

“One Thing One Did Not Question”: The Christian Perspective

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The question of American novelist Frank Norris's spiritual orientation is less than a pressing one today. There are several possible explanations for this, among them the widely understood fact that he is a writer long associated with the school of Literary Naturalism. Naturalistic works typically neither incorporate nor encourage readers to give positive consideration to spiritual views of life, and especially not traditional Christian ones. Indeed, the “father” of the school, Emile Zola, set the pattern by repeatedly declaring and demonstrating his hostility to art that in any way suggested the relevance of the supernatural; Naturalism's focus, after all, is upon the self-contained operations of nature. Whether this does indeed function today for many as an a priori precluding consideration of Norris as a man given to spiritual experience and beliefs is not clear, though. In the recent literature on Norris, clarifications are not offered since the question of Norris's spirituality, or lack thereof, is never raised. Another factor, about which one can be more certain, is that there is little encouragement at present for investigations of this kind, save when the American author in question represents a marginalized minority group whose worldview, or spiritualism, requires explanation

for readers in the majority. Norris was, of course, as “mainstream” as an innovative young writer of his generation could be; and refining available working definitions of the spirituality of writers in his class seems hardly a high priority now. There is, however, another, more formidable obstacle to progress in this regard within the discipline of Norris studies itself as it has developed since the mid-twentieth century. The conventional wisdom among Norris scholars who *have* noted signs of a spiritual orientation appears to be that the matter has already been thoroughly investigated. From the late 1960s on, the consensus has been that Norris’s no longer fashionable flirtations with things metaphysical—what may be termed his leaps into the supernatural or the irrational—have been accounted for satisfactorily.

I.

Emerging from a context of labored, decades-long discussion of the character of Norris’s worldview and the question of whether he ever achieved logical consistency therein are two influential studies produced during the 1960s. The first is Warren French’s *Frank Norris*, which in 1962 argued on the basis of affinities displayed in his canon that Norris is most appropriately viewed as a latter-day American Transcendentalist, a Literary Naturalist who referred to himself as the “Boy Zola” but was instead a philosophical idealist who resisted the influence of his French literary mentor’s radically empirical, quite anti-metaphysical orientation—to articulate a vision resembling those of Emerson and Thoreau. The extent of Emile Zola’s influence was similarly qualified in 1966 in Donald Pizer’s *The Novels of Frank Norris*. Pizer, while not denying the influence of the earlier American idealists cited by French, enjoyed this advantage: unlike French, who could not demonstrate a direct influence since Norris never mentioned or quoted any American Transcendentalist, Pizer could position Norris in a student-professor relationship with an idealist of the subsequent generation, a post-Darwinian evolutionary theorist on the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley: Joseph LeConte. This philosophically adept and theistically committed

geologist, Pizer explained, provided his student in the early 1890s with an ethically framed metaphysical worldview. Further, although Norris never publicly acknowledged his indebtedness, it was an application of LeConte's paradigm for the relationship between the natural and the supernatural that he manifested in the conclusion of his 1901 novel, *The Octopus*—a focal point in the Norris canon for French as well.

There, the character Presley has an experience recalling the “transparent eyeball” moment in chapter 1 of Emerson's *Nature* and, like Emerson at the end of that 1836 essay, he sees that the evils afflicting mankind pale in significance before the individual who has achieved the “right” angle of vision. Or, viewed within the LeContean frame Pizer provides, Presley waxes teleological as an evolutionary visionary, concluding that, despite the tragic events he has recently observed in the survival-of-the-fittest economic arena of California's San Joaquin Valley, there are invisible forces at work guiding and, in the long run, guaranteeing the morally benign operations of nature. In the “larger view” of life, Presley thinks to himself, “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.” His close friend Annixter dies because of the ruthless machinations of a railroad corporation, but the wheat is harvested from his land, and “in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved . . . all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for the good” (651–52).

While Pizer does not rate highly the scene in *The Pit* (1903) in which the characters Sheldon Corthell and Laura Jadwin comment on how evolution predictably yields improvement, Norris's next-written novel and second installment in his wheat trilogy, *The Pit*, seems at first glance to amplify such a LeContean theme and to offer clarification of its spiritualistic dimension. Avows Sheldon there is something deep down in nature ensuring positive evolutionary development, including ethical progress, over time. Laura responds by interpreting his point theistically: she identifies this something as the God she knows as an Episcopalian. The more cosmopolitan,

secular-minded Sheldon demurs, apparently preferring not to include anything so archaic as a role for the biblical deity. Laura, more than a bit naive because inexperienced with “big ideas” of the kind, offers a compromise, girlishly suggesting that her God and Sheldon’s nature can “work together.” Then she is given the last, pantheistic word, “No, no, they are one and the same thing” (246–47). One may thus conclude that here, in one of the three relationships between God and nature she has improvised on the spot, Laura has approximated the gist of Norris’s own spiritual vision. If Norris was indeed a disciple of LeConte, who attempted to reconcile Darwinian evolutionary theory with Christian orthodoxy, it is likely that the first of Laura’s explanations is most accurate. For LeConte’s emphasis is on a divine will gradually effecting amelioration through the mechanism of evolution. And thus is the unidentified first cause for Presley’s optimistic assessment of the human condition given a name: it is Laura’s and, presumably, Norris’s God.

