

# The Politics of Time in Frank Norris's Criticism and Fiction

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What questions must we ask about the subject now that have not been asked before?" I queried last December. The reply: "I don't know. (laughter) . . . That's for the next generation."<sup>1</sup>

## RÉSUMÉ

*Dans une de ses "lettres hebdomadaires" écrites au tournant de siècle, Frank Norris définit le naturalisme comme se situant à mi-chemin entre le réalisme et le romantisme; si le réalisme recherche l'exactitude et que le romantisme désire la "vérité," le naturalisme souhaite trouver ce difficile équilibre entre la représentation exacte et la vérité romantique. Développement littéraire le plus "juste," selon Norris, cet équilibre n'efface pas la distinction entre la vie et la littérature; il soutient le rôle du romancier qui est de négocier la distance entre l'expression politique et l'expression littéraire. Cet essai a pour but de montrer comment Norris assimile son rôle à la mission sociale de la littérature, qui est de se placer du côté des "forts" en se battant pour "les faibles." Pour réaliser ce projet, le romancier doit examiner "la vie" et faire partie du contexte social tout en prenant ses distances vis-à-vis du discours socio-économique prévalent.*

*La définition du naturalisme que propose Norris, et qui s'articule autour de la négociation de cette distance, soulève une question – celle de critiquer la rhétorique du pouvoir tout en restant dans sa portée discursive – qui continue d'être actuelle. Ceci est particulièrement évident dans *The Epic of the Wheat*, où Norris reprend ses discours contemporains sur le capitalisme et l'impérialisme en questionnant la justice sociale de leurs buts. À travers une lecture minutieuse de *The Octopus* et *The Pit*, nous avancerons que la compréhension du naturalisme qui est celle de Norris offre de l'importance pour les débats critiques contemporains ayant trait aux nouvelles directions du naturalisme littéraire américain.*

In a recent interview about his contribution to the status of naturalism in American literary history, Donald Pizer humorously passes the torch to the next generation of scholars who face the challenge of finding new directions in the expanding corpus of American literary naturalism. From the turn of the twentieth century to the present, the shape of this corpus has seen a profound transformation due to the developing critical interest in the genre. Earlier views of American naturalism as an aesthetically lesser relative of realist fiction have given way to studies of naturalism as a movement with distinct literary value, and historicist readings that examine it within discourses of race, gender, and class.<sup>2</sup> This critical history – indicative of a broader transition from formally and aesthetically oriented approaches to historicist accounts – has fleshed out the thematic complexity and rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Brennan, "Literary Naturalism as a Humanism: Donald Pizer on Definitions of Naturalism," *Studies in American Naturalism* 5.1 (2010): 19.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this critical history, see Eric Carl Link, "Defining American Literary Naturalism," *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, ed. Keith Newlin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011) 71-91.

plasticity of American naturalism. For most scholars, naturalism develops in continuous exchange with other literary currents and genres, such as realism, regionalism, and documentary nonfiction.<sup>3</sup>

On one hand, such exchange allows for the dynamic reshaping of the American naturalist corpus. On the other hand, it intensifies the difficulty of coming up with a concrete yet all-encompassing definition for American naturalism. In fact, this remains a matter of contention among critics, who waver between the earlier emphasis on post-Enlightenment intellectual developments and the more recent, historicist focus on socioeconomic contexts.<sup>4</sup> Christophe Den Tandt describes this split as a shift from a "classical" definition of naturalism to "postmodernist" readings that "reject the reflectionist concept of realistic mimesis" and draw attention to incomplete strategies of representation.<sup>5</sup> Den Tandt urges scholars toward a "postclassical definition" of naturalism that does justice to metadiscursive features of a text while keeping track of naturalism's scientific grounding and its attempt at "sociological mapping."<sup>6</sup>

To do so, I argue, we must return to naturalist texts that theorize the tension between the purported objectivity of realist representation and a self-reflexive awareness of incomplete representational strategies. The primary expression of this tension can be found in Frank Norris's critical writings, which define naturalism as the thematic, formal, and stylistic negotiation between the historical accuracy of realism and the transhistorical truth of romance.<sup>7</sup> Using a temporal register, Norris develops a theory of naturalism that requires the author's management of the seemingly contradictory immediate representation of the present and the ability to look toward the future. Norris illustrates

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Keith Newlin's "Introduction: The Naturalistic Imagination and the Aesthetics of Excess," where he draws attention to naturalism's "receptivity to adaptation" and incorporation of narrative strategies from realism, documentation, and melodrama (*Oxford Handbook* 5).

<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of defining a set of formal and aesthetic criteria for American literary naturalism results from the longstanding view of naturalism as a flawed appropriation of a deterministic philosophy and a realist aesthetic. Donald Pizer's work has been important in foregrounding a naturalist aesthetic that focuses on the ethical affirmation of human life and the critique of social conditions; see his seminal essay "Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition," *Bucknell Review* (1965): 1-18, and the revised version "Late Nineteenth-Century American Literary Naturalism: A Re-Introduction," *American Literary Realism* 38 (2006): 189-202. In a different vein, Eric Carl Link's *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004) notes the important epistemological distinction among philosophical, scientific, and literary naturalisms. Link suggests that the unifying thread of American literary naturalism is the *thematic* appropriation of post-Enlightenment philosophical and scientific ideas.

