

ANALYSIS

The Octopus (1901)



Frank Norris

(1870-1902)

“Trafficking in wheat is a less organic function than either growing or eating it. *The Pit*, though its success on the stage and its energetic drama of business made it popular, falls in interest and power below *The Octopus*. The Octopus of the title is the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad which holds the wheat growers of California in its cruel tentacles, able if it likes to deny them access to their natural markets, and consequently a symbol of the control which economic machinery exercises over the elements of life. The book sets forth the drama of Agriculture and Trade locked in a fierce conflict, with Trade for the moment villain and victor. Norris’s sympathies lie with the oppressed ranchmen; the Railroad has the iron teeth and ruthless hunger of the Old Witch of juvenile melodrama; in the end, though the ranchers have been defeated, the wheat itself too symbolically pours in upon the agent of the Railroad and destroys him... And yet these cosmic implications do not remove the story too far from actual existence in California... The style, though often turgid, is strong and full; the movement is nervous and swift; the pictures, though panoramic, are richly alive.

The passion which informs *The Octopus*, a kind of fiery zeal for truth which lifted and enlarged all Norris wrote, is the quality which marked him off from the older realism of Howells. Zola had it, and Norris, who called Zola the very head of the Romanticists, was willing to name his own form of Naturalism romantic if he could argue for the use in fiction of deeper and more stirring truths than those minute, surface matters which, in his opinion, were the stock in trade of official Realism. The clearest instance in his work of this romantic tendency is the story of Vanamee in *The Octopus*, the sheep-herder who has mystical communion with the spirit of his dead mistress. But equally romantic, in fact, is Norris’s constant preoccupations with elemental emotions. His heroes are nearly all violent men, willful, passionate, combative; his heroines—thick-haired, large-armed women, almost all of a single physical type—are endowed with a frank and deep if slow vitality.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 234-35

“*McTeague* and *Vandover* are of the city and its sordid evil ways. They are studies in psychology. *The Octopus* is of the great California valleys and the evils that have come into the farm life with the railroad. It is a study in economics... A certain magnificence in Norris responded to the epic breadth of the valleys—they fired his imagination—the vast sweep and power of nature: the rich soil, the brilliant sun that lays its palpitating heat upon the land... There is an epic sweep of life and reproduction here, and this epic of the soil is linked with the tragedy wrought by the Southern Pacific—the economic machinery of man’s making. The facts were well known and they took hold of Norris’s imagination. His sympathy is aroused and yet instead of attacking the railroad he weaves it into his deterministic philosophy.

Theme: Ostensibly the wheat.... In reality, the impotence of unimportant individuals in the struggle with things as they are. In *The Octopus* the individual is dwarfed by the vast spaces, he is crumpled and despoiled by the railroad. The flock of sheep destroyed by the train is only a symbol of the men and women of the valley, under the wheels of modern industrialism. Action: A huge canvas with crowding figures and abundant action.... A ‘strongly interwrought group of episodes’...that fall into [a] series... (1) The atrophy of Magnus Derrick, which might well be a story in itself; (2) The development of Annixter, ‘out of an absolute, yet not gross, materiality,’ through the love of Hilma Tree; and then their final annihilation; (3) A host of background characters—supernumeraries—that give a sense of epic sweep.

The Note of Romance: The riot of color, of life, arouses the latent romance of his nature. He cannot remain detached but projects himself into the story in the person of Vanamee. He returns to the use of the symbol as in *McTeague*—the wheat. He allows his villain to perish melodramatically. How much more convincing is the figure of Charlie Geary setting Vandover to work than S. Behrman in the hold of the vessel. In the end he abandons the amoral attitude. After proclaiming the doctrine of determinism—that the railroads are the masters—not the puppets of men—he takes refuge in a moral order. In the large balance, the wheat remains, rectifying wrong—saving other lives to make good what it here destroys...in contemplating the injustice done by the railroads, Norris neither demands nor expects relief.”

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927,1930) 332-34

“In spite of being couched in an illiterate style the book has extraordinary force: The plot displays a series of related personal tragedies resulting from the impact upon individual lives of a corrupt financial power. The financial magnate responsible justifies his actions in Emersonian terms, and the author’s representative in the story, Presley, enlarges upon this justification in extensive passages that might have been plagiarized from the Essays. Norris, however, was so little a literary scholar that one is inclined to believe it more likely that he got these passages from the philosophical atmosphere of his period than from Emerson’s text.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1938) 268n

“The first part of an unfinished trilogy, ‘The Epic of the Wheat.’ The central theme in this realistic study of California farm life is the growing and harvesting of the wheat. Magnus Derrick operates the great Rancho de los Muertos, near Bonneville in the San Joaquin Valley, and is the leading spokesman for the farmers of the community. His son Harran helps him to manage their tenants and agricultural activities, while another son, Lyman, is a corporation lawyer in San Francisco. Among the neighboring farmers are Broderson, Osterman, and Annixter, all of whom are associated in a struggle to resist the encroachments of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, which dominates the state government and gradually extends its monopoly over other industries. The railroad is in complete control of Bonneville, for it subsidizes Genslinger, editor of the town paper, and through S. Behrman, its unofficial agent, influences prices, interest rates, and all financial transactions. When Dyke, a veteran engineer, quits his position rather than accept a wage cut and becomes a farmer, he is ruined because of exorbitant freight rates, and in desperation robs a train, later ending up in prison.