But a LeContean interpretation of Norris’s worldview does not, however, pass muster, and a true measure of Norris’s spirituality cannot be accomplished by means of such an approach, which assumes that in the passages indicated, Presley and Laura are at least roughly articulating Norris’s position. Such is not the case, for in the last pages of *The Octopus*, one finds instead a situation (resembling the finale of *The Red Badge of Courage* [1895]) in which Presley’s consciousness, not his creator’s, is described via the narrative technique of free indirect discourse as he hysterically embraces a metaphysics enabling him to cope with the traumatic experiences that have rendered him clinically depressed. That is, Norris has sensitively recorded the grim causes of Presley’s malaise, refrained from positioning the reader to enjoy the panacea Presley does, and ended his novel in very much the same ironic way that his French mentor, Zola, closed *Germinal* (1885): both writers disclose the points of view of psychologically unstable heroes determined to see silk purses where sows’ ears abound. Both writers trust that their readers will see what has been made obvious: the exuberant optimism of neither Presley nor Etienne Lantier is warranted in light of how life has been imaged over the previous hundreds of pages.

As to the dialogue between Sheldon and Laura in *The Pit*, the scene is intentionally a silly one. It is a send-up bringing to mind Norris's 1897 lampooning of theosophist Annie Besant in his fable "The Puppets and the Puppy." In *The Pit* the target of the satirist is not proponents of reincarnation (such as Besant and like-minded seers represented by the character Vanamee in *The Octopus*) but contemporary idealists intent upon putting a positive, teleological face on the unruly processes of evolution and the inhumane consequences of the struggle for existence in late nineteenth-century, laissez-faire America. While Pizer finds Sheldon's and Laura's theorizing a lame demonstration of the LeContean perspective and faults Norris for mishandling the scene (175), Sheldon's and Laura's pronouncements are, to the contrary, quite successfully designed to illustrate drolly just how preposterous is the pretense of understanding the ultimate purpose of (or giving an alleged design to) phenomena—either from the perspective of insentient nature per se, or of God, or of both, or of an indivisible Oneness that is both God and nature. Noteworthy is the conclusion of *The Pit*, where we find that Laura herself has neither taken to heart nor made practical use of what she has said to Sheldon. At this point in the plot she has suffered life's messy complications at least as much as Presley did. But, unlike Presley, she cannot understand why, ultimately, things are the way they are. More specifically, she is both disturbed and puzzled by the fact that so much misery attends the positive workings of both nature and the equally Darwinian socio-economic order (420-21).

Turning from Pizer back to French, one may question whether Norris is dealing directly with the divine in either novel when he is imaging nature in ways recalling the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. What of the grand, deific personifications of nature in *The Pit*? What about the veritably reverential descriptions in *The Octopus* of nature as the fecund mother, the nourisher of mankind, and the dynamic source of renewal manifested in the overnight emergence of pale green shoots of wheat from the bare ground of the day before? Granted, Norris employs the literary convention of personification and fashions no end of grandiose metaphors; he lyrically celebrates

the vitality, beauty, and grandeur of nature, and he graphically pictures its terrible manifestations of force. But the superhuman nature pictured thus does not denote the supernatural any more than Norris's fanciful descriptions of the fickle goddess of luck in *The Pit* do (87, 104, 110, 371, 374). While Romantics Philip Freneau and William Cullen Bryant seemed quite serious when replacing the transcendent biblical deity with a Mother Nature-like figure in poems such as "The Wild Honey Suckle" and "Thanatop-sis," and while Emerson observed that nature is spirit materialized for those who have clarified their vision and can see the truth at last, Norris did neither. Zola was just as excitedly lyrical as Norris when describing nature in *La Terre*, yet he too did not feel the need either to install a deity in the natural order or to hypostatize nature as deity. Put another way, what Norris *did* do as grandly as Zola was very much the same thing other artists working in various media had repeatedly attempted since the eighteenth century, when the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant became a fashionable subject matter and art was crafted to induce in the beholder the experience thereof.

II.

Once Norris as thinker and artist is disencumbered of the inappropriate identities assigned him in the twentieth century, those determined to take the measure of his spirituality encounter afresh the "Boy Zola"—the "American Zola" cited in the review columns of his time. Ironic as it may appear, since Zola is studiously bereft of spirituality, it is by viewing Norris as a Zolaesque American writer that a proper study of his religious orientation must begin. How Norris's reading of Zola influenced the plots, characterizations, imagery, prose style, and themes of the major works in his canon requires no rehearsal. How Norris, the only American Naturalist of his generation to describe and theorize the school he represented, celebrated Zolaesque novels as the type of the "modern" in literature is also well known. That he read Zola's most important manifesto, "The Experimental Novel," which appeared in English in a collection of essays of the same title in 1893,

