

INTELLECTUAL CONSISTENCY AND ARTISTIC

VALUE IN THE OCTOPUS

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University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois
1957

Master of Arts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1958

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 1958

NOV 7 1958

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PREFACE

I first became interested in Norris about two years ago when I read McTeague. In reading that novel I was struck by the artistic flavor of naturalism--naturalism as an artistic technique as well as a world view. I read other naturalistic novels: especially those of Zola, Dreiser, and, of course, Norris. Then I began to look into the published scholarship dealing with naturalism and, especially, with Norris. There seemed to be little real agreement anywhere about anything. I therefore decided to do my thesis in this area. I chose to do a primary study of The Octopus because, first of all, I felt that comments on the novel were, for the most part, superficial. Secondly, it seemed to me that, although generalizations about naturalism abounded, primary evidence and analysis were sparse. I felt that more primary evidence and analysis were needed before one could justly evaluate these generalizations. Thus the chief value of this thesis to future scholarship is to contribute to that primary evidence.

I am grateful to Dr. Clinton C. Keeler, my adviser, for his guidance and to Dr. Cecil B. Williams for his comments on my manuscript. Both have allowed me as much latitude as I would stand, yet both have been quick to advise me when I needed advice, as I often did.

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CHAPTER I

Frank Norris' epic novel of the Far West, The Octopus, was published in 1901. Norris (1870-1902) had formulated a sweeping plan for a "Trilogy of The Epic of the Wheat," in which The Octopus was to deal with the production of wheat, The Pit (1903) with the distribution of wheat, and The Wolf (never written) with the consumption of wheat. But in The Octopus, as to a lesser degree in The Pit, the mechanics of the wheat process constitute only one part of the surface subject matter of the novel. Norris included a "war between the wheat grower and the Railroad Trust;" a romantic episode between a mystic shepherd and a young girl who had been dead for sixteen years; a parallel love story between a prune-eating, Dickens-reading, "feemale-hater" and an idyllic milkmaid; and a manhunt for a wronged ex-railway engineer. I call these elements "surface subject matter" because they are but the narrative raw material of a novel which, through Norris' utilization of certain artistic techniques, contains a sub-stratum of significant ideas. It is the purpose of this thesis, first, to examine the nature and the consistency of this sub-stratum and, second, to investigate the manner in which these ideas have been presented as art.

Before proceeding directly to an analysis of The Octopus, however, it will be well both to analyze Norris'

theory of novel-writing as it pertains to The Octopus and to review existing criticism of the novel. The former will be a distinct aid in interpreting Norris' artistic attitude as he wrote The Octopus, and the latter will indicate the critical void which this study will undertake to fill.

In one of his most interesting essays, Norris is almost vehement in asserting that the best kind of novel "...proves something, draws conclusions from a whole congeries of forces, social tendencies, race impulses, devotes itself not to a study of men but of man."¹ He cites as an example Victor Hugo's Les Miserables and calls this kind of novel the "novel with a purpose." The Octopus is a novel with a purpose, and, like other such successful novels, it has avoided, for the most part, the peculiar artistic hazards of the genre: preaching and ill-advised abstraction.

The novelist avoids preaching by becoming engrossed in the "page-to-page progress of the narrative." He must regard his purpose (his theme) in the same way that the musician regards his keynote, i.e. as a guiding or organizing principle. Perhaps one of the most valid criticisms of Norris' writings is that he followed his dictum to excess. He became so absorbed in his characters and story that his purpose, at least his ideological purpose, became blurred

¹Frank Norris, "The Novel with a Purpose," in The Complete Works of Frank Norris (New York, n.d.), IV, 265. Subsequent references will be to Works.

in the process. If one is to get at the ideas within The Octopus, he must be prepared to take into account this artistic flaw of over-absorption; he must be prepared to discount certain factors in the narrative when he examines the ideas in the novel.

Hamlin Garland records in his autobiography that William Dean Howells once advised him, "Don't preach,--exemplify."² Norris' observation on novel-writing has much the same flavor when he says that a novel "deals with elemental forces, motives that stir whole nations. These can not be handled as abstractions in fiction."³ Along with preaching, then, a peculiar artistic hazard of this genre is abstraction. Nearly everyone will agree that, as Norris says, "Fiction can find expression only in the concrete."⁴ However, the writer of a purpose novel continually faces the temptation to draw his "conclusions from a whole congeries of forces" by means of a generalization or a mechanical symbol. This dangerous temptation is closely related to the sin of preaching and it can be avoided in a similar manner. That is, the novelist's generalizations (his conclusions) must be drawn from the concrete elements of the narrative; and his symbols must be concrete and integrated into the narrative.

²Hamlin Garland, A Son of the Middle Border (New York, 1917), p. 417.

³Frank Norris, Works, IV, 266.

⁴Ibid.

Norris does not deal in any detail with the problem of the relationship between concreteness and abstraction in his Essays on Authorship; yet the problem is central to an interpretation of The Octopus. For example, the reader of this novel finds himself face to face with a recurring metaphorical description of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad as an octopus, a metaphor which gives the Railroad a symbolic meaning: at one level, the octopus stands for a trust; at a second level, it stands for all trusts; and at a third level, it stands for a vague, impersonal force which destroys whatever stands in its way. However, no matter how broadly one abstracts the symbolic meaning of the Railroad, it has an integral function as a literally conceived institution, and not as a symbol, on the narrative level of the novel. Thus Norris' symbol is concrete and integrated into the narrative; and it therefore effectively represents an abstract idea.

In a sense of "concreteness" different from that of the previous paragraph, Norris has been concrete instead of general. That is, Norris has, in the best naturalistic tradition, made use of minute detail in The Octopus--detail which gives abstract meaning a solid foundation upon which to rest. For example, the incident in Chapter I of The Octopus, as Presley sees the sheep slaughtered by the train, foreshadows the outcome of the wheat rancher's battle with the railroad trust. The incident ultimately supports Norris' deterministic thesis that men are at the mercy of vague,

impersonal forces and have, finally, little or no control over their destiny. One notices the concrete detail and the lack of directly abstracted meaning in the description of the incident.

In some way, the herd of sheep--Vanamee's herd--had found a breach in the wire fence by the right of way and had wandered out upon the tracks. A band had been crossing just at the moment of the engine's passage...The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. Underfoot it was terrible. The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur.⁵

The poorest sentence in this description is only four words long: "Underfoot it was terrible." In this sentence, Norris loses his seeming objectivity and, instead of expressing meaning through concrete detail, directly exposes his attitude. Despite such occasional lapses, however, Norris usually builds a concrete foundation of detail upon which abstraction can safely rest.

The novel with a purpose (and preferably with a comprehensive theme), then, is to Norris the best kind of novel. The two peculiar artistic hazards of the purpose novel are preaching and ill-advised abstraction. The one can be avoided if the author becomes more interested in his story and characters than in his theme; however, this does not negate

⁵Frank Norris, Works, I, 42. Subsequent references to The Octopus throughout this thesis will be by page number only.

the importance of the purpose nor mitigate Norris' artistic offense of becoming excessively absorbed in his story and characters. The latter artistic hazard can be avoided by the novelist's integration of his symbols into the narrative and by his continuous use of the concrete.

Norris' expository writings are helpful in interpreting The Octopus; criticism by others should also be helpful, even though, in proportion to the number of writings, few perceptive insights have resulted from over half a century's criticism of Norris' work. An early reviewer predicted that The Octopus would be

...a book certain to arouse favorable and unfavorable comment, to be liked and disliked, to be looked at from many varying points of taste and thought, but at all events not a book⁶ to be passed over as slight, trifling, or merely amusing.

The prediction, though general, has at least the merit of anticipating the varied, often antithetical attitudes toward The Octopus.

One might divide criticism of The Octopus into four rough categories: (1) contemporary reviews, (2) a Norris revival beginning in the early 1930's, (3) periodical writings since the early reviews, and (4) commentaries on Norris' work in histories of the novel, especially of the naturalistic novel.

⁶The Outlook, LXVII (April 20, 1901), 923-24.

Contemporary reviews of The Octopus are generally laudatory, but they offer more of an insight into the varying attitudes of the period than into the novel. Ernest Marchand has effectively summarized the situation; he points out that the body of early Norris criticism

...reveals that engaging diversity of opinion which always affords a malicious satisfaction to the man skeptical of absolute values in literature. The student who makes his way patiently through the contemporary reviews, and through all that has since been written of Norris, will learn a good many things about him and his work that cannot lie down peaceably together in the same mind...

