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He could not cable

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Frank Norris: A Life by Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler
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When Frank Norris died of appendicitis in 1902, at the age of 32, he had written six novels, as well as scores of essays and reviews. At least two of the novels, *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901), are recognised masterpieces, and a number of the essays, particularly those about the Spanish-American War, retain their power today. Norris's life, on the other hand, was distinguished only by its privilege.

He was the child of a prominent San Francisco family, whose every holiday was reported in the society pages. He attended a series of elite schools, and then went off to Paris to study art. He attempted a medieval battle scene in the grand historical manner, but abandoned the project when he found that the canvas would not fit through his door; his most successful work was a portrait of his mother's cat. After two years in Paris, he decided that writing, not painting, would be his métier. He applied to Berkeley, was admitted despite his poor performance in the entrance exams, and was soon petitioning the university to waive the required coursework. He had enrolled, he loftily said, 'with the view of preparing myself for the profession of a writer of fiction', and should not be made to study Latin or maths. The university was not persuaded, and Norris left with an 'honourable dismissal' rather than a degree. At Berkeley he divided his time between writing for campus magazines and living the life of a fraternity man. He hazed the younger students with great vigour and once filled the bed of an unsuspecting friend with gruel. His studies occupied little of his time. As he confessed in an essay published some years later, he made frequent use of the files of old papers conveniently compiled by former students.

Harvard proved more congenial. Norris studied there for a year after Berkeley and took a course much like a contemporary writing workshop. After that he returned to San Francisco and lived with his mother in a lavish hotel suite while writing freelance for a regional magazine called the *Wave*. He went to South Africa to write a series of essays on 'the picturesque side of African life' but failed to send his mother the promised cable when he arrived in Cape Town, setting off a frenzy of maternal worry that was covered in the San Francisco newspapers. 'Friends of Frank Norris Anxious', announced the first of a series of headlines; the last, weeks later, explained: 'Norris Could Not Cable'. Travelling from Cape Town to Johannesburg, Norris found himself caught up in the Jameson Raid, an ill-advised uprising of British settlers against the Boer government and a harbinger of the Boer War. He joined a settlers' militia, only to find himself assigned to office work. He nonetheless seized a horse and rode off to meet the enemy, but sensibly retreated when they started to shoot. He returned to San Francisco, where his mother was shocked by his newly acquired tattoos.

That autumn, Norris became first a staff writer on the *Wave* and then associate editor, and his writing career began in earnest. Within a year, he had published one minor novel and begun writing another, as well as completing a collection of short stories. More important, he had finished the manuscript of *McTeague*. How the painter manqué, the would-be revolutionary, the high-spirited fraternity boy came to write this remarkable novel is a mystery that Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler cannot explain. They are frank about the difficulty of knowing what Norris thought or felt. 'Ironically,' they write, 'it is less difficult to trace Frank Norris's lineage through several lines back to and beyond the 17th century than it is to discover what it was like for him to reach adolescence in the home of his parents.' Where other biographers might have indulged in speculation, McElrath and Crisler have indulged in research. They give us all the 17th-century ancestors, as well as the churches that Norris's father might have attended before Norris was born and the two different routes Norris himself might have taken when travelling to Key West. This information is less illuminating than McElrath and Crisler suppose, and the arc of Norris's life is lost in a welter of irrelevant details. The syntax is alternately sloppy and strained, and much of the phrasing is simultaneously hackneyed and unclear. Readers would do well to stick to Norris's work.

It isn't clear what prompted Norris to become a serious novelist, but Zola seems to have played a crucial role. Norris was his great champion in the United States, although his critical writings on naturalism are more vigorous than discerning. He defines naturalism in terms of subject-matter, setting it against a timid and now superseded realism. Realism, according to Norris, lies in 'the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea'. Naturalism, by contrast, emerges when 'things commence to happen to us, if we kill a man or two, or get mixed up in a tragic affair, or do something on a larger scale, such as the amassing of enormous wealth or power or fame.' Norris's quest for 'larger' subject-matter led him to the violent and the grotesque. In one piece he wrote at Harvard, a man attacks his wife and leaves her to die in a pool of blood. 'Not a toothsome subject,' his teacher noted in the margin, and Norris's novels would be filled with many such things. But this is not what makes them naturalist.