has not been confirmed, although his works repeatedly echo that essay relative to literature proffering “irrational and supernatural explanations” of “natural phenomena” (54). As in *The Octopus* and *The Pit*, so in *McTeague* (1899) and *Vandover and the Brute* (1914): why people behave the way they do is made clear Naturalistically both by their narrators’ direct comments and by significant action. Causes of effects are disclosed in empirical terms or else, as in the case of *McTeague*’s “sixth sense” or Vanamee’s mental telepathy abilities in *The Octopus*, they are forthrightly identified as undiscoverable. Norris’s characters articulate many points of view: Vanamee, for example, is even more sanguine than Presley when we last see him in *The Octopus*, for he not only minimizes the significance of death but denies its reality. His deceased lover Angéle Varian, he declares, has come back to him in the body of her daughter! His point of view thus stands in dramatic contrast with the cruel deaths of other characters not explained away by reference to some supernatural agency such as the transmigration of souls and thus rendered as disturbingly real warrants for grief. Zola’s positivism and especially his twin emphases on the causal roles played by heredity and environment Norris refers to in his 1896 review of Zola’s *Rome* as the “gospel of naturalism.” Such a scenario was truer to experience than those manufactured by Romantic and Victorian idealists for the simple reason that it acknowledged things-as-they-are in terms of natural causes and their natural effects. For Norris, Zola’s precepts were “gospel.”

The consequent problem is, of course, reconciling a Zolaesque worldview and aesthetic with the notion that spirituality can be assigned to Norris. Why should the question arise at all, that is, if he was neither a proponent of natural religion, nor a Transcendentalist, nor a LeContean idealist but a Zolaist who, like Charles Darwin, did not assign the supernatural an active role in the biological sphere? More specifically, why give consideration to the seemingly paradoxical possibility that Norris was both a Naturalist and a Christian? In my 1981 essay, “Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*: The Christian Ethic as Pragmatic Response,” I identified the reason I then broached the question. What I had noted was that, while Norris neither overtly

sanctioned the inhumane operations of the socioeconomic order pictured, nor intruded upon his narrative to propose a corrective for this grim depiction of a survival-of-the-fittest world, he did create the character Shelgrim who does sanction it, delivering an apology for the Social Darwinist perspective on the economic warfare in the San Joaquin Valley witnessed by Presley and the reader. Shelgrim's point is that the economic system in place emerged from and works in harmony with the operations of nature: it cannot be changed any more than natural laws can be altered. He, as the head of the railroad corporation that has ground down its opponents, cannot control how the system works nor modify it; it dictates its modes of operation, and neither he nor an agent such as S. Behrman is responsible for the outcomes of the workings of the iron laws of necessity (*Octopus* 575–76). This cameo role hardly prompts one to wonder whether Norris's orientation was Christian, yet (even if it does not bring to mind the great self-exculpator himself, Pontius Pilate) Shelgrim's sang-froid attitude toward the victims of his corporation's depredations positions the reader to recall and appreciate Annixter's very different attitude toward his fellow man presented earlier in the novel.

Norris refrains from overtly stating his own point of view when entertaining the question of what corrective might be proposed for situations like that seen in the San Joaquin Valley. As with Shelgrim, so with Annixter. He assigns Annixter an attitude and a mode of behavior that seem to promise a means of at least mitigating the harsh, inhumane conditions in which the struggle for existence proceeds. Annixter is introduced as a wheat grower very much like all of the other California agriculturalists pitted against the railroad. He too is "looking out for number one," motivated wholly by the desire for personal gain—until, in the second half of the novel, a remarkable change unique to him occurs. This self-centered misanthrope, whose loneliness is as pronounced as his aggressiveness, personally experiences a radical readjustment to things-as-they-are. As does Laura in *The Pit* when she breaks through a debilitating condition of self-absorption, Annixter finds psychological health and happiness as he learns how to look beyond self and take an

interest in the welfare of another (360–69, 496–98). His loving of Hilma Tree, rather than selfishly seeking to exploit her sexually as he originally planned, is imaged in *The Octopus* as the means of escape from what Norris termed in *The Pit* the “cruel cult of self” (404). To Annixter’s surprise, the experience of disinterested love yields such a positive result that he finds himself motivated to demonstrate a like concern for others in his local community; and, when Presley expresses astonishment at such unprecedented behavior on his part, Norris has Annixter deliver a veritable sermon on the mount, celebrating his new-found “religion” (467–68). Annixter does not identify his nontheistic “religion” of helping others in need, but Norris does in fact have him articulate the essentials of the Christian social ethic after demonstrating the transformative effects of the disinterested love psychology central to the Greco-Christian concept of agape. He is by design fashioned as a much more attractive figure than Shelgrim.

My point in 1981 was not that the Literary Naturalist was also a Christian. Rather, I speculated only that Norris appropriated the social ethic that the historical Jesus articulated in the New Testament. Norris, it seemed to me, was like his namesake Benjamin Franklin: while not a conventional Christian believer, he happened to agree with Jesus with regard to how people should treat each other. A pragmatic ethicist, he echoed the practical suggestions made by an ancient wise man who was responding to inhumaneness in a world not essentially different from that known personally by Norris. A realist, Norris did not transform Annixter into a saintly “role-model” figure typing selflessness in the extreme: Annixter becomes a kindly neighbor, but he persists in fighting fire with fire as he resists the injustices being perpetrated by the railroad. Ready to kill to prevent the wrongful seizure of his property, he is himself slain. Such was my modest proposal as I tried to glean the personal point of view of an author who sometimes appears in *The Octopus* as the most intrusive and self-disclosing of narrators and at other times so self-effacing and detached from his characterizations that his point of view on those characters and the themes associated with them have generated more debate than have those of any other work in his canon.

III.