He will hear that the mysticism of The Octopus is 'preposterous' and, on the other hand, that it is the saving feature of the work. He will hear that there is a 'lack of vivid character drawing' in this novel...but against this it is declared that the wrongs and sufferings of Magnus, Dyke, Annixter, and Hilma 'touch us as if they were personal friends.' Norris' 'interest was not that of the ethical teacher, the reformer who turns on the light'; not so: 'He never hesitated to right a wrong.' The sumptuous dining of the Gerards and their guests while Mrs. Hooven dies of hunger is a masterly scene, big; nonsense! it is nothing but yellow journalism... And so the catalogue of irreconcilables might be extended to include every aspect of Norris' work down to the last detail.⁷

Other than offering some curious and suggestive differences of opinion, the early reviews of The Octopus are of little help in dealing with the problem of ideas and the manner of their presentation in the novel. And the years between Norris' death (1902) and the Norris revival of the early 1930's offer less help, for nothing significant was written

⁷Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Palo Alto, California, 1942), pp. 193-96. This book has a nearly complete Norris bibliography and directions to further Norris material.

about Norris during that time.⁸

The publication of Franklin Walker's biography of Norris (1932)⁹ seems to have given impetus to a Norris revival already begun; the next year saw the publication of Marius Biencourt's excellent study of Zola's influence on Norris.¹⁰ And in 1942, Marchand published his full length study of Norris' work. Although none of these studies deals with the central problem of The Octopus as a work of art, the first steps toward an interest in Norris had nevertheless been taken. And from 1930 forward, Norris increased in importance slowly but inevitably. Commentaries on his work appear in periodicals with a respectable frequency until 1950.¹¹

From 1930 to 1940, twelve articles on Norris appear in periodicals; only one, however, deals with The Octopus. From 1940 to 1950, eight articles appear on Norris, and three

⁸Six articles dealing with Norris were published from 1903-1930. (1905, '07, '13, '14, '28, '29). See Lewis Leary, Articles on American Literature: 1900-1950 (Durham, N.C., 1954). None of these articles are chiefly concerned with The Octopus.

⁹Franklin Walker, Frank Norris: A Biography (New York, 1932).

¹⁰Marius Biencourt, Une Influence du Naturalisme Francais en Amerique: Frank Norris (Paris, 1933).

¹¹Since 1950, the only article I can find published about Norris is by Henry Dan Piper, "Frank Norris and Scott Fitzgerald," HLQ, XIX (August, 1956), 393-400.

of them deal specifically with The Octopus.¹² Furthermore, in 1947 The Octopus was finally reprinted. Thus, not only Norris, but more specifically The Octopus, has been critically examined with an increasing frequency since 1930 in periodical articles. Several book-length studies have also appeared; and commentaries on Norris in histories of the American novel now appear as a matter of course.

Still, however, the ideas in The Octopus, their artistic objectification into the elements of fiction (e.g., symbol, character, plot, setting), and Norris' consistent ideological perspective have not been completely understood. One cause of this lack of complete understanding has its roots in the self-imposed limitations of the studies in which commentaries on The Octopus appear. As the Literary History of the United States points out, "The Octopus...is usually studied as our first great economic thesis novel..."¹³ This observation is probably based, to a large degree, on Walter Fuller Taylor's The Economic Novel in America (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1942), which deals in some detail with The Octopus--yet only from this semi-historical point of view of the American economic novel.

¹²H.W. Reninger, "Norris Explains The Octopus: A Correlation of His Theory and Practice," American Literature, XII (May, 1940), 218-227. C.C. Walcutt, "Frank Norris on Realism and Naturalism," American Literature, XIII (March, 1941), 61-63. G.W. Meyer, "A New Interpretation of The Octopus," College English, IV (March, 1943), 551-59.

¹³LHUS, II, 1031.

Furthermore, The Octopus is often studied as one of the giants of early American naturalism.¹⁴ But the point of view in these studies is generally one of "influences"--not the best approach to understanding completely the ideas and art of The Octopus. This is not to say that such studies are of no use; on the contrary, many of them are of no small value in another context. But for the purpose of interpreting The Octopus as a work of art, they are of but partial value, for they are but partial studies.

A second possible cause of the lack of complete understanding is that "...the principles at the foundation of the book were never thought through" by Norris.¹⁵ Thus, the novel cannot be completely understood because Norris supposedly did not understand the ideas himself and did not, therefore, present them understandably. Commentators would find what seemed to be either vague, ambiguous ideas or contradictory attitudes in The Octopus, which would then subject the novel to diverse interpretations. For example, imagine the contradictory criticism which might be formulated by a consideration of these two passages, both representing the thoughts of Presley.

Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand--were these then the enemies, after all? Not enemies; there was no malevolence in Nature. Colossal indifference only...¹⁶

¹⁴See, for example, Lars Ahnebrink, The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

¹⁵LRUS, II, 1033.

¹⁶pp. 417-18.

The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.¹⁷

At first Presley had thought that Nature was malevolent; but no, now it is colossally indifferent. And then, in the second passage, Nature is ultimately beneficent; it is a Hegelian Nature.

These two passages and others like them are, despite assertions to the contrary, reconcilable within the framework of the novel; for both are to be analyzed and interpreted dramatically, not absolutely. That is, Norris is not making contradictory assertions; Presley is. Presley is changing his mind. It is one of the purposes of this thesis to demonstrate that such absolutely contradictory, but dramatically consistent, passages follow a pattern throughout the novel. The existence of this pattern shows the fallacy in asserting that "...Norris has no consistent position on the vast economic and metaphysical problems he raises."¹⁸

Before outlining the pattern of the novel, however, one must first point out the angle of view from which Norris constructs The Octopus. Norris assumes the existence of forces over which men have little or no control and about the operation of which men have little specific knowledge. In The Octopus (as, theoretically, in the empirical world), these forces control both the actions of men and the

¹⁷ p. 473.

¹⁸ LAUS, II, 1032.

consequences of those actions. They are represented in the novel by the Railroad Trust (a man-made force) and the wheat (a natural force). Norris makes the further assumption that in some mysterious way the wheat will inexorably flow from the California wheat fields to the mouths of hungry consumers all over the world. The Railroad aids the wheat in its progress, and men will be destroyed if they try to interfere with the process of this natural law.

In theory, it would seem that man should be able to control those forces which he creates; but, in practice, he cannot. As Shelgrim, the president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, says to Presley,

...if I run my road, as a business proposition, I can do nothing. I can not control it. It is a force born out of certain conditions, and I--no man--can stop it or control it.¹⁹

The wheat is also a man-made force in a sense; at least, man is a pre-condition of its existence. For, if men do not plant and nurture the wheat, it cannot flourish. However, like Shelgrim and the railroad, the wheat ranchers cannot, according to Norris' assumed natural law, control the wheat once they plant it, unless they destroy it; and destruction is not control. Man's creative relationship to these forces is similar to that of the watchmaker to the watch in that favorite analogy of the eighteenth-century rationalists. He

¹⁹
p. 417.

creates but cannot interfere with the operation of that which he has created.

Given the existence, then, of uncontrollable and, as shall be pointed out later, ultimately unknowable forces, what is man's subsequent relationship to them? Are they beneficent, malevolent, or indifferent? The answer to this question contains the core of Norris' perspective in The Octopus. Norris answers it several times²⁰, but in describing Annie Derrick's attitude toward the wheat fields, one feels he is describing his own attitude.

She felt vividly that certain uncongeniality which, when all is said, forever remains between humanity and the earth which supports it. She recognized the colossal indifference of nature, not hostile, even kindly and friendly, so long as the human ant-swarm was submissive, working with it, hurrying along at its side...Let, however, the insect rebel...and at once it became relentless, a gigantic engine, a vast power...; crushing out the human atom with soundless calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor²¹ through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.

By nature Norris means all the forces operating in the universe--including not only those which we ordinarily call natural, but also those which are man-created yet function as inexorably and as unknowably as natural forces.

If it is true that, from Norris' angle of view, the forces of nature are indifferent to man, it is also true that, in The Octopus, these same forces seem either beneficent or malevolent to a given character or group of

²⁰See pp. 114, 324, 418.

²¹p. 133. My italics.

characters--a situation which has given commentators a good deal of trouble. However, if one interprets the attitude of these characters dramatically while continually remembering that Norris himself sees these forces as indifferent, there is no longer a problem about Norris' consistency in The Octopus. For example, the wheat ranchers think of the railroad as malevolent; their perspective is characterized by their attitude toward S. Behrman; for, as Norris says, there is "no denying the fact that for Osterman, Broderson, Annixter, and Derrick, S. Behrman was the railroad."²² Yet S. Behrman is only "the representative of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad in that section" of California;²³ he is not the railroad itself. If he were destroyed, the railroad would hardly be affected. The point is that, although the ranchers see the railroad as malevolent, their perspective is not necessarily Norris'. To interpret The Octopus validly, one must keep the two separate.

From this assumption of indifferent forces Norris has constructed the intellectual pattern of The Octopus. Each of his characters is related to both the forces of the novel, the wheat and the railroad. By this relationship Norris organizes his novel into an enormous answer to the question: how can a man, when in conflict with the indifferent forces of nature, control his destiny? To this question Norris

²²p. 53.

²³Ibid.

offers no generalized answer. He contents himself with demonstrating that no answer has yet been found, at least by the people who move through the pages of his novel. This is his purpose, his theme. And he presents it by means of a most interesting technique. The characters of The Octopus are arranged so that they fall into three groups (with overlapping). One group tries to answer the question in terms of art; another in terms of economics; and another in terms of philosophy. Furthermore, there are several different attempted answers in each group. None are conclusive and each character reaps the consequences of his attempted answer, which is, incidentally, not always put into words. Sometimes the answer is only suggested by action; but more often than not the answer is couched in both words and action. Since the artistic ideas in The Octopus have never been fully considered and accounted for--often they are hardly mentioned--it will be well to examine first the stratum of art in the novel.

