the purveyor of inside dope, the teller of war horror stories, the no-nonsense businessman, the playful enemy, the risqué fraternity brother, the proud author, the vain author, the mocking self-effacer, the ebullient enthusiast, the harsh self-critic, the astute critic of others, the faithful friend, the dutiful son-in-law. A Norris who is alive and vital emerges. Even the business-like letters exude verve and conviction, and most of the letters vibrate with energy, purpose, and self-confidence. Although some reveal the formal propriety of bread-and-butter notes of the 1890s, even these often have a playful, puckish undertone. Most of Frank's letters betray little of the self-conscious awareness that they might some day be edited for posterity, unlike the letters of his brother Charles and his sister-in-law Kathleen which were carefully numbered. Usually far briefer than Charles and Kathleen's letters, they are nonetheless packed with important and useful information.

Yet with all the revealing wealth of this new collection of missives and epigraphs, there remain gaps, some of them extraordinary, considering Frank Norris's many close friendships and family attachments. There is still no adequate record of Frank Norris as son, as brother, as lover. No childhood letters have surfaced. In fact, the first item in the collection dates from 1891 (?) when he was already 21. There are no letters to his father, mother

or brothers. The absence of a single love letter to his future wife Jeannette Black supports her claim that, "on marrying, they decided to burn them [the love letters they kept in a pillow-case] and did so in one grand fire." But what of the letters he wrote home during his two-year stint in Paris? What of the letters to family and friends he wrote during his later travels in America and abroad? A treasure hunt awaits indefatigable critics and biographers. Meanwhile this collection will serve very well indeed.

With painstaking research and scholarship and careful editing, Crisler has presented an admirable model for continued exploration. This is a fine book that clearly will be indispensable for any future critical, scholarly or biographical consideration of Frank Norris and his circle. A monument to Norris and Norris scholarship, it will serve as a catalyst for future scholars to search out the countless letters that are doubtless in libraries and in files and attics of the descendants of the recipients of his correspondence. *Frank Norris: Collected Letters* represents an important step toward the proper recognition of a still underrated major American writer.

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