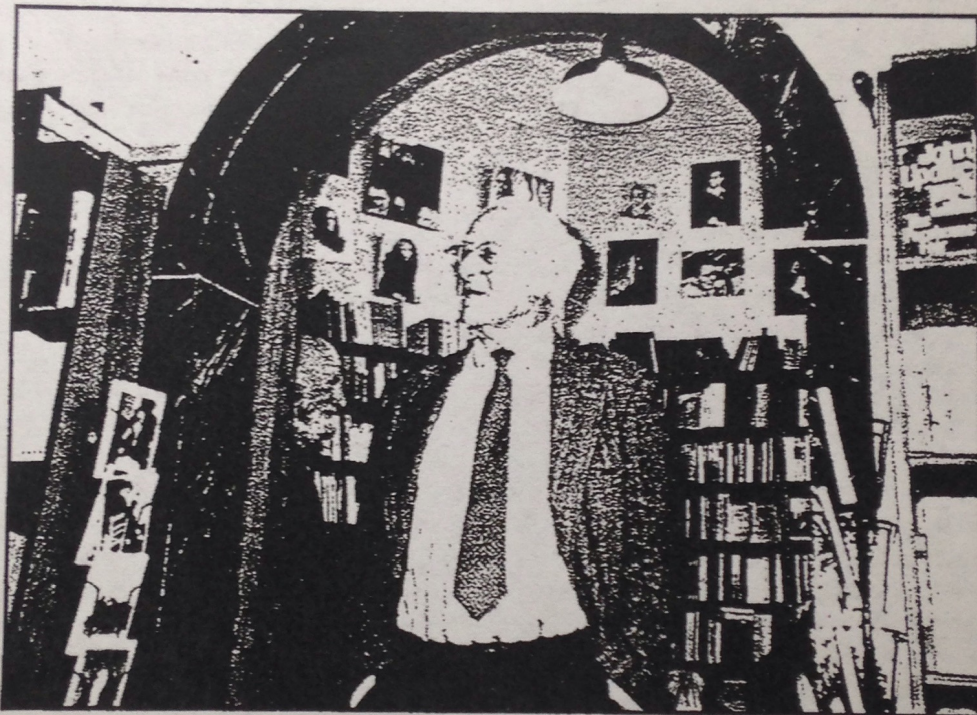


FRANK NORRIS STUDIES

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On 2 October 1988 at the City Lights Bookstore, James D. Hart offers remarks on the renaming of San Francisco streets after local literary artists such as Frank Norris.

IN MEMORIAM
JAMES D. HART
1911-1990

The late Dr. James D. Hart was, for twenty years, the Jim Hart whose office at the Bancroft Library was always open to scholars working with the Norris Collection there. Before and after he assumed the directorship of the library, he labored indefatigably to build up that collection. A distinguished Norris scholar himself, he was also exceptional as the dynamic enabler whose delight was in sharing the unique resources which he had assembled. Many a Society member will fondly remember Jim entering the reading room of the Bancroft, coming directly to one's desk, and asking how things were going and whether there was any problem in locating materials. He always showed a personal interest, as though one was his guest. Jim, the first president of the Norris Society, will be missed.

Toward a Biography of Frank Norris

Edwin Haviland Miller

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"This is the story of a boy who barely became a man before he died, but in whom the boyish qualities were the qualities which made him great," is the first sentence in Franklin Walker's *Frank Norris: A Biography*.¹ The sentence has predetermined much of the subsequent critical discussion of a boy-man who is one of the American originals in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain.

Alfred Kazin in 1942 writes of Norris's "invincible youthfulness," "boyish sentimentality," and "boyish energy"; it is an "inveterately curious, overgrown boy" he describes. "Though he was already a considerable artist," Kazin informs us, when he wrote *The Octopus*, Norris "was still a boy." And Kazin concludes that, like Jack London, Norris was "pre-eminently a child."²

Kenneth Lynn in 1955 entitles his essay "Frank Norris: Mama's Boy," a somewhat flippant title which undercuts some of his brilliant insights. Lynn states as fact that Norris "suffered all his life from being born with a silver spoon in his mouth," as though poor is better, and that Norris views women in his novels from the perspective "of a small boy looking at his mother."³

Warren French in 1962, while agreeing with his assessment, chides Walker for failing "to observe that boyishness is not enough where there is a man's job to be done." French insists that Norris "through most of his career . . . remained an overgrown boy," a "Peter Pan" in fact with "a hatred of growing up." He sums up: "This novelist is best understood as a fraternity man—a refugee from intellectualism."⁴

But the simple fact is that Frank Norris is not Peter Pan and grew up and at his death was within three years of the middle of the journey as measured in biblical time. The condescension and reductionism behind the boy thesis helps not at all in our understanding either of the man or of his art. As William B. Dillingham observes, Walker "bears down too heavily on Norris's boyishness and touches too lightly upon Norris's frustrations and psychological complexity."⁵

Admittedly the "story" of Frank Norris poses problems for the biographer and critic. There are in the superb new edition by Jesse S. Crisler only 124 letters, which, however, are not very helpful in providing clues to the personality and the depths of the novelist. There are no diaries or commonplace books. The recollections of his friends, gathered almost thirty years after his death, provide few penetrating insights into the Norris mystery, perhaps because friends refused to cast shadows on the reputation of a man who died tragically at 32. Or perhaps they refused to write freely when they observed that the two people who were in the best position to write about Norris, his wife and his brother Charles, took vows of silence, the wife perhaps because the marriage was not successful, the brother perhaps because he did not know how to handle the ambivalences of sibling rivalry. Charles and his wife Kathleen, an enormously successful writer of romances, should have been chilled for life after spending the first two weeks of their honeymoon listening to Gertrude Norris read aloud in entirety *McTeague* and *The Pit*. (Yet what an experience that must have been—listening to Gertrude Norris reading the speeches of her fictional

counterpart, Laura Dearborn Jadwin.)

It is doubtful at this late date that new holograph materials or unknown recollections will suddenly unfold the whole "story"; reminiscences often are fictions or perceptions which shed little light. We must be reconciled to the fact that, in biography as well as in criticism, truth inevitably mixed with the fictions of the writer himself, of observers, and, not least of all, of biographers and critics. Despite its limitations, Walker's biography has performed a great service, particularly in the interviews of those who knew Norris personally, and Norris admirers remain in his debt. In the changed critical climate of recent decades we now have more substantial commentaries which are free of the condescension and arrogance that marred the writings of many early interpreters. Norris's relevancy, his genius, and his art we have at long last begun to praise adequately. The boy has in fact at last become a man. It is time: on March 5, 1990, we celebrated his 120th birthday.

It is time, then, to consider closely omissions in biographical and critical commentaries, which are not separable, the art and artist being one.

(1) Too little attention has been paid to the impact of deaths in the Norris family. Gertrude watched helplessly as she lost three of her five children in the first twenty years of marriage. This is a frightful burden for any mother to bear. Frank, as the oldest of the surviving children, had to adjust to the loss of a sister when he was three and brother when he was seventeen. This, too, is shattering, especially if until his death, his brother Lester was the favorite child. Too many academicians shrink from dealing with death, as in the last century their predecessors shrank from dealing with sexuality.

(2) Sibling rivalry is a painful subject for the participants as Charles' silence and Frank's response to Lester's death indicate: the wounds are deep and lasting, unforgettable and too often unforgivable. The murder of Trina takes place in a setting which appears to be the Lester Norris Memorial Kindergarten, where she is now a scrubwoman, and, curiously Ida, the girl whom Vandover seduces, is a kindergarten teacher. Here Norris perhaps unveils his long-concealed hostility to the mother who favored his brother; the other side of his ambivalence appears in *The Pit*. It is perhaps no mistake that McTeague and Vandover are only children and that the Jadwins have no offspring.