<sup>5</sup> Christophe Den Tandt, "Refashioning American Literary Naturalism: Critical Trends at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," *Oxford Handbook* 405. Den Tandt uses the term "postmodernist" to describe an array of "Neo-Marxist, neo-historicist, multiculturalist, or feminist essays of the 1980s and 1990s," as opposed to earlier, "classical" readings of American literary naturalism by Parrington, Walcutt, and Pizer (404). See Vernon Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America 1860-1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930); Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); and Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (New York: Haskell, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Den Tandt 406, 420.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that Norris's understanding of the term "genre" is broad, as it includes literary currents such as realism and naturalism. Although his theory of "genre" is an important part of his oeuvre, it attracts less scholarly attention than his fiction. As Eric Carl Link points out, "[Norris's] essays have been overlooked, dismissed, treated as the self-serving statements of an insecure author, taken as the naïve speculation of a young author, and even, on rare occasions, taken seriously" ("Defining American Literary Naturalism" 79). In fact, few critics have fully developed the critical, aesthetic, and formal implications of Norris's theory with regard to continuing scholarly debates; Donald Pizer's comprehensive study of Norris's criticism remains the exception (*The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964]). Pizer develops the implications of Norris's "sophisticated primitivism" – a systematized aesthetic that contradicts Norris's belief in the spontaneity of authentic experience – for twentieth-century American literature, but does not extend his argument to further critical debates.

this management in *The Epic of the Wheat*, where a series of characters arbitrate the temporal limit between historical actuality and transhistorical “truth” within the discourses of market capitalism and financial speculation.

Norris’s work foregrounds the close affinity between naturalism as theory (the aesthetic management of the impetus for realist representation and the inexorable draw of romance) and naturalism as practice (the translation of this management in the discursive contexts of economy and politics). While this affinity is often missing from aesthetic or formalist readings of Norris’s œuvre, it is overemphasized in historicist approaches that end up collapsing the boundaries between Norris’s work and his contemporary cultural practices.<sup>8</sup> To favor either approach, however, is to misread Norris’s theory of naturalism; for Norris, the political import of naturalism is an inevitable result of the aesthetic negotiation between the historical actuality of realism and the transhistorical scope of romance. As he fleshes out the temporal agility of naturalism – the common ground between aesthetics and politics – Norris calls for a rapprochement between aesthetically and historically informed critical practices. And in this vein, I suggest, we must seek new directions in naturalism studies.

### **Between Accuracy and Truth: The Development of a Naturalist Aesthetic in Norris’s Critical Writings**

Norris’s critical writings span many years, starting with his reporter days at the San Francisco *Wave* in 1896 and reaching full momentum with freelance work for various newspapers and magazines in 1901-1902.<sup>9</sup> Most of his writings pivot on the distinction between “life” and “literature” that many scholars have read as either problematic or untenable.<sup>10</sup> Yet a closer look at Norris’s definitions of what he refers to as “genres” reveals that not only was he aware of this problematic distinction but he also turned it into the ground for a temporal negotiation that would mediate the “accuracy” of realism against the “truth” of romance. This negotiation gives rise to a correspondence between the aesthetic and the political dimensions of literature, and sustains Norris’s increasing emphasis on naturalism as the most just of what he terms “literary genres.”

In his “Weekly Letter” for the *Chicago American Literary Review* in August of 1901, Norris introduces the distinction between life and literature by posing this question: if an event is taken from actual life, is it necessarily true when told as fiction? To justify his denial of an affirmative

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<sup>8</sup> Earlier scholarship includes Donald Pizer’s influential approach to Norris’s naturalism in the context of turn-of-the-century intellectual developments (*The Novels of Frank Norris*); Don Graham’s insightful study of the aesthetic aspects in Norris’s œuvre (*The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978]); and William Dillingham’s thematic exploration of Norris’s fiction (*Frank Norris: Instinct and Art* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969]). For representative historicist readings, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Howard Horwitz, “To Find the Value of X’: *The Pit* as a Renunciation of Romance,” *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 215-37.

<sup>9</sup> Pizer, *Literary Criticism* xviii-xix.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Mary Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000). Lawlor stresses Norris’s failed attempt at drawing ontological distinctions between “life” and “literature.” In her important study *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), Barbara Hochman argues that Norris’s distinction between “life” and “literature” suggests multiple oppositions (for example, feeling and knowledge, energy and form, child and man) that comprise his vision of life and art. See also Pizer’s *Literary Criticism* that places Norris’s views in the context of anti-intellectual philosophies and the polarity between content and form.

response, Norris resorts to the “wide difference” between “Accuracy” and “Truth.”<sup>11</sup> Even if an accurate representation of reality should entail “the most scrupulous adherence to fact,” it would not be true because it would be akin to the “meticulous science of the phonograph” or “the incontestable precision of the photograph.”<sup>12</sup> Norris is cautious of the studious adherence to facts, because it fosters a thematically limited aesthetic, as expressed in the realist theories of William Dean Howells and Hamlin Garland. The Howellsian aesthetic calls for a “fidelity to experience” that contributes to an honest representation of the commonplace, while Garland’s theory champions a verism that expresses locally distinct types.<sup>13</sup> Though Norris is sympathetic to the aspired fidelity of realist representation, he remains wary of its stultifying results; his oft-quoted “Plea for Romantic Fiction” describes Howellsian realism as limited to “the surface of things,” while “The True Reward of the Novelist” defines realism as a “masquerade; the novel of the copyists.”<sup>14</sup> Norris develops elsewhere his view of realist accuracy; it is “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.”<sup>15</sup> Norris’s choice of vocabulary is telling: it grounds the accuracy of realism in a vision of calculability that undermines the goal of “truth.”

