

IMPRESSIONISM IN FRANK NORRIS'S NOVEL

THE OCTOPUS

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It is the object of this report to examine the influence of Impressionist painting on Frank Norris's novel The Octopus. It is true that Frank Norris considered himself a Naturalist and never referred to his work as Impressionistic.¹ Nevertheless, in a few of his critical essays, when talking about certain qualities of style, Frank Norris describes Impressionistic methods, and there can be little doubt that he used these methods deliberately in his fiction.

¹In literature Naturalism and Impressionism are sometimes said to be two contradictory movements, the latter resulting out of the first as a reaction to it. However, in painting, contrary to literature, the relation between Naturalism and Impressionism is very close. Before the word Impressionism had been coined the Impressionistic group of painters was usually referred to as Naturalistic. In this report I use the term Impressionism only to designate the concepts of the French painters, which Zola and Norris sought to apply to literature.

The group of painters we now refer to as the "Impressionists" started to form in Paris during the 1860's. Like the realists before them, in the first part of the century, these young men were concerned with visible aspects of reality. What made them differ from the Realists is that their main concern was in the immediate appearance of the objects they painted. This made the painters fully conscious of continuity in nature; they conceived the changing appearances to be due to the changes in light. The colors used by the Impressionists became brighter than ever before in the history of painting, because these colors were understood as a function of light. Impressionism may be called the brightness of sunshine caught with a brush, and the painters soon found devices to reinforce their colors by placing, for example, yellow next to violet.

Color and light, in their paintings, were to create shape and space. Edouard Manet was the first one to abandon all shadows and grey tones. He simply laid on light and dark, one immediately next to the other, without soft, traditional modelling. Forms were kept flat and color areas were applied solidly. The most eminent feature of this group of young painters (Renoir, Sisley, Monet, Basille, Cezanne, and Pissarro) who had gathered round Manet from the beginning of the sixties was to paint "en pleine air" - outdoors. The more the group experimented, the more, it seems, its members became sensitive to the colors around them. The immense interest they took in the study of light made them aware of the importance of the moment for their art. Therefore it soon became their effort not to convey what might be called a generally true aspect of nature, but to capture the moment's truth.

In 1874 a canvas by Claude Monet attracted much public attention. It represented the effect of the sun rising over the sea, and was entitled Impression. The French critic Louis Leroy, in an article "L'exposition des impressionistes" in the Charivari, took up this name to ridicule the endeavor; and surely without intending to do so, he gave a name to a new current in art: from the picture mentioned the word Impressionism was coined to characterize the new principles.²

Impressionism was a reaction against artistic conventions, against Romantic and Realistic tendencies of the time. It inaugurated independent painting, freed from academic fetters, based only on the pure colors of the prism, and the splitting up of tone into its component colors. It became an expression of outdoor modern life; its chosen subjects were Paris and urban scenes, the coast of the English Channel, and the North Sea, or the little village resorts on the banks of the Seine and the Oise, made accessible by the railway.³ Only a very small group of critics, among them Emile Zola, the French Naturalistic writer, realized that here was something new - something that was truer and more genuine than the routine stuff of those artists who were at the time publicly appreciated and famous.

It will have to be shown now how Frank Norris became acquainted with the doctrine of the painters mentioned above.

² Cf. Jean Leymarie "Impressionism," Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. XII (1966), 9.

³Cf. John Rewald, The History of Impressionism (New York, 1946), pp. 256 - 261.

In 1886, when Frank Norris was sixteen years old, he won his first victory over his father: the latter had insisted on the son's attending a boys' high school in San Francisco (where the Norris family was then living) which was to prepare Frank for business. It was an unfortunate experience, as Frank could not adjust to the school's atmosphere. Finally his father could be persuaded to change his mind about his son's education. So the boy was allowed to enroll at an art school, as had been his wish for a long time. He might not have been able to realize this change but for the faithful help of his mother, who always favored and backed her son's artistic inclinations. However, the change was not wholly satisfactory:

Frank's enthusiasm for action and color was hardly satisfied by the conventional exercises which he was asked to do in the studio. He became impatient with constant drilling in drawing from the antique and in making still-life studies. He wanted to do things on a grand scale; then, as later, in both art and literature, he hankered after the dramatic subject and the wide canvas, and was impatient with the meticulous practice and revision required in an orthodox training.⁴

Moreover, San Francisco, in those days, was not considered an appropriate place for serious art students; the thing to do was to go to Paris. Once again with the faithful support of his mother, Frank's plan was finally realized. After a short interval in England, in the fall of 1887, he enrolled in the Bouguereau studio of the original Julien Academy. There the routine was different, but still unsatisfactory:

They had no regular instructor, but various well-known artists came frequently to comment on their work. . . . Frank never became one of the favorite ten to sit on the tabourets in the front row just below the model. At home he did a picture

⁴Franklin Walker, Frank Norris, A Biography (New York, 1963), p. 25.

of his mother's black cat perched upon a cushion; to his delight it pleased the master and was chosen as one of the week's best. But even this was not enough to qualify him to enter the Beaux Arts, and his interest began to flag and his absences from the atelier to become frequent.⁵

By the time the Morrises got to Paris, the works of the Impressionist painters were becoming recognized as art, and appreciated. The question that arises here is: how far were the artists who tutored the students at the Bouguereau studio sympathetic to Impressionism? And what was the attitude of Norris's fellow students? Nowhere could I find a definite answer to these questions, but I should imagine that the artists who criticized the Bouguereau students at that time were closer to the traditional conception of art.

To what extent the young Frank Norris became acquainted with Impressionism as an art student must probably always stay obscure to us. There are no records, either, of his reading contemporary French writers like Emile Zola, although by 1887 he was the most outstanding and widely discussed one among them. Nor do we know about Norris going out and painting "en pleine air" as the Impressionists were doing. Thus it seems to us now that the actual events of the day in his new surrounding did not immediately capture his imagination. We find him, amidst all the exciting influences of the Paris of that time, playing lead-soldier games with his little brother Charles.⁶ His interest in these had been awakened by descriptions of battles he found in his reading: Scott, Froissart, and others.