(3) Although a few critics have observed the painful significance of the collapse of the Norris marriage in 1892 and its legal termination two years later, not enough attention has been directed to the feelings of abandonment and orphanhood even mature children feel as they watch a marriage disintegrate and a family collapse. It is no coincidence that in the two novels written in the aftermath of the divorce, *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*, the McTeague marriage collapses and no new family units are formed in either work.

(4) Some scholars speak of Frank's silver spoon, but ignore the fact that the father's relentless and successful upward mobility made it possible and necessary to purchase a Michigan Avenue mansion, with all its accouterments, yet two years later to move to Oakland, California, and almost at once to send Frank off to boarding school in Belmont. Frank had to break his arm in a football game in order to return home—now San Francisco—and resume his place at the center of the family. The father's pursuit of success

deprived the children of continuity in peer relationships, yet this has long been an acceptable form of child abuse. Frank himself perhaps treats the subject comically in the case of August Sieppe, whose impatient, abusive mother is responsible for the greatest wee-wee scene in literature, a scene which led to outrage and censorship. However, while Walker has Norris bouncing through childhood and adolescence, Norris's more observant uncle, W.A. Doggett, characterized the youth as "melancholy," or, perhaps more accurately, depressed.⁶ Substantiation appears in that extraordinary first chapter of *Vandover and the Brute* in what the narrator terms "scattered memory pictures," one of which depicts Vandover, alone, playing house with his guinea pigs in his back yard. The picture brands itself on the reader's consciousness: it is a brilliant example of Norris's understatement which too often has been ignored.

(5) Some commentators, particularly Maxwell Geismar and Kenneth Lynn, have treated the fiction autobiographically, primarily, however, from a rigidly Freudian perspective. They at least have ignored the absurdities of the Biographical Fallacy, when, every one should know, writers in words, painters with brushes, sculptors with their tools and musician with notes, will in one way or another record their autobiographies, their hopes, dreams, illusions, disappointments, failures, and wrenching confusions about life and living, which we as the audience share. Obviously biographers as well as critics should not be heavy-handed or indulge in promiscuous speculations but approach the writings with sensitivity and empathy, both of which have been sometimes lacking in the existing Norris criticism.

When he heard of Norris's death, Hamlin Garland wrote in one of the loveliest eulogies I have ever read, that Norris "was the kind of man whose hidden self—inarticulate so far as speech is concerned—becomes suddenly and surprisingly large simple and passionate as he begins to write. He was a *man* of great laughter—of that pithy speech—humorous almost always deeply sympathetic."⁷ Although Garland, unfortunately, does not elaborate, the hidden self is an excellent title for an analysis of the veils to which Norris, in the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, resorts in his self-portraiture. Norris agrees with Emile Zola as to "the suppression of the author's personality," with the qualification, "so far as possible." On another occasion he remarks: "It must be remembered that the artist has a double personality, himself as a man, and himself as an artist," which, like the comments of Hawthorne on the same subject, begs the question.⁸

Despite such lapses as those enumerated above, close readings of Norris's fiction disclose fruitful soil for both critical and biographical conclusions. In 1892, Norris's father departed for a trip around the world, after which he returned to Chicago and never saw the members of his family again. French chooses to dwell on Norris's hi-jinks in his fraternity house at this time, which may have been Norris's way of evading the pain which he was experiencing. When in 1894, Norris entered Harvard as a nondegree student, he was eager for the companionship of his peers, but he was also seeking ways to render in novel form the disintegration and degradation of McTeague and Vandover, whose depressions Frank understood from personal experience: he too often found himself alone, looking in horror into the abyss.

While *Vandover and the Brute* for a time closely reflects

Frank's experiences at Harvard, without reference, however, to the presence of his mother and brother Charles nearby (it may even be significant that Vandover's mother is dead), and describes Norris's failure as a painter, *McTeague* unveils a painful self-portrait from another perspective. Nothing about the physically and intellectually musclebound McTeague appears to resemble Frank Norris, until we recognize that the would-be dentist originates in his creator's unconscious, with murderous fantasies, sexual aberrations and shattering feelings of anxiety. McTeague acts out his rage, while Vandover, truly born with the silver spoon, listlessly self-destructs, adjusting to downward mobility seemingly with little difficulty, hiding the agony as any well-bred son will do. What we observe, then, are two ways of coping with depression and despair.

Norris appears freer in *McTeague* perhaps in dealing with the "hidden life." Look at the subject matter of the novel: a rape fantasy in the dentist's office, fears of emasculation ("you can't make small of me"), homoeroticism in the physical and sexual rivalry of McTeague and Marcus Schouler, the sadomasochistic sexuality of the McTeagues, the alcoholism of the father and son, Trina's sexualization of her greed, the grisly murder, and the deaths of the two men bonded at last, with handcuffs. We should also note that Frank Norris himself, in the company of one of his college friends, meets McTeague in the office of the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County after McTeague returns to his former home where his father and he worked together. This authorial intrusion in a tragic novel surely establishes Norris's identification with his character.

In the upper middle-class world of *Vandover and the Brute*, we witness the sordid bacchanalian reveries in the Imperial Cafe with pathetic whores like Flossie, who infects the virginal Dolly as well as Vandover; the suicide of Ida, who wants to be a good girl and have fun; compulsive gambling and alcoholism; a lurid drowning at sea; the lycanthropy of Vandover as well as his deadening depression as he seems to shrink into a horrifying, nonfeeling, perhaps fetal state.

McTeague and Vandover in ways doomed to fail attempt to recover a past, not an Eden but a Conradian "horror." One is the son of an alcoholic miner given to uncontrollable rages and a mother willing to apprentice him to a quack dentist, perhaps with the best intentions, although that is not the son's perception: McTeague "resumes his life again exactly where he had left it when his mother had *sent him away* with the traveling dentist."⁹ Vandover loses his mother when he is eight and drifts to maturity with a pleasant but essentially indifferent "governor," old enough to be his grandfather, who governs with 25-cent bribes. After the collapse of his marriage and a career as a dentist, McTeague seeks to replicate his youth by fishing, drinking, and working in an all-male society. After the murder of Trina, who "makes small" of him, he returns to his old position in the illusory security of a man's world, and continues to expend his little supply of love, his only constant, on the canary in the golden cage, which has always been his tie to the mines and his father's world. When he dies handcuffed to his old friend-enemy, Marcus Schouler, "the half-dead canary [is] chattering in its little gilt prison," as Norris delicately empathizes with suffering man in the pitiless golden light of the desert.¹⁰

One morning Vandover is enjoying womblike security in the warm water of his bath, "with his novel on a rack in front of him and a box of chocolates conveniently near . . . eating and reading

... until at length the enervating heat of the steam gradually overcame him and he dropped off to sleep.¹¹ His illusory security is suddenly shattered when he learns of Ida's suicide. The "governor" provides the money for Vandover to leave town when a scandal erupts. The father dies suddenly and the son is filled, at least for a while, with guilt. Soon there is endless drift and decline as Vandover searches randomly for the father and presumably for forgiveness. As Don Graham notes, in decorating toy banks, Vandover associates himself in futile imitation with his father's materialistic success.¹² He is cheated of his father's real estate holdings by his Harvard chum, Geary, who, however, acts as a self-serving paternal surrogate. Finally, Geary puts Vandover to work cleaning a sink in a building once owned by the father. The new renter of the house (a burnisher, a word rich in chivalric and literary associations) rewards Vandover with a 25-cent tip, evoking the father's rewards. The last scene of the novel ends in a frieze—the burnisher's son and Vandover looking at each other, "the little boy standing before him eating the last mouthful of his bread and butter," a scene which certainly belies the allegations that Norris lacks empathy and art.¹³

A slight shift in perspective to consider the orality of Norris's materials in the early novels reveals that he also anticipates the Freudian construct of the three phases of development—oral, anal, and genital—and introduces a unifying motif in his writings. McTeague, novel and character, is enveloped in orality, with a skill and immense subtlety for which Norris is given too little credit. The relationship of McTeague and Trina begins in his dental office and is consistently developed in an oral framework: the rape fantasy in the dental chair, the gold tooth, the Sieppe picnics, the biting necessary for sexual consummation, and Trina's sublimation when she takes gold coins in her mouth and rubs her body in coins. The relationship of McTeague and Marcus begins in bars and develops in the extraordinary billiard ball scene and physical contest involving biting. The hungry McTeague throws cherry seeds against Trina's window before the murder. The mine to which McTeague returns has an "enormous maw" and finally thirst leads to the death of the male antagonists and the canary.