According to Norris, the expression of “truth” is better suited to the aesthetic qualities and the thematic purview of romance.<sup>16</sup> His 1901 “Plea for Romantic Fiction” is an inspired manifesto that takes great pains to distinguish the tenor of romance from the sentimentality of popular and historical romances. Norris’s definition of romance draws a contrast to the limited scope of realism: rather than the surface treatment of reality, romance reveals “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man.”<sup>17</sup> This oft-quoted excerpt rests on dramatic overtones to illustrate the difficulty of reaching (and representing) the full depth of “truth.” As Norris remarks in his “Weekly Letter,” “[i]t is not difficult to be accurate, but it is monstrously difficult to be True; at best the romanticists can only aim at it, while on the other hand, mere accuracy as an easily obtainable result is for that reason less worthy.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Frank Norris’s Weekly Letter,” *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: The Library of America, 1986) 1139.

<sup>12</sup> Norris, “Weekly Letter,” *Novels and Essays* 1139.

<sup>13</sup> William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891) 15; Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art, Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894).

<sup>14</sup> Frank Norris, “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” *Novels and Essays* 1166; “The True Reward of the Novelist,” *Novels and Essays* 1149.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Norris, “A Problem in Fiction: Truth Versus Accuracy,” *Literary Criticism* 58.

<sup>16</sup> Norris uses the terms “romanticism” and “romance” almost interchangeably to illustrate his preference for a literature of broader scope and deeper sentiment than realism. In fact, we can see a gradual maturation in Norris’s understanding of romance. The nearly sublime tenor of his earlier description of Zola’s literature as romantic – “extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror” (“Zola as a Romantic Writer,” *Novels and Essays* 1106) – softens into his later evaluation of romanticism as the expression of “the essential vital, elemental, all-important, true life within the spirit” (“True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1149). For Eric Carl Link, Norris’s views on romanticism are fully consistent with nineteenth-century aesthetic theories and particularly antebellum theories of romance (*Vast and Terrible* 21-67). For more on the American tradition of “romance,” see Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957); and Perry Miller, *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>17</sup> Norris, “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” *Novels and Essays* 1168-69.

<sup>18</sup> Norris, “Weekly Letter,” *Novels and Essays* 1141.

To solve this predicament, Norris opts for naturalism, the “midway” between realism and romance, which balances between the easily obtainable accuracy and the monstrously difficult “truth.” The possibility of this balance makes naturalism the most “adequate,” “satisfactory,” and “just” literary development.<sup>19</sup> For Norris, the literary and aesthetic justice of naturalism lies in its transgeneric qualities. As many critics have remarked, this is the kernel of his view of naturalism. For instance, Eric Carl Link describes Norris’s naturalism as a “postrealistic romance that strives for accuracy in detail, while at the same time pursuing hidden truths buried beneath surface reality.”<sup>20</sup> Other scholars, such as Donald Pizer, suggest that this process involves a dialectic resolution; as Pizer points out, “Norris placed realism, romanticism, and naturalism in a dialectic, in which realism and romanticism were opposing forces, and naturalism was transcending synthesis.”<sup>21</sup> Even if Link’s argument stresses the romantic origin of this synthesis while Pizer’s dwells on its resolution, both approaches are symptomatic of critical trends that read Norris’s naturalism either in terms of its origins or in view of its ends. In fact, Pizer’s use of dialectic presupposes a transcending synthesis that sublates the conflicting genres and literary currents. Norris’s account, however, draws the reader’s attention to the *process* rather than the resolution of the conflict: his later criticism places an increasing emphasis on the difficulty of managing the tension between realism and romance, as well as resolving their conflict into a balanced, harmonious aesthetic.

The challenge of resolving the conflict stems from the necessity of balancing the temporal qualities of each genre. In “The True Reward of the Novelist,” Norris notes that realism and romance defy the specificity of temporal context: “[t]hey are here today. They existed in the time of Job. They will continue to exist to the end of time, not so much in things as in the point of view of the people who see things.”<sup>22</sup> This transhistorical view results in a uniform perspective, which obscures the author’s access to “immediate life.”<sup>23</sup> To secure access and know where to look for the future, the author needs to leave the past and embrace the present. Yet it is no easy task to achieve immediacy; “[t]he 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.”<sup>24</sup> In this case, the novelist’s task involves mediating the present with the eyes of the future, in order to represent his contemporary reality while looking beyond it.

The temporal aspect of representation reveals a correspondence between two dimensions of justice in the naturalist genre: the aesthetic mediation between accuracy and truth and the political negotiation between fiction and power. The correspondence turns into a homology, as both aspects of naturalist justice rest on the “flippant paradox” that “[l]ife itself is not necessarily True – not necessarily True to life.”<sup>25</sup> This asymmetry sustains the *raison d’être* of literary expression: there is always a “truth” to be sought, a problem to be solved, and an *x* to be found. The role of the novelist is to solve the equation in a way that does not erase the asymmetry between literature and life but keeps it as a sense of political urgency.<sup>26</sup> For Norris, such urgency involves a committed authorship

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<sup>19</sup> Norris, “Weekly Letter,” *Novels and Essays* 1142.