⁵ Walker, op.cit., pp. 28.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 33.

This antiquarian reading suggests that the adolescent Frank was an introvert, who was living a dream life in the past, and spending an enormous amount of his time studying armor in the Musee de Cluny, to which he and his friend Ernest Peixotte had a special permission to go when the public was not admitted. The original purpose of both boys was to collect material for battle pictures, and a preserved note shows how intensely Frank studies any little detail, so that he might make use of it later on the canvas. And this was at a time when the Impressionistic interest in outdoor painting was at its highest.

The result of his research was that after another year Frank turned out to be an expert on medieval armor. But what about his painting? He had just given away to his friends an enormous piece of canvas, originally planned to be used for a huge battle scene. He had given it away, simply to get rid of it. For somehow, like his young painter Vandover, he did not seem to be able to realize on canvas what he must have invisioned in his mind. It was during this period that Frank Norris, "by means of gradual transition, turned from a career of painting to writing."⁷ When, finally, his father, embodiment of a Victorian parent, or perhaps even more a disciple of American Pragmatism, found out about his son's shift in interest, Frank was ordered back to the United States at once. This was in 1889.

Norris's interest in the Middle Ages lasted through the first winter back at California, when he was studying at Berkeley. "Paradoxically enough,

⁷Walker, op.cit., p. 41.

the printing of his first book marked the end of the interest which created it."⁸ It has been said that his main purpose for composing Ivernelle (1891) was to use it as a vehicle for his illustrations of medieval armor. It leaves us wondering when we consider that the poem Ivernelle was finally accepted by the printers, but not his drawings, so that his mother had to spend \$ 400.00 to have the text "lavishly" illustrated by another artist.⁹

By this time Norris had definitely abandoned his idea to be a painter. In a letter addressed to the Academic Senate of his university he said: "I entered college with the view of preparing myself for the profession of a writer of fiction."¹⁰ As to Frank Norris's waking up to his contemporary surroundings, his becoming conscious of currents and influences in the 1880's and 1890's, French writes:

Norris apparently "discovered" Zola while studying French at Berkeley. Although he had ignored the great experimental writers and painters while in Paris, he began to read yellow paper-bound novels around with him and to expound the virtues of naturalism, which there is little evidence he understood. He was probably quite ready to abandon the Middle Ages for the world of the 1890's anyway, for out of class he was having a good time. He wrote for a short-lived campus humor magazine, "Smiles," and for the school annual. He wrote the Junior Class farce and participated in college theatricals. He is also credited with originating the plotting of football plays for the newspapers, and he enjoyed playing poker and drinking at Hagerty's Saloon with the campus merrymakers.¹¹

There can be no doubt about Emile Zola's great influence on Norris which made him turn to Naturalistic fiction and eventually made him the

⁸Walker, op.cit., p. 51.

⁹Warren French, Frank Norris (Indiana University, 1962), p. 24.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹Ibid., p. 24.

leader of this school in the United States.¹² But in this context a different kind of influence Zola exercised on Morris is in respect to our examination of great relevance for the latter's further development. Zola was not only a writer of fiction, but also one of the most outstanding and important critics of his time. He had always shown a great interest in art, which he defined as "a bit of creation seen through the medium of a powerful temperament."¹³

Zola was a very close friend of Paul Cezanne and through him knew all the Impressionist painters in Paris. His reviews were among the first favorable ones the group of artists received. Writing about the Realists of the Salon¹⁴ in 1866 (at which exhibition the early Impressionists like Manet and others were rejected), Zola said: "The word 'realist' means nothing to me who asserts that the real should be subordinated to the temperament," adding that he cared little for a realistic subject if it was not treated in an individual manner. ¹⁵ Thus he paved the way for the group of young artists, most of them still rejected by the jury that selected the pictures for the Salon. For them the designation "Naturalists" had been coined by a critic, Castagnary, as early as 1863:

¹² Zola's influence is recognised by French (cf. p. 52) and Walker (cf. "Naturalism", pp. 78 - 101), besides many other critics.

¹³ Quoted in Rewald, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ The Salon was an annual exhibition of paintings of living French artists.

¹⁵ Quoted in Rewald, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

Naturalism, which accepts all the realities of the visible world and, at the same time, all ways of understanding these realities is . . . the opposite of a school. Far from laying down a boundary, it suppresses all barriers. It does not do violence to the temperament of painters, it liberates it. It does not bind the painter's personality, but gives it wings. It says to the artist: "Be free!"¹⁶

Rewald goes on to say:

Manet and his friends, however, seem to have cared little for this designation, but Zola was to take it up with fervor and use it both in connection with his artist friends and with his own literary tendencies. Yet, whether they called themselves "naturalists" or not, it remains true that Castagnary's definition applied extremely well to the efforts of the young painters.¹⁷

These comments reveal that Naturalism and Impressionism characterized exactly the same tendency among this group of French painters. Moreover, Zola, their close friend, was not only the critical advocate of what they practiced, but applied the very same principles of his criticism of art to his criticism of literature. In France, Zola, without doubt, represents the center in which the currents of literature as well as painting of his time meet. It was Zola's conviction that an artist "exists by virtue of himself and not the subjects he has chosen."¹⁸

The object or person to be painted are pretexts, genius consists in conveying this object or person in a new, more real and greater sense. As for me, it is not the tree, the countenance, the scene offered to me which touches me:

¹⁶Quoted in Rewald, op.cit., p. 131.

¹⁷Rewald, op.cit., p. 131.