CHAPTER II

THE STRATUM OF ART

The Octopus is one of those books which gather together many aspects of human life and thought between their covers. It has ten important characters and more than ten not so important ones; and it deals with ideas in art, economics, and philosophy. One could expect that the unification of so many varied people and ideas into an artistically coherent work would be no simple task. Yet Norris has been remarkably successful in welding a whole out of so many parts. His most obvious forging tool is Presley, the character through whose eyes many of the story's happenings are seen. As one commentator has put it,

The poet [Presley] is intended to sustain the same relations to the story as were held by the chorus in the old Greek tragedies. He interprets for the reader by struggling to understand conditions himself.¹

The Octopus begins with Presley's being told of the chief conflict of the story--the battle between the wheat ranchers and the railroad over wheat hauling rates. In the first chapter, Presley's holiday bicycle trip allows the reader to make a first acquaintance with a number of important characters: the Hooven family, who figure in an anticlimactic

¹"The Octopus," The Independent, LIII (May 16, 1901), 1139.

tragedy near the end of the novel; Dyke, the railroad engineer whose flight from the law after he robs a train provides the most exciting single episode of the novel; Annixter, who is temperamentally the opposite of Presley and who reads David Copperfield continually; Harran Derrick, the son of rancher Magnus Derrick; and Vanamee, "a poet by instinct, where Presley was but a poet by training."²

During the trip, one also hears of other characters who are to figure in the story: S. Behrman, the stereotyped, fat, florid, evil representative of the railroad, who blocks the farmers' battle for fair wheat hauling rates and who, near the end of the novel, meets a poetically just but artistically unconvincing death under a landslide of wheat; Magnus Derrick, the almost, but not quite, impeccably honest leader of the wheat farmers, whose tragic disgrace symbolizes the end of a political and social epoch; Father Sarria, a Catholic priest who sympathizes with Vanamee's problems and who is found to be a man, besides being a priest, when he is discovered carrying fighting-cocks to his parish; and Angel Varian, who was, years before, Vanamee's sweetheart and with whom, after her death, Vanamee communicates by a sort of sixth sense which can only be described as mystic. It is also in this first chapter that Presley sees the sordid slaughter of the sheep which foreshadows the result of the wheat farmer-railroad battle to follow.

²p. 31.

It might be well to examine exactly what Norris has accomplished in his introductory chapter. First, he has acquainted his readers with most of the many characters in the novel. Second, he has brought the main conflict of the story to their attention. Third, he has foreshadowed, in true naturalist fashion, the inescapable result of that conflict; Norris would call this foreshadowing by means of the sheep slaughter the "pivotal event" of the first chapter. And fourth, he has set the stage for the various artistic answers to the question of man's ability to control his destiny when he is in an improper relationship to inexorable natural forces. These answers form a "stratum of art" in the novel.

Because of its importance in the analysis, this terminology deserves special explanation. By "stratum of art" I mean to indicate that there are six characters in The Octopus who are attempting to answer, in terms of art, the question of man's ability to control his destiny: Mrs. Derrick, Presley, Vanamee, Annixter, Mrs. Cedarquist, and Hartrath. There were at least two alternatives in choosing this terminology: "hierarchy of art" and "level of art." Neither, however, adequately suggests the nature and interrelationships of these six answers. Hierarchy suggests too strongly a step-by-step progression of answers, each one better or worse than another. To a certain degree it is true that Norris approves of, say, Vanamee's answer in preference to Mrs. Cedarquist's; there is a slight progressive

relationship between some of these answers. But it is too slight to merit the use of the word hierarchy. If one were dealing with only the group of characters which answers the question in terms of art, level would be an adequate word. But later the answers in terms of economics and philosophy must also be considered; and it is in relationship to these two other groups that level is misleading. The word connotes a relationship of "higher" or "lower." But the true relationship of these three groups of answers (in terms of art, economics, and philosophy) is, in The Octopus, on a plane, more like three pieces of a jig-saw puzzle which, when fitted together, make up a whole. Thus level misleads one as to the relationship of one group of answers to the other two, and hierarchy misleads one as to the relationship of the single answers within a given group. Perhaps more for its colorlessness than anything else, then, "stratum of art" best suggests the nature and relationships of artistic answers in The Octopus to the question of man's ability to control his destiny.

Norris makes the membership of Mrs. Derrick in the stratum of art obvious. Her answer to the question can be seen by reading carefully Norris' description of her and by understanding her attitude as she talks with Presley.

Her one ambition was to see Italy and the Bay of Naples. The 'Marble Faun,' Raphael's 'Madonnas' and 'Il Troyatore' were her beau ideals of literature and art.../Never/ for one moment since the time her glance first lost itself in

the unbroken immensity of the ranches had she known a moment's content...She did not want to look at so much wheat. There was something vaguely indecent in the sight, this food of the people, this elemental force, this basic energy, weltering here under the sun in all the unconscious nakedness of a sprawling, primordial Titan...So she retired within herself. She surrounded herself with books. Her taste was of the delicacy of point lace... 'Marius the Epicurean,' 'The Essays of Elia,' 'Sesame and Lilies,' 'The Stones of Venice,' and the little toy magazines, full of the flaccid banalities of the 'Minor Poets,' were continually in her hands.

When Presley had appeared on Los Muertos she...looked forward to long conversations with the young man on literature, art, and ethics. But Presley had disappointed her...His indifference to 'style,' like Norris' indifference...was a positive affront. His savage abuse and open ridicule of the neatly phrased rondeaux and sestinas and chansonettes of the little magazines was to her mind a wanton and uncalled-for cruelty. She found his Homer, with its slaughters and hecatombs and barbaric feastings and headstrong passions, violent and coarse. She could not see with him any romance, any poetry in the life around her; she looked to Italy for that. His 'Song of the West,' which only once, incoherent and fierce, he had tried to explain to her, its swift, tumultuous life, its truth, its nobility and savagery, its heroism and obscenity, had revolted her.

'But, Presley,' she had murmured, 'that is not literature.'

'No,' he had cried between his teeth, 'no, thank God, it is not.'³

From Norris' own comments, it is known that he does not approve of people whose artistic taste is "of the delicacy of point lace," who cringe at the sight of nature's power and its representation in Homeric poetry, and who finally retreat into themselves and their effete literature. Such an attitude is less than no answer at all to the question of how man can control his destiny. Annie Derrick hates and fears the immensity of the wheat; her reaction to the conflict over wheat rates is withdrawal, and she pays the consequences of her answer. For, in the last pages of the

³ pp. 47-49.

novel, she is a woman "who knows she can suffer no further."⁴

As has been pointed out, Presley is the Greek chorus of The Octopus; by struggling to understand conditions for himself, he interprets for the reader. He is a poet living in California in order to find material with which to write a great epic poem, "Song of the West."⁵ As he struggles to discover what the true subject of his poetry should be, the reader learns that art cannot even approach an answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny unless it at least deals with the subject directly. Presley finds that the subject of art is not to be found in a modern copy of Homer's rosy fingered dawn⁶, nor in an ancient romance between a Mexican Don and a beautiful woman.⁷ It is to be sought in the life and sufferings of the People. And so Presley's only successful poetic endeavor is a poem called "The Toilers," which is a "comment upon the social fabric."⁸ Norris points out why Presley succeeded with this poem and failed in his previous attempts.

⁴p. 450.

⁵It is interesting to note a parallel between Presley and Norris here: Norris spent four months in California gathering material for The Octopus, just as Presley does for his poem.

⁶p. 223.

⁷p. 21.

⁸p. 269.

He saw why he had never grasped the inspiration for his vast, vague, impersonal Song of the West. At the time when he sought for it, his convictions had not been aroused; he had not then cared for the People...Now he was one of the People; he had been stirred to his lowest depths. His earnestness was almost a frenzy. He believed, and so to him all things were possible at once.

The stratum of art has moved from Annie Derrick's withdrawal into feminine literature to Presley's successful poem of the People. Presley had, at first, assumed an attitude toward the wheat and the conflict over wheat-hauling rates faintly similar to that of Mrs. Derrick: "...these eternal fierce bickerings between the farmers... and the...Railroad irritated him and wearied him."¹⁰ But he soon became sympathetically involved with the ranchers and thereby discovered that in such conflicts lay the answers to the mysteries of life. The wheat became, to him, a symbol of eternal renascence. However, like Mrs. Derrick's, perhaps Presley's answer is also no answer at all. For the most he tells the reader is with what emotions the artist must search for answers. That is, one must sympathize with those who are battling the inscrutable forces before he can understand the cause of their suffering and perhaps suggest a remedy for it. Such knowledge, however, is not the answer, as Presley found out: "...he emerged from the affair... with not one sane suggestion as to remedy or redress."¹¹

⁹ pp. 269-70.

¹⁰ p. 13.

¹¹ p. 223.

There is another characteristic of Presley which, perhaps more than any other, supports Norris' thesis that there has not yet been found an answer to the question of how man can control his destiny. Presley, it seems, tries everything: at first he is indifferent to the conflict; he becomes, for a time, an anarchist; he tries to change the order of things through his poetry and through an impassioned but unsuccessful speech; finally, he accepts an absurd stoic philosophy, which will be discussed later. Nothing seems to work for him; nothing seems to be the answer. For how can the artist reform the people and thereby alter events when inexorable forces, controlled by natural law, in turn control the People? It would seem that the artist, as reformer, is doomed by the nature of things to failure.

However, perhaps the artist who lives his art may be more successful. Vanamee is this kind of artist. He does not write poetry; he lives poetically.