Naturalism is characterised by its determinism; it is the modern descendant of tragedy.

Realist novels take human agency for granted. Their plots turn on moments of decision, such as whom to marry or which profession to pursue, and their characters are endowed with consciousness. Naturalist novels, by contrast, show how human agency can be suspended, or even overridden, by external forces. Their plots follow inevitable trajectories, and their characters manifest little or no consciousness at all. Generations of scholars have thought of naturalism as Darwinian but it has more recently been shown that it was also shaped by other evolutionary theorists whose work was popular at the turn of the century. The naturalist novel is characterised not only by such familiar Darwinian concepts as natural and sexual selection, but also by an array of now forgotten ones: inherited traits, vestigial traits, reversion to type, recapitulation and devolution. Other scholars have drawn attention to the significance of psychological determinism, to such forces as habit or compulsion. These wider definitions of naturalism mean that nearly all the important US novelists writing at the turn of the century can be contained within it: Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Charles Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin.

McElrath and Crisler, however, claim that the naturalist novel has been slighted by scholars in favour of the realist. This was true when they began writing their biography, thirty years ago, but it is not true any more. Nor is it true, as they grumpily insist, that Norris has been systematically ignored because of his privilege. ‘It certainly is no advantage in the academy today,’ they write, ‘for an author to have been an upper-middle-class Anglo-Saxon male who never experienced race or gender bias, much less oppression of any sort.’ This is far from accurate: for the past twenty years, Norris has been celebrated as the most innovative US naturalist, and *McTeague*, in particular, is widely taught and universally admired.

The protagonist of *McTeague* is a self-trained dentist, famous for extracting teeth with fingers rather than pliers. Brutishly strong, he leads a life of animal contentment, working all week and then spending Sundays eating, sleeping and playing a few songs on his concertina. His routine is unsettled by Trina, a young woman who comes to him with a chipped front tooth. Overcome by a desire he doesn’t understand, McTeague expresses it as fully as he can. ‘What’s the matter with us getting married?’ he asks her. ‘No, no,’ she replies again and again, as he cajoles: ‘Ah, come on . . . ah, come on.’ At last, he grabs her, and she submits. There is no deliberation, no real choice; their actions are determined by what Norris describes as ‘the animal within the man’. McTeague and Trina are happy enough for a few years, until he is forced to stop practising dentistry because he doesn’t have a licence. They descend into poverty, and the traits that McTeague inherited from his drunken father begin to assert themselves. He takes to getting drunk and beating Trina – and to gnawing on her fingertips until they are swollen and bleeding. For Trina, the pain is strangely arousing. She discovers an ‘unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power’. At this point, Norris begins to offer an account of human motivation that has less to do with Darwin than with Freud.

Even more striking than Trina's masochism is her growing obsession with gold. It begins as ordinary frugality. After becoming engaged to McTeague, she wins $5000 in a lottery. She places her winnings in a bank, and the pleasure of saving prompts her to hoard a bit more of the household money every week. She hides it under her bed and soon becomes fascinated by the coins themselves. She delights in counting them, stacking them, feeling them in her hands. Finally, she takes her winnings out of the bank, forgoing her monthly interest for the pleasure of covering her bed with gold coins and sleeping naked among them.