Presley, a poet from the East, stays for a time at Derrick's ranch and learns to sympathize with the cause of the oppressed farmers. He writes a poem about them that is widely popular, but finds it has no effect in the conflict of tremendous issues and resigns himself to being only an observer of the stirring events which follow. The farmers hold much of their land on option from the railroad, which raises the price enormously and puts up the land for public sale. Outraged by the broken promises and unfair tactics of Behrman and the corporation, the farmers form a protective league to protest and influence the state administration in their interests, electing Magnus Derrick their president.

The league succeeds in placing Lyman on the state commission to fix rates, but he is bribed by the railroad and betrays his backers. When the railroad causes legal authorities to dispossess the farmers of their land, they revolt and in an armed clash many are killed, including Annixter, who has just married Hilma Tree. The railroad has now won complete domination, and the families of the insurgents are thrown into poverty and suffering. Magnus has been disgraced and ruined and is forced to enter the employment of Behrman, who is later accidentally smothered to death while watching the loading on shipboard of his own dishonestly gained wheat. Presley, indignant over the outrages he has witnessed, visits Shelgrim, president of the railroad, but instead of the inhumane criminal he had expected finds Shelgrim sentimental and genial, convinced that his actions are dictated by circumstances and economic laws."

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"*The Octopus* (1901) is usually studied as our first great economic thesis-novel, but to Norris it was 'the big, epic, dramatic thing.' His literary problem is written into the poet Presley who goes to live on the Los Muertos ranch in Tulare County in preparation for his epic of the West.... Presley accomplished no more than his poem 'The Toilers,' an idea modeled on Markham's 'The Man With the Hoe,' but Norris, putting his vast idea into more versatile prose, wrote *The Octopus* and very nearly achieved the masterpiece he visioned. Since *Moby-Dick*, by then virtually forgotten, there had been nothing like it in American literature.

In sheer spread of canvas *The Octopus* achieved all that Norris hoped for it, but as a work of art it has obvious faults. With romantic fogginess of mind, Norris resolved none of his major issues, artistic, economic, or philosophic. His main story of the decline of Magnus Derrick, the master of Los Muertos, follows the course of those of McTeague and Vandover, although outside circumstance as well as moral weakness undermines the structure of character. This in itself is an advance in Naturalistic understanding, a recognition of the force of environment as well as that of biological defect, a movement away from the merely psychological to the sociological novel. But the story of Magnus is intertwined with the primitive and tragic love of the rancher Annixter for his milkmaid Hilma Tree (again the mating of Moral but now on a more civilized and restrained level), and with the mystical romance of the shepherd Vanamee with the spirit of his dead Angelé, reminiscent of *Trilby*, a book which Norris scorned. These three strands, together with lesser ones, are woven by an epic theme and a common philosophy into an intricate pattern—or at least it was Norris's intention so to weave them. Presley abandoned his Milton and Homer for Mill, Malthus, Henry George, and Schopenhauer.

All these personal stories became merged in one impersonal conflict between the Life Force, as symbolized by the Wheat, and the Machine, as symbolized by the Railroad. Magnus, as leader of the wheat growers, and the potbellied S. Behrman, as spokesman for the railroad, became primary antagonists in the struggle. The vigorous California storyteller saw the tragic issue of the time and place as the New England recluse Henry Adams saw it: the Wheat and the Railroad were the Virgin and the Dynamo, less subtly and profoundly understood.

The climactic scene where the ranchers meet the representatives of the railroad at the irrigation ditch more than satisfies Norris' requirement that a novel build up to a 'pivotal event' and explode in a 'rush of action,' but the somewhat fortuitous conclusion—S. Behrman buried by his own wheat in the hold of his own vessel—fails to achieve the effect of Naturalistic determinism which it was obviously designed to produce. 'Men were naught,' Presley had finally decided, 'death was naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed.' But the traditional idealist in Norris would not down so easily and he pushes past this force to the

‘primordial energy flung out from the hand of the Lord himself, immortal, calm, infinitely strong.’ Hence the fecundity of earth may find its expression equally in the warmth of Hilma Tree or the unreality of Angelé; the shepherd Vanamee may conquer death while the impersonal Force is crushing out the lives of his friends; and the demon behind it all, Shelgrim, the president of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad, may plead that he, too, is a puppet in the impersonal drama of natural law.

Dramatic it all is on a grand scale, both epic and tragic in its power, but logical it is not. The book finally fails as tragic drama because Norris has no consistent position on the vast economic and metaphysical problems he raises. Fiction need not provide answers to such problems, but its angle of view must be consistent. Norris shifts with his poet Presley from sympathy with the capitalistic ranchers to support of the ‘reds’ and back to excuses even for the railroad, from mechanical determinism to mystical theism and back. The principles at the foundation of the book were never thought through.

A great failure is akin to a success. *The Octopus* is the most ambitious novel of its generation. Though planned as the first of a trilogy which was to follow the Wheat through the three stages of growth, marketing, and export to famine-ridden Europe or Asia, it must stand alone, for its sequel *The Pit* (1903) is a relapse into the conventional novel form, and the third work, *The Wolf*, was never written. In *The Octopus*, the wheat itself could be the central character, for it was ever present. ‘There it was. The Wheat! The Wheat! In the night it had come up. It was there, everywhere from margin to margin of the horizon.’ But in the Chicago grain pit, it is off stage, a column of figures in a ledger, a few miles of ticker tape, an object of man-made speculation rather than of elemental force.