Twenty years ago, then, I did not assume Norris's ethical pragmatism was grounded in his own religiosity. But in fact there exist pertinent data suggesting that the question of Norris's Christianity now merits reconsideration. Among the papers of Norris biographer Franklin Walker is an interview Walker had in 1930 with Judge Harry M. Wright, one of Norris's long-term friends. Wright made Norris's acquaintance in 1890 or 1891 when they were fellow members of the class of '94 at Berkeley. Beginning in June 1891, they were Phi Gamma Delta fraternity brothers, and thereafter they maintained a friendly relationship described in the lengthy and most appreciative eulogy Wright wrote upon Norris's death in 1902. When interviewed by Walker, Wright offered what should have been perceived by the biographer as a startling disclosure: that Norris "was a good orthodox Episcopalian—one thing one did not question. Mother's influence." Walker did not register the seeming incompatibility of this claim with what one finds in *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898) and *McTeague*, two works that illustrate boldly the absence of God from human affairs; and he did not pose any follow-up questions about this matter, perhaps because he inferred from Wright's statement that Norris was only a nominal Episcopalian determined to please his mother.

A month later, though, Walker returned to the subject as he interviewed Norris's widow Jeannette Preston who, happily, did provide a means of refining the definition given by Wright. For example, she described Norris's "nature" as "very spiritual." Whether Walker asked if Norris was an orthodox Episcopalian appears beyond question, for she related that he was "decidedly not orthodox and disliked particularly the high church. . . . They went to church once in Roselle [N.J.]," when living there in the fall and winter of 1900–1901, and they did not return. It was "high church—no good." However, what Jeannette meant by "decidedly not orthodox," as distinguished from not-high-church, cannot be confidently inferred, given that her family affiliation was with a denomination radically different from the Episcopal. Preston, a Presbyterian, joined the Episcopal

church in which she was married only to placate a mother-in-law who did not think her a suitable match for her son, and she quickly demonstrated in the interview that she could not be depended upon to make informed religious distinctions. After she noted Norris's distaste for the high-church worship conventions either closely resembling or identical to those of the Roman tradition, she unwittingly offered the contradictory datum that Norris "loved to go to the Catholic Church for the beauty of the services." Further, she did not differentiate between a liturgical low-church orientation and the evangelical perspective normally associated with the term low-church. Norris was clearly *not* evangelical. One thus suspects that Norris's wife infrequently attended services of any kind and that defining what is and is not orthodox was beyond both her ken and curiosity. One thing she could understand, though: what she may have thought of as "orthodoxy," high-church formalities and appurtenances, was anathema to her husband.

This is a datum considerably more important than it may initially appear, in that it is one of several means of understanding why Norris was not more expressive publicly about his Christianity. Whether high- or low-church, the spirituality of Episcopalians is not easily measured. Members of the denomination, dubbed "the frozen chosen" and sometimes said to have been seen ice-skating to their pews on Sunday mornings, are typically as undemonstrative in demeanor as they are rationalistic in their distinctly private faith. The non-evangelical low-church Episcopalian orientation often proves more rationalistic, demonstrating an essentialism in a plain-and-simple style of worship commensurate with a minimalist theology similarly shorn of extravagances. And so it is no fluke that Norris in 1902 revealed a similar preference when in one of his literary essays he extolled the virtue of "Simplicity in Art," citing a passage from the Nativity narrative of the Gospel According to St. Luke as more artful than anything written by Shakespeare or Milton.

Norris's essay is noteworthy in another way as well. It not only expresses his disdain for the high-church style—"an affair of gold embroidered vestments and costly choirs, of marbles, of jeweled windows and of incense,"—but with some help from Isaiah, Norris tucks into his ar-

gument concerning the aesthetic excellence of Luke a measured, tasteful, and quite orthodox expression of Christian belief:

What we would now call simple, our forbears would look upon as a farrago of gimcrackery, and all our art—the art of the better-minded of us—is only a striving to get back to the unblurred, direct simplicity of those writers who could see that the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the mighty God, the Prince of Peace, could be laid in a manger and yet be the Savior of the world. (17)

This is a rare moment in the Episcopalian author's canon. Norris hardly strikes the evangelical note, but one does not hear its like again. Standing in marked contrast to Norris is the type of Christian represented by Curtis Jadwin of *The Pit*, a Presbyterian who has felt the influence of fundamentalist Dwight L. Moody and become a proselytizer given to testifying to the difference Christ has made in his life. The high-church Episcopalian heroine of that novel has difficulty keeping a straight face before Curtis when recalling what she observed at the Sunday School he founded in Chicago, where she watched him lead the hymn-singing of the children with the vigor of an inspired evangelist at a tent meeting (122–26). While being Episcopalian is, indeed, a biblically-based, Christian religious condition, it is inconceivable that she would ever act in public like this born-again Christian brimming over with Pentecostal enthusiasm. That Norris's faith was "one thing one did not question" could not have meant that he himself never had his doubts or refused to think critically about Episcopalian beliefs; for, as will be seen, it is clear that he did. Given the sociocultural tradition in which Norris stood and the fact that urbane Episcopalians do not wear their hearts on their sleeves, Wright's statement most likely meant two things: first, that neither Wright nor anyone else could elicit from a cosmopolitan gent like Norris an apologia for or even explanation of his faith; second that Wright understood that a true gentleman would not ask a fellow sophisticate to give an account of articles of faith that passeth human understanding—for example, the doctrine of the resurrection as enunciated by St.