Oral imagery also links the three plots of the novel. Zerkow goes almost insane and murders in his lust for the gold plates of Maria's imagination. The gentle Miss Baker (observe the name) brews her tea nightly on her side of the wall which separates her from Mr. Grannish, whose name conjures up granary, in a delightful parody, perhaps, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The wedding feast unfolds with luxurious oral excesses and concludes brilliantly, foreshadowing the tragic conclusion of the novel, when the song the participants remember well enough to sing together is "Nearer My God to Thee."

Oral imagery also pervades *Vandover and the Brute* from the bathtub scene to "the old hambone covered with a greenish fuzz" which Vandover discovers below the sewer pipe. His drunken cronies raucously and lasciviously sing of cherries on the streets. The next night Ida, who has heard of the incident, is seduced in one of the closed dining rooms at the Imperial. In his decline and seizures Vandover crawls on the floor like a hungry wolf, and finally settles into the Lick House, which prepares the reader for the final frieze of a loved child and an unloved man who vaguely, if stupidly, hungers for the maternal breast with its promise of security and gratification.

Observe, too, that in the trilogy which Norris did not live to complete the subject of his so-called epic is wheat and the universal hunger of humankind, but the foundations of his art rendered it inevitable that the universal condition will be played out in the framework of the family romance and autobiography.

The Pit, as everyone (surprisingly) agrees, deals with the story of Norris's parents and the collapse of their relationship, which, however in Norris's fiction, is averted at the last moment. In the year of his father's death, 1900, Norris began his memorial of a man whom he had not seen for eight or nine years and who had disinherited him, as in effect the son did the father in his contraction of his name from Benjamin Franklin Norris, Jr., to Frank Norris. *The Pit* is, then, a fiction consisting of the son's fictions concerning what transpired between his parents three or more years before his birth, and concludes with a happy ending and filial forgiveness, perhaps, of both parents. Before he began to write Norris returned to Chicago in order to understand the workings of the grain market and, like McTeague, to revisit scenes of childhood.

The novel depicts a battle between and in the grain pit and the orchestra pit, between materialism and art, which, we discover, have things in common—the Unknown Bull of the market and the toreador of the opera, mediated as it were by Corthell, a Mephistophelean character out of the opera, *Faust*, the music of which is heard on the day Jadwin's predecessor failed to corner the wheat market.

If, as Lynn suggests, Corthell is a portrait of Frank Norris himself, not of Bruce Porter, one of Norris's closest friends and an artist, as Walker proposes, we witness not only the son's rivalry with the father for the mother, the oedipal situation, but also the son's recognition of the erotic nature of the involvement and its destructive effects upon the unity of the family.¹⁴

And so, in what was to be the last frieze or tableau in his writings, the son effects the reconciliation of his parents and their departure from Chicago for the West, to California—filled with hope that they can recapture security—and love—and give rebirth to Benjamin Franklin Norris, Jr.

Notes

¹(New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 1.

²*On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), pp. 99, 101, 102, 111.

³*The Dream of Success* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), pp. 160, 184.

⁴Warren French, *Frank Norris* (New York: Twayne, 1962), pp. 46, 47, 140-141.

⁵*Frank Norris: Instinct and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), pp. 155-56.

⁶Dillingham, p. 4.

⁷Reprinted in *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, ed. Jesse S. Crisler (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1986), p. 227 (italics added).

⁸*The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), pp. 55, 92.

⁹*McTeague*, in *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 216 (italics added).

¹⁰*McTeague*, p. 249.

¹¹*Vandover and the Brute*, in *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*,

ed. Donald Pizer (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 75.

¹²*The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 29.

¹³*Vandover*, p. 260.

¹⁴Lynn, p. 207, and Walker, p. 260.

Self-Disclosure in the Fiction of Frank Norris

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... the critics of the twenty-second century ... striving to reconstruct our civilization, will look not to the painters, not to the architects nor dramatists, but to the novelists to find our idiosyncrasy.¹

Like other late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers of fiction, Norris polemically affirmed the disappearance of the author from the work. "The man behind the pen—what has the public to do with him?" asks Norris in "A Problem in Fiction." By way of an answer, he advocates—"so far as possible"—"the suppression of the author's personality" in fiction.² At the same time, however, there is a kind of authorial intrusion or presence in the story which Norris both coveted and feared. To reflect upon the grounds of this tension between the absence and the presence of the writer in the text is to clarify Norris's conception of writing itself—his notion of the writer's tale as a source not only of power and pleasure, but also of potential danger.

Despite Norris's programmatic emphasis on the neutral voice and absent writer of the story, his conception of fiction, especially as expressed in his critical writing and his letters, paradoxically reveals a wish for intimacy and physical presence in and through writing. Such a wish is already implicit in Norris's well-known evocations of the oral storyteller, spinning his yarn. Norris's polemical insistence on the value of "yarns" and just "tell[ing] your story," over and above a concern with style or "literariness," is familiar and often discussed. But one aspect of Norris's yarn-spinner rhetoric has remained in the background. The proximity of teller and listener implicit in the very idea of a storyteller provides a sharp contrast to the professional writer of "realist" fiction who keeps himself (or herself)—both body and personality—veiled and removed from the text. The very idea of an oral storyteller depends upon the concept of a speaker who is present and visible. Norris often evokes an idyllic image of the teller/listener situation—"young Greeks ... on marble terraces ... listen[ing] to the thunderous roll of Homer's hexameter" or "young boys" in "feudal castles" listening to the "minstrel [sing] ... of Roland."³ Whatever the historical status of such images, they suggest that Norris's repeated complaint over the lack of an American "epic" is at least partially informed by his sense of a lost value inherent in the traditional relationship between listener and bard.

If one is telling a story, rather than writing a manuscript, one does need to be there, before one's audience—in person. The problematic shift from being there in the flesh, to only being there in (or behind) the written words on the page, repeatedly makes itself felt as a tension in Norris's own writing. A great deal of Norris's

work is informed by uncertainty or ambivalence about the extent to which he (or any author) is simultaneously inside and outside his or her story. Like any writer of fiction, Norris surely projected aspects of himself and his experience into his work. Condy Rivers in *Blix* is only the most obvious example of a figure whose experience is informed by events and aspirations known to have been shared by Norris himself.

In the little book that Charles Norris wrote about his brother in 1914, he notes a more oblique intrusion into a text by Norris's image of himself. Referring to a description of a mining office in *McTeague*, Charles Norris focuses upon a character with "hair surprisingly gray, who was playing with a half-grown Great Dane puppy. . . ." This was Frank himself. One of the other men was his college chum, the owner of the mine, who was afterwards to furnish the material for . . . Annixter in *The Octopus*.⁴ Charles continues: "Nothing could be more characteristic of the whimsical humor of Frank Norris than this casual introduction of himself into his story."⁴ If we reflect upon this vignette in the context of his repeated assertion that the author should stay out of his fiction, Norris's own storytelling begins to look like a way of appearing and disappearing at one and the same time. Perhaps he saw the work of fiction as a medium for controlled visibility, for a teasing game of peak-a-boo in which the possibility of self-representation, even self-disclosure, is alternately entertained and resisted.