¹⁸Quoted in Rewald, op.cit., p. 123.

it is the man I find in the work, the powerful individual who has known how to create, alongside God's world, a personal world which my eyes will no more be able to forget and which they will recognize everywhere.¹⁹

In Zola's postulations for the experimental novel the same ideas are picked up. A "new, more real or greater sense" is again the key idea, just as it is also exactly what the Impressionist painters strove for. In The Experimental Novel and other Essays, a collection of Zola's critical writing, we find the following passages:

Since imagination is no longer the ruling quality of the novelist, what, then, is to replace it? There must always be a ruling quality. To-day the ruling characteristic of the novelist is the sense of reality. And this is to what I am coming.

The sense of reality is to feel nature and to be able to picture her as she is. It seems at first that, as all the world have two eyes to see with, nothing ought to be more common than the sense of reality. However, nothing seems to be more rare. Painters know and realize this better than anyone else. Put certain painters face to face with nature and they will see her in the strangest manner in the world. Each will perceive her under a dominant color; one will dress her out in yellow, another in violet, and a third in green. As to shape, the same phenomena will be produced; some will round off objects, others will multiply the angles. Each eye has a particular way of seeing. Then, again, there are eyes which see nothing at all. There is doubtless some lesion, the nerve connecting them with the brain has become paralyzed in some way that science has not been able to determine as yet. One thing is certain. That it is no use for them to look at the life throbbing around, as they will never be able to reproduce a scene from it correctly.

As I do not wish to name any living novelist, it makes my demonstration a little difficult. Examples would make the point clearer. But each one can see that certain novelists remain provincial, even after twenty

¹⁹ Quoted in Rewald, *op.cit.*, pp. 123.

years' residence in Paris. They excel in pictures of their own country, but as soon as they touch the Parisian scene, they make a nice mess of it, and never succeed in giving a correct impression of surroundings in which, however, they have lived for years. Here is one example of a decided lack of the sense of reality. Doubtless the impressions of childhood have been the most vivid; the eye has retained the pictures which it was first impressed with, then paralysis developed - it is no use for the eye to look at Paris; it sees it not, it will never see it.

The most frequent case, however, is that of complete paralysis. How many novelists think they see nature and only see her through so many distorted mediums. They persuade themselves that they have put everything in a picture, that the work is definite and complete. This is of a piece with the conviction with which they have piled error upon error in colors and forms. Their nature is a monstrosity that they have dwarfed or enlarged in trying carefully to finish off the painting. Notwithstanding their efforts, everything is touched up with false tints, everything is topsy-turvy. They might perhaps be able to write epic poems, but they will never be able to produce a true work, because the lesion of their eyes prevents it, and because, when you have not the sense of reality, you can never acquire it.

. . .

This sense of reality seems to me very easy to detect in a writer. For myself, it is the touchstone which decides all my judgments. When I have read a novel I condemn it if the author appears to me to be wanting in the sense of reality. Let the scene be laid in a ditch, or in the stars, below or above, it is equally indifferent to me. Truth has a sound about it which I think you can never mistake. The phrases, the lines, the pages, the entire book should ring with the truth. They will tell you that you need very delicate ears; you need a true ear, and nothing else. And the public itself, that cannot very well boast of a great delicacy of sense, clearly hears the works which ring with truth; it turns more and more towards these, while it soon becomes silent about the others, about the false works, which ring with error.

In the same way that they formerly said of a novelist, 'He has imagination,' I demand that they should say today 'He has a sense of reality.' This will be grander and more just praise. The ability to see is less common even than creative power.

. . .

However, to see is not all: you must give it again. This is why, after the sense of reality, there is the personality of the writer. A great novelist should have

the sense of reality and also personal expression.²⁰

Make your real characters move in real surroundings. To give your reader a scrap of human life, that is the whole purpose of the naturalistic novel.²¹

If we do not give you nature in its entirety we at least give you truthful nature as we see it through our individuality, while the others complicate the deviations of their own sight with the errors of an imagined nature, which they accept in a haphazard way as being true.²²

The conclusion to which I wish to come is this: If I were to define the experimental novel I should not say, as Claude Bernard says, that a literary work lies entirely in the personal feeling, for the reason that in my opinion the personal feeling is but the first impulse. Later nature, being there, makes itself felt, or at least that part of nature of which science has given us the secret, and above which we have no longer any right to romance.²³

The passages above should demonstrate how closely related Zola's critical passages are to the principles of Impressionism. As I pointed out, Morris knew all of Zola's works very well, not only his fiction, but also his criticism. Zola, who is admittedly the father of Morris's Naturalism, must therefore equally be considered the father of his Impressionism. It can be shown now that the Impressionistic concepts had several kinds of influences on Frank Morris.

²⁰Emile Zola, The Experimental Novel and other Essays, translated from the French by B.M. Sherman (New York, 1964), pp. 212 - 216.

²¹Ibid., p. 212.

²²Ibid., p. 95

²³Ibid., p. 53. In Impressionistic painting "that part of nature of which science has given us the secret" is represented by the theoretical and practical studies of the artists concerning coloring.

From the beginning of his literary career, Frank Norris wrote critical articles that are quite important for the history of modern American literature. As Walker pointed out, Norris was not a systematic thinker; it is therefore "futile to search for a coherent intellectual position in his fiction or criticism."²⁴ However, his writings frequently revealed Impressionistic doctrines as Zola had expounded them. In his critical work, for example, Norris repeatedly pointed out that what a writer needs is sensitivity to the world around him. And the second important characteristic is truth. In a relevant article, which appeared in the Boston Evening Transcript, November 6, 1901, Frank Norris contrasts truth with accuracy in fiction.