<sup>20</sup> Link, *Vast and Terrible* 49.

<sup>21</sup> Pizer, *Literary Criticism* 69.

<sup>22</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150.

<sup>23</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150.

<sup>24</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150.

<sup>25</sup> Norris, “Weekly Letter,” *Novels and Essays* 1140.

<sup>26</sup> See Norris’s 1901 essay “Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need” where he berates his fellow writers: “Have you found the value of *x* in your equation? Have you solved the parenthesis of your problem? Have you even done the problem at all?” (*Novels and Essays* 1153). Norris stresses that an “American school of fiction” can only be achieved if “each and all of us should address ourselves with all diligence to finding the value of *x* in our problems” (1152).

in the service of the people. Along with religion and education, fiction must illustrate that “power is abused” and “that the strong grind the faces of the weak.”<sup>27</sup> Yet this can only happen through a rapprochement between art and power; as Norris suggests, the “rightful place” of fiction is “with the leaders” but for the sake of a “well-defined, well-seen, courageously sought-for purpose.”<sup>28</sup> Though he sketches a treacherous affair between fiction and power, Norris purports to maintain a qualifying distance that he expresses once again in temporal terms: the “novelist of the future” must be rooted in the present insofar as he should dive into “the heart of a new life, on the borders of a new time.”<sup>29</sup> Norris describes this challenge in *The Epic of the Wheat*, which he composed and published concurrently with his later criticism.<sup>30</sup>

### **The American Fiction of the Future: Temporal Negotiations and the Challenge of Authorship in *The Octopus* and *The Pit***

In *The Octopus: A Story of California*, the first part of his projected trilogy, Norris presents us with the character of Presley, whose romantic sensibility fails to catch up with contemporary reality. Presley aspires to write an epic for the West not only as a tribute to the past but also as a hymn for the future; for him, the West encapsulates a passing phase of history – “the ranch, the range, and the mine”<sup>31</sup> – as well as the “frontier of Romance, where a new race, a new people [...] were building an empire” (9). Much as he welcomes the future in terms of the new empire, Presley cannot synchronize his antiquated romantic sensibility with contemporary reality. To make reality compatible with romance, Presley tries to understand the economic conflict between the ranchers and the railroad that unfolds around him. Despite his growing awareness that the gritty realism of economics is to be part of his romantic saga, Presley fails to translate it into the “[r]ealism of motives and emotions” that Norris identifies as the modern romance.<sup>32</sup>

Presley’s myopic reaction is emblematic of the challenge that confronts turn-of-the-century American authors, who need to add their contemporary socioeconomic context to a romanticized view of reality that shatters against the new realism of “grain rates and unjust freight tariffs” (13). As Eric Sundquist has argued, the age of realism in America is “the age of the *romance of money* – money not in any simple sense but in the complex alterations of human value that it brings into being by its own capacities for reproduction.”<sup>33</sup> As the meaning of romance changes to accommodate

<sup>27</sup> Frank Norris, “The Novel with a ‘Purpose,’” *Novels and Essays* 1200.

<sup>28</sup> Norris, “Novel with a ‘Purpose,’” *Novels and Essays* 1200.

<sup>29</sup> Norris, “Novelists of the Future,” *Novels and Essays* 1156.

<sup>30</sup> The first part of Norris’s *The Epic of the Wheat*, *The Octopus*, reached the bookstores in April 1901, and sold 33,000 copies in its first trade edition. By that time, Norris had already started researching the second volume of his epic, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*, which was completed in June 1902 and published posthumously in 1903. Norris’s sudden death from a ruptured appendix in October 1902 did not allow him to see the unprecedented commercial success of his last novel (*The Pit* sold 95,000 copies in its first trade edition) or complete his projected trilogy. For more, see Joseph R. McElrath and Jesse S. Crisler, *Frank Norris: A Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (New York: Penguin, 1986) 10. All subsequent citations are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Norris, “True Reward” 1148. Many scholars have warned against reading Presley as a spokesman for Norris’s ideas. See, for instance, Pizer (*Novels*). Other critics have emphasized Presley’s inability to grow both as a writer and as an individual. For more, see Barbara Hochman; and Clare Eby, “*The Octopus*: Big Business as Art,” *American Literary Realism* 26.3 (1994): 33-51.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Sundquist, “Introduction: The Country of the Blue,” *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 19.

the economic criteria for human value, the role of authorship becomes economically defined; its products are sought, edited, and marketed by publishers who cater to a mass audience and aim at making profit.<sup>34</sup> While such changes contribute to the increasing professionalization of authorship, they revise the nineteenth-century romantic ideal of authorial sovereignty into an economically inflected bargaining with the publishing industry and the mass market.<sup>35</sup> Charles Johanningsmeier points out that “instead of a ‘hidden hand’ hegemonically controlling the publishing industry, multiple groups of interested parties – whose memberships were constantly changing – negotiated over the publication terms of each naturalist text.”<sup>36</sup>