It is worth noting, however, that while the moment referred to by Charles Norris—or the portrait of Condy in *Blix*—would seem to assert the possibility of the writer's controlled or limited appearance within his own text, both *McTeague* and *Blix* bristle with characters in the grip of compulsive activities. Not the least of these activities is obsessive storytelling itself. Such storytelling, beyond the control of either will or intellect, afflicts not only Maria Macapa in *McTeague*, and Captain Jack in *Blix*, but many other characters throughout Norris's work. Thus the figure of Condy—or the image of Frank Norris in the mining office—reflects not only Norris's characteristic sense of humor, but also a certain ambivalence about the effaced or neutral storyteller. Throughout his work, intermittent traces of "the man behind the pen" express a serious concern with the dynamics of self-control and self-exposure inseparable both from the process of spinning yarns and writing fiction.

As a writer, Norris certainly strove for control of his medium—and control of himself in relation to it. If Norris sometimes slips images of himself into his text on purpose, however, he is keenly aware nonetheless of the potential danger of doing so inadvertently. Writing about his own writing (especially in his letters), moreover, Norris repeatedly conveys not only a strong sense of physical presence experienced in the act of writing, but also a sense of physical power and physical impact. "I'm full of ginger and red pepper," Norris declares to his friends, the Peixottos, as he begins his work on *The Octopus*: "[I] am getting ready to stand up on my hind legs and yell big."⁵ A sense of vigorous well-being and noisy exuberance characterizes Norris's descriptions of reading and writing throughout his letters. Norris speaks of the "hair-lifting story" he means to write, the manuscript that "slumps and strikes", the book that "hits hard" and gives one "a kink in the brain."⁶ All these images suggest forceful, physical impact on another person as the consequence of storytelling.

To contemplate the signs of this powerful exuberance,

however, is again to confront, in other terms, the question of modulation or control. Norris's sense of physical exhilaration often borders on potential violence. The novelist who goes "a-gunning for stories," "hair-lifting stories," that "hit hard," is hardly a neutral observer. Moreover, intertwined with the notion of physical presence or bodily contact is a fear of unwitting exposure that may help explain Norris's wish to keep himself hidden behind his own words.

Norris's work is consistently informed not only by a hesitation about embodying oneself in a story (or a story in oneself) but also by a conflict between the impulse to display and *not* to display oneself. Within his fiction, Norris's portrait of Laura in *The Pit* most explicitly thematizes the implications of self-display. "It's myself, for the moment, whatever it is," Laura says, when she plays Theodora, Athalia, and Carmen in turn.⁷ Throughout the novel, Laura insists upon the right to present herself in a variety of guises, especially at times of inner stress. What Page calls Laura's "grand manner," moreover, is a weapon she employs, now to make others "pay" (as she reflects during her first encounter with Jadwin),⁸ now in an effort to "make" others love her.⁹ Yet Laura ultimately questions her own motives for the self-display with which, toward the end of the novel, she tries to force her husband to return to her.¹⁰

If Laura's impulse to display herself in order to exercise power or elicit love is critically scrutinized by the end of *The Pit*, other traces of this dynamic in Norris's work more clearly suggest the relevance of self-display to the writer of fiction. At the level of policy, or ideology, Norris certainly affirms the absent or hidden author—especially at the climax of a story. "[W]hen the catastrophe comes," Norris notes in "Simplicity in Art," "we want to forget the author."¹¹ From this point of view, as from several others, the epic writer is Norris's ideal.

In "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," Norris speaks of the novel as "essential . . . to the civilization of the twentieth century. . . . Because [the novel] is so all-powerful today," Norris says, "the people turn to him who wields this instrument with every degree of confidence. . . . The unknown archer who grasps the bow of Ulysses may be expected by the multitude to send his shaft far and true. If he is not true nor strong he has no business with the bow."¹² This description would seem to conflate, or collapse, two images, evoking two figures at once. "The unknown archer . . . expected by the multitude to send his shaft far and true" is not only Homer (or the novelist), but also Ulysses (or the hero). Certainly for Norris, as for innumerable other readers, Homer is the very epitome of the "unknown" or absent author, even as Ulysses is the truest of archers.

Certain other implications also emerge from Norris's image of the novelist "who wields [an all-powerful] instrument." His evocation of the writer as the "unknown archer who grasps the bow of Ulysses" is especially suggestive when seen in the context of the *Odyssey* itself on one hand, and Norris's own early fiction on the other. In "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," Norris repeatedly refers to the novel as an "instrument." Indeed, he speaks of the novel as both the most expressive and the most powerful instrument of the modern age. The analogy between the novel and the bow of Ulysses bears further scrutiny, however. In the *Odyssey* to be sure, Ulysses—or Odysseus—is a consummate master of his instrument, his medium. But his medium is not exclusively the bow

and arrow, instruments of war. Odysseus' medium is also the disguise, and the story.

Indeed, Odysseus is the storyteller and actor *par excellence*—and never more so than toward the end of the *Odyssey* when, disguised as a beggar and undetected by his own wife, he carefully orchestrates and controls a sequence of recognition scenes. The culminating moment of these "recognitions" is the moment that Norris refers to in "Responsibilities of the Novelist"—the moment of stringing the bow. This, then, is not merely the moment when Odysseus asserts his power, arming himself and beginning to kill the suitors. It is also the moment when Odysseus reveals his identity, to reclaim his rightful place as ruler, father of Telemachos, and husband of the faithful Penelope.

The further implications of this moment, for Norris, can be better appreciated when Ulysses' self-assertion and self-revelation are juxtaposed with a different recognition scene, within Norris's own work. An early story, "The Jongleur of Taillebois," presents another figure who takes up a stringed instrument at a decisive moment—with very different results. "The Jongleur" begins with the secret burial of a murdered man. Amelot buries his victim in a forest, beneath a pit where a tree is to be planted the following day. Fifteen years later, Amelot is felled in a storm by the very tree that has grown over the spot. When he recovers from this accident, Amelot finds himself unable to proceed with the trade of war by which he made his living; and so "[h]e turned jongleur . . . he changed the lance for the lute, and carrying it under his arm went to the cradle of song and poetry. . . . He went to France, he went to Provence."¹³

Waiting his turn to perform in a contest of minstrel players, Amelot selects an "instrument with which to accompany his song"; he chooses "a *vielle* . . . of marvellous workmanship," and prepares to sing a recent Italian love song.¹⁴ As soon as he begins to play, however, Amelot—unlike Odysseus stringing his bow—no longer controls either the instrument or himself:

. . . no sooner had he laid his bow to the quivering strings than a strange spirit, seemingly emanating from the richly carved sounding box, took possession of him; he was no longer master of himself, the bow refused to obey his will, driven by one stronger than his own. The *vielle* seemed on a sudden to be endowed with some strange inhuman life.¹⁵

When "resourceful Odysseus" takes up the great bow, he "easily . . . pulls the strongly twisted cord" and, stringing the bow "without any strain," plucks the bowstring to elicit a fitting response: "an excellent sound like the voice of a swallow."¹⁶ By contrast, Amelot's instrument seemed to

swell and contract like the hide of a serpent. . . . the slack . . . strings hanging from the pegs coiled themselves about his fingers and drove them along the keyboard with resistless force. . . . The *vielle* was playing of itself; by it he had become completely mastered, and had been transformed into the mere instrument of the instrument's self.¹⁷

Soon he "had felt the hair of his flesh to stand up with unspeakable horror, for the air was not his chosen composition, but

one that had been the favorite of [the man he had murdered]."¹⁸

Amelot's violent effort to stop the unbearable tune elicits "a chord, a sound, a cry that set his every nerve aprick with . . . horror, for the note evoked was the precise musical imitation of Yere's death scream."¹⁹ Smashing the instrument, Amelot saw "in its shattered fragments . . . a revolting, thick, and darkly ruddy ichor" and "recognized the wood of the Black Pine of the Taillebois forest"—wood of the tree that had grown over the body of the murdered man.²⁰ "And now [Amelot] looked about him, struggling to regain composure, wondering if it was his voice that but now had been so passionately speaking, and if it had been so, endeavoring, yet fearing, to recollect what he had confessed."²¹ His own voice has replaced his chosen song, and he has, of course, confessed his crime, unmasking himself as murderer.