For the assumption is that truth is a higher power of accuracy, that the true thing includes the accurate; and assuming this, the authors of novels - that are not successful - suppose that if they are accurate, if they tell the thing just as they saw it, that they are truthful. It is not difficult to show that a man may be as accurate as the spectroscopist and yet lie like a Chinese diplomat. As for instance: Let us suppose you have never seen a sheep, never heard of a sheep, don't know sheep from shavings. It devolves upon me to enlighten your ignorance. I go out into the field and select from the flock a black sheep, bring it before you, with the animal there under our eyes, describe it in detail, faithfully, omitting nothing, falsifying nothing, exaggerating nothing. I am painfully accurate. But you go away with the untrue conviction that all sheep are black! I have been accurate, but I have not been true.²⁵

This postulation for all works of fiction is exactly the motto of

²⁴Frank Norris, The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris, edited by Donald Pizer (Austin, 1964), Introduction, p. XIII.

²⁵Ibid., p. 56.

Impressionist painters: we need not to be accurate, but we must be true to the very moment of life.

Accuracy is the attainment of small minds, the achievement of the commonplace, a mere machine-made thing that comes with niggardly research and ciphering and mensuration and the multiplication table, good in its place, so only the place is very small. In fiction it can under certain circumstances be dispensed with altogether. It is not a thing to be striven for. To be true is the allimportant business, and once attaining that, 'all other things shall be added unto you.' Paint the horse pea-green, if it suits your purpose; fill the mouth of Rebecca with gasconades and redomontades interminable: these things do not matter. It is truth that matters. . . .²⁶

And elsewhere in this article Norris drew even more explicit analogues between his own goals as a writer and the goals of the Impressionist painters:

Naturally enough it will be asked what then is the standard. How shall the writer guide himself in the treatment of a pivotal, critical scene, or how shall the reader judge whether or not he is true? It is a crux, one admits. But the incident must be handled so as to seem true. Perhaps after all the word 'seem,' and not the word 'true' is the most important. Of course no good novelist, no good artist, can represent life as it actually is. Nobody can, for nobody knows. Who is to say what life actually is? It seems easy, easy for us who have it, and live in it and see it and hear it and feel it every millionth part of every second of the time. I say that life is actually this or that, and you say it is something else, and number three says 'Lo here,' and number four says 'Lo there.' Not even science is going to help you; no two photographs, even, will convey just the same impression of the same actuality; and here we are dealing not with science, but with art, that instantly involves the personality of the artist and all that that means. Even the same artist will not see the same thing twice exactly alike. His personality is one thing today and another thing tomorrow; is one thing before

²⁶Frank Norris, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

dinner and another thing after it. How then to determine what life actually is?

The point is just this. In the fine arts we do not care one little bit about what life actually is, but what it looks like to an interesting, impressionable man, and if he tells his story, or paints his picture, so that the majority of intelligent people will say, 'Yes, that must have been just about what would have happened under those circumstances,' he is true. His accuracy cuts no figure at all. He need not to be accurate if he does not choose to be. If he sees fit to be inaccurate in order to make his point - so only his point be the conveying of a truthful impression - that is his affair. We have nothing to do with that. Consider the study of a French cuirassier by Detaille; where the sunlight strikes the brown coat of the horse, you will see, if you look close, a mere smear of blue, light blue. This is inaccurate. The horse is not blue, nor has he any blue spots. Stand at the proper distance and the blue smear resolves itself into the glossy reflection of the sun, and the effect is true.²⁷

In order to realize these principles, Norris postulates, the novelist must go "en pleine air" like the painters: Go out into life and keep your eyes open!

The difficulty then is to get at the immediate life, immensely difficult, for you are not only close to the canvas, but are yourself part of the picture.²⁸

But if [the would-be writer] only chose he could find romance and adventure in Wall street or Bond street. But romance there does not wear the gay clothes and the showy accouterments, and to discover it - the real romance of it - means hard work and close study, not of books, but of people and actualities.²⁹

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that Norris thought of himself only as a "word painter."

When [Norris] said, 'Life is not always true to life. . . .

²⁷Frank Norris, op.cit., pp.56.

²⁸Ibid., p. 86.

²⁹Ibid., p. 86.

In the fine arts we do not care one little bit about what life actually is, but what it looks like to an interesting, impressionable man,' he was speaking, like Crane, as the painter, but also as the dramatist. He was a novelist because of his passionate conviction that the novel 'expresses modern life better than architecture, better than painting, better than poetry, better than music.'³⁰

It is this life which (as we can conclude from the evidences and records left) he lived and enjoyed with all the fibres of his personality, with all his senses alert. And since all of them had an equal share in his experiences, it would never have done for him to restrict himself to pictures alone. That would have limited or considerably narrowed his means of expression. Therefore he had to find a field that would engage his whole personality, a field where all senses might be active, where he might touch, hear, smell, taste, as well as see. He wanted to grasp life in its fullness, richness; it could not be done on a canvas, but in a novel: thus he lived and wrote not just through his eyes but with all his five senses. And when he tried to write about what he perceived, it became to a certain extent, like the following passages, Impressionistic:

Colour was everywhere. A thousand little notes of green and yellow, of vermilion and sky-blue, assaulted the eye. Here it was a doorway, here a vivid glint of cloth or hanging, here a huge scarlet sign lettered with gold, and here a kaleidoscopic effect in the garments of a passerby. Directly opposite, and two stories above their heads, a sort of huge 'loggia', one blaze of gilding and crude vermillions, opened in the gray cement of a crumbling facade, like a sudden burst of flame.³¹

³⁰Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, Canby, Ludwig, Literary History of the United States (New York, 1963), p. 1027.

³¹Frank Norris, Elix, in vol. III (New York, 1928), p. 33.