Norris is not oblivious to these structural changes, which require that every author become a careful manager of his work. Even though he admits that “fiction-writing” yields insignificant royalties and cannot be a “money-making profession,” Norris affirms the changes that are taking place in the process of publication; the novelist “must wait for a new idea, and the novel writer must then jockey and manoeuvre for publication.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the aspiring novelist must wrestle with the uncertainty of time, which now takes the form of the risky, unpredictable marketplace. Just as Presley is confronted with the uncertainty of the railroad as a metaphor for the unsettling effect of new capitalist monopolies on his antiquated ideas of romance, Norris’s “novelist of the future” is faced with the challenge of updating his long-held practices with new market demands. Rather than shirk the challenge, however, the aspiring novelist can manage the risk; he can write short stories, serialize his work, publish it abroad, offer lectures, write editorials, or offer special articles in literary periodicals.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the new conditions of the market require a higher degree of flexibility that Norris illustrates in his own assessment of the marketplace: he takes note of existing possibilities for authors, evaluates their shortcomings, and demonstrates the most feasible ways to respond to market demands. Interestingly enough, his diction rings with the echoes of the market: the “exploitation” of work transforms the product of authorial labor into a “commodity,” which might offer the possibility of “the author getting his fair slice every time.”<sup>39</sup> Yet despite his concession to economic conditions, Norris refuses to forgo the question of justice, and ventures to ask whether the fairness of a market deal secures a just reward for the novelist.

The answer recalls his earlier dismissal of the superficial veneer of accuracy for the unfathomable depth of truth. Norris draws a differentiating line between the fairness of a business deal and the

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<sup>34</sup> In his excellent study *Writing Realism: Howells, James and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), Daniel Borus gives a thorough account of the structural changes in authorship as a result of its increasing dependence on the marketplace. See especially 37-57; and 102-29. See also William Dean Howells’s essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” in *Literature and Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902) 1-35. In addition, Norris’s piece, “The ‘Volunteer Manuscript’: Plain Talk to the Ambitious Amateur,” published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on December 11, 1901, offers advice to new novelists who might be intimidated to send unsolicited work to publishers (Pizer, *Literary Criticism* 141-46).

<sup>35</sup> For more on the professionalization of American authorship, see Borus 65-77; Ellery Sedgwick, “Magazines and the Profession of Authorship in the United States, 1840-1900,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 94.3 (2000): 399-425; and Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 40-62, 63-91. More recently, critics have nuanced the problematic of professionalization. For instance, Paul Retrie draws on Howells’s contributions to *Editor’s Study*, in order to reconsider the ethical underpinnings of the realist aesthetic (*Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnut, and Cather* [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005]). In *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), Leon Jackson uses concepts from economic anthropology to explain the disembedding of authorial economies from their constitutive social relations in nineteenth-century America.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Johanningsmeier, “Naturalist Authors and the American Literary Marketplace,” *Oxford Handbook* 359.

<sup>37</sup> Frank Norris, “Fiction Writing as Business,” *Novels and Essays* 1171.

<sup>38</sup> Norris, “Fiction Writing as Business,” *Novels and Essays* 1174.

<sup>39</sup> Norris, “Fiction Writing as Business,” *Novels and Essays* 1174.

justice of fiction writing: the difference lies in the author's willingness to tell the truth with sincerity. In this case, Norris's call for sincerity is defined by a temporally inverse move: while the novelist's immersion in his immediate reality required a temporal update of romantic truths, the just management of an economically defined authorship necessitates a resistance to new fashions. The novelist must deny the temporal vagaries of the marketplace – where “hungry presses go clashing after another writer, the ‘new man’ and the new fashion of the hour”<sup>40</sup> – and defy the sirens of the market. At this point, Norris seems to deny the historical immediacy of realism (embodied in the swift turnaround of the market), in favor of a more stable, permanent, transhistorical view of literary justice, which comes close to his previously described vision of romantic “truth.” Such a view might appear to contradict Norris's definition of naturalism as the negotiable aesthetic balance between realism and romance. These views, however, are far from incompatible; Norris's recurrent emphasis on temporality brings into focus the precariousness of the balancing process and the resulting need for sincerity, the “nameless sixth sense or sensibility” that lets the novelist see what is elemental and vital in “people and actualities.”<sup>41</sup>

Norris's idea of sincerity offers a strong link between the dimensions of temporality and justice in his theory of what he terms “genre,” because it illustrates the limited fungibility between art and power. Although sincerity shields the novelist against the volatility of the market and the sirens of wealth, it also brings him closer to the politics of business. Norris describes sincerity as “the thing that would make of you a good *man* as well as a good novelist, the thing that differentiates the mere business man from the financier (for it is possessed of the financier and poet alike – so only they be big enough).”<sup>42</sup> Even though Norris draws explicit connections among literature, business, and finance, he safeguards the necessary, albeit narrow, distance between authorship and economics that he considers important for the relation between art and power. To safeguard this distance, Norris resorts to his theory of genre; if romance is more suitable to the range of human emotions and the depth of our experience, it acts as a safety valve against pressing economic demands, which are expressed in the temporal immediacy of the realist aesthetic. In this sense, the function of romance is twofold: it is the aesthetic counterbalance to realism as well as the political shield against the author's unreflective engagement with his contemporary capitalist practices.