Paul. Thus, one had to—and now has to—infer Norris's loyalties by observing his behavior rather than by expecting testimonies: for example, his membership in the Society for Study of Ethics and Religion when he was a student at the University of California, Berkeley; his attendance at worship services and consequent comments recalled by his widow; his being married in 1900 at a more congenial Episcopal church in New York (Manhattan's St. George's) than the one in Roselle, N.J.; the contribution, noted by his widow, of his time and talents to a program for boys at that New York church; his infusions of Christian ethical concepts in *The Octopus* and *The Pit*; and, in *Vandover and the Brute*, his as-relevant, tough-minded illustrations of the difficulty of maintaining belief in a world (as understood by Literary Naturalists) wherein the supernatural is not directly experienced. One notes as well the significance of the eulogy written by W. S. Rainsford, the rector of St. George's, for *World's Work* magazine, in which Norris stands forth as an Annixter-like fellow who "ever and always . . . tried to serve his brother men" (3276). Why that gratuitous gesture then from an Episcopal minister? Or, if *World's Work* editor Walter Hines Page asked Rainsford to write it, what did Page, co-founder of the publishing firm that handled Norris's books after 1899, know about Norris's religiosity that he did not himself document? Why did he think of the Reverend Rainsford as an appropriate eulogist who could testify to the fact that "the honesty, the bravery, the faith of the man, all live in his work" (3276)?

Also meriting attention are other kinds of data that may now be viewed in a new light. The Norris canon is rife with biblical quotations and paraphrases bespeaking a thorough familiarity with scripture. Some of it is comical in function. Timid Mr. Grannis in *McTeague*, for example, is usually at a loss for words but especially anxious to grasp at straws when feeling the need to say something significant to McTeague just before his wedding ceremony commences (156–57). First, Grannis sententiously declares that marriage is a noble institution. Then, recalling a line from the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, he quotes God Himself! "It is not good that Man should be alone" (2:18). At other moments, Norris makes more serious use of fine

biblical detail. In *Vandover and the Brute* the hero entitles a painting he is planning “The Last Enemy,” referring to a lion stalking a soldier alone and on his last legs in the desert (64). The choice of this double-entendre title appears coincidental. Though Vandover too is Episcopalian, Norris gives no indication that this literal-minded hero recalls St. Paul’s proclamation of the doctrine of resurrection in I Corinthians, where death is described as “the last enemy” defeated by God (15:26). Norris, on the other hand, knew this epistle well, making it central to the Vanamee subplot in *The Octopus*, in which Vanamee’s grief is measured by his adamant refusal to accept defeat by “the last enemy” that requires his waiting until he too dies before he can be reunited with Angèle Varian. Examples abound of Norris’s witty as well as more somber uses of such biblical detail and doctrine at appropriate moments, and their evidentiary value should not be ignored.

Nor should Norris’s familiarity with and use of the *Book of Common Prayer* be overlooked. Again, Norris could be whimsical and perhaps irreverent. The first, tongue-in-cheek sentence of *Moran of the Lady Letty* is keyed to a petition in the “Litany” asking to be spared the experiences of battle, murder, and sudden death (*Book* 31); Norris paraphrases the plea to indicate that the hair-raising adventure romance that has commenced features all three in abundance (1). But two other appropriations are positioned at key moments of high seriousness in *The Pit* and *Vandover and the Brute*, playing significant roles in characterization and thematic development. “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” (*Book* 277–80) defines the context in *The Pit* when the heroine marries a man she does not love, the text for the ceremony making clear the high seriousness of the fraud she is committing before God and thus the religious dimension of the crisis through which she is passing as she perjures herself (183–88). In *Vandover and the Brute*, it is during the Episcopal communion service (*Book* 221–43) that Vandover registers mentally his sinful state and the guilt plaguing him through much of the rest of the novel (60–62). Debauching himself through a Saturday night and having only three hours’ sleep before he joins his fiancée at church, his condition is dramatized by the one portion of the service quoted: the invitation intoned by the minister to

confess one's sins is heard by a nauseous and exhausted Vandover, who has to use the back of a pew to prevent himself from falling. Further, the reader is positioned to note subsequently Vandover's inability to do what the prayer book's call for amendment of one's behavior specifies: leading "a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways."

Granted, while Norris may have been so Episcopalian that he myopically assumed a degree of familiarity with scripture and the prayer book beyond the experience of many of his readers, his novelistic behavior does not mandate an inference of spirituality. Atheist Ambrose Bierce pulled the phrase "In the midst of life we are in death" (299) from the *Book of Common Prayer* when he later modified the title of his 1891 volume *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*; and stridently anti-Methodist Stephen Crane appropriated much from the Bible as he warred against his parents' conception of God. That Norris based the short story "The Wife of Chino" on the 2 Samuel 11 account of David's relationship with Bathsheba, originally entitling the piece "The Wife of Uriah," may likewise be an indifferent datum. However, Norris appears to have been privately engaged in a long-term, though perhaps sporadic, meditation on the relationship between the natural and the divine, a result of which was published in 1897 in the San Francisco weekly, *The Wave*, and then in radically revised form in the Christmas 1898 issue of *McClure's Magazine*. Both are clearly imaginative inventions, what we may term historical romances featuring Jesus as their hero. And in them, because he was freed from the Naturalistic constraints of fidelity to empirically defined nature, Norris appears to have disclosed more than he could or would normally about his private ruminations and beliefs.