He is a college graduate and a man of wide reading and great intelligence, but he has chosen to lead his own life, which is that of a recluse...Living close to nature, a poet by instinct, where Presley was but a poet by training, there developed in him a great sensitiveness to beauty and an almost abnormal capacity for great happiness and great sorrow; he felt things intensely, deeply.¹²

Vanamee is a mystic; he has a sixth sense by which he communes with his dead fiancée and with nature. His mystic relationship to the fecund earth is important, for he is the

¹²pp. 30-31.

ultimate artist in Norris' pattern. And as such, his relationship to nature is significant. He differs from Presley, as an artist, in that (1) he is a poet by instinct, (2) his poetry is lived, not written, and (3), being so deeply involved in his personal sorrow, he is extremely sensitive to the problems of the ranchers, even though he has little to do with the conflict over rates per se. The answer for which Vanamee stands in the context of the stratum of art could, by an imaginative leap, be called Wordsworthian. That is, one must live in close harmony with nature; nature is a restorative and a balm to the sorrowful. Yet note that, again, one does not find a complete answer to the question of how man can control his destiny when in an improper relation to natural forces. As a matter of fact, Vanamee was never in such a position. His personal sorrow is the result of an attack upon, and the subsequent death of, Angel Varian. It has little to do with man's relation to nature. Vanamee's answer is not only that man cannot control his destiny when he is in improper relation to nature, but that he cannot control his destiny even when he is "submissive, working with it." His remedy is not one which points out how to control, but rather where to find solace after being defeated.

Annixter, the fourth character, is intimately connected to the main action of the story; he is one of the harassed wheat ranchers. Norris characterizes him as Dickens would and, perhaps to give credit where credit is due, Norris

portrays the wheat rancher as continually reading Dicken's David Copperfield.¹³ Annixter is a gray contrast to both Presley and Vanamee. Similar to them in having a college education, Annixter is unlike the poets in his practicality.

However, for Presley, Annixter professed a great admiration, holding in deep respect the man who could rhyme words, referring to him whenever there was question of literature or works of fiction. No doubt, there was not much use in poetry, and as for novels, to his mind, there were only Dicken's works. Everything else was a lot of lies. But just the same, it took brains to grind out a poem. It wasn't everyone who could rhyme "brave" and "glaive," and make sense out of it.¹⁴

Annixter fits into the stratum of art because, as the novel progresses, he loses his Philistine practicality and develops into a lover with the sensibilities of a poet. He meets Hilma Tree, a milkmaid who represents ideal, yet real, beauty, and he falls deeply in love with her.¹⁵

Norris intended for the parallel with the Vanamee-Angel romance to be immediately apparent, but he failed partially; he became too absorbed in the Vanamee-Angel romance as a story in itself, instead of as one part of a larger whole.

¹³Not enough has been made of Norris' debt to Dickens. It is almost as great as his debt to Zola. A study such as Biencourt's, applied to Norris and Dickens, would yield interesting results.

¹⁴p. 24.

¹⁵Richard Chase, in describing Hilma Tree's symbolic function, says that she is "a kind of Eternal Woman or Goddess of the Wheat..." The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York, 1957), p. 194.

But he failed only partially. Norris seems to be trying to say that, although Vanamee is the ultimate poet whose poetry is not written but lived, Annixter is the ultimate man whose life, in its beautiful reality, is better than poetry. As Norris says in Blix, "Life was better than reading, life was better than literature, and his new-found love for her was poetry enough for him."¹⁶ Annixter's love is real; Vanamee's can only exist in his mind, for Angel is dead. As Norris puts it and as Vanamee finally learns, "The simple honesty of a loving, trusting heart is better than a legend of flowers, a hallucination of the moonlight."¹⁷ Annixter's answer to the question of how man can control his destiny is summarized in his comment to Presley after he has undergone that amazing transformation of love: "...a fellow can't live for himself any more than he can live by himself. He's got to think of others."¹⁸ Annixter loves a beautiful reality about which poets write; and his answer is that one must love and help his fellow man.

Yet Annixter dies in the fight at the irrigation ditch, and old Mrs. Dyke and her granddaughter, Sidney, who were the objects of Annixter's new-found altruism, are in the end but "the wreck of another family."¹⁹ Annixter's answer is

¹⁶ Frank Norris, Works, IV, 100.

¹⁷ p. 463.

¹⁸ p. 338.

¹⁹ p. 459.

beautiful, but unfortunately it does not stand the test of experience. It may be true that, as Thornton Wilder says, "love is the only survival, the only meaning";²⁰ but this is only a way to say that we can find no meaning in events other than the love of one human being for another and that there is no real defense against the inexorable forces which control events. Nevertheless, Annixter made a valiant and admirable attempt to find an answer. And it will seem even more admirable as the last two figures in this stratum of art pass under our scrutiny.

At the beginning of the second half of The Octopus, Presley, Magnus Derrick, and Harran Derrick go to San Francisco on business which pertains to the ranchers' battle with the railroad. Presley has an aunt there, Mrs. Cedarquist, who is interested in charities, concerts, "minor" artists, and anything which is fashionable and useless.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo

are the words T.S. Eliot uses to describe the brand of social and artistic dillettantism which Mrs. Cedarquist represents. Like Annie Derrick, Mrs. Cedarquist is interested in the "minor poets" and in art as a pretty bauble, not as a vehicle for interpreting life. She offers no answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny. In fact, Norris

²⁰Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (New York, 1955), p. 117.

takes great pains to point this out, for it is part of his purpose to demonstrate that it is impossible to understand and interpret the forces which control life without at least studying them directly. Presley learned that.

Hartrath, the modern "Michelangelo" about whom Mrs. Cedarquist and the other women talk as they come and go, fits perfectly into Mrs. Cedarquist's fashionable circle of art-appreciators. His latest picture is "A Study of the Contra Costa Foothills"; according to Mrs. Cedarquist, Hartrath "interprets nature" in it. Hartrath's self-description, especially if read aloud with the proper inflections, gives a fair indication of the type of man he is.

'Oh, my dear Madame,' murmured the artist... 'I am a mere bungler... I am too sensitive. It is my cross. Beauty,' he closed his sore eyes with a little expression of pain, 'beauty unmans me.'²¹

As an artist, Hartrath is far removed from Presley and Vanamee; as a man, he is even farther removed from Annixter. His function in the stratum of art is to provide a contrast to the two poets, Presley and Vanamee. The only sense in which he helps answer the question of man's ability to control his destiny is that he shows one how not to go about looking for an answer.

Art, then, according to Norris, provides no answer to the question of how man, when in an improper relation to forces and natural law, can control his destiny. Annie

²¹ pp. 229-30.

Derrick uses art as a refuge into which she can withdraw. At the end of the novel she can "suffer no further." Presley tries to arouse the People with his poem, "The Toilers," and is unsuccessful. However, he has learned that one must deal directly with the problem if there is to be any chance at all of success. Vanamee finds solace in living poetically; but his life is a balm for defeat, not a way to escape defeat. Annixter proposes love for his fellow man, but he dies at the irrigation ditch. And Mrs. Cedarquist and Hartrath live in a false, unreal world of diletantism in which no answer can possibly be found, as Presley learned. The characters who make up the stratum of art have each submitted an answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny; and each answer is inadequate.

CHAPTER III

THE STRATUM OF ECONOMICS

The Octopus has been most often studied as an economic thesis novel; it is one of America's first. But just as sociology and politics blend into the fringes of economic thought and are hardly separable in reality, so in The Octopus each of these academic disciplines is a part of the stratum of economics. The question of man's control over his destiny is answered in broadly social terms, not only in the relatively narrow terms of economics.

There are more characters in the stratum of economics than in the stratum of art, and the stratum of economics is not so nearly arranged into an ordered and distinct set of answers. Nevertheless, it is reasonably clear that certain characters represent certain answers to what Norris considers an unanswerable question. One can hardly be too emphatic in cautioning the reader that the significance of Norris' use of this "stratum technique" to present an idea is primarily esthetic. His coherent presentation of this complex question has, of course, intellectual significance; but it is through an artistic form that the idea is presented, and as art that it must finally be evaluated.

Genslinger, Lyman Derrick, and S. Behrman are three related characters in the stratum of economics; as representatives of answers to the question of man's ability to control his destiny when in an improper relationship to nature, they may be considered as one. Each is using the forces of the wheat and the railroad to his own advantage, and each is successful. Genslinger, editor of the railroad-owned newspaper, blackmails Magnus Derrick for \$10,000. and, "after pocketing the Governor's hush money," sells him out.¹ Lyman Derrick, Magnus' son and the ranchers' traitorous lawyer, sells out to the railroad interests and later becomes the "Regular Republican Nominee for Governor of California"--backed, of course, by the railroad.² S. Behrman appropriates the land formerly owned by the ranchers and is in every material way a success until he is smothered under a landslide of wheat in the hold of the Swanhilda.

If it were not for S. Behrman's poetically just death, one might assert that, according to The Octopus, man can control his destiny by using and working with forces which destroy other men, in order to profit himself. However, although the assertion is invalid, it is invalid for a reason other than S. Behrman's death. Norris disrupted the intellectual pattern of his novel when he killed off the railroad agent. He became absorbed in S. Behrman as a character,

¹p. 403.

²p. 471.

but forgot about him as the representative of an answer in the stratum of economics. Behrman is an evil, detestable person and, by every standard of humanity, should pay for his oppression. So Norris contrives an adventitious accident in order to kill him: "His foot caught in a coil of rope, and he fell head-foremost into the hold."³

Behrman's death satisfies the desire of readers for poetic justice, and the scene is, by itself, extraordinarily powerful. But his death is a flaw in the coherent presentation of an idea and an accident in the derogatory sense of the word. It is neither intellectually nor artistically convincing (considering the novel as a whole, and not the scene alone) because it does not proceed from those forces which, it is premised in The Octopus, control men's destinies. To be consistent, Norris should have allowed S. Behrman to live, just as he did Genslinger and Lyman Derrick.