Yet to be able to use the romantic shield, the novelist must bring life and art closer *and* keep the distance that allows him to see the responsibility he has not think only of himself or for himself. Even though the necessary immersion in life might obfuscate the author's vision, it enables what Norris describes as the “right sort” of self.<sup>43</sup> This sort of self is “right,” not only because it fosters the novelist's sacrifice for the weak, but also because it remains aware of the risk that necessitates political management: the artist is in peril of becoming so engrossed in the canvas that he forgets to look beyond its boundaries, yet when he does, he might become so keen on the larger picture that he disregards the present moment. This is why both the poet and the financier need to be “big enough” to negotiate the limit between the present (realism) and the transhistorical (romance). In fact, Norris suggests the complexity of this negotiation not so much in Presley, the self-professed poet of *The Octopus*, but in Lyman, the expedient manager who lacks sincerity in politics and business.

Unlike his father, Magnus, Lyman rejects the uncompromising integrity of old school politics and adopts the style of a “good business man,” who needs to be “clear-headed” and “far-sighted”

<sup>40</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1151.

<sup>41</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150.

<sup>42</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150; emphasis in original.

<sup>43</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1151.

in order to deliberate his goals over a series of negotiations (290). He explains to the ranchers that “[g]reat things grow slowly, benefits to be permanent must accrue gradually” (439); the small cut he has accomplished for them is a “great advance” (440) to the extent that it lays a plan of action that yields results in due time. As the ranchers retort with the need to see immediate benefits, Lyman repeats that the issue will be solved “*in time*,” since “so radical a measure as that cannot be put through in a turn of the hand” (443; emphasis in original). The altercation between Lyman and the ranchers illustrates the importance of the effective assessment of time: whereas the ranchers (including Lyman’s father) aspire to instant results, Lyman waits for the right moment to reap the benefits of a long course of future-oriented action. The latter’s ability to assess, measure, and work with time allows him to become governor of California.

Lyman’s process of decision-making is akin to the practice of temporal management that Norris requires of the modern novelist, which consists, as I have argued, in sustaining a perspective that is historically current *and* temporally distanced. However, even if Lyman is perceptive enough to acknowledge this perspective, he remains oblivious to the responsibility it entails, namely, to realize that he cannot think only of himself or for himself. In fact, Lyman becomes so engrossed in political gains that he loses sight of what Norris describes as “man” and “his heart.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, Lyman’s practice leads to a self-aggrandizing pursuit that resembles the methods of the mere businessman. In the end, Lyman remains a businessman because he cannot realize the complexity of the “right” self that Norris explores further in the character of Curtis Jadwin, the financier of *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*, the second book of his unfinished trilogy.

Jadwin’s initially conservative business temperament – similar to Lyman’s measured managerial care – gradually yields to a brash attraction for speculation that necessitates the negotiation of limits. Jadwin admits that speculation puts every limit to the test: “[w]ith half a show, I would get in a little more and a little more, till by and by I’d try to throw a big thing, and instead, the big thing would throw me.”<sup>45</sup> Speculative activity requires diligent planning and careful maneuvering insofar as you always “risk more than you can afford to lose” (243). Though Jadwin seems cognizant of this risk and confident in his ability to manage it, he gradually loses track of the limit that would allow him to cover his losses. What is more, he increasingly misses the temporal mark that enables his success, that is, the awareness of the right moment to strike. Norris emphasizes that a speculator must be quick in his advances yet cautious in his openings, which results from an effective assessment of time: the speculator should secure himself against contingencies by predicting the exact moment the market should fail. If his prediction falls through, he should act quickly, reconfiguring the limit of how much he will buy or sell, all the while maintaining a balance between taking a risk and covering his losses. Hence, the key to successful speculation lies in risking a move forward while patiently holding back; and the negotiation of this risk is a matter of time – predicting the right moment to strike and seizing it when it comes. Only thus can a speculator manage the shock that ensues from the asymmetric nature of speculation, described as a gun “that kicks further than it shoots” (215).

When the high prices that Jadwin has instigated cause farmers to grow more wheat than he can buy, his empire – Norris describes Jadwin as the true “Napoleon of LaSalle Street” (318) – falls to pieces, as it can no longer sustain the asymmetry that is needed to feed its power: the ability to risk more than what one might lose. While Norris attributes Jadwin’s collapse to the latter’s violation of the natural forces of supply and demand, he gives voice to a moralistic condemnation

<sup>44</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1150.

<sup>45</sup> Frank Norris, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (New York: Kennikat, 1967) 80. Subsequent references to *The Pit* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

of speculation through Cressler, the character whose failure in speculation results in suicide. Cressler explains:

The only way to do so that neither the American farmer nor the European peasant suffers, is to keep wheat at an average, legitimate value. The moment you inflate or depress that, somebody suffers right away. And that is just what these gamblers are doing all the time, booming it up or booming it down. (122)

In Cressler's view (which voices Norris's contemporary cultural discomfort about speculation), speculative activity is immoral, because it substitutes the question of social justice for the fun of a profitable game that comes close to gambling.