Both versions of "Miracle Joyeux" are framed stories in which a first-century narrator tells of an incident in Jesus' career not registered in the then available versions of the Gospels. He also records what had been noted by none of their authors: he saw Jesus smile. (Jesus is never pictured as smiling in these accounts). In the *McClure's* version, it is the gentle, meek-and-mild Jesus, who suffered the little children to come unto him, who solves a little girl's problem, brings joy into her

life, smiles, and goes on his way. The disarmingly pleasant portrait is as conventional as it is attractive. No wonder that it was renamed *The Joyous Miracle* and published as a book in 1906 for Christmas gift-book marketing. The former version, however, is a strikingly more ambitious and insightful exploration of a multidimensional, considerably more complex personality, suggesting Norris's thoughtful consideration of the variant characterizations of Jesus not only among the four Gospels but within each.

Two pondered questions are implied in the original "*Miracle Joyeux*." First, how does one reconcile the gentle Prince of Peace aspect of Jesus' personality, to be emphasized in the McClure's version, with what is revealed in sterner moments as he sparred with the Scribes and Pharisees, angrily drove the money changers from the temple, deflated the ego of the smug young ruler who enquires about what he must do to become perfect, and foretold how remorselessly the goats would be separated forever from the sheep on the day of judgment? Particularly pertinent is this last manifestation of Jesus' nonsense attitude if one assumes that Norris was consistent in his understanding of mankind's divine expectations when he developed his characterization of Annixter. For Jesus is quite specific in regard to what distinguishes the sheep who will "inherit the kingdom" prepared for them and the goats who will be cast into "everlasting fire" (Matthew 25:31-46). The latter will be the self-servers who, unlike Annixter, did nothing to help their fellows in need. Given Norris's ongoing preoccupation with the vice of greed and its antisocial consequences, one will hardly be surprised to find a Jesus who deals somewhat harshly with two "goats" who embody avarice in *The Wave* story. The second question addressed by Norris has less to do with divinity expressing high expectations of humanity than with the human dimension of the individual who was—as No. 67 in the *Hymnal* Norris knew phrases it—"God in Man made manifest" (61-63). How human was the son of God who referred to himself as the son of man? Norris's rather sensational fictional answer is "fully." How he makes that plain in the story may still startle his readers.

One day, two men—one a miser and usurer who has never forgiven a

debt, the other consumed with envy of and resentment for anyone who possesses what he does not—happen upon the miracle-worker about whom they have heard. They lie about their very healthy financial status, pretending to be paupers; they fawn before him as they beg a boon, attempting to manipulate the magician for whom all things are possible. Display by cringing display, they become more and more contemptible, and the narrator of the story describes them with growing disgust. He hopes that the carpenter's son will not be fooled by these despicable rascals pandering for yet more wealth, and he is not disappointed. Jesus agrees to grant them a wish, but with one condition. At first this condition may seem as mean-spirited as it is psychologically insightful. For they must accept what is for them the unthinkable: that the second petitioner will receive twice as much as was given to the one who asked first. (Annixter may come to mind for those familiar with not only the Norris canon as well as the various ways in which New Testament themes similarly challenge conventional wisdom: the last will come first; the humble will be exalted; and those who look beyond self-interest to aid others will, ultimately, enjoy more than those who devoted all of their energies to personal gain.) What Jesus is offering the two miscreants is an opportunity to rise above self-interest and demonstrate the generosity of spirit that characterizes those who will be judged the blessed. Moreover, even before the last judgment they will be rewarded if (like Annixter) they adopt a new attitude toward their fellow man. They fail the test. Neither can countenance the other receiving more than he, arguing at length and with increasing fury over who will go first—until one is struck by the other in the face. Enraged, the striker responds by declaring that he *will* go first and be glad with one-half of what the other receives. He asks not for money but that Jesus blind him in one eye, so that his companion will be blinded in both. The wish is granted, and both men thus stumble homeward, the partially blind one and the wholly blind other cursing each other. “For a few moments the carpenter's son remained looking after them,” relates the narrator. “Then, as they vanished around the bend of the road, I saw him smile. It was a smile partly of pity, partly of contempt and partly

of amusement. Then he continued his road" (162).

From one historically informed point of view, the tale may be termed a decadent work of art, an act of cultural vandalism worthy of Oscar Wilde or Aubrey Beardsley. On the other hand, if one is focusing on the question of Jesus' humanity, his mixed attitude of pity, contempt, and amusement immediately makes sense both intellectually and emotionally. Given Norris's extreme characterization of self-centered men unwilling to tame their avariciousness, the assumption is that Jesus' human nature was one and the same as Norris's own; and the premise is that a just God will treat the sheep as sheep and the goats as what they are. One might prefer the stained-glass Jesus of the nineteenth century, who radiates love and has little to do with meting out justice; as preferable is the image of the ever-benevolent, wise moralist, who for the Deists of the eighteenth century was merely a fellow humanist and humanitarian. But Norris desentimentalizes and restores divinity to the latter cultural construct, fashioning a characterization as consistent with the composite portrait of Jesus in scripture as it is with human nature as Norris understood it. Most important for the Norris biographer, though, the characterization of Jesus rendered in both versions of the story indicates the extent of Norris's reflection upon what it meant to be "God in man made manifest" and how he conceived of God in personal terms.