But if S. Behrman's death does not conflict with the assertion that man can control his destiny by working in harmony with oppressing force, the fact that such an answer can hardly be a general answer should. For there still remain the substantial number of people who are oppressed. It is for this reason that the assertion is invalid. Furthermore, neither Geslinger, Lyman Derrick, nor S. Behrman was ever in an improper relation to natural force, strictly speaking. From one point of view, perhaps, they were in an

³p. 466.

immoral relation to their fellow men. But this is not part of Norris' theoretically amoral point of view. They were working with force, not against it as the ranchers were, and this is the important point. Since these three characters were not in an improper relation to force, then, it is not from them that we seek an answer. They represent a spurious and limited answer which a competitive society, under the influence of social Darwinism, offers.

Magnus Derrick is the antithesis of Genslinger, his son Lyman, and S. Behrman. He is a politician of the out-dated, honest school with the instincts of a gambler. He is "in every sense the 'prominent man'"⁴ and the epitome of the wheat ranchers--greater than they, yet their representative. At a crucial point in the novel, Magnus is faced with an apparent choice. Should he join the ranchers in adopting the corrupt tactics of the enemy, or should he remain adamant in refusing to sacrifice his lifelong moral rectitude, even though the end is a righteous one? He decides to join his neighbors, for if he does not fight, he will be financially destroyed. The actual "choice," then, is between financial ruin and fighting for a worthy end with the only means open to him--corrupt ones. Either alternative leads inevitably to degeneration of one kind or another--the former financial and the latter moral.

To the question of whether man can control his destiny

⁴
p. 51.

when in an improper relation to force, Magnus Derrick, as the representative of the ranchers, stands for the answer that, since men do have choices available and can make them, they can indeed control their destiny. Actually, though, Magnus Derrick has no real choice; his situation is a dilemma. The answer which Magnus Derrick represents is invalid, and his final degradation supports this conclusion.⁵

The difference between Genslinger, Lyman Derrick, and S. Behrman and Magnus Derrick is great; but the difference between all four of them and Caraher is just as great. Unlike the wheat ranchers, the anarchist advocates violence against the railroad without subterfuge. Where the ranchers try to use the law dishonestly to save themselves, Caraher advocates violence and revenge against the trust-made-law in despair. He both incited Presley to bomb S. Behrman's house and urged the frustrated Dyke to revenge through robbing the railroad. Critic Richard Chase says that Caraher is the only character in the book who has any meaningful political ideas at all, with the exception of the archaic Calhoun conservatism of Magnus Derrick.⁶

Although the observation is overstated, it indicates that Chase sees Caraher's ideas as significant.

⁵p. 454.

⁶Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York, 1957), p. 195.

'Oh, if the people only knew their strength. Oh, if I could wake 'em up. There's not only Shelgrim, but there's others. All the magazines, all the butchers, all the blood-suckers, by the thousands. Their day will come, by God, it will.'

Caraher's answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny is offered in this half-prayer: the people must be moved to violent rebellion against those who represent the forces of immense power. Although Presley rejects Caraher near the end of the novel and says that he was "an evil influence among the ranchers, an influence that worked only to the inciting of crime,"⁸ one doubts that this is the reason why Caraher's answer is invalid. It is more likely invalid because it can hardly be successful, the people being by nature inert unless a wrong is done them directly.

For this same reason, Mr. Cedarquist's answer, much the same as Caraher's, is invalid.

'If I were to name the one crying evil of American life... it would be the indifference of the better people to public affairs...The People have but to say "No," and not the strongest tyranny, political, religious, or financial, that was ever organized, could survive one week.'⁹

This is, indeed, an answer of some merit; it differs from Caraher's chiefly in being less violent. But it is no more

⁷ p. 258.

⁸ p. 450.

⁹ p. 221.

practicable, one fears, than the anarchist's. Presley also tried to move the People to say "No"--once with an impassioned speech in which "for all his scorn of literature, he had been literary"¹⁰ and again in his poem "The Toilers"--and he also failed. One can approve of this answer as one which has a good deal of potential; but, as Presley learned, it is easier to theorize about the People than to help them help themselves.

The People, about whom Caraher and Mr. Cedarquist speak, can hardly be identified. But perhaps they are partially represented by the Hooven family. Hooven, his wife, and their two children are the only "lower class" characters in the novel. A German immigrant and something of a share-cropper, Hooven says that the Fatherland is where his family is.

'Budt der Vaterland iss vhair der home und der wife und kinder iss. Eh? Yes? Voad? Ach, no. Me, I nef'r voad. I doand bodder der haid mit dose ting. I maig der wheat grow, und ged der braid fur der wife und Hilda, dot's all. Dot's me; dot's Bismark.¹¹

How are the people to say "No" if they are non-voters like Hooven? And even if they do vote, it is doubtful whether their votes will save their families from the pathetic fate of Mrs. Hooven and her children, one of whom becomes a prostitute in order to eat while the younger one sees her mother die from starvation on the streets of San Francisco.

¹⁰ p. 400.

¹¹ p. 129.

The forces which control the destinies of men seem just as far beyond the reach of Mr. Cedarquist's votes as beyond Caraher's violence.

Indeed, there seems to be no economic answer, about which one could generalize, to the question of how man can control his destiny when in an improper relation to the forces of nature. The railroad and the wheat represent economically omnipotent forces. The former exacts as payment "all the traffic will bear"¹² and the latter flows to hungry mouths according to the "laws of supply and demand."¹³ Each is indifferent to the human animalcules caught in the middle. Political tactics are but the squirmings of the doomed; the violence of a few has no effect; and votes are as flimsy as the paper upon which the illiterate "X" is marked. The only safety seems to lie in using the strength of natural forces to one's own advantage, as do Genslinger, Lyman Derrick, and S. Behrman. But, since it is safety for only a few, this answer too is invalid. Perhaps an answer in terms of philosophy will prove less fruitless than those in the stratum of economics.

¹²p. 254.

¹³p. 417.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRATUM OF PHILOSOPHY

To be absolutely true to fact, this chapter should be entitled "The Quasi Stratum of Philosophy." For there are set forth in The Octopus only two significant philosophical views which deal with the question of man's ability to control his destiny. Two answers seem hardly enough to merit being called a stratum. Yet, for the sake of symmetry and with a qualification, the title, as it stands, should be roughly accurate.

In the broadest traditional sense of the word, philosophy is concerned with three areas of thought: natural science, ethical principles, and metaphysical speculation. As used here, philosophy refers primarily to metaphysics, for it is into this area that the "philosophers" of The Octopus venture. The philosopher must base his metaphysical speculations on his observations in the empirical world. He can go no farther than his facts will allow him. In the same way, the characters who speak philosophically in a novel must base their speculations on their observations within the world of the novel. If they try to go beyond these "facts" they will be both artistically and intellectually inconsistent.

The facts available to the "philosophers" in The Octopus are easily summarized. First, most of the events of the narrative have taken place before Shelgrim and Presley begin to speculate. Second, no way has been found in either art or economics for man to control his destiny when in an improper relation to natural forces (here, the wheat and the railroad trust). And third, it is premised that these forces are indifferent to man; they are neither malevolent nor beneficent.

From these facts of The Octopus's world come two speculative views within the novel. The first is expressed by Shelgrim.

'Men have only little to do in the whole business. Complications may arise, conditions that bear hard on the individual--crush him maybe--but the Wheat will be carried to feed the people as inevitably as it will grow. If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. Blame conditions, not men.'

The second speculative view is expressed by Presley in the last paragraph of the novel.

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.

¹p. 417.

²p. 473.

It has been asserted that Presley's thoughts, above, could also be expressed by Pope's line, "Whatever is, is right."³ Pope's line, however, implies morality--"rightness" and "wrongness." It also implies that the forces of the universe are ultimately beneficent (and not indifferent), even though individuals may suffer. If Presley's thoughts in the last paragraph of the novel mean the same as Pope's line, and if one is to identify Presley with Norris⁴, the ideas in The Octopus are definitely inconsistent.

However, one can hardly identify Norris with Presley, even though the novelist uses the poet as his point of view, and even though Presley's philosophical speculations are, misleadingly, the last ideas expressed in the novel. George Wilbur Meyer has gone to some trouble to substantiate this:

In the first chapter Norris remarks:

'One guessed that Presley's refinement had been gained only by a certain loss of strength...It could be foreseen that morally he was of that sort who avoid evil through good taste, lack of decision, and want of opportunity. His temperament was that of the poet; when he told himself he

³H.W. Reninger, "Norris Explains The Octopus: A Correlation of His Theory and Practice," American Literature, XII (May, 1940).

⁴Biencourt was, to my knowledge, the first major critic of Norris to maintain this: "Il est curieux de noter comment Presley, c'est-a-dire l'auteur lui-meme..." Marius Biencourt, Une Influence du Naturalisme Francais en Amerique: Frank Norris (Paris, 1933), p. 103.

had been thinking, he deceived himself. He had, on such occasions, been only brooding.' In the same chapter Norris asserts that Presley 'wished to see everything through a rose-colored mist--a mist that dulled all harsh outlines, all crude and violent colors.' Then we read a few pages further on that 'Presley was a confirmed dreamer, irresolute, inactive, with a strong tendency to melancholy...' These descriptions of Presley make it obvious that Norris did not look upon this genteel eastern⁵ poet as a promising source of high philosophical truth.

The other "if"--whether Presley's last thoughts are supposed to mean the same as Pope's line--is difficult to ascertain. There is a second possibility; but before explaining it, Shelgrim's view must be analyzed.