But at this hour the colour of the scene was its greatest charm. It glowed with all the sombre radiance of a cathedral. Everything was seen through a haze of purple - from the low green hills in the Presidio reservation to the faint red mass of Mount Diablo shrugging its rugged shoulder over the Contra Costa foothills. As the evening faded, the west burnt down to a dull red glow that overlaid the blue of the bay with a sheen of ruddy gold. The foothills of the opposite shore, Diablo, and at last even Tamalpais, resolved themselves in the velvet gray of the sky. Outlines were lost. Only the masses remained, and these soon began to blend into one another. The sky, and land, and the city's huddled roofs were one. Only the sheen of a dull gold remained, piercing the single vast mass of purple like the blade of a golden sword.³²

When Norris first had the idea about the great trilogy of the west he started calling it "an idea as big as all outdoors."³³ And Walker talks about it as an idea which for the first time promised him the breadth of canvas suited to his talents.³⁴ It is hardly surprising, then, that the novel The Octopus, which Norris shaped from this idea, should reflect the influences of Zola and the contemporary Impressionist painters. Just as they packed up easel, canvas and oils, and took an early morning train to get into the country, he went "en pleine air" collecting material for The Octopus. On April 5, 1899, he wrote his friend Harry West:

I am leaving for California Monday next to be gone, very likely, until fall. It has happened quite unexpectedly but is the result of a talk I had with the firm here. They believe with me that the big American novel is going to come out of the west - California. . . .

³²Frank Norris, Elix, op.cit., pp. 54.

³³Quoted in Walker, op.cit., p. 240.

³⁴Ibid., p. 240.

It involves a very long, a very serious, and perhaps a very terrible novel. It will be all about the San Joaquin wheat raisers and the Southern Pacific, and I guess we'll call it The Octopus - catch on? . . .

I am going to study the whole thing on the ground and come back here in the winter and make a novel out of it. What do you think of the idea?³⁵

In a letter written on May 7, 1899, to his best friend, Ernest Peixotto, he said:

I am having such a bully good time. Feel just as if I was out of doors playing after being in school for years. . . .

The Wheat stuff is piling up B I G. . . .
. . . I have gone (naturally not alone) out to the Presidio Reservation and sat down and wallowed in the grass on just the spot I told you about and done everything just as I had planned we should and I'm just having the best time that ever was - viola tout.³⁶

Norris certainly kept his eyes open. He watched the wheat through the seasons, from sowing till harvesting time. And besides these slow, gradual changes through the year the reader experiences the subtler ones produced by the different times of the day and the different light effects that, every time, create a completely different atmosphere. Right from the beginning Norris makes use of this Impressionistic device when he lets us accompany Presley on his roaming through the valley from early in the morning till late in the evening.

However, Norris does not describe the physical appearance of his characters in Impressionistic terms. These characters are all physically very real, beings of flesh and blood, represented to us with a few clearcut lines; their features are often rendered unforgettable by numerous repe-

³⁵Quoted in Walker, op.cit., p. 343.

³⁶Ibid., p. 245.

titions referring to some striking physical characteristics (for example, Annixter's tuft of hair on the crown, sticking always straight in the air; or Angela's full Egyptian lips). His method in describing the characters, though, must be called traditional; he does not represent them, as the Impressionists did with their portraits, under a moment's circumstance. There is nothing of the indistinct, slightly blurred softness of paintings of this period in them. When Norris introduces the different members of the action, he portrays them so precisely, and conveys so many little details that we are at once reminded of the minutely lined etchings of a Durer or a Van Dyck.

But although the characters are not portrayed Impressionistically, their surroundings are. In this novel the setting is the San Joaquin valley during the different times of days and seasons. It is very easy for the reader to visualize the scenes Frank Norris describes in the book as well as if they had been represented to us with a brush on canvas. In the following part of the paper I want to demonstrate how closely Norris's description very often suggests actual Impressionistic painting by juxtaposing passages of this text with a selected group of pictures.

It will be found that the passages I chose from the book are not always merely pictorial ones, but that very often a description of colors is accompanied by a description of sounds or even scents. Like the colors, however, these other types of sensory detail can be considered as aspects of Norris's Impressionism, his effort to render what life seems like "to an interesting, impressionable man."

Now the sky was without a cloud, pale blue, delicate, luminous, scintillating with morning. The great brown earth turned a huge flank to it, exhaling the moisture of the early dew. The atmosphere, washed clean of dust and mist, was translucent as crystal. Far off to the east, the hills on the other side of Broderson Creek stood out against the pallid saffron of the horizon as flat and as sharply outlined as if pasted on the sky. The campanile of the ancient Mission of San Juan seemed as fine as frost work. All about between the horizons, the carpet of the land unrolled itself to infinity. But now it was no longer parched with heat, cracked and warped by a merciless sun, powdered with dust. The rain had done its work; . . .³⁷



Vincent Van Gogh, The Sower.

³⁷Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. I (New York, 1928), pp. 121.

. . . he saw her in a glory of sunlight that set a fine tinted lustre of pale carnation and gold on the silken sheen of her white skin, her hair sparkled with it, her thick, strong neck, sloping to her shoulders with beautiful full curves, seemed to radiate the light; her eyes, brown, wide, innocent in expression, disclosing the full disc of the pupil upon the slightest provocation, flashed in this sunlight like diamonds.³⁶



Claude Monet, Woman with a Sunshade (1886).

³⁶Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. I, op.cit., p. 219.

It was late in the day, already his shadow was long upon the padded dust of the road in front of him. On ahead, a long way off, and a little to the north, the venerable campanile of the Mission San Juan was glinting radiant in the last rays of the sun, while behind him, toward the north and west, the gilded dome of the court-house at Bonneville stood silhouetted in purplish black against the flaming west.³⁹



Claude Monet, San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk (1908).

³⁹Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., p. 74.