Nevertheless, Norris’ contemporary reviewers were not far wrong in greeting the story of the rise and fall of Curtis Jadwin as his most mature novel. Its theme is of profound social significance; the characters of Jadwin and his wife Laura Dearborn, like those of McTeague and Trina, studies of degeneration through greed, achieve sympathy through understanding and powerful treatment; and the plot, in spite of its unfortunately happy ending, has originality within its conventional frame. Anticipating Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), it is a sincere and impartial study of the meaning of American capitalism, of the degenerating influence of greed in high places. In this last novel Norris finally blended what he understood of Naturalistic fiction with the romance of contemporary life. The result is not his most impressive work, but it is sound, and it was acceptable to his readers. He had proved, at least to his own satisfaction, that romance could find the truth in contemporary life as well as could Realism.”

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1031-33

“There has been considerable discussion during recent years as to whether *The Octopus* is philosophically consistent. Whether it is artistically unified would seem to be a more important consideration. The story, with its numerous subplots and its vast social and economic implications, is built around the struggle for land between the ranchers and the Southern Pacific Railroad; the locale is the San Joaquin Valley in California; the climax is furnished by the Mussel Slough tragedy of 1880. The tale of Annixter and Hilma Tree, of the man’s redemption through his love for her, is well integrated with the main plot, but the story of Vanamee and Angelé Varian—‘pure romance,’ Norris called it—‘oh, even mysticism, if you like, a sort of allegory’—does not seem quite at home in the book. On the other hand, the fact that the ranchers who fight the railroad—and are destroyed by it—are not proletarians but agrarian capitalists does not seem very important. *The Octopus* is not a perfectly integrated novel, but it is full of life and of warm, generous feeling. After all, ‘a man’s reach should exceed his grasp’.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 221

“The octopus is the railroad, which had so profoundly reorganized the West in the latter part of the last century. The action of the book has to do with the struggle between a group of wheat ranchers and the rapacious railroad interests and chronicles the inevitable victory of the railroad. There are so many people

in the book that it may be well to describe some of them in turn. There is Magnus Derrick, an upright man on the large scale, as his name suggests. Now a wheat farmer, he had been a politician and a miner. He is a gentlemanly American of the old school; he is forensic, Roman, dignified, honest, and his hero is Calhoun. Norris describes his gradual corruption, telling us how he finally consents to enter into a scheme to bribe the commissioners who determine the railway rates, and in Magnus Derrick's moral anguish and shame, we see the failure and decline of an older America, very much as we do in similar characters in the Nebraska novels of Willa Cather.

Then we have Derrick's wife Annie; she is an easterner and therefore effete. She reads Pater and poetry and recoils from western manners. She is frightened by the mere vast fecundity of the limitless wheat fields. Norris clearly dislikes her because of her refinement. The Derricks have two sons: Lyman, who moves to San Francisco, and Harran, who remains faithful to his father. The city (even San Francisco) is the abode of evil and decay, like the East, in Norris's Populist mythology; and so Lyman quickly becomes corrupt. He is a member of the commission, and being covertly in the pay of the railroad, betrays the wheat ranchers. Harran, although he fights 'the interests' along with his father, is more up-to-date; he takes to bribing and suborning as the way of the world.

The most appealing character in the novel, and the only one who is developed novelistically, so that we understand the inner strains of the man and can carefully watch the changes that take place in him, is another rancher named Annixter. He is a brilliant, irritable man with chronic indigestion who eats prunes all day and is reading *David Copperfield* throughout *The Octopus*. He is a maverick, a cynic, and has a raw, distrustful contempt for human beings. He is a strong woman-hater but is finally brought out of his misanthropy by his love for Hilma Tree, a kind of Eternal Woman or Goddess of the Wheat who works in Annixter's dairy. Through his love for her he is newly made a member of the human race, before being killed in an encounter with the marshal and the railroad agents. The story of Annixter and Hilma Tree departs from the canons of Naturalism—according to which any character involved in life must degenerate in a straight line of descent and defeat. A tragic note is struck in his humanization and subsequent death, and his life is implied to be a kind of triumph, rather than just another bleak and meaningless episode in the spectacle of human fate, which is the usual impression Norris leaves about the meaning of individual lives.

Among the villains of the piece there is Genslinger, the venal editor of the local paper; he is in the pay of the ubiquitous railroad, and he blackmails and then doublecrosses Magnus Derrick. The star villain, however, is S. Behrman, a caricature of the capitalist. He seems obviously to be a Jew, although this is never said to be so. He is the local banker and general agent of the railroad and finally becomes the owner of Magnus Derrick's ten-thousand-acre ranch. He meets a spectacular end when he is found buried alive by the wheat in the hold of a ship.

Among the other minor characters there is Dyke, the well-meaning train engineer and now small-time farmer who is hounded and ruined by S. Behrman. There is Caraher, the Irish saloonkeeper, an anarchist of bomb-throwing tendencies, and the only character in the book who has any meaningful political ideas at all, with the exception of the archaic Calhoun conservatism of Magnus Derrick.