When Shelgrim says, "Blame conditions, not men," he is taking an amoral position which reasonably follows from the assumption of indifferent, controlling forces in nature. But his further implication does not necessarily follow from that assumption; he implies a fatalism in the denouement of events in The Octopus. "Fatalism" is a belief in the preordination of all events; it should be contrasted to "determinism," a belief in the preordination of events according to conditions, which men can, by an exertion of the will, change.⁶

Whereas Shelgrim is a fatalist, believing that the pathetic denouement of The Octopus will repeat itself since conditions cannot be changed, Presley may be a determinist,

⁵G.W. Meyer, "A New Interpretation of The Octopus," College English, IV (March, 1943), 358-59.

⁶This distinction was first brought to my attention in reference to The Octopus by G. W. Meyer in two of his published articles. See the bibliography.

believing that, although the denouement of The Octopus was inevitable given certain "conditions," those conditions can be changed.

Thus, within The Octopus there are two characters who philosophize about the meaning of events: Shelgrim and Presley.⁷ The former is a fatalist and the latter is either an optimistic determinist or one who believes that whatever is, is right. Critics have argued that one or another is the view taken by Norris himself; at various times, each has been asserted to be Norris' attitude.⁸ But both philosophers go beyond the evidence and assumptions Norris presents in the novel. Shelgrim is speculating when he implies that conditions cannot be changed; Presley is speculating if he is saying that conditions can be changed; and he is speculating if he says that there is morality inherent in the universe. Of course, Norris speculated too when he constructed The Octopus on the assumption of the indifference of force;

⁷Vanamee also philosophizes, and perhaps with more factual validity than Presley. But since Presley is a more important character than Vanamee and since he appropriates Vanamee's ideas, the two can be considered as expressing the same view.

⁸The fatalist point of view is automatically taken by those who interpret naturalistic fiction according to a conventional pre-conception of "pessimistic determinism." G.W. Meyer asserts that all truly naturalistic fiction is, by definition, an attempt to reform society (an attempt which he calls "optimistic determinism"); he bases his assertion on an analysis of Zola's Le Roman Experimental. H.W. Reninger maintains that Norris, through Presley, is saying that "whatever is, is right." Meyer's and Reninger's works are listed in the bibliography.

but a novel cannot be written without making some sort of speculative assumption or another.

The conclusion one must finally reach is that Norris is fully advocating none of these views. He is offering no final analysis of the meaning of the denouement at the irrigation ditch. Throughout the novel, Norris has been consistent in demonstrating artistically that the many answers offered, in either art or economics, to the question of man's ability to control his destiny are not finally valid. He continues to be consistent by fully advocating none of the answers to the question of what is the meaning of man's inability to control his destiny.

Norris is face to face with the dilemma of the modern artist: there is no set of beliefs which he can advocate without reservations. Yet he is a novelist and must write. The result is a novel which offers no solution to the problems it studies, which demonstrates instead that, as far as the novelist knows, there is no final answer. There are peculiar artistic problems involved in writing such a novel. And since it is ultimately as art, not as idea, that The Octopus must be evaluated, it will be interesting to see how Norris meets these problems.

CHAPTER V

ARTISTIC UNITY AND ASSERTION

Norris has resolved two important artistic problems in The Octopus. The first might be described as the unification of complexity. That is, Norris has welded the many ideas, characters, and single scenes of The Octopus into a powerful, moving intellectual and artistic whole. The second problem might be called the artistic assertion of an idea: Norris has asserted ideas in the novel without preaching or abstracting invalidly. The techniques by which Norris has resolved these problems are of primary importance in evaluating him as an artist, for his dexterity in applying them is the measure of his craftsmanship. Thus, the following pages undertake to analyze in detail Norris' resolution of the two important artistic problems of The Octopus.

First, however, it might be well to review the intellectual unity Norris has achieved in The Octopus through restriction. As has been pointed out in the three previous chapters, the novel is an enormous answer, in terms of art, economics, and philosophy, to the question of man's ability to control his destiny. It should be noted that a novel which revolves about the answer to one such question has, by its very nature, an inherent intellectual organization.

Furthermore, Norris has elected to search for the answer only in terms of art, economics, and philosophy (i.e., the question is not significantly answered in terms of, say, religion or science);¹ he has restricted the area in which the answer is to be found and has thus taken a step toward unity.

But this point has been developed in the preceding chapters. This chapter intends to deal with The Octopus as art, not as idea--the presentation of the idea, not the idea itself.

The conflict between the wheat ranchers and the railroad trust is the dramatic center around which revolve both the sub-plots of the novel and the ideas within the novel. Even characters seemingly remote from the central conflict of The Octopus are in some way or another related to it. Mrs. Cedarquist, for example, lives in San Francisco, a good distance from the San Joaquin valley, and is an intellectual, artistic, and social dilettante. She is the last person one would expect to be concerned with the main conflict of the story. But if she were not, The Octopus would lose some of its unity; it would have loose threads. So the reader discovers that Mrs. Cedarquist is Presley's aunt, a social friend of the Gerards (Mr. Gerard is a vice-

¹Father Sarria gives a Roman Catholic answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny. See p. 103 ff., et seq. Yet it is involved in the action only in so far as Vanamee reacts to it and then passes it on to Presley. And in this process, the answer changes form.

president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad), and a philanthropist; during the eighteen months of the novel, she is engaged in a do-good project to send wheat to the starving people in India. It is no coincidence that Presley leaves America at the end of the novel on the Swanhilda, the ship which carries Mrs. Cedarquist's wheat (grown on Los Muertos) and which is S. Behrman's coffin. In this way, through the existence of the Swanhilda, several dramatic threads of the novel are finally woven into the main design. Mrs. Cedarquist is not only related to the dramatic center of the novel; she also contributes to its development. One technique, then, which Norris uses to unify The Octopus dramatically is to relate his characters--even the most remote--to the central dramatic conflict.

Norris has been highly and justly praised for his ability to paint large, panoramic, single scenes. Perhaps this ability derives from his youthful activities as a painter. In any case, even a casual reader of The Octopus will hardly be able to forget such scenes as the panorama of plowing, the dance at Annixter's barn, the rabbit drive, and the chase after Dyke. Norris was conscious of this characteristic in his work.

Each chapter...is a little work in itself, and the great story of the whole novel is told thus as it were in a series of pictures, the author supplying information as to what has intervened between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next by suggestion or by actual résumé. As often as not the reader himself can fill up the gap by

the context.²

Such a "series of pictures" with suggestion filling the gaps between the pictures might be a fair description of the picaresque novel, but it does not adequately describe the tightly knit dramatic plot of The Octopus. One needs to examine a further remark of Norris' in the same essay in order to see how, in The Octopus, he has knit together the series of pictures: "...in a phrase one could resume the whole system of fiction mechanics--preparations of effect."³ As an example of Norris' preparations of effect, let us consider his preparation for the dance at Annixter's barn.

The first time the reader hears of the barn is the first time he meets Annixter, through Presley.

'By the way,' he [Presley] added, 'I see your barn is about done.'

'You bet,' answered Annixter. 'In about a fortnight now she'll be all ready.'

'It's a big barn,' murmured Presley...

'Guess we'll have to have a dance there before we move the stock in,'⁴ observed Annixter. 'That's the custom all around here.'

The conversation is seemingly innocuous, even banal. But Norris seldom allows his characters to say things not to the

²Frank Norris, Works, IV, 316.

³Ibid., p. 315.

⁴p. 26.

point; he is preparing. The next mention of the barn is brief and offhand.

'And I got to be out in it [the rain],' fumed Annixter, 'and I suppose these swine will quit work on the big barn now.'⁵

Later, after Annixter bungles his attempt to kiss Hilma Tree, he walks outside and watches the construction of the barn. Norris describes the activity. Annixter, asking his foreman when the barn will be finished, is "told that at the end of the week the hay and stock could be installed."⁶

A few pages later Presley informs him that he must send out typewritten invitations to the dance.⁷ And the next reference to the barn begins one of Norris' best pictures--the barn dance.⁸ One could also consider as preparation for the barn-dance Annixter's firing of Delaney;⁹ for Delaney's violent entrance to the dance is one of its climactic events. The preparation for the barn-dance also relates the various scenes in time. The first time the reader hears of the barn, he knows that it will be ready in "about a fortnight." Thus, time in the first part of the novel is measured by the progress of the barn.

⁵ p. 69.

⁶ p. 127.

⁷ p. 135.

⁸ p. 163.

⁹ p. 70.

Norris' preparation for Annixter's barn-dance is only one of many such preparations. It is a technique whereby the series of pictures is made into a whole, whereby variety is unified. This technique is not, of course, unique with Norris; every competent novelist makes use of it. But it is only one of several techniques Norris uses. "Foreshadowing," for example, is another. If "preparation" makes the reader aware that an event is going to take place, "foreshadowing" prepares him for the outcome of that event.

It has previously been pointed out that the slaughter of Vanamee's sheep foreshadows the bloody defeat of the ranchers by the railroad. But there are many other foreshadowings. For example, the outcome of Dyke's personal revolt against the railroad is not for long in doubt. As a conversation with Harran Derrick indicates, the railroad will overcharge Dyke when he attempts to ship his crop of hops.

'And, by the way, have you looked up the freight rates on hops?'

'No, I haven't yet,' answered Dyke, 'and I had better be sure of that, hadn't I? I hear that the rate is reasonable, though.'