Norris's tale of the jongleur's self-exposure—the tale of a murderer-minstrel turned confessor—raises many questions in the context of the issues under discussion here. Is confession (spontaneous and uncontrollable confession) *always* a potential danger when one sings a song, or tells a story? Is such danger present even if one does not seem to be telling a story of oneself? Certainly the jongleur's own intention is to sing a wholly neutral song. He selects his instrument with "methodical calculation" and chooses the song itself with reference to the composition of his audience.²² Nonetheless, his instrument takes on a life of its own and betrays him. Perhaps it is no wonder that the writer of this tale worried about keeping himself out of his story.

Like the jongleur's *vielle*, Ulysses' bow is an "instrument" of self-revelation. Through Odysseus' use of his bow he shows us who he is, and with this showing he reasserts his public claim to all the prerogatives of identity. If Odysseus fully controls instrument and self-disclosure alike, however, the case of Norris's wanderer is different. The song and the instrument that are to serve one purpose serve another; and self destruction is the consequence of self-revelation.

In "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" Norris uses the image of Ulysses stringing his bow as a stand-in for the figure of the writer. In the "Jongleur," on the other hand, Norris is "simply" telling a yarn. But to place Norris's image of Odysseus in the context of his wandering minstrel—and to consider both figures in the light of Norris's comments about writing—is to find hidden complexities and a potential for unwitting self-disclosure, in every simple telling of one's tale.

Notes

¹"The Responsibilities of the Novelist," in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Russell and Russell, 1976), p. 95.

²In *The Literary Criticism*, p. 55.

³"A Neglected Epic," in *The Literary Criticism*, p. 120.

⁴*Frank Norris* (New York: Doubleday Page & Co., 1914), p. 10.

⁵*The Letters of Frank Norris*, ed. Franklin Walker (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1956), p. 38.

⁶*Letters*, pp. 35, 67, 91.

⁷(New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), p. 312.

⁸"She had not yet forgiven [Jadwin] that stare of suspicion when first their eyes had met; he should pay her for that yet" (*The Pit*, p. 13).

⁹Laura challenges both Jadwin and Corthell to "make me love you," when they first propose marriage; toward the end of the novel, largely through her theatrical representations, she tries to "make" Jadwin love her again.

¹⁰She reflects, "Was this, after all, the right way to win her husband back to her—this display of her beauty, this parade of dress, this exploitation of self" (*The Pit*, p. 464).

¹¹In *The Literary Criticism*, p. 63.

¹²In *The Literary Criticism*, p. 45.

¹³In *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), vol. 10, 12.

¹⁴"The Jongleur," 13.

¹⁵"The Jongleur," 13-14.

¹⁶Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), Book 21, lines 407-11.

¹⁷"The Jongleur," 14.

¹⁸"The Jongleur," 14.

¹⁹"The Jongleur," 14.

²⁰"The Jongleur," 15.

²¹"The Jongleur," 15.

²²He had selected his song in reference to the character of those who were to listen to it ("The Jongleur," p. 13).

The Critical Reception of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*

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Norris's *McTeague* met with much critical dismay in 1899 because of its graphic portrayal of the seamier side of life. It should come as no surprise, then, that Erich von Stroheim's film adaptation of the novel, *Greed*, also scandalized much of the critical community in 1924. Von Stroheim earned his moniker of "the man you love to hate" not only through his budgetary excesses and tyrannical directorial method, but also through such depictions of outrageous subject matter in films of painstaking realism. As will be seen, reactions to the man and his work have ranged from near-hatred to virtually unqualified admiration. The constant amidst it all is that all responses have been as extreme as that which provoked them. There is hardly a dull moment in the body of literature containing the reactions.

Greed promised to be the ultimate von Stroheim production, as Norris's sensational novel provided material perfect for the director's image. The MGM studio and film critics played on this image in its pre-release hype of the film. Henry Carr, one of von Stroheim's staunchest supporters, saw most of the rushes and called it "the most wonderful stuff I have ever seen on the screen."¹ In April of 1924, Carr wrote:

I saw a wonderful picture the other day—that no one else will ever see. It was the unslaughtered version of Erich von Stroheim's *GREED*. It was a magnificent piece of work, but it was forty-five reels long. We went into the projecting-room at 10:30 in the morning; we staggered out at 8:00 that night. I can't imagine what they are going to do with it. It is like *Les Misérables*. Episodes

come along that you think have no bearing on the story, then twelve or fourteen reels later, it hits you with a crash. For stark, terrible realism and marvelous artistry, it is the greatest picture I have ever seen.

Could any other director in the world have gotten away with this? One of the best love scenes in the picture is played with the lovers sitting on an outfall sewer pipe down which the body of a dead cat has just drifted. And I give you my word, it is a tender, beautiful and romantic love scene.²

MGM did know, however, that it had a "problem sell" with this sordid film in an age of Hollywood happy endings. The studio cautiously released the film on 4 December 1924 in a small first-run house, New York's Cosmopolitan Theatre, hoping good reviews would arouse public curiosity.³

The reviews were not good and the public was not curious. The *New York Times* lauded the acting, the editing, the direction, and the realism, but ultimately found the film to be "the sour creme de la sour creme de la bourgeoisie. . . . From beginning to end this affair is sordid, and deals only with the excrescences of life such as would flabbergast even those dwelling in lodging houses on the waterfront."⁴ *Variety* aptly recognized the film's subject matter as box-office poison:

Nothing more morbid and senseless from a commercial picture standpoint has been seen on the screen in a long long time. . . . It is a cinch that there isn't going to be a mob clamoring at the door of the Cosmopolitan comprising mothers and fathers who are taking their children to the theatre to give them a good time. . . . The women won't like it. Imagine any girl keeping company with a young fellow urging him to take her to see "Greed" when she knows the night that he sits through it he is going to sour on every thought that has to do with marriage!⁵

James R. Quirk in *Photoplay* (February, 1925) took a more direct approach: "Greed is sordid. Greed is depressing. Greed is brutal. Greed is shocking. It reeks with good acting and wonderful direction. . . . Director von Stroheim has emphasized the detail of a sordid story until it becomes almost repulsive. It is the realism of vulgarity to the nth degree, and if that is art, von Stroheim has produced a masterpiece."⁶ *Moving Picture World* offered roughly the same assessment, great acting and direction but unbearable sordidness: "Despite its good points, . . . it does not entertain, for it leaves one with the impression in which a sordid theme, a morbid tone, the stressing of the unpleasant and a gruesome ending are dominant and outweigh the excellent acting, fine direction and undoubted power of the story."⁷ Laurence Reid of *Motion Picture News* disagreed that the art of the film could be separated from its subject matter: "This effort to show the unwholesome expressions of life does not develop the characters, nor does it build drama—for these characters and this plot are so definitely established in their sordid environment that the director's hammer-like blows struck for the cause of stark realism lose their significance."⁸

Perhaps the most hysterical review appeared in *Harrison's*

Reports:

If a contest were to be held to determine which has been the filthiest, vilest, most putrid picture in the history of the motion picture business, I am sure *Greed* would walk away with the honors. . . . I do not remember ever having seen a picture in which an attempt was made to pass as entertainment dead rats, sewers, filth, rotten meat, persons with frightful looking teeth, characters picking their noses, people holding bones in their hands and eating like street dogs or gorging on other food like pigs, a hero murdering his wife and then shown with hands dripping with blood; I have never in all my life seen a picture in which all the principal characters were people of the gutter and remained such to the end. All these things and more are found in *Greed*; they will turn inside-out the stomach of even a street cleaner.⁹