Then there is Vanamee, a character on whom the author seems to bank rather heavily as a representative of the mysterious and occult branches of experience. A kind of Ishmael, a wandering shepherd and range rider, Vanamee is a mystic who resembles, as Norris keeps saying, 'the younger Hebrew prophets.' Vanamee's life has been blighted by the fate of Angelé Varian, a girl he had been in love with but who had been raped and had died. He had discovered that by pressing his hands to his temples and concentrating he can turn people into automata and call them to him, which he frequently does. Vanamee spends his agonized nights trying to call back the spirit of Angelé. He finally finds peace of mind in the Christian-pagan message that may be derived from the book—namely that death, injustice, and suffering are redeemed and recompensed in the eternal rebirth of Life, symbolized by the cycle of the wheat.

But much the most portentous character in *The Octopus* is Presley, who is in an odd way one side of Norris himself and who acts fitfully as the book's center of intelligence. Presley is rather abstractly conceived as a poet and as an intellectual. In keeping with the clichés of lowbrow literature, which *The Octopus* is, he is presented as *the* poet, *the* intellectual. It seems clear that in the figure of Presley, Norris is

shriving himself of one aspect of his own personality—for he too was a poet and intellectual or might have been had he not escaped the early influence of his education in France and at Harvard.

Trained in an eastern university, Presley has come West to write a great poem on the romance of the frontier 'where,' as he says, 'a new race, a new people—hardy, brave, passionate—were building an empire; where the tumultuous life ran like fire from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn again, primitive, brutal, honest, and without fear.' Presley, as we see, has the makings of an epic poet of the West. Yet there is an inner uncertainty in the man, which grows worse as he stays on in California and watches the struggle between railroad and rancher. Searching for the 'true Romance,' as he calls it, he finds only the sordid machinations of the railroad. Believing himself to belong with 'the People' he nevertheless tends to find them rather repulsive as individuals. And so we find Presley saying to himself 'the romance, the real romance, is here somewhere. I'll get hold of it yet.'

Presley seems finally on the verge of a great poetic vision, however, when he exclaims to Vanamee: 'The great poem of the West. It is that which I want to write. Oh, to put it all into hexameters; strike the great iron note; sing the vast terrible song; the song of the People; the forerunners of empire!' 'Vanamee,' Norris adds, 'understood him perfectly'—which seems to prove that Vanamee is a man of supreme intelligence. Presley finally begins to write his projected epic, 'Song of the West.' Vanamee finds it great, but Mrs. Derrick, who reads 'the little toy magazines, full of the flaccid banalities of the "Minor Poets"' says that it 'is not literature'—to which Presley replies 'between his teeth' that he thanks God it is not. The epic does not work out however, and in the end Presley becomes a famous writer only because of a 'Socialistic poem' he has written called 'The Toilers.' But Presley is destined to discover that literature is unsatisfactory; he abandons his writing and becomes an anarchist, declaring to the saloon keeper Caraher, 'By God, I too, I'm a Red!' He then throws a bomb at S. Behrman, but, like a true intellectual, he misses.

Norris thus makes out of Presley a prototype of a whole series of 'intellectuals' and 'poets' who are imagined in modern liberal idealism to have given up literature for political action or for a closer contact with reality, because of their sense of social injustice and their perception of the impotence of literature to affect the reality into which they try to hurl themselves. Presley seems, however, to be operating in a vacuum; for he never has any real involvement with or knowledge of either literature or politics. Perhaps we may call Presley a subintellectual, as his friend Vanamee is a submystic. This is nothing against them—the only point being that Norris takes each of them for the genuine article.

Although Vanamee finds a religious significance in the life cycle of the wheat, Norris himself derives a different lesson and the book concludes with a declaration of the Naturalist creed: 'Men—motes in the sunshine—perished, were shot down in the very noon of life... In the isolated group of human insects, misery, death, and anguish spun like a wheel of fire. *But the WHEAT remained...* that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless... The larger view always and through all shams...discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.'

It is possible to suppose momentarily that Norris is presenting something like Henry Adams's symbolic Virgin and Dynamo. The Wheat, that is, might be the benignant nourishing force which in the end overcomes the inhuman and destructive force symbolized by the railroad. But in Norris's mind there is no differentiation of forces; there is only Force, and although *The Octopus* seems to be a liberal diatribe against capitalist reaction, the railroad and every injustice it brings with it, down to the last foreclosure on the most miserable property, are finally said to be as exempt from moral evaluation as the wheat itself. Both are irresistible manifestations of the 'world-force.' This irrationalism comes into play, however, only when Norris is trying to make ultimate formulations or when he breaks over into his particular kind of impassioned poetic insight (the same may be said of other Naturalistic writers, particularly Norris's fellow Californians Jack London and Robinson Jeffers)."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 193-98

“Henry James criticized *War and Peace* for its looseness and bagginess; one wonders what he might have said about *The Octopus*. Sprawling and huge, crowded with characters, seething with events luridly outlined against the panoramic backdrop of an enormous Western valley, Norris’s most ambitious work extravagantly displays all the formal weaknesses to which James felt the epic novel was dangerously susceptible. Measured by any architectonic standard, *The Octopus* is a literary chaos. What gives the novel coherence, what focuses its terrific energies, is that for all its swirl and sweep the book is fundamentally a story of three young men. Through them, Norris’s epic is bound together.