The great compound hissed and trembled . . . The engine moved, advanced, travelled past the depot and the freight train, and gathering speed, rode out on the track beyond. Smoke, black and boiling, shot skyward from the stack; not a joint that did not shudder with the mighty strain of the steam; but the great iron brute . . . came to call, obedient and docile as soon as ever the great pulsing heart of it felt a master hand upon its levers. It gathered its speed, bracing its steels muscles, its thews of iron, and roared out upon the upon track, filling the air with the rasp of its tempest-breath, blotting the sunshine with the belch of its hot, thick smoke.⁴⁰

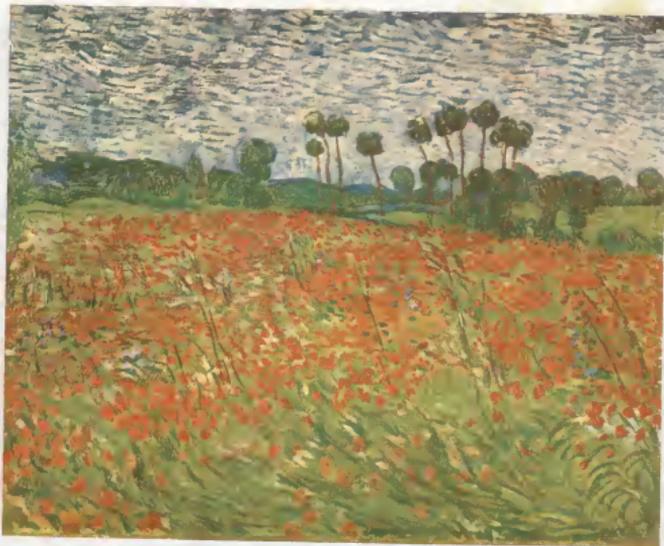


Claude Monet, Old St. Lazare Station, Paris (1877).

⁴⁰Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., pp. 187.

Meanwhile, as spring advanced, the flowers in the Seed ranch began to come to life. Over the five hundred acres whereon the flowers were planted, the widening growth of vines and bushes spread like the waves of a green sea. Then, timidly, colours of the faintest tints began to appear. Under the moonlight, Vanamee saw them expanding, delicate pink, faint blue, tenderest variations of lavender and yellow, white shimmering with reflections of gold, all subdued and pallid in the moonlight.

. . . then as the buds opened, emphasizing itself, breathing deeper, stronger. An exquisite mingling of many odours passed continually over the Mission, from the garden of the Seed ranch, meeting and blending with the aroma of its magnolia buds and punka blossoms.⁴¹



Vincent Van Gogh, Poppies.

⁴¹Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., p. 98.

At length, the day broke, resplendent, cloudless. The night was passed. There was all the sparkle and effervescence of joy in the crystal sunlight as the dawn expanded roseate, and at length flamed dazzling to the zenith when the sun moved over the edge of the world and looked down upon all the earth like the eye of God the Father.⁴²



Vincent Van Gogh, The Way with the Cypress and the Star.

⁴²Frank Morris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., p. 346.

In the preceding passages I tried to show how closely related writing and painting are in The Octopus. I did perhaps not always choose the best examples from Norris's book, nor the best reproductions of Impressionistic paintings. But my sources as to the pictures were rather limited; and trying to match the material I could obtain as well as possible with passages from the book was not always easy. I encountered one big difference in the first place: The French Impressionist painters whom I "quoted" with more or less good reproductions of their works lived in a completely different setting, with much more northerly light conditions than Norris found in California. Therefore the parallels cannot always be very close. In this respect we must also consider the great difference in the employment of machinery for agricultural purposes in the two countries, a difference that becomes obvious by the example on page 26.

Yet it was not my endeavor to "illustrate" different parts of Frank Norris's book The Octopus, on the pages above, by well known Impressionistic paintings. Such a plan can never be realized, due to one very important different conception between the Impressionist painters and the writer Frank Norris. The first went out painting merely for the pleasure they hoped to give to other people with the results of their efforts. There was no other motif behind: it was painting for painting's sake, it was color "per se" their interest focused on. Not so Frank Norris. His purpose in the art of writing novels was obviously a didactic one. As to this he never changed his mind; we can trace it in most of the literary essays he wrote; if it is not mentioned explicitly it al-

ways lurked in the background.⁴⁴ Therefore, the parallels pointed out are only those of method and result; they are not so much the effect of a common philosophical and moral-psychological basis Frank Norris might have shared with the painters. I was, accordingly, less concerned about exact analogues in the preceding juxtapositions than, in a very general respect, Impressionism in its apparent form.

The question that arises now is the following: is Impressionism in the works of Frank Norris only limited to the pictorial level I talked about above. I will try to point out in the following that there is another Impressionistic trait to be observed, although I could not find any confirmation for my theory in Frank Norris's critical writing. It might be a device he used more or less subconsciously - yet to me it has a striking parallel in painting.

It was the light the Impressionistic painters were interested in more than anything else. They were fascinated by the changes it could produce on objects, on nature. Yet there must, at the bottom of their hearts, have been the feeling that by capturing a moment's appearance on their canvas they did not really do justice to the object. In order to represent the object's truth, one portrait, which can give just one temporal aspect, is not enough. We must capture sight of our object again and again, see it under all the changing shades of daylight. This

⁴⁴Cf. Frank Norris, The Literary Criticism . . . , "The Novel with a 'Purpose'", op.cit., pp. 90 - 93.

is what Monet tried to achieve with his series of pictures The Water Lilies, Rouen Cathedral, and The Haystacks. Each series depicts the same scene at different times of the day.



Frequently in The Octopus the writer Frank Norris does, at least in my eyes, exactly what the painter Monet had done with his brush: he gives us a picture of the same setting under different light conditions:

He was still on the Home ranch. A few miles to the south he could just make out the line of a wire fence that separated it from the third division; and to the north, seen faint and blue through the haze and shimmer of the noon sun, a long file of telegraph poles showed the line of the railroad and marked Derrick's northeast boundary. The road over which Presley was travelling ran almost diametrically straight. In front of him, but at a great distance, he could make out the giant life-oak and the red roof of Hooven's barn that stood near it.