Another point of criticism centered on the length. Even though von Stroheim had edited his ten-plus hour version down to four hours and an unnamed editor had further pared it down to two, critics found the film too long. The *New York Times* praised the editing generally, but "the only pity is that they did not use the scissors more generously in the beginning."¹⁰ Robert Sherwood in *Life* said, "Von Stroheim is a genius—*Greed* establishes that beyond all doubt—but he is badly in need of a stopwatch."¹¹

There were a few voices of support for the film among contemporary critics, however. Matthew Josephson virtually revelled in what everyone else found repugnant: "Those deeply moving experiences which I demand of a great art that almost leaves wounds and scars in the memory, come in fragments of 'Greed,' Eric von Stroheim's great picture. To see this is like living thru the night of one of those big storms on the Atlantic. . . . It was these new and terrible sensations of deep shadows and masses, of heavy tragic movements that I got from 'Greed.'"¹² Despite Iris Barry's complaints about the smudged yellow tinting of all gold objects and "unnecessary symbolism," she hailed the film as "a magnificent piece of realism, and nothing like it has been seen before. . . . The producer of *Greed* must be reckoned with the few men who are really contributing to the development of the motion picture. . . . He has made here a masterpiece in quite a new manner."¹³ Richard Watts, Jr. of the *New York Herald Tribune* called *Greed* "the most important picture yet produced in America. . . . It is the one picture of the season that can hold its own as a work of dramatic art worthy of comparison with such stage plays as 'What Price Glory?' and 'Desire Under the Elms.' When the 'movies' can produce a *Greed* they can no longer be sneered at."¹⁴ *Exceptional Photoplays* applauded the liberating influence of the film:

For motion picture art has by this time attained its majority. It is entitled to experiment in any form from the ultra-sentimental to the latest fad in symbolism. The days of censorship in that sense, the feeling that motion pictures must always be pretty pictures, are over. The time has come when we can invite the spirit of Matthew Arnold to the screen to see what he saw in litera-

ture, namely a criticism of life. Most emphatically, there is and should be a place for a picture like *Greed*.¹⁵

Von Stroheim himself committed an act of criticism by disowning the released version of the film and often claimed that he would never stoop to see it, though there is plenty of evidence that he did see it several times, even that he owned a print. Herman Weinberg quotes von Stroheim, after seeing the released version, as saying, "It was as if a man's beloved was run over by a truck, maimed beyond recognition. He goes to see her in the morgue. Of course, he still loves her, but it's only the memory of her that he can love—because he doesn't recognize her anymore."¹⁶ The director was also reported to have been at a press party to inaugurate a season of his films at the National Film Theatre in 1953 with *Greed* as its prime attraction,¹⁷ and George Mitchell, in a letter responding to William Everson's tribute to von Stroheim in *Films in Review* after his death, recalls a 1952 meeting with von Stroheim, who invited him to a private screening of *Greed* in Munich, a screening of the director's own print. Mitchell also claims that von Stroheim, while regretting the state of the released version, "did not seem at all bitter about the way *Greed* had been cut from more than 20 to 10 reels."¹⁸

Much later criticism of the film centers on this issue of the extent to which the cutting harmed or helped the film. Robert Herrin in 1930 admits the sudden transitions from Trina's thrift to her miserliness are disconcerting, but places blame more on von Stroheim than the editor: "It is one of Stroheim's faults that he cannot select. His incidents rely for their effect not on significance but on accumulation; if one of them goes, something goes from the whole film."¹⁹ Joel Finler is most adamant about the devastating effects of the cuts, calling the film a "mutilation" and excoriating "the complete destruction of the original balance between the realistic and naturalistic, and the weird, bizarre or subjective elements."²⁰ Most of the cuts are complete excisions of whole scenes and of the Grannis/Baker and Maria/Zerkow subplots, so most remaining scenes are intact. Nevertheless, Finler criticizes especially the excision of Mac and Trina's happy life ("without this we cannot fully appreciate the extent of their later degradation"²¹) and the sub-plots, especially since "a great strength of Stroheim's direction is the interaction between major and minor characters."²² Overall, though, "all that remain are the few climactic scenes. The film suffers from a concentration, in which one intensely dramatic scene follows another without any respite."²³ Most critics agree that the replacement of whole story sections by intertitles, some extremely inept, was a weakness, so much so that, as Lewis Jacobs says, "the picture became mere verbal representation."²⁴

Despite Jacobs' recognition of the problems caused by the excisions, as well as von Stroheim's "lack of knowledge and power in editing,"²⁵ he still finds *Greed* "an important contribution to movies in general"²⁶ for its emphasis on what is now called *mise-en-scène*, even though the genius of the director's composition is due to his editing "incompetence." Jacobs even goes so far as to call *Greed* "an outstanding achievement in American film tradition"²⁷ and finds the cut version of *Greed* perfectly acceptable:

Significantly enough, this depletion and editing of von Stroheim's work by another mind did not vitally affect it. His films are not based on the

editing principle but on the piling up of detail within the scenes. In the scenes themselves he did everything that another director would do by cutting; his continuity and story were within the scene itself, and did not depend for meaning upon a particular combination and organization of shots. Details, action, and comment were selected and brought into the camera's scope without any changing of shot. Hence someone else could edit von Stroheim's films without destroying the essential von Stroheim: the edited version was not so effective as the original, but it was still powerful.²⁸

Perhaps the staunchest supporter of the cut version of *Greed* is William K. Everson. In 1952, in his tribute after von Stroheim's death, he scolds both von Stroheim and everyone else who calls the film a pathetic hack job:

Greed was cut with respect and care and its editing is masterly. It looks as though it had been shot that way, and anyone ignorant of the film's history is not aware of gaps in story or continuity. The editing of *Greed* was not a job of slick condensation, or of covering-up for missing sequences. It was a creative work in itself. Critics are unanimous that *Greed* is a motion picture masterpiece, and this judgment is based on the "butchery" of this cutter, not on Stroheim's original conception or on all the footage he shot.²⁹

Everson continues his campaign to uphold the integrity of the MGM 10-reel version in his 1978 book, *American Silent Film*: "The ten-reel version as released is definitely a masterpiece . . . The theme of *Greed* is concentrated in a ten-reel version in a way that would have been impossible in the longer version that Stroheim conceived."³⁰

In his seminal *What Is Cinema?*, André Bazin also recognizes von Stroheim's power in composition rather than editing:

But it is most of all Stroheim who rejects photographic expressionism and the tricks of montage. In his films reality lays itself bare. . . . He has one simple rule for direction. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and ugliness. One could easily imagine as a matter of fact a film by Stroheim composed of a single shot as long-lasting and as close-up as you like.³¹

With critics like Jacobs, Everson, and Bazin making their contributions, criticism of the film had moved from the commercial realm to the artistic and academic, and *Greed* achieved the reputation as a "great" film. Fellow directors invariably cited von Stroheim and *Greed* as influential greats. Renoir and Cocteau called *Greed* "the greatest of all films." Eisenstein called von Stroheim "the director of all directors." Sternberg said, "We were all influenced by *Greed*." Lubitsch dubbed von Stroheim "the screen's only novelist."³² Film critics and historians inevitably place von Stroheim and *Greed* as important figures in cinema for ground-breaking subject matter as well as adaptation and cinematic

technique, not to mention their places in industry history. David A. Cook's assessment in a general film history is typical:

Greed is a fragmentary masterpiece with vast gaps in continuity bridged by lengthy titles, but it is a masterpiece nonetheless. Because von Stroheim was an original master of the long take and built up his most powerful effects *within* shots rather than editing between them, many of the film's greatest sequences have survived intact. Even as it stands, *Greed* is overwhelming in its psychological intensity, for von Stroheim used strikingly clear deep-focus photography and a documentary-like *mise-en-scene* to totally immerse us in the reality of the film. . . . In its uncompromising depiction of degradation and despair, it raises reality to the level of symbol and asks profound questions about the nature of human experience.³³

It seems the worst that can be said about the film is that "*Greed* remains a laboratory experiment of the first importance—valuable for its failures as well as its successes, and comprising a virtual textbook on some of the formal issues that it raises."³⁴ This "museum piece" attitude persists, and the film remains a document more than a vital entertainment, seen only at occasional von Stroheim revivals and under the scholar's scrutiny.