The novel's other characters share Trina's obsession. McTeague longs to buy a large papier-mâché tooth, covered in gilt, to hang in his office window and advertise his practice. His charwoman compulsively describes a gold dinner service, one hundred pieces in all, that she has come to believe her family once possessed. And a junk dealer persuades himself that the charwoman's dinner service really exists and spends his evenings digging in the cellar to find it. The subtitle of *McTeague* is 'A Story of San Francisco'. In the mountains surrounding the city, hordes of prospectors dig for gold. McTeague joins them towards the novel's end, and realises that the drilling and excavating he had done in his previous life as a dentist had merely been a miniaturised version of mining. The novel culminates with two men stranded in the middle of Death Valley, with no water left and no hope of getting out, fighting to the death over a bag of gold coins.

In the year *McTeague* was published, Norris set to work on what he would call 'The Trilogy of the Epic of the Wheat'. In a preface to the first of these novels, he explains his plan for the whole: together, they will tell 'the story of a crop of wheat from the time of its sowing as seed in California to the time of its consumption as bread in a village of Western Europe'. It is tempting to imagine that Norris was drawn to this unexpected subject by his experience of reporting on the Spanish-American War. What most struck him about the war was the incompetence of its planners, as McElrath and Crisler show in the most illuminating section of their book. Outfitted in winter uniforms, the US troops set sail to fight in Cuba without enough drinking water for the voyage and with hardly any medical supplies. Even worse, when they arrived in Cuba, they were barely able to feed the starving civilians they had come to liberate. In one of his essays on the war, Norris celebrates the organisational genius of a volunteer who averted a famine by finding, preparing and distributing corn mush to thousands of people a day. He also condemns the Cuban aid societies for failing to transport fifty cases of much-needed evaporated milk, resulting in the deaths of several infants. In these stories, we can see the origins of Norris's interest in the movement of wheat.

The trilogy begins with *The Octopus*, which describes an epic struggle between farmers and the railroad, seen from the perspective of the farmers, who are at the mercy of the railroad but not in any straightforward sense its victims. The railroad made possible their fabulous wealth, but it now threatens to take that wealth away: it requires the farmers to ship their wheat by circuitous routes, and the rates they pay are precisely correlated to the rising price of their crops. Slowly being strangled by the railroad, the farmers have come to think of it as an octopus. They vow to fight it to the death, and death is inevitably what comes. Here we return to a determinism older than naturalism: the farmers have over-reached, and they have been struck down for their hubris.

The Octopus does not end as a tragedy, however, but as something more interesting and rare: a novel of business. With the defeat of the farmers, the novel's attention shifts to the men who run the railroad. Until this point, they had been invisible and unnamed, represented only by their contemptible lawyer. But now we are shown the president of the railroad, 'the man whose power was so vast, whose will was so resistless, whose potency for evil so limitless, the man who for so long and so hopelessly they had all been fighting'. We see him through the eyes of a poet, a friend of the farmers who had hoped to write a great poem of the West, and who sees the president as the embodiment of power. He is a massive man, of extraordinary energy, but displays more surprising capacities as well. He is a keen critic of painting and poetry, and knows the smallest details of his employees' lives. The poet attributes an almost godlike knowledge and agency to him, but he insists that he has no agency at all. 'You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men.' Agency lies with the laws of supply and demand, and no man can go against them. The president is not even responsible for the building of the railroads, which 'build themselves' as surely as the wheat grows on its own. As an economic analysis, this isn't remarkable. What is significant is Norris's effort to create novelistic forms consonant with these economic claims. The tragic plot gives way to the laws of supply and demand, and the wheat becomes the main character. In the first of the novel's two concluding scenes, the wheat in the ground continues to grow, indifferent to human need or hope; in the second, the wheat in the hold of a ship crushes the man who has tried to master it. These are glimpses of what a novel might look like if it were to take seriously the insight that economic systems everywhere determine our lives.

Norris never finished the trilogy. He wrote its second volume, *The Pit* (published posthumously in 1903), set in the Chicago futures market, and then died before he could begin the third, which was tentatively entitled 'The Wolf'. Crane died young in 1900, London in 1916; and Dreiser fell silent. All these losses were grievous. What ended with Norris's death was the early groping towards a literature capable of depicting the economic systems which rule our lives.

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