According to Howard Horwitz, Norris's discomfort about speculation suggests a social unease about the difficulty of distinguishing "real" from "fictitious" dealings: the former honor the intrinsic value of an object that makes a speculator deliver the goods he has promised, while the latter aim at the profit that comes from market fluctuations.<sup>46</sup> In the latter case, it is even harder to distinguish between gambling and speculation, because the ethical grounds that furnish the difference are also subject to economic fluctuations that undermine intrinsic value. For Horwitz, Norris's defense is to naturalize the forces of supply and demand into a balanced exchange that secures an objective idea of value by annulling the role of the speculator and the market. Horwitz eventually reads this defense as a compromise of Norris's theory of fiction, because it sacrifices the speculative economics of romance – the need to find the value of  $x$  – for the realistic equivalence of a balanced exchange.<sup>47</sup>

Yet to read *The Pit* as the substitution of Norris's authorial equation for a balanced economic exchange is to misread Norris's idea of balance in the context of an inherently asymmetric (and thus continually negotiable) equation. Norris grounds his understanding of balance in the asymmetry between life and literature, which turns naturalism into a *process* of negotiation rather than a strictly equivalent exchange between realism and romance. In fact, Norris's theory of naturalism does not valorize either part of the exchange, but points to the importance of sustaining their interplay insofar as naturalism can negotiate between accuracy and "truth."

*The Pit* illustrates the political stakes of this negotiation in Norris's own rhetorical maneuvers, which pivot on the substitution of the author's sincerity for the speculator's common sense. Indeed, the definition of sincerity in Norris's criticism comes very close to the description of the speculator's "common sense" in *The Pit* (187). Just like the successful speculator has an "inexplicable instinct" or "intangible, vague premonition" (81) – which does not allow him to be overly cautious by warning him *when* to make the opening of a risk – the good novelist is endowed with a "nameless sixth sense or sensibility" that shows him when to penetrate reality to find romance.<sup>48</sup> The analogy between the speculator and the author runs throughout *The Pit*, especially when the former seems to surrender his agency to the market so that he can know and manage its demands. As in a scene of romantic seduction, the speculator cajoles the market to feel "how [it] moved, how it strengthened, how it weakened. He knew *just when* to nurse it, to humour it, to let it settle, and *when* to crowd it, *when* to hustle it, *when* it would start rough handling" (93; emphases added). Thus, the speculator must assess time just as the author must negotiate between ephemeral economic profits and the longstanding responsibility of telling the truth with sincerity. Much as the author

<sup>46</sup> Horwitz, "'To Find the Value of X'" 220. I am citing Horwitz's argument as representative of New Historicist accounts of American literary naturalism.

<sup>47</sup> Horwitz, "'To Find the Value of X'" 223.

<sup>48</sup> Norris, "True Reward," *Novels and Essays* 1151.

and the speculator share the need for temporal management, the latter has more difficulty negotiating between the ephemerality of economic ambition and the longstanding reward of forfeiting selfish pursuits.

Norris illustrates this difficulty in Jadwin's relation to his wife, Laura. As Jadwin's involvement with the market becomes more intense, his relationship with Laura becomes more estranged. Norris describes the distance between the couple as a temporal asymmetry that gives a different pace to their lives. Where Jadwin's frantic activity takes up "every minute of his time" and makes his body rhythm pulsate dynamically to the gong of the pit (268), Laura's time seems to drag into an empty continuum: "[h]er evenings were long, her time hung with insupportable heaviness upon her hands" (271). Far from seeing himself as a companion, Jadwin defines himself as an emperor, whose greatness depends on knowing the right moment to make his advance; he wonders, "[is] it the moment for a chief?" (247). He thus turns the necessary assessment of time from a shield against the risks of speculation into an offensive weapon for founding his empire, where "no Czar, no satrap, no Caesar ever wielded power more resistless" (330). In a crucial encounter with one of his major opponents, Jadwin had "timed Crookes [his opponent] to a split second," as he had foreseen "the exact moment when he [Crookes] would make his supreme effort" (311).<sup>49</sup>

Jadwin's hubris results in the collapse of his "empire," which leads to a reunion with his wife through an aesthetically poignant, albeit narratively rushed, affirmation of their love. At the end of the novel, Laura wonders whether her previous lack of interest in Jadwin's affairs has contributed to her husband's estrangement, and substitutes her "cruel cult of self" for a revised understanding of selfhood: "[s]he had been accustomed to tell herself that there were two Lauras. Now suddenly, behold, she seemed to recognize a third – a third that rose above and forgot the other two, that in some beautiful, mysterious way was identity ignoring self" (388).<sup>50</sup> Jadwin reciprocates her gesture, willing to rekindle their love. In one of the final, haunting scenes of *The Pit*, Jadwin and Laura sit close to each other, "silent and trembling, ridden with unnamed fears, groping in the darkness," teetering between the remnants of the past and the uncertainty of the future. They whisper to each other, "[i]t's dark, dark. Something happened ... I don't remember" (395). When Jadwin admits that he cannot remember, Laura retorts that he *should* not remember. For her, the ability to forget marks the beginning of a new life, in which their relation will be based on love as "capitulation and not a triumph," and victories will be won only by surrendering (397). Yet this victory can hardly be won by erasing the traces of the past. As Laura and Jadwin are leaving Chicago to begin a new life in the West, the Board of Trade remains a site of mourning that casts a shadow over their newly minted selves.