The three young men have only casual connections with one another. They are not related by family ties, as are the three brothers Karamazov; they do not remember a common loss, as do Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras; in personality, they are miles apart—Annixter, with his explosive temper and nervous stomach, his ferocious energy and his curious fastidiousness, is as different from the neurasthenic poet Presley as he is from the exalted, God-defying Vanamee. Nevertheless, they share certain extremely significant resemblances. All three are college graduates, widely read, conscious of their intelligence, what Europeans would call intellectuals—although Annixter would be the first to fling down the book he was reading and deny the charge. Above all, they are lonely, disaffiliated men. Vanamee’s terrible self-exile in the desert makes his case the most dramatic, but Presley and Annixter both are acutely aware of what it is like to feel cut off from society.... Each is seeking, in the teeth of uncertainty and self-doubt, for a way out of his isolation.... The principal characters often times represent unresolved aspects of the author’s personality. Certainly this is true of Norris and the three young men of *The Octopus*.”

Kenneth S. Lynn, ed.
The Octopus
(Houghton 1958) v-vi

“In *The Octopus* Norris attempted an epic portrayal of the operation of economic determinism, such as Zola had carried out so triumphantly in *Germinal*. Norris’ story, however, fails to embody a consistent determinism. The reason for the failure is that his epic is laid on the frontier, and his ranchers, who begin the story as free agents possessed of more than the usual amount of force and self-sufficiency, engage in a heroic conflict with the forces of evil represented by the railroad. The evil of the railroad is personified by the figure of S. Behrman, whose villainous deeds are prompted by an evil within him which is not explained as the product of determining economic pressure.

The uncertainty of Norris’ philosophical position is brought out by the inconsistency of his economic viewpoint. At one moment the railroad is evil, at another the apathy of the voting public is to blame, at another the evils of competition are justified by the ultimate fact that the wheat is somehow grown and distributed, and at still another the wheat is presented as a force in itself which mystically *wills* to be grown and eaten.... The climax of the novel, a pitched battle between farmers and railroad men, was founded on a historic incident known as the Mussel Slough affair. A love affair is woven into the main plot. In spite of many vivid descriptions, its thoughtful presentation of social and economic problems was a landmark in the development of the American novel.

The story is continued in *The Pit*, Norris’ weakest serious novel; here his renunciation of a Naturalistic technique in favor of popular sentimental romance is nearly complete. The novel was written for money, in all probability, and was the author’s greatest popular success.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“By the turn of the century the device [the image of the machine in the garden] was becoming a cliché of American writing. In *The Octopus* (1901), Frank Norris used it to provide a dramatic, premonitory climax for the opening chapter. Presley, a poet, is walking at sunset in the rich San Joaquin Valley. It is a lovely, mild evening. Everything is very still. He is in a revelry. ‘All about, the feeling of absolute peace and quiet and security and untroubled happiness and content seemed descended from the stars like a benediction. The beauty of his poem, its idyll, came to him like a caress.... But suddenly there was an interruption.’ By now it is dark, and the train, ‘its enormous eye, Cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance,’ comes thundering down the track and smashes into a herd of sheep....

Sick with horror, Presley turns away. 'The sweetness was gone from the evening, the sense of peace...stricken from the landscape.' Walking on, he hears the whistle of the engine, faint and prolonged, reverberating across the sweep of land. He again sees the machine in his imagination, a 'terror of steel and steam,' hurtling across the horizon; but now he sees it as 'the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley...; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.'

There is no point in piling up examples. The omnipresence of the device is significant chiefly because it relates the special conditions of life in America with that tendency of mind to which Richard Chase directed attention: a habit of defining reality as a contradiction between radically opposed forces."

Leo Marx
The Machine in the Garden
(Oxford 1964) 343-45

"In the preliminary sketch Norris made for Presley there are traits he would hardly have assigned to himself—irrationality, for example. That Presley is swayed by the anarchist Saloon-keeper, Caraher, to avenge his friends by throwing a futile bomb into the home of the railroad's agent, S. Behrman, and then regretting it, as well as his intemperate 'red' speech at the memorial service, are evidence enough that Norris stuck to his preconception. The poet, though impulsive, seems an educable, sensitive spirit, exposed to violent conflict and partisan through friendship and sensitivity, whose 'education' forms a major strand in the story. Norris made him the author of a poem called 'The Toilers,' very like 'The Man with the Hoe' possibly in deliberate defiance of Huntington, while allowing the magnate of the novel to overwhelm him. An open, unprepared mind is never the equal of a ready, closed one, and to think of Presley confounding Shelgrim is to indulge in absurdity. Huntington made Norris reconsider his story, while Shelgrim only temporarily confounds Presley. Shelgrim's presence, dress, and details of his office are so exactly those of Huntington's appearance and mode of work that the stunning effect of trying to challenge him is probably the purest verisimilitude. But Presley recovers...

But Presley's thought is not the author's until it is qualified by the experience of the 'shepherd-prophet' Vanamee. Visiting for the last time the site of the epic struggle, Presley views the sleeping valley, its wheat all harvested, from the range above, and comes to the conclusion that men are nothing, 'mere ephemeredes,' and that 'FORCE' is everything. Shortly after this, however, he joins his friend Vanamee, whom he has seen below. The shepherd has had both a devastating and restorative experience. The lovely Angelé whom he adored had been raped and had died in childbirth. Returning ever to the spot of their trysts and her ravishment, Vanamee, unable to avenge himself upon the never-revealed rapist, by concentration of the will has called Angelé back—or rather, her perfect semblance in her daughter, who becomes his bride. Out of his personal experience of grief and restitution Vanamee counsels Presley and Presley accepts his counsel: 'You will find, if your view be large enough, that it is *not* evil, but good, that in the end remains.'