These works are, of course, fantasies—autobiographically significant, but theologically only pipe dreams. In Norris's more characteristic writings, God is not immanent but, when reference is made to Him, wholly transcendent—as He would have to be for a theist describing human experience in the manner of a Literary Naturalist. Norris does not equivocate about this when writing in the realistic vein, for example, in *Vandover and the Brute*. In this novel the Naturalist deals frankly with the problem the religious rationalist must confront. The first of two fictional reflections of this kind is represented during a shipwreck, when Vandover encounters on deck a vocal fundamentalist, a Salvation Army lassie who proclaims, "I ain't going to drown; Jesus is watching over me. . . . Jesus is going to save me." She advises Vandover to embrace the same faith; all that he has to do is believe, and all will be well (132–33).

God will intervene in human history in the way he repeatedly did in the Old Testament. Shortly thereafter, a boom swings across the deck, hitting her squarely in the back and breaking her spine (135–36). Norris again calls a spade a spade several chapters later, when Van experiences another crisis, precipitated by several devastating developments in his personal life, and is moments away from attempting suicide. He prays frantically: “Oh, help me! Why don’t you *help* me? You can if you only will!” Silence follows (244–45). One may recall that in *The Octopus* when Annixter, certainly more worthy of divine intervention than Vandover is, wrestled with his personality to become a new, better man, even he was not rescued from the disastrous flow of events leading to his death.

Two wicked, or blasphemous, novels then? Hardly. All of Norris’s Naturalistic writings acknowledge the problem of a compassionate and just God conspicuously absent from the phenomenal order and that empirical evidence of His governance of the course of events to benign ends is lacking. But no less a believer than Jesus himself registered a like perception. As to the hope that justice will be made to reign immediately, here and now, with evil punished and virtue rewarded, Jesus noted during his Sermon on the Mount the observable fact that God refrains from setting things right on earth: He “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). Focusing on how his followers should treat their fellow human beings, Jesus’ point here is that it is up to them to make a difference in their personal lives and in society. As to Vandover’s query, “Why don’t you *help* me?” and God’s silence, the situation is dramatically anticipated by the passage in St. Mark’s Passion read to Episcopal congregations each Easter season. Year after year, Jesus’ agonized query when upon the cross is quoted: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (15:34). This dimension of the human predicament represented in the New Testament, registered as well in the Old, and manifested in Norris’s canon cannot be ignored even by the pious. Rather, it is appropriate matter for reflection for all thoughtful believers. Norris, then, could be “a good orthodox Episcopalian” without adopting the blind,

unreasoning faith of the young lady who could not countenance the notion of a natural order that functions independently, apart from the supernatural.

IV.

The test of Norris's Christian spirituality does not lie solely in a "good works" orientation that may have been the fruit of a post-Christian ethical pragmatism instead of a consequence of Norris's denominational affiliation and religious reflections. Rather, the ultimate measure of theological orthodoxy is to be found in the face of a deity's apparent unresponsiveness at moments of crisis, when faith is challenged by natural occurrences prompting one to pray for relief. In the Annixter subplot of *The Octopus* and the two pertinent episodes in *Vandover and the Brute*, Norris identifies the problem, but little if anything is revealed about how he personally dealt with it—save to make clear why the three characters may be thought of as "forsaken." Elsewhere in *The Octopus*, however, it is possible to take a fuller measure of Norris's point of view.

When the reader first encounters Vanamee, he has been struggling unsuccessfully for eighteen years to come to terms with his fiancée having been raped and her death being caused by the birthing of the daughter of the rapist. Here is another instance in which Norris can be noncommittal, simply picturing the situation giving rise to Vanamee's denial of the existence of God. What readers may assume as implied in these novels is made explicit by Vanamee: a just and compassionate God, if He exists, would not have allowed the rape of the virtuous young woman and her wholly unmerited death. If He exists, He would have intervened; and, if He did not intervene eighteen years earlier, why cannot He restore Angéle to life now? As Vanamee in his grief makes these declarations to the Roman Catholic priest Father Sarria, who can do no more than advise Vanamee to cling to the Christian faith, Norris has the opportunity to declare himself in the only way possible for a Literary Naturalist, intent upon refraining from a didactic intrusion into the narrative, through the characterizations of Vanamee

and Father Sarria (142–49). Vanamee informs Father Sarria that the idea of heaven is a delusion, yet he proclaims that so-called death is merely a temporary, reversible suppression of life (635). The issue dividing Vanamee and Father Sarria has to do with how death should be viewed: whether it is the hard and fast reality the latter acknowledges when counseling Vanamee to accept it as such. Not yet a reincarnationist, Vanamee is obsessively fixated upon his painful loss, and the best that Father Sarria can do for him is to proffer the Christian perspective on her death by quoting from memory St. Paul's explanation of the doctrine of resurrection in I Corinthians (15: 35–38, 44). Angéle is now in heaven, and he will be with her again some day in the future when he too throws off his mortality. To the nonbeliever resurrection and heaven itself may appear just as spurious as reincarnation, but before this logic is applied to Norris, one should note the only clear evidence of where Norris stands vis-a-vis these two characters' points of view is in his image of the man who assertively expresses his faith and kindly invites Vanamee to find relief by embracing the same.