All about him the country was flat. In all directions he could see for miles. The harvest was just over. Nothing but stubble remained on the ground. With the one exception of the life-oak by Hooven's place, there was nothing green in sight. The wheat stubble was of a dirty yellow; the ground, parched, cracked, and dry, of a cheerless brown. By the roadside the dust lay thick and grey, and, on either hand, stretching on toward the horizon, losing itself in a mere smudge in the distance, ran the illimitable parallels of the wire fence. And that was all; that and the burnt-out blue of the sky and the steady shimmer of the heat.⁴⁵

A few days later:

. . . the prospect was dreary; the distant horizons were blotted under drifting mists of rain; the eternal monotony of the earth lay open to the sombre low sky without a single adornment, without a single variation from its melancholy flatness. Near at hand the wires between the telegraph poles vibrated with a faint humming under the multitudinous fingering of the myriad of falling drops, striking among them and dripping off steadily from one to another. The poles themselves were dark and swollen and glistening with wet, while the little cones of glass on the transverse bars reflected the dull grey light of the end of the afternoon.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Frank Norris, The Octopus, op.cit., p. 11.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 88.

This Impressionistic device, the description of landscape under different light conditions, is here altogether pictorial. Yet the same principle can, in my eyes, be traced on a different level, a level that gets close to Henry James's practice in his great novels.

The idea startled me first when reading Vandover and the Brute. There, after the death of his father, the thought of the old man enters Vandover's mind rather often, at least at the beginning. The great leather chair in which the Old Gentleman had died becomes a symbol for his father's good influence on him. Whenever this object provokes a conscious turn of the painter's thoughts to his father, it awakes all the good in him. By the device of describing these momentary glimpses Vandover has of the past, Norris reveals the development of Vandover's character. Shortly after his father's death these thoughts are frequent and welcome; but they grow less and less so the more Vandover yields to the brute in him. The final separation from the great leather chair means the death of all the good in Vandover. Looking at the different stages of this relation between man and chair is just as relevant for a study of Vandover's character as the putting side by side of the Rouen Cathedral canvases by Monet is to convey a complete impression of this building; the device brings us closer to the man on the one and closer to the edifice on the other side.⁴⁷

This same Impressionistic method reappears often in The Octopus. For example, Magnus Derrick revolves in his head whether he shall join

⁴⁷Cf. Frank Norris, Vandover and the Brute, vol. V (New York, 1928), pp. 136; p. 189; p. 215; p. 238; p. 245.

the farmers' league or not. And with every change in the situation at his ranch the problem appears in a slightly different light. Even more notable is Morris's treatment of Annixter, as he ponders about his relations to Hilma Tree. What changes do these short reflections about her undergo!

When we encounter Annixter first, he is not a bad man, but not a good man either. He is self-centered, hard, quick in losing his temper, and people do not easily get along with him. He then becomes aware of Hilma Tree. First she is only a spot in his thoughts. But the next time the idea of her crosses his mind, the spot is just a little bigger; Hilma is no longer one among many, but Annixter recognizes in her, subconsciously, something special. Soon, he starts looking out for her; ultimately, they marry. To reveal this development to us, Frank Morris simply pictures certain stages of Annixter's mind, at appropriate intervals throughout the book. These passages recall the canvases of Monet. To demonstrate this point more clearly I want to quote several of the passages consecutively here:

He gathered up a handful of pebbles and began snapping them carefully into the creek. He fell thoughtful. Here was a face of the affair he had not planned in the least. He had supposed all the time that Hilma took his meaning. His old suspicion that she was trying to get a hold on him stirred again for a moment. There was no good of such talk as that. Always these female girls seemed crazy to get married, bent on complicating the situation.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Frank Morris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., p. 50.

For the first time doubt assailed him. Suppose Hilma was indeed all that she appeared to be. Suppose it was not with her a question of his property, after all; it was a poor time to think of marrying him for his property when all Quien Sabe hung in the issue of the next few months. Suppose she had been sincere. But he caught himself up. Was he to be fooled by a female girl at this late date? He, Buck Annixter, crafty, hard-headed, a man of affairs? Not much. Whatever transpired he would remain the master.⁴⁹

But he wanted to see Hilma. The idea of going to bed without at least a glimpse of her became distasteful to him. Annixter got up and descending from the porch began to walk aimlessly about between the ranch buildings, with eye and ear alert. Possibly he might meet her somewhere.⁵⁰

Annixter was in torment. Now, there could be no longer any doubt - now it was Hilma or nothing. Once out of his reach, once lost to him, and the recollection of her assailed him with unconquerable vehemence. Much as she had occupied his mind, he had never realized till now how vast had been the place she had filled in his life. He had told her as much, but even then he did not believe it.⁵¹

She had told her parents all. She had left Quien Sabe - had left him for good, at the very moment when he believed he had won her. Brute, beast that he was, he had driven her away.

An hour went by; then two, then four, then six. Annixter still sat in his place, groping and battling in a confusion of spirit, the like of which he had never felt before. He did not know what was the matter with him. He could not find his way out of the dark and out of the turmoil that wheeled around him. He had had no experience with women. There was no precedent to guide him. How was he to get out of this? What was the clue that would set everything straight again?

That he would give Hilma up, never once entered his head. Haver her he would. She had given herself to him. Everything should have been easy after that, and instead, here he was alone in the night, wrestling with himself, in deeper trouble than ever, and Hilma farther than ever away from him.

⁴⁹Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., pp. 75.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 77.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 79.

It was true, he might have Hilma, even now, if he was willing to marry her. But marriage, to his mind, had been always a vague, most remote possibility, almost as vague and as remote as his death - a thing that happened to some men, but that would surely never occur to him. Or, if it did, it would be long after years had passed, when he was older, more settled, more mature - an event that belonged to the period of his middle life, distant as yet.