'You be sure to have a clear understanding with the railroad first about the rate,' Harran warned him.¹⁰

After Dyke has been overcharged and financially ruined, he goes into Caraher's saloon. His degeneration is foreshadowed in the thoughts of Presley, Annixter, and Magnus Derrick.

¹⁰p. 57.

In silence, grim, bitter, infinitely sad, the three men... contemplated the...inevitable collapse and submerging of one of their companions, the wreck of a career, the ruin of an individual.¹¹

The point need not be labored further. Norris prepares for events meticulously and foreshadows their outcome in the best naturalistic tradition. By doing so, he knits the elements of his story into a garment with few loose threads.

Perhaps the most characteristic and effective technique for unification in The Octopus is the use of the wheat as a central symbol in the novel. As Biencourt has pointed out, "Dans l'Octopus...le symbole est avant tout le blé qui incarne la perpétuité de la vie."¹² Furthermore, just as each character in McTeague is related to every other character by his relationship to gold, so in The Octopus a character's relationship to the wheat partly defines his relation to other characters. Thus, the wheat unifies the novel. But it also performs another function.

Besides the problem of unity in The Octopus, Norris had to take into account another artistic problem: how to assert his ideas and attitude toward the events of the story. An early Victorian novelist would find this no problem; he could simply comment on happenings as they took

¹¹p. 261.

¹²Marius Biencourt, Une Influence du Naturalisme Français en Amérique: Frank Norris (Paris, 1933), p. 171. Cf. Father Sarria's "Your grain of wheat is your symbol of immortality." p. 108.

place, as did Thackery and George Eliot. But following the naturalistic tradition, Norris must give the illusion of objectivity; he should not comment. He must, therefore, assert his ideas and attitude by some means other than direct statement. He must, for example, suggest meaning by establishing a norm, just as the satirist must suggest a norm for his irony if he does not wish his satire to be interpreted literally.

One of Norris' norms is man's relationship to the wheat. He not only uses the wheat as a unifying symbol; he also uses it to suggest meaning. For example, the men who plow the wheat fields are the only characters in the novel who are harmoniously related to the wheat; they establish Norris' norm.

Work, food, and sleep, all life reduced to its bare essentials, uncomplex, honest, healthy. They were strong, these men, with the strength of the soil they worked, in touch with the essential things, back again to the starting point of civilization, coarse, vital, real, and sane.¹³

These men are working with the wheat-force; they neither fear it like Annie Derrick nor do they try to use it for personal gain like Magnus Derrick and S. Behrman. Using the workers as a norm, then, one can interpret the novel as it has been interpreted in this thesis: as a study of man in improper relation to natural forces. Norris has communicated meaning through a norm, objectively and without the comment

¹³
p. 99.

typical of the early Victorian novelists. However, the workers are only a norm and no more; they do not represent Norris' answer to the question of man's ability to control his destiny. For Norris emphasizes their eminently sane state only enough to establish a norm, not enough to suggest them even faintly as an answer.

While continuing the illusion of objectivity, Norris sets up a contrast in The Octopus between country and city. In the country, the workers are happiest, but even a businessman-farmer like, say, Harran Derrick, is relatively content, even though he is in an improper relation to the wheat. On the other hand, Lyman Derrick, living in the city and having little or no direct contact with nature, is corrupt and morally degenerate. The city is a place of evil to all who enter it: see, for example, the Hooven women near the end of the novel¹⁴ or Hilma Tree, the "Goddess of the Wheat," in San Francisco.¹⁵ The contrast between country and city is significant to the degree that a reader understands Norris' attitude toward man and his relation to natural forces--to the degree that a reader grasps the norm of the workers and the wheat.

Besides the establishing of norms, Norris uses other devices to get across his meaning without losing his seeming objectivity. The ironic and suggestive juxtaposition of

¹⁴ pp. 418-45.

¹⁵ p. 291.

incidents is one of the most successful. The most obvious use of juxtaposition in The Octopus occurs near the end of the novel: Mrs. Hooven and young Hilda are walking the streets of San Francisco, starving and penniless, while Presley is, at the exact same time, eating a sumptuous dinner at the lavish home of the vice-president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. The last few paragraphs of the section should adequately illustrate the technique.

Just before the ladies left the table, young Lambert raised his glass of Madeira. Turning toward the wife of the Railroad King, he said:

'My best compliments for a delightful dinner.'

The doctor, who had been bending over Mrs. Hooven, rose.

'It's no use,' he said; 'she has been dead some time-- exhaustion from starvation.'¹⁶

The novelist need not comment on such a situation. Its injustice, when presented in such a manner, is obvious. And Norris' sympathies are also obvious, even though he refrains from an explicit moral judgment.

There is much to criticize in Norris' use of juxtaposition in this scene; it is too obvious, too melodramatic, too sentimental. He makes much better use of the technique earlier in the novel. Vanamee is going to the mission garden to exert his mysterious will-power in order to bring Angel back from the dead. At the same time, Annixter is spending the night in the fields, trying to decide whether

¹⁶ p. 445.

to marry Hilma Tree. "For a moment, the life-circles of these two men, of so widely differing characters touched each other."¹⁷ The two men spend the night, thinking, conjuring, reflecting. As the sun begins to rise, three events take place simultaneously: (1) Annixter finds that he loves Hilma and wants to marry her, (2) Vanamee has attracted Angel to him through his will-power, and (3) the wheat comes up from under the tilled soil. Although this three-fold juxtaposition is not within the realm of probability, one accepts it because Norris gives the illusion of objectively reporting it, as if it did actually happen, and because the juxtaposition is meaningful. By the juxtaposition, the reader is to understand that

Once more the pendulum of the seasons swung in its might /mighty/arc, from death back to life. Life out of death, eternity rising from out dissolution. There was the lesson.¹⁸

Throughout the novel, Norris uses juxtaposition to convey his attitude, even toward very minor events. For example, Dyke goes to see S. Behrman about the freight rates for hops. After previously telling Dyke that the rate was two cents a pound, the railroad raised the rates to five cents a pound--because the price of hops had gone up. Dyke naturally asks what the standard for raising rates is. And S. Behrman answers that it is "All the traffic will bear."¹⁹

¹⁷ p. 275.

¹⁸ p. 284.

¹⁹ p. 254.

Immediately after Behrman's pronouncement, a worker comes into the railroad office to put up a "door closing apparatus."

The man who had come to fix the apparatus was unwilling to guarantee it, unless a sign was put on the outside of the door, warning incomers that the door was self-closing. This sign would cost fifteen cents extra.

'But you didn't say anything about this when the thing was ordered,' declared S. Behrman. 'No, I won't pay it, my friend. It's an overcharge.'

'You needn't think,' observed the clerk, 'that just because you are dealing with the Railroad you are going to work us.'²⁰

The joint effect of the two events is humorous. But poor Dyke sees nothing humorous in it. The railroad's overcharge for delivering his hops will ruin him. Norris obviously sympathizes with Dyke. And it is through the juxtaposition of two similar incidents that he lets the reader in on his attitude.

Norris has other techniques by which he can convey the significance of an event or situation and his attitude toward it. The arrangement of chairs in a room, for example, has meaning.

Around the table the chairs in which the men had sat throughout the evening still ranged themselves in a semi-circle, vaguely suggestive of the conference of the past few hours, with all its possibilities of good and evil, its significance of a future big with portent.²¹

A map of the San Joaquin valley, with red lines signifying the path of the railroad, has a symbolical meaning for the

²⁰ pp. 254-55.

²¹ p. 93.

ranchers looking at it.

The map was white, and it seemed as if all the color which should have gone to vivify the various countries, towns, and cities marked upon it had been absorbed by that huge, sprawling organism, with its ruddy arteries converging to a central point. It was as though the State had been sucked white and colorless, and against this pallid background the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting; and excrescence, a gigantic parasite, fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth.²²

The choice of words and the attitude they convey make Norris' position clear. Yet the illusion of objectivity is not abandoned. It is Presley who feels a significance in the semicircle of chairs; it is the ranchers who feel a symbolic meaning in the map. Norris is merely reporting and clarifying their feelings, or so he would have his readers think.

Constantly striving for generalized meaning, Norris uses several techniques to indicate the significance a reader is to attach to events in The Octopus. One of these techniques has been mentioned several times: the concrete symbol which stands for an abstraction. The Railroad's trains are metaphorically described as iron monsters, as gigantic, indifferent machines, as octopuses.²³ On another level, it is no longer the train which is the octopus, but the trust. Then, on the highest level of abstraction, the

²²p. 210.

²³It is interesting to note how Norris mixes his metaphors in describing the railroad. Although the octopus dominates, the iron monster and the machine follow in that order. See pp. 41-42, 251, 260, 418, 472.

monster is the Trust (all trusts). By the same process, the wheat symbolizes the indestructibility of the natural order. The men caught between the workings of these two abstractions symbolize, at one level, all the ranchers of the State, and at a second level, "every citizen of every State."²⁴ It is Presley who indicates this generalization of The Octopus as he writes in his journal.

...ask yourselves, every citizen of every State...have you not the monster in your boundaries? If it is not a Trust of transportation, it is only another head of the same Hydra. Is not our death struggle typical? Is it not one of many, is it not symbolical of the great and terrible conflict that is going on everywhere in these United States?²⁵

Still, however, Norris does not destroy the illusion of objectivity in this symbolic process. He is interpreting, ostensibly, Magnus Derrick's imagination, or he is seeing things through Presley's eyes; he is reporting their reactions. But a reader who matches up the varying ideas which Norris is supposedly reporting finds a consistency in them which can only be Norris'. The conflict of The Octopus represents those over all the United States. The Octopus is a microcosm of the forces which control the destinies of men. It is a microcosm because Norris obliquely tells his readers it is, through his symbolic arrangement.