The ominous view of the Board of Trade – the final note of the novel – suggests Norris's mistrust of a selfhood that aspires to break away from the pressing reality of economic concerns. While Laura and Jadwin profess their mutual self-surrender, they claim a different sense of self-sovereignty that draws on the denial of material possessions and related economic questions. After Jadwin's collapse, Laura wonders what servants, money, and things are worth, and annuls their

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<sup>49</sup> In his insightful discussion of *The Pit* ("Fighting Against the Earth Itself": Sadism, Epistemophilia, and the Nature of Market Capitalism in Frank Norris's *The Pit*," *Studies in American Naturalism* 7.2 [2012]: 151-75), Adam Wood interprets Jadwin's desire for knowledge as evidence of the speculator's sadistic impulse for mastery. Though I agree with the connection between Jadwin's impulse for mastery and his desire for knowledge, I emphasize an aspect of knowledge that Wood does not fully address, that is, its temporal specificity.

<sup>50</sup> For more on the double identities of naturalism, see Michaels who reads selfhood in the context of market capitalism. See also Clare Eby, "Domesticating Naturalism: The Example of *The Pit*," *Studies in American Fiction* 22.2 (1994): 149-68; and David Zimmerman, "Frank Norris, Market Panic, and the Mesmeric Sublime," *American Literature* 75.1 (2003): 61-90.

calculable value before the incalculable measure of love. As Laura appears to renounce the contemporary reality of economics for an uncomplicated view of incalculable, romantic love, Norris seems to forfeit the historical actuality of realism for the uncomplicated prospect of his characters' new beginning in the West – Presley's new frontier of romance in *The Octopus*. Much as the ending of *The Pit* tends toward this account, however, it does not leave the gritty reality of economics unchallenged.

In free indirect discourse, Laura wonders why the elemental forces of supply and demand cannot let the huge nourisher of nations reach the people without suffering and misery (403). As she searches “troubled and disturbed for an answer” (403), Laura cannot find any other sign than the sight of the Board of Trade. Dark and impenetrable, the risky site of speculation fosters a question that suggests not only the uncertainty of a fluctuating market – a *real* contingency that belongs to the historical immediacy of capitalism – but also the difficulty of negotiating the limited fungibility between the historical context of economics and the transhistorical scope of larger, elemental forces. Laura's view of supply and demand as elemental (rather than historical) forces echoes Jadwin's insistence that he was annihilated by larger, uncontrollable circumstances, which Laura internalizes and repeats to herself. Whereas Laura submits to these circumstances and Jadwin denies his role in managing their force, Norris dwells on the question they engender both for the reader and the novelist. The last paragraphs of his novel – somber in tone and dramatic in diction – foreground the undecipherable sight of the Board of Trade as a symbol of the tension between the transhistorical nature of elemental forces and the immediate context of turn-of-the-century capitalist economy.

This tension is also at the root of the novelist's management of his aesthetic and rhetorical concerns. As I have previously remarked, the good man (and novelist) must be able to work for the ephemeral monetary rewards of the “hungry presses” on the literary marketplace while pursuing a truth that extends beyond the temporal constraints of one's contemporary context.<sup>51</sup> According to Norris, this is a temporal challenge that turns naturalism into the negotiation between the contemporary scope of realism and the more distant perspective of romance. This challenge entails a rhetorical pose that keeps the negotiation at play: insofar as naturalism asks the novelist to remain economically savvy, socially informed, and politically engaged, it encourages him to know, confront, and express his contemporary socioeconomic discourses. Meanwhile, if the novelist's work is to challenge these discourses by expressing truths that are vital, elemental, and inherently transhistorical, he must continue to navigate the temporal asymmetry between realism and romance in a way that strives for balance but defies equivalence.

In this sense, the vantage point of the author's perspective becomes an “insider's” view that ensues from the novelist's immersion in reality and his awareness of the need to negotiate its discursive structures. As a result, the purported objectivity of naturalist authorship becomes a self-reflexive management that is neither a detached reflection (as earlier formalist scholars would suggest) nor an unaware absorption in reality (as later historicist critics would maintain). Rather, it is the unresolved and continuous negotiation of the limited degree of fungibility among rhetoric, fiction, and power. In this negotiation, I have argued, we find the seeds of the “postclassical” definition of naturalism sought by contemporary scholars: Norris proposes a discursively oriented aesthetic of representation that can never be complete to the extent that it should continue to manage the exposure to various socioeconomic contexts and different literary genres.

Finally, Norris describes this management as a process, which develops as it interprets, and questions while it adapts. This is truly the case for American literary naturalism today, as it continues to interact with other literary currents and genres and raise new questions in response to current

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<sup>51</sup> Norris, “True Reward,” *Novels and Essays* 1151.

critical developments and pressing socioeconomic concerns.<sup>52</sup> To sustain this inquiry – and open new directions for naturalism scholars – we need to revisit the aesthetic and political grounds of the genre. And Norris’s œuvre is a place to start.

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<sup>52</sup> Scholarship on American literary naturalism continues to develop in new and exciting directions. For example, see recent studies of American naturalism and early cinema; Katherine Fusco, *Silent Film and U.S. Naturalist Literature: Time, Narrative, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Donna Campbell, *Bitter Tastes: Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women’s Writing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).