He had never faced the question of his marriage. He had kept it at an immense distance from him. It had never been a part of his order of things. He was not a marrying man.⁵²

But as the intellect moved slower, its function growing numb, the idea of self dwindled. Annixter no longer considered himself; no longer considered the notion of marriage from the point of view of his own comfort, his own wishes, his own advantage. He realized that in his new-found desire to make her happy, he was sincere. There was something in that idea, after all. To make someone happy - how about that now? It was worth thinking of.⁵³

"Why - I - I, I love her," he cried. Never until then had it occurred to him. Never until then, in all his thoughts of Hilma, had the great word passed his lip.⁵⁴

A little later Norris lets Annixter sum up his development:

"Fres," he exclaimed, "she's made a man of me. I was a machine before, and if another man, or woman, or child got in my way, I rode 'em down, and I never dreamed of anybody else but myself. But as soon as I woke up to the fact that I really loved her, why, it was glory hallelujah all in a minute, and, in a way, I kind of loved everybody then, and wanted to be everybody's friend. And I began to see that a fellow can't live for himself any more than he can live by himself. He's got to think of others. If he's got brains, he's got to think for the poor ducks that haven't 'em, and not give 'em a boot in the backsides because they happen to be stupid; and if he's got money, he's got to

⁵²Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., pp. 79.

⁵³Ibid., op.cit., pp. 80.

⁵⁴Ibid., op.cit., p. 82.

help those that are busted, and if he's got a house, he's got to think of those that ain't got anywhere to go. I've got a whole lot of ideas since I began to love Hilma, and just as soon as I can, I'm going to get in and help people, and I'm going to keep to that idea the rest of my natural life. That ain't much of a religion, but it's the best I've got, and Henry Ward Beecher couldn't do any more than that. And it's all come about because of Hilma, and because we care for each other.⁵⁵

This Impressionistic device of revealing a character by focusing on him at an important instant of his development (the scattered descriptions of moment's ideas passing through Annixter's head in the examples quoted) together with the pictorial features of Impressionism where Norris is, in his technique, so close to the mentioned painters that one can actually juxtapose passages of his text to Impressionistic canvases, can be found in all of this writer's novels. The latter device, though, is specially prominent in The Octopus; subject and setting of the novel made Frank Norris turn into a genuine "word painter".

One more point must be made. Not only the work of Frank Norris, but

. . . modern literature from Chateaubriand to Proust has given us many descriptions at least suggesting the effects of painting and inciting us to visualize scenes in terms frequently evocative of contemporary paintings. Though it may be doubted whether the poet can really suggest the effects of painting to hypothetical readers totally ignorant of painting, it is clear that within our general cultural traditions writers did suggest the emblem, the landscape painting of the 18th century, the impressionistic effects of a Whistler and the like.⁵⁶

Thus I want this report to be understood "within our general cultural traditions." I wonder whether I could have visualized Frank Norris's

⁵⁵Frank Norris, The Octopus, vol. II, op.cit., p. 180.

⁵⁶R. Wellek and A. Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1956), p. 115.

landscape as I did if I had not known anything about the Impressionistic method. But this would have been a prerogative impossible to fulfil. I did know painters like Monet, Renoir, Cezanne, Van Gogh, and many others. Therefore, I could only try to be as skeptical and critical about the parallels I felt I could see on the one and be as objective as possible in treating the subject matter of this report on the other side.

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IMPRESSIONISM IN FRANK MORRIS'S NOVEL

THE OCTOPUS

by

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Frank Norris is usually regarded as one of the first representatives of Naturalism in the fiction of the United States. He is never thought of, though, as a forerunner of Impressionistic writing. It is the subject and the purpose of this report to show that many Impressionistic features can be traced in Frank Norris's novels, but mainly so in his probably most important book, The Octopus.

Before going into a detailed investigation, a short historical survey of Impressionism will be given. This term is originally employed for a certain new approach in the art of painting. It started with a group of painters that formed round Claude Monet, who became the chief representative of this direction in painting during the 1870's and 1880's. It was the aim of the Impressionists to capture on their canvases a single fugitive moment by means of composition, but mainly by a completely different use of colors. The same term, Impressionism, was later employed in the art of writing to characterize the description of a single moment's impression by an author.

If Frank Norris, in his novels, is supposed to employ Impressionistic devices, the question arises when in his life he came into contact with this new approach. There were three important periods in Frank Norris's life during which he was exposed to the art of painting in general and Impressionism in special. The first step was taken when he decided to become a painter. He had his first experiences in this field at the San Francisco School of Art. It was significant for him that very soon he grew impatient with the old method of copying that was required from the art students there. His natural disposition re-

quired more, wanted to be creative. Therefore, the family finally agreed that the future artist should continue his studies in Paris. Frank Norris spent a year there, at a time when the Impressionist painters experienced their first popular successes. During this time Frank Norris developed a taste for writing. In Berkeley, where, after his return to the United States, he took literary courses, he started reading Emile Zola and other writers of the French Naturalistic school. Zola, who was one of the most interested in the development of the "beaux arts" among the writers and critics in France, and who was a personal friend to several of the Impressionist painters, was of greatest influence on Frank Norris. His critical essays may be considered an effort to link the art of writing and the art of painting, and it is only natural that Frank Norris, especially after his education in the arts, should follow in his steps.

Reading Frank Norris's novel The Octopus carefully we find that there are many more Impressionistic passages than we ever expected. Especially in his landscape descriptions Frank Norris is so vivid that we can actually close our eyes and visualize the scenery. Doing so, we are constantly reminded of Impressionistic paintings of the group mentioned above. Juxtaposing some passages of the book to prints of Impressionistic paintings will support this statement. Therefore it is justified to speak about Impressionism on the pictorial level in Frank Norris's novel.

In the following part I want to prove that a second level of Impressionism can be traced in this novel. Very often we find that he

describes his characters by showing that what they think or feel about a particular situation changes from moment to moment. This may be paralleled by the effort of the Impressionist painters, mainly Monet with his series Rouen Cathedral, to give us a complete or rounded idea of what their object is like by painting it at different times of the day and under different light-conditions. This second Impressionistic device, though, is not carried out too regularly, and I could not find a proof for my concept in Frank Norris's critical essays.

From this investigation it must be concluded that Frank Norris must be considered a forerunner of later Impressionistic writers.