Even the characters symbolize abstractions within this microcosm. As Biencourt puts it,

²⁴ p. 390.

²⁵ pp. 390-91.

Le poete qui grandit et embellit ces figures incarne souvent en elles une idée ou un penchant...Lyman Derrick /incarne/ la politique; Vanamee, le mysticisme; Behrman, la scélératesse; Hilma Tree, sa plus belle création symbolise l'amour.²⁶

Norris uses several techniques to let the reader know the exact abstraction which a given character represents. The most interesting is his naming of characters. Richard Chase points out that the name of Faulkner's character, Lena Grove in Light in August, has the same implications as the name Hilma Tree: "The bovine woman brings to Faulkner's mind echoes of ancient myth and ritual (hence the name, Lena Grove--cf. Hilma Tree in The Octopus)..."²⁷ Hilma Tree is thus the incarnation of womanhood. One could speculate on the meaning of other names: Magnus Derrick (Magnus=great; Derrick=a towerlike framework); Vanamee and Angel Varian (exotic names for mysterious people); Hooven (hovel). Magnus Derrick's ranch is also significantly named: El Rancho De Los Muertos (the ranch of the dead). Even if one's speculations cannot be verified, many of the names of characters and things in The Octopus are at least suggestive.

An early reviewer of The Octopus pointed out that

...as Wagner has a musical phrase for every person or idea, so Mr. Norris seems bound to repeat certain descriptive phrases whenever his personages reappear in the tale.²⁸

²⁶Biencourt, op. cit., pp. 170-71.

²⁷Richard Chase, op. cit., p. 212.

²⁸The Outlook, LXVII (April 20, 1901), 923.

Perhaps it would be better to compare this technique of Norris' to Dickens, whom Norris so much admired. In any case, Norris gives a few characteristics to his characters which stick with them throughout the novel. For example, Annixter reads David Copperfield and eats prunes, hates "feemales," and continually repeats his favorite argumentative phrase: "In a way [it has], and then, again, in a way, it hasn't." By describing his characters in this way, Norris gives them static, allegorical characteristics, to which one can ascribe abstract meaning.

On the other hand, these same characters develop and learn as the novel progresses: Annixter, Presley, Hilma Tree, Magnus Derrick, and Vanamee, to list only the most important characters, are changed people at the end of the novel. Through this combination of static, allegorical characteristics and character development, Norris' characters stand for an idea. The seeming irregularity in this combination can be resolved if it is suggested that just as an idea develops and changes when carried out to its logical conclusions, so does a character develop and change. Neither, however, loses identity: the characters do not lose their static characteristics and the ideas do not lose their basic assumptions.

Norris' titanic (some would say turgid) style is an especially apt subject with which to round out this analysis of craftsmanship in The Octopus. For it matches the tremendously broad ideas in the novel. Norris had a

contempt for the meticulous stylistics of Flaubert and others of the "exact word" school. As he, in characteristic language, once put it, "Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil."²⁹ His style is obviously not that of the exact word. It gains its effect rather from a Whitmanesque amplification and re-inforcement of a guiding attitude. In the following passage, Norris is describing the land as it receives the plow.

One could not take a dozen steps upon the ranches without the brusque sensation that underfoot the land was alive; roused at last from its sleep, palpitating with the desire of reproduction. Deep down there in the recesses of the soil, the great heart throbbed once more, thrilling with passion, vibrating with desire, offering itself to the caress of the plow, insistent, eager, imperious. Dimly one felt the deep-seated trouble of the earth, the uneasy agitation of its members, the hidden tumult of its womb, demanding to be made fruitful, to reproduce, to disengage the eternal renescent germ of Life that stirred and struggled in its loins.³⁰

One should note, first, in this passage what Norris uses instead of a meticulous choice of the exact word. I am speaking of his typical technique of amplification-- "insistent, eager, imperious." The three words give an almost Miltonic weight to the passage; they strike with the power of a sledge hammer, each time driving the point a little further home. Compare Norris' amplification (not only in these three words, but throughout the passage) to

²⁹ Frank Norris, quoted by Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Palo Alto, California, 1942), p. 174, from a letter to Isaac Marcossou.

³⁰ p. 95. My italics.

these lines from Milton's Samson Agonistes.

No less the people on thir Holy-days
Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable. (l. 1421-22)

The same sledge hammer qualities are observable in both passages. While not wishing to suggest that Norris is an artist of Milton's caliber, one feels a comparable grandeur in the two.

The sexuality of Norris' imagery is, however, more comparable to Whitman's poetry than Milton's. As C.H. Grattan has pointed out,

Probably nowhere in American literature has there been a more constant and frank emphasis on the sexual nature of the fecundity of the earth. Norris rose at points to the frenzy of a believer in a fertility cult--and his imagery is constantly sexual.³¹

One can easily see the sexual imagery in the paragraph quoted above from The Octopus. The plow represents masculinity cohabiting with mother earth in order to produce their offspring, wheat.

Norris' amplified style, his emphasis on the sexual nature of the fecundity of the earth, and his absorption in his "yarn" to the exclusion of the exact word, are most appropriate to the ideas of his novel. One can hardly imagine, say, Henry James dealing with the subject matter of The Octopus. James is precise; he is concerned with the

³¹C.H. Grattan, "Frank Norris," Bookman, LXIX (July, 1929), 506.

important subtleties of consciousness. Norris is voluminous; he is concerned with the permeating influence of a vague set of forces on human destiny. James' style suits his subject, and Norris' style is, in the same way, suitable to The Octopus.

It is Norris' ability to unify and assert his ideas artistically--through the restriction of his characters' ideological function, through dramatic unity, through preparation, foreshadowing, symbolism, juxtaposition, imagery, and characterization, and through style--which forces one to admire The Octopus. One may disagree completely with his ideas and at the same time admire his presentation of them. For, although his weaknesses are evident, he is a craftsman of no small ability.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND RE-EVALUATION

The ultimate assertion of this thesis is that The Octopus is a valuable work of art, not a stereotyped product of naturalism to be read only as a part of literary history. Norris' intellectual consistency in the novel supports the assertion. He has placed his characters in a situation which forces them to attempt to find a way of controlling their destiny. None is successful in his search, and the novel should be interpreted as asserting that, when in conflict with indifferent forces, men cannot control the situation; in fact, they can hardly understand it.

Norris offers his readers no teleological Morrison's Pill; he offers no easy resolution to the question of why men cannot control their destiny. Perhaps this has been the chief reason why he has been accused of inconsistency, and has thus been misinterpreted: interpreters look for a teleological resolution of the problem, such as Presley offers at the end of the novel, and when they find one, they have a tendency to accept it as the author's and not as the character's. For example, Marchand says,

The moral and philosophical issues are not clear-cut. Norris was unable to give up a teleological view of the world, and there lingered in him a notion that good and evil are absolute entities inherent in the nature of the cosmos, instead of human concepts. Hence he wavers between the idea of impersonal force for which good and evil have no meaning and the idea of a triumphant good for which the universe itself stands sponsor.¹

If one were to substitute "Presley" for "Norris" in the passage, Marchand's assertion would be valid. But to completely identify Presley with Norris is to misinterpret The Octopus.

One critical point of view maintains that the problem of Norris' consistency in The Octopus is relatively unimportant.

There has been considerable discussion during recent years as to whether The Octopus is philosophically consistent. Whether it is artistically unified would seem to be a more important consideration.²

Artistic unity is, of course, of major importance in literary criticism. But is not philosophical consistency one part of artistic unity? A novel can hardly be artistically unified and at the same time be philosophically inconsistent. It is partly because of Norris' philosophical consistency that The Octopus is artistically unified.

It is also partly because of the harmony between the ideological level and the narrative level that The Octopus is artistically unified. As has been pointed out, this

¹Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Palo Alto, California, 1942), p. 81.

²Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 221.

harmony is brought about through artistic techniques which, while preserving an illusion of objectivity, give the narrative abstract meaning.

If philosophical consistency and harmony between ideas and the narrative are important in evaluating a novel--and they undoubtedly are--then a re-evaluation of The Octopus is necessary. Criticism of it has for too long accepted its "inconsistency" without careful examination. Furthermore, there is still an undercurrent of critical thinking extant which finds that a "naturalistic novel" is automatically non-artistic and even repulsive. Like Nancy Huston Banks, an early reviewer of Norris' work, some approach a naturalistic novel with a pre-conceived bias against it.

The passing of morbid realism has never been quite so complete as the healthy-minded hoped it would be, when it was swept out of sight five or six years ago by the sudden on-rush of works of ideality and romance, which arose³ like a fresh, sweet wind to clear the literary atmosphere.

Such an attitude will never allow one to evaluate The Octopus fairly. And, of course, the obverse is also true. If one's predilection for naturalism is so intense as to blind him to the faults of a given work, that work will never be fairly evaluated.

But the critic must not only rid himself of bias; he must also be willing to hold in abeyance those generalizations about a work or tradition which abound in literary circles.

³Nancy Huston Banks, "Two Recent Revivals in Realism," The Bookman, IX (June, 1899), 356.

He must be willing to follow the work itself, wherever it may lead him.

In short, The Octopus must be evaluated on its own merits, not merely on those of the literary tradition to which it belongs. This study has been an attempt to move in that direction. It is up to future readers of The Octopus to re-evaluate it in light of its intellectual consistency and artistic unity.

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