The film's career as a frequent resident of "greatest" film lists also attests to its historical importance, though Koszarski notes its susceptibility to the ebb and flow of critical and political fashion.³⁵ As Koszarski summarizes,³⁶ the 1952 Brussels critics poll (or 1958 according to Weinberg and Finler) placed it seventh on its list of "the best films of cinema history," behind Chaplin, Eisenstein, and Griffith. Ten years later, *Sight and Sound* renewed the poll, and *Greed* was tied for fourth place, the top silent film on the list, probably reflecting its current vogueish martyrdom by Hollywood studio system haters. Its importance as a symbol more than a work of art is underscored by the poll's insistence on the *uncut Greed* as "the greatest silent film of all time," which of course nobody voting had ever seen. By 1972, *Greed* disappeared entirely from the list, not even among the 23 finalists. *Greed* had moved into a new realm (Koszarski calls it "meta-critical"), not as one of the best films, but as one of the "most important and misappreciated American films." More than two hundred international critics placed it on such a list, third behind *Citizen Kane* and *Sunrise*, for the 1978 Belgian Film Archive Poll.

Much of the latter-day critical activity has centered on dreams of finding a complete version of the film. Herman Weinberg has come closest with his masterful *The Complete Greed* (1972),³⁷ a compilation of 400 stills, including some from cut portions of the film, many of which were discovered as the Museum of Modern Art was preparing its revival exhibition. Combined with the Belgian Cinémathèque's 1958 publication of von Stroheim's personal copy of the original script,³⁸ and Joel Finler's 1972 version with expansions of those parts in semi-note form,³⁹ Weinberg's book is the closest thing we have to von Stroheim's original.

Most of the substantial information on the film is contained in biographies of von Stroheim which concentrate on the film's production rather than critical analysis. Von Stroheim biographies

like Peter Noble's (1950)⁴⁰ and Thomas Quinn Curtiss' (1971)⁴¹ are largely anecdotal, though, and often unreliable. There have been several books in French on von Stroheim, but they invariably repeat the ideas and inaccuracies of Noble and Curtiss.⁴² Richard Koszarski's recent book, *The Man You Loved to Hate* (1983) is an accurate and excellent, currently the best, source of information on the film.

Until recently, though, very little critical analysis of the film has been done outside of fleeting mentions in film histories. In 1953, Gavin Lambert attempted to bring critical attention to von Stroheim with an article entitled "Stroheim Revisited: The Missing Third in the American Cinema;"⁴³ the section on *Greed* focuses on the film's social theme, its composition, and its imagery. In 1975, Charles Wolfe attempted the same thing by devoting an entire article to *Greed*, "Resurrecting Greed,"⁴⁴ in which he attempted, like Lambert, to assert the aesthetic importance of the film, this time by exploring the relationships between the subjective and objective in the film. Joel Finler's book *Stroheim* (1967) has a few analytical remarks, but it mostly focuses on determining what was left out of the novel and changed from the novel in the adaptation process. George Wead attempted another comparative study between novel and film in 1977 with a chapter in *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*,⁴⁵ but his analysis is marred by a limited understanding of Norris's novel.

An increase in critical analysis of *Greed* has recently occurred under the auspices of The Frank Norris Society with its sponsorship of a panel on the film at The Florida State University's annual film/literature conference in January of 1987. Three papers were presented: Leger Grindon's "Word to Image: Composition and Meaning in von Stroheim's *Greed*," Mary Lawlor's "Searching for Gold: The Place of Source in *Greed* and *McTeague*," and Thomas K. Dean's "The Flight of *McTeague*'s Soul-Bird: Thematic Differences between Norris's *McTeague* and von Stroheim's *Greed*." The Society also sponsored a screening of *Greed* at the conference, as well as a screening at the Society's annual meeting at the 1988 MLA conference in New Orleans. Finally, Lawlor has recently published an essay on von Stroheim and his understanding of Naturalism as seen through *Greed*, "Naturalism in the Cinema: Erich von Stroheim's Reading of *McTeague*," in *Frank Norris Studies*,⁴⁶ and Dean's above-cited conference paper, "The Flight of *McTeague*'s Soul-Bird," is forthcoming in *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

With the current increased academic interest in early American film and film preservation, perhaps a new round of attention to *Greed* is in the offing.

Notes

¹"The Directors Who 'Bring 'Em In,'" *Classic*, November, 1923, p. 89.

²"On the Camera Coast with Harry Carr," *Motion Picture Magazine*, April, 1924, p. 76; rptd. in *Spellbound in Darkness* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 332.

³Richard Koszarski, *The Man You Loved to Hate: Erich von Stroheim and Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 145.

⁴"Frank Norris's 'McTeague,'" *New York Times*, 5 December 1924, p. 28.

⁵"Greed," *Variety*, 10 December 1924, n.p.

⁶*Photoplay*, February, 1925, p. 55; rptd. in Anthony Slide, ed., *Selected Film Criticism, 1921-1930* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982), p. 126.

⁷C.S. Sewell, "Greed," *Moving Picture World*, 20 December 1924, p. 737.

⁸"Greed," *Motion Picture News*, 20 December 1924, p. 3186.

⁹"Greed," *Harrison's Reports*, 13 December 1924; quoted in Koszarski, p. 146.

¹⁰"Frank Norris's 'McTeague,'" p. 28.

¹¹"Greed," *Life*, 1 January 1925; rptd. in Don Whittemore and Philip Alan Cecchetti, *Passport to Hollywood: Film Immigrants Anthology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), p. 115.

¹²"Masters of the Motion Picture," *Motion Picture Classic*, August, 1926, p. 66.

¹³"'Greed'—A Film of Realism," *The Spectator*, 14 March 1925, p. 402.

¹⁴"Landmark in Film Annals," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 December 1924; quoted in Koszarski, p. 147.

¹⁵"Greed," *Exceptional Photoplays*, December-January 1925; rptd. in Whittemore and Cecchetti, pp. 115-116.

¹⁶"An Introduction to 'Greed,'" *Focus on Film*, 14 (1973), 53.

¹⁷G.W. Stonier, "Press Party," *New Statesman*, 9 January 1954, p. 35.

¹⁸*Films in Review*, 8 (1957), 424.

¹⁹"Stroheim and 'Greed,'" *Life and Letters Today*, 1930; rptd. in Peter Noble, *Hollywood Scapegoat: The Biography of Erich von Stroheim* (London: The Fortune Press, 1950), p. 224.

²⁰*Stroheim* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 43.

²¹Finler, p. 61.

²²Finler, p. 43.

²³Finler, p. 35.

²⁴*The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), p. 350.

²⁵Jacobs, p. 350.

²⁶Jacobs, p. 351.

²⁷Jacobs, p. 345.

²⁸Jacobs, p. 350.

²⁹"Erich von Stroheim: 1885-1957," *Films in Review*, 8 (1957), 309-310.

³⁰*American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 287-288.

³¹*What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 27.

³²Quoted in Herman G. Weinberg, *Stroheim: A Pictorial Record of His Nine Films* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975), pp. xiii-xv.

³³*A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), pp. 227-228.

³⁴Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Second Thoughts on Stroheim," *Film Comment*, June, 1974; rptd. in Whittemore and Cecchetti, p. 136.

³⁵Koszarski, p. 147.