Norris' faith, expressed through a mystic who has an unusual, not to say extraordinary experience, is not supported by the main action of the novel, unless we count the poetic justice visited upon S. Behrman as an adequate resolution for the tragedy. However despicable, S. Behrman is not the railroad, and none of its magnates is reached by the events. They were too far above the battle. S. Behrman is the best surrogate Norris could devise, and Behrman's destruction by the wheat itself as a force is highly deserved. But the Greeks never visited the wrath of the gods solely on surrogates. Nor can we accept the punishment of Behrman as an earnest of further justice to come. The railroad magnates will be bypassed, as indeed in life they were....

Thinking the ranchers guiltless in his naivete, he had discovered them to be speculators and corrupt. In the carefully developed story of Magnus Derrick he works out a punishment in excess of the crime, with an inevitability that is thoroughly satisfying. But the more enormous crime of the railroad owners, while adequately indicated, remains punished only symbolically through S. Behrman's fate... We know that *The Octopus*, followed by *The Pit*, in each of which evil came comfortably off, were parts of a trilogy to be climaxed by *The Wolf*, in which American wheat was to relieve a famine in Europe. Even in *The Octopus*

the very wheat that smothers the consciousness of S. Behrman is intended to relieve the famished in India and is provided by the largesse of the mulcters of the ranchers. In the larger view, recommended by Vanamee, the wheat is a divine force predestined to accomplish good. The theme, reinforced by Norris' careful avoidance of revenge, suggests the romantic assurance of Victor Hugo....

Most of Norris' difficulties arose from the fact that he was an American and a Californian, therefore essentially optimistic, a believer in progress under the mild supervision of God. As an artist, however, he had been fascinated by the methods of the French naturalists, particularly those of Zola. Disillusioned by the successive failures of French republicanism and contemptuous of their middle class, the French Naturalists were pessimistic determinists, interested in depicting the degeneracy of man. Where no deeply felt issues involving his countrymen were concerned, Norris could perfectly imitate them, as he did in *McTeague*. Had he been content with a French conclusion he would have produced the American equivalent of *La Terre* or *Fecondite*, and easily a better book than either, for he readily achieves a sense of the fecund earth and the fecund woman, borrowed from these books, and his characterizations are infinitely better than Zola's. Magnus Derrick, Harran, Hooven, and Annixter live. But he would have been false to himself and his America. After all, Californians conceded, the Big Four *did* complete the railroad and confer a prodigious future on California. They could not have done it without boodling and plundering, for no one and no combination of persons in California was wealthy enough to do it."

Oscar Cargill
Afterward, *The Octopus*
(New American Library/Signet 1964) 466-68

"In writing *The Octopus*, Norris seemed little interested in the railroad's specific abuses, which reformers were already attacking. He was never concerned with radicalism, and unlike Garland, stood outside the Populist movement. He had no taste for politics; and though he recognized clearly and attacked specifically the railroad's oppression, he was more interested in its development in the economic and social change that was overtaking the country's old agrarian way of life.

Determined now to take the largest possible view of the struggle for life, he used the railroad and its setting to illustrate impersonal forces that so deeply interested him. He used specific personalities and events to illustrate general ideas.... The Southern Pacific Railroad had long dominated most of the western states through which it passed, and most specifically California.... Its agents in Norris' view reflected its greed and oppressive power, caricatured in S. Behrman, railroad agent and chief human obstacle to the wheat farmers.... Behrman was the human villain of the plot. He was imperturbable, sinister yet somehow as impersonal as the economic forces he represented.

Norris cast the railroad's opposition in an equally large mold. The men opposed to the railroad because its rates were high, and because it would not sell them their land at reasonable prices, were hardly embattled farmers. Their leader, the aloof, dignified Magnus Derrick, in whom flowed a vein of ruthless expediency that proved his downfall, farmed vast estates. In many ways they were as greedy as their opponents. 'They had no love for the land...' If the railroad was corrupt, so were the farmers who bought a railroad commission, bitter only when it turned against them to do the railroad's bidding. They had more animal frenzy than the forces Behrman symbolized, and between the two Norris saw little to choose....

Norris developed his story in a panoramic manner, using the earth and its life-giving wheat to show the indifferent natural processes that controlled man's actions. In magnificent sweep, he describes the plowing, harvesting, and storing of the wheat in a series of famous scenes that gave the grain a life of its own.... *The Octopus* was verbose and often sentimental, but it was captivating in its vitality and color.... In its sweep, *The Octopus* seemed merely a series of great set pieces, like an old-fashioned opera.... a moving attack on economic oppression. If Naturalism implied disinterest in its subject, *The Octopus* was not Naturalistic. The reader never doubted that his interests lay against the railroad.... Shelgrim's explanation was a classic statement of laissez-faire economics. Presley left Shelgrim's office disturbed. He had never seen the struggle, so personal to him, from so great a height. Shelgrim's argument seemed valid: the railroad was but an agent of a vast unseen force; the railroad manipulated men and goods, and the force manipulated the railroad. The system was invincible, blind, inevitable.