Like Annixter, the Roman Catholic priest is attempting to help his fellow man, ministering to him in the manner of the good shepherd—as he has unstintingly done so for all of those in his charge who need both spiritual and material assistance (202–04). The imagery employed by Norris is revealing. For Father Sarria thus stands in marked contrast to Vanamee, who at this point is literally a shepherd but a bad one. It was his flock that was neglected, allowed to wander upon the railroad tracks and be slaughtered by a speeding locomotive. Compounding the negative characterization, Norris brings King Herod to mind (Matthew 2:16) by referring to the decimation of the flock as “a massacre of innocents” (49–50). As the subplot is further developed, the humane reader with no cause for negative perception of the priest will observe another contrasting dimension of Vanamee's personality. For nearly twenty years Vanamee, keenly sensitive to his own loss, paid no attention whatsoever to Angéle's bastard child and has had no contact with nor assisted the grandparents who have reared her. For Vanamee, she literally does not exist until she meets *his* needs by appearing to be the vehicle for her mother's reincarnation. Even when

the teenager becomes the lover of this man in middle age, she is not herself the object of his affection, and, as the novel ends, one has to wonder what this bizarre relationship holds in store for the young woman, who may not be aware of how Vanamee is using her. Finally, it is Vanamee who serves as the mentor of a credulous Presley, providing him with exotic notions from which to reconstruct reality to diminish the loss of his friend Annixter.

In short, Father Sarria, when compared with Vanamee, Presley, and the cold-blooded Social Darwinists of the time represented by the robber baron Shelgrim, comes off rather well under Norris's hand, perhaps surprisingly so for many readers when he quotes St. Paul in I Corinthians on God's "defeat of death." Neither irony nor archness can be detected in Norris's voice as he has this character articulate Christian faith in the gift of an after-life and in the compassionate God who has conquered "the last enemy." In this respect, Father Sarria proves more important a figure than Annixter, who discovers his own personal "religion" but is not a Christian theist. This priest is not only an ethical individual who helps another in need; he does so, unlike Annixter, as a Christian who has attended to Jesus' command that he show love for his fellow man. In addition, his actions balance the "horizontal"—or interpersonal—dimension of a consciously adopted post-Christian worldview with Christianity's traditional "vertical" orientation that spells faith in the transcendent deity in whom "a good orthodox Episcopalian" would also place his trust. This trait is, finally, the essential that distinguishes a humanitarian secularist from the Christian theist. True, Norris has his fun with Father Sarria, the cigar-smoking do-gooder who is as kind to dumb animals as he is to the people in his charge (201-04); his "Spanish" weakness for the spectacle of cockfighting, when discovered by Annixter, is offered to the reader as an amusement (205-06). But, again, nothing of the risible is to be detected in Norris's voice as the priest articulates a cornerstone doctrine of the Christian faith.

The terminus to which all of the relevant data bring one is a framework for viewing Norris that is not really unique to Literary Naturalists. Rather, it is one common for artists of various stripes compelled by experience to make a distinction between the conclusions made possible by the exercise of reason and those beliefs firmly anchored in faith. As a Literary Naturalist, Norris described what is: nature according to Darwin's and Zola's definitions of the term. Thus in *McTeague* there is the simple allusion to a "a chromo of a couple of peasants in a ploughed field" (383) in the office of the Big Dipper gold mine in the Sierra Nevadas to which McTeague has fled after murdering his wife. This chromo is a reproduction of Jean François Millet's *Angelus*—as denuded of its spiritual significance as McTeague's wedding ceremony—hanging from the same nail as a bullion bag and a pistol in the pouch of a cartridge belt. The allusion highlights the fact that nowhere else in this novel is there a positive reminder of the supernatural dimension of human experience known by those peasants who have paused at noon to pray. For McTeague, Trina, Marcus, Zerkow, and the other characters, the relationship between the human and the divine is not even a mystery; the matter has nothing to do with their stories and is thus irrelevant until Norris chooses to focus the reader's attention upon it here for a very brief moment. In *The Octopus*, *The Pit*, and *Vandover*, the author of the two versions of "Miracle Joyeux" is similarly circumspect when touching upon matters pertaining to faith as defined by St. Paul: "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). In two ways, though, Norris gave reason to entertain the possibility that he was a conventional believer. First, in these three novels he fashioned situations and characterizations that give rise to theological significations inviting both interpretation and evaluation. Second, while Norris remains the detached narrator suppressing any desire he may have felt to hold forth in the manner of didactic writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Charles W. Chesnutt, he could not wholly conceal the fact that he was neither an amoral observer of life nor a writer as devoid of spirituality as his French mentor, Zola. To term him a Christian Naturalist would be to coin a semantic conundrum causing

no end of mischief. Suffice it to say that Norris fashioned works in which he manifested a two-tiered mentality—as a hard-headed rationalist who also accepted gladly the benefits attending belief in religious truths that, in the here and now, lie beyond the possibility of empirical verification.

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