³⁶Koszarski, pp. 147-148.

³⁷*The Complete "Greed" of Erich von Stroheim* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

³⁸*Greed* (Cinémathèque de Belgique, 1958).

³⁹Erich von Stroheim, *Greed*, ed. Joel W. Finler (London: Lorimer Publishing, 1972).

⁴⁰*Hollywood Scapegoat: The Biography of Erich von Stroheim* (London: The Fortune Press, 1950).

⁴¹*Von Stroheim* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971).

⁴²Bob Bergut, *Eric von Stroheim* (Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1960); Freddy Buache, *Erich von Stroheim* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972); Giulio Cesare Castello, *Erich von Stroheim* (Rome: Edizioni di Bianco e Nero).

⁴³"Stroheim Revisited: The Missing Third in the American Cinema," *Sight and Sound*, 22 (1953), 165-171, 204.

⁴⁴"Resurrecting Greed," *Sight and Sound*, 44 (1975), 170-174.

⁴⁵"Frank Norris: His Share of *Greed*." In *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*, ed. Gerald Perry and Roger Shatzkin (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 143-151.

⁴⁶No. 8 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 6-8.

Zelda Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov and James A. Michener: Three Opinions on Frank Norris's *McTeague*

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In most ways Zelda Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov and James A. Michener are about as diverse a trio as one can imagine. They had, however, at least two things in common: they were writers, and they shared strong opinions about Frank Norris's *McTeague*.

Evidently Zelda Fitzgerald didn't share her husband Scott's enduring enthusiasm for *McTeague*.¹ In fact, her initial olfactory impression was close to that of the contemporary reviewer who suggested "A Study in Stinks" as an appropriate subtitle for Norris's second published novel.² In 1920, she wrote to Scott:

And I love you so terribly that I'm going to read "McTeague"—but you may have to marry a corpse when I finish. It certainly makes a miserable start—I don't see how any girl could be pretty with her front teeth lost in action, and besides, it outrages my sense of delicacy to have him violently proposing when she's got one of those nasty rubber things on her face—All authors who want to make things true to life make them smell bad—like *McTeague*'s room—and that's my most sensitive sense. I do hope you'll never be a realist—one of those kind that thinks being ugly is being forceful—³

Twenty-three years later Vladimir Nabokov expressed a similar (though less visceral) disapproval about a book he couldn't even name. As well as suggesting a foreign parallel, Nabokov evidently shared William Dean Howells's negative view of the notorious "death in the desert business."⁴ In a letter most probably written in 1943, he told Edmund Wilson:

I happened to read the other day a remarkably silly but rather charming book about a dentist who murdered his wife—written in the nineties and uncannily like a translation from Maupassant in style. It all ends in the Mohave Desert. The blurb says it is an "American classic" but I

cannot believe it. Do you know it?⁵

More recently James A. Michener expressed a far more positive view in clear agreement with the ever-growing majority report that *McTeague* is indeed a minor classic, and perhaps Norris's best book, if not his wisest. In a 1981 letter he wrote:

I have testified several times to the great esteem in which I hold the novel *McTeague*. It had a powerful impression on me when I read it as a young man and helped form the aesthetic bases on which I judged novels, especially those written about America.

My principal education in literature was English and European, so that for me to find a strong American novel was important. I judged *McTeague* to be as good as Gogol or Zola and still do. His use of local setting, unusual characters and melodrama held within bounds was most appealing. . . .

I reread *McTeague* two years ago in preparation for a work which died before it got started, and I saw once more all the strong points which had attracted me in the first place. A good novel of which we can be proud, and one well worth reading by young aspirants today.⁶

Although *McTeague* is not without its unpleasant odors (part of its unique attraction) and does clearly mix silliness with charm, the end result is much more deserving of Michener's accolades than the brick bats that have intermittently assaulted it for over ninety years.

Notes

¹F. Scott Fitzgerald's enthusiasm for Frank Norris's writings—including *McTeague*, *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Octopus*—is scattered throughout his letters from 1920 to less than a month before his death in 1940. Norris's influence on Fitzgerald is clearly established in such articles as Henry Dan Piper's "Frank Norris and F. Scott Fitzgerald," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 19 (1955-56), 393-400; Richard Astro's "Vandover and *The Beautiful and Damned*: A Search for Thematic and Stylistic Reinterpretation," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 14 (1968), 397-413; and my "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Charles G. Norris," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 10 (1983), 40-54.

²Franklin Walker attributes this comment to a reviewer for the *Argonaut*. See his *Frank Norris: A Biography* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 224.

³*Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 52.

⁴For the letter to William Dean Howells in which Norris responds to his criticism of *McTeague*, see *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, compiled and annotated by Jesse S. Crisler (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986), p. 73.

⁵*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. Simon Karlinski (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 107.

⁶Letter from James A. Michener to Richard Allan Davison, 19 December 1981.

Society News

Joe McElrath

With issue No. 10 to appear shortly and a fifth anniversary of the Norris Society upon us, it appears time to take stock.

Frank Norris Studies. Since its first publication in the spring of 1986, *Frank Norris Studies* has expanded from four pages to eight to twelve, as a journal featuring substantive scholarly articles and notes, reviews, and an annotated checklist of writings related to Norris. Our articles are listed and described in the *MLA International Bibliography* and thus enjoy visibility within the international scholarly community. Thanks to the additional contributions from members who have elected to become benefactors (\$100), patrons (\$50), and sustaining members (\$25), *Studies* will be able to remain twelve pages in length with occasional expansions to sixteen. In future issues, "Society News" will become a regular feature.

Meetings at Conferences. Since the Society's organizational meeting in Chicago in December, 1985, we have arranged eight organized meetings at which papers focusing on Norris and related literary figures have been delivered and discussed. Those who have made one or more presentations include Benjamin F. Fisher, IV, Lee Clark Mitchell, Earle Labor, Stephen Brennan, S.S. Moorty, Jesse S. Crisler, Don L. Cook, Robert Newman, James R. Giles, Mary Lawlor, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Thomas K. Dean, Edwin Haviland Miller, Richard Allan Davison, Charles L. Crow, Barbara Hochman, Donald Pizer, and James L. Nagel.

The American Literature Association. While the Society may in the future sponsor meetings ("special sessions") at the Modern Language Association's annual conventions in late December, its "home organization" for its formal annual meetings is the American Literature Association. Organized by Alfred Bendixen of California State University, Los Angeles, the ALA is a consortium of discrete individual-author societies like ours. Each society sponsors its own sessions at the annual meetings. Last spring the spectacularly successful first meeting in San Diego included a Norris session, "*McTeague: The First Ninety Years*," with forty-five participating in the discussion following the presentation of papers by Don Cook, Jesse Crisler, and Charles Crow. During Memorial Day weekend, 1991, the second ALA convention will occur when the organization meets in Washington, D.C., at the Mayflower Hotel. Attention: \$60.00 per night per room; six blocks from the White House; and half a block from the metro. Should a Norris Society member be interested in coming to the Washington meeting, he or she will want to know that he or she is already a member of the ALA. There are no extra dues now required.

Frank Norris Studies is a publication of the Norris Society and is issued twice per year for the members. Membership for individuals requires the payment of dues of ten dollars per year to The Frank Norris Society, Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1036. Library subscriptions at the same rate may be directed to this address or initiated through the EBSCO or FAXON subscription services.

Manuscripts should be addressed to either of the editors: Jesse S. Crisler, Division of Language, Literature & Communication, Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus, Laie, Hawaii 96762; or Robert C. Leitz, III, Department of English, Louisiana State University in Shreveport, Shreveport LA 71115. Members of the Editorial Advisory Board include: Don L. Cook, Indiana University; Charles L. Crow, Bowling Green State University; William B. Dillingham, Emory University; Donald Pizer, Tulane University; and Barbara Hochman, Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Florida State University, is the managing editor.