Norris passed without comment to the novel's end, leaving the impression that this was also his view. But he was perhaps more subtle than he knew, for the moralist shadowed the determinist in this famous scene. If Shelgrim could defeat these blind forces and save a drunken clerk's family, why could he not also intervene to save the farmers or the public from extortion and oppression? Men were not in fact at the railroad's mercy, for they built it. It was a human machine, run by men, who grew their wheat for it and for other men. Shelgrim's talk was simple rationalization for his and others' sins of omission and commission in their business policies. Because of its sprawling form and confused philosophy, *The Octopus* remains one of the most complex modern American novels. Though it was not a pamphlet aimed at contemporary evils, neither was it entirely Naturalistic. It was pessimistic in doubting the scope of man's effectiveness, but it preached action and was not passive or negative. Norris' confused Naturalism was never more real, for he behaved as if good and evil were supernatural qualities. In fact, they are man-made and not absolute in the world.... The poet Presley captured the essence of meaning behind the false talk by erupting with the true reformer's zeal in a classic attack on the laissez-faire doctrine...

The Octopus ranked with *McTeague* as Norris' best work, but its faults could not be ignored. It was overly long, it preached, it bore all the irritating marks of Norris' habitual repetitiousness. Its plot was not fully developed, its continuity was sporadic, and some of its characters were mere pasteboard mouthpieces for the author's preaching. But it remains a deeply moving work, and its achievements far outweigh these detriments of style which are more irritating than damaging. Its central purpose was to show man in nature, to depict some of the struggles of life in a manner believable to all men, and in this it did not fail. *The Octopus* made Norris an important American figure... Though many reviewers quarreled with the book's message and condemned its stylistic faults, they praised its gusto and vividness."

H. Wayne Morgan

American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 134-40

"His panoramic California novel, *The Octopus* (1901), in which he aimed at what he called 'the big, epic, dramatic thing'—it is centered in the conflict between wheat ranchers and the railroad oligarchy—may well be in a publicity sense what Professor Robert Spiller has called it, 'the most ambitious novel of its generation,' but it is also very nearly the most preposterous. Norris's hectoring style can rarely deliver the simplest, tritest observation without repeating it three times over and in the process blurring it beyond credibility. 'He was dizzied, stunned, stupefied.... Terrible, formless shapes, vague figures, gigantic, monstrous, distorted, whirled at a gallop.' So, too, a 'sense of melancholy' is something 'lugubrious, lamentable, infinitely sad.' When a certain charismatic name is dropped into a tense debate, it is 'abrupt, grave, somber, big with suggestion, pregnant with huge associations.' The grossest effects of this kind are produced when the book's mystical Earth-theme is brought forward... It is as if Cole Porter had written novels. 'Veritably' is the giveaway. The word is a favorite with Norris—'It was no longer a supper. It was a veritable barbecue,' or, 'Around Caraher's was a veritable throng'—a precise admission of his own helpless sense of incurable fuzziness.... Of *The Octopus* something may be said for a few relatively efficient passages of California scene-painting and for set pieces like the ambush of the ranchers or the death of the mortgage-taker, S. Behrman, under an avalanche of wheat in the hold of a grain ship; something even for the large melodramatic design of the book as a whole."

Warner Berthoff

The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(The Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 224-25

"Although epic similitude is directly stressed more frequently in *The Pit*, in conception and execution *The Octopus* is obviously Norris's chief attempt at the Great Heroic Novel. Indeed, the *raisonneur* of the book, Presley, is himself searching for an epic theme. In one sense, the subject of the novel is the way the epic can be brought into being. Presley is a writer preparing, at the conclusion of the novel, to write the epic he has lived; the novel is in a sense hung upon his growing insight into the nature of an American epic, as he has lived through it. During the book, he rejects most of the genteel notions of the epic.

A graduate of 'an Eastern college,' he stays at Magnus Derrick's ranch in California in hopes of finding the great subject for his poem; for he 'was determined that his poem should be of the West, that world's frontier of Romance.' But Presley has entered an action quite devoid of the sort of romance he was seeking;

for it was one that Norris modeled after the well-known Mussel Slough affair—in which an actual conflict between ranchers and the Southern Pacific Railroad over freight rates and land prices ended in a bloody battle in the San Joaquin Valley. Presley at first finds this conflict irritating and distracting, for ‘in the picture of that huge romantic West that he saw in his imagination, these dissensions...[were] material, sordid, deadly commonplace.’ As Norris sums up Presley’s problem, but also, of course, his opportunity, ‘he searched for the True Romance, and, in the end, found grain rates and unjust tariffs.’ Presley was forced to learn to redefine the epic for modern times.

Eventually, he forgets his unwritten ‘Song of the West,’ along with the galloping romanticism it implies, by reinterpreting the chivalric encounter. He now understands the conflict between Magnus Derrick and the Octopus—the railroad—‘that great monster, iron-hearted, relentless, infinitely powerful.’ Always, the Octopus ‘had issued triumphant from the fight; always S. Behrman, the Corporation’s Champion, remained upon the scene as victor.’ Here it is obvious that Norris’s diction is designed to evoke epic battles or chivalric jousts. Much later, envisioning his role anew, Presley would even be able to declare himself ‘the champion of the People.’ Cedarquist, the manufacturer, had suggested that Presley’s epic should deal with the way the farmer and manufacturer are crushed by the Trust. Blindly angered by the social and economic tyranny of the railroad, Presley abandons his hope for an epic and begins to read Bakunin, Malthus, and Henry George. Thus equipped, and newly inspired, he writes a poem—not a ‘Song of the West,’ but one called ‘The Toilers,’—obviously recalling Markham’s ‘Man with a Hoe’ in its character and in the circumstances of its publication. Now preaching an epic of involvement, he insists that he had not been able to write before, since ‘his convictions had not been aroused.’

But, in keeping with Norris’s argument in ‘The Novel With a “Purpose”,’ such convictions interfere with his art. Indeed, Presley soon loses the calm perspective necessary for art and plunges even more deeply into emotional involvement. After the bloody climax, declaring himself ‘a Red,’ he tries to assassinate Behrman, the railroad’s agent, by throwing a bomb through his window. He was to learn the weakness of his position and his art. Even Shelgrim, the railroad president (modeled after Collis P. Huntington), tells Presley that since his poem is inferior to the picture that inspired it, it is superfluous. Only at last, in the concluding passage---does Presley achieve the supreme detachment necessary to the artist in his contemplation of the primordial power of the wheat. Neither the railroad nor the farmers are responsible for that power. Even the great Shelgrim is himself helpless before the wheat’s power... Thus, at the conclusion Presley has arrived at the stage of understanding where he might begin the true Epic of the West. But, of course, Norris has already written it for him: *The Octopus* is a demonstration of the epic which Presley had been searching for. The quest for the epic becomes the subject of the epic.

On the one hand the ranchers have failed; on the other, in a melodramatic anticlimax Behrman, representative of the railroad, is buried in the wheat as it pours into a ship’s hold. The principals in the conflict both fall before force. Only Norris, the author who chronicles, understands, and interprets all this, succeeds, for he shapes his understanding into a book. Out of the reality of destruction he builds the artifice of success.”

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 75-77

“In his most important novel, *The Octopus*, he was to give his blessing to progress through the workings of an evolutionary nature.... Presley represents the faith of Jacksonian America. He has fled the cities and factories which have brought complexity even into the Midwest; hoping to find in the last frontier of the Pacific coast a final outpost, an oasis of virgin land, where this faith can be restored. He wants the inspiration of Jefferson’s republic with its promise of timeless harmony, wants to recapture its faith in a nature which is serene in its completeness, to find inspiration for his poem in a dream that Norris claims never was and never can be. Presley is presented as a romantic who is persuaded that his fantasy expressed the reality of nature....

Presley has taken up residence on a wheat ranch in a vast fertile valley of California in order to achieve organic harmony with nature. But he cannot write. His farmer friends are not living in harmony with the good earth; even here on the last frontier, eastern complexity has disturbed the spontaneous equilibrium of

man and land. Into this last vestige of the American Garden, there has crept a serpent, an octopus, the railroad. The disharmony of artificial, man-made culture, is corrupting the West. For Presley, there can be no American poem in the midst of disharmony; the promise of America has been that of progress away from the corrupt complexity of Europe. And now America has proved to be without uniqueness; the New World was no different from the Old...

All was lost for Presley unless this small band of farmers, the last American free men, began a second American revolution which would destroy the octopus and lift the tyranny of human institutions from the land... Presley had achieved a vision of doom through technological progress which paralleled that of Mark Twain. But he still remained true to his Jacksonian principles, to a belief in progress away from complexity to simplicity. Human institutions were artificial; they had no intrinsic strength. Farmers, men of the soil, were so strengthened by nature that even this small band of embattled men might begin to turn the tide and destroy the last urban-industrial frontier which had spread from Europe...

Magnus Derrick seemed to Presley like one of the patriot leaders who inspired their neighbors in that spring of 1775 to take a stand against British tyranny...who had his roots in the Jeffersonian republic... Presley witnesses the total destruction of his dream. But hope springs eternal and now he comes to believe that Magnus Derrick and his fellow-farmers were not crushed by the Octopus, the juggernaut of nineteenth-century technology. It was nature, the West itself which has defeated them. Surely here was no love of nature, no real desire for harmony. How was Derrick truly different from Behrman?...

Norris wanted to reassure his readers that if nature was not static and harmonious, it was nonetheless benevolent and redemptive. He wanted them to have faith that a living, dynamic nature was making evolutionary progress toward an ultimate good and that this process, while it might appear superficially dreadful and cruel, was necessary to man's salvation.

This is the authentic nature that Presley discovers when he abandons his eighteenth-century concept that was sterile in its deathlike and rigid permanence. He has begun to find a new theme for his poem about the West, a West which symbolized a vibrant, vital growing nature.... The West was not people, fallible and corrupt; it was nature, strong and fertile. It was only in the seasons of the earth itself that there was significant drama. All human actions, all history was meaningless. Presley is prepared to believe Shelgrim, president of the railroad, when he tells him that there is no octopus, that no human was responsible for the suffering of the farmers; the railroad is only a necessary adjunct of nature, necessary to distribute the fruits of her loins...

Presley was ready, at last, to write his poem of the West. He would tell Americans to surrender their pride of independence and perfection and throw themselves on the mercy of nature, to be humble and wait for nature to make them better. The ranchers, under the leadership of Magnus Derrick, had struggled to control the wheat for their own profit, and they were defeated. Behrman had conspired to use the railroad for personal profit, and the wheat killed him. To achieve salvation, men must turn away from culture, their artificial creations, must come naked and unashamed to nature and follow wherever it leads. Only then might the promise of total possibility for an American Adam be fulfilled."

David W. Noble
The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden
The Central Myth in the American Novel since 1830
(Grosset & Dunlap 1968) 109-15

Michael Hollister (2015)