Introduction by Kevin Starr

Benjamin Franklin Norris Junior (1870-1902), or Frank Norris as he preferred to call himself, had a short but astonishingly productive life. Dying at age thirty two of a ruptured appendix and kidney failure, Norris left a legacy of literary achievement that might have cast credit on a writer twice his age. This young San Franciscan found his calling early in life, stuck to it determinedly, and before his thirtieth birthday -- in 1899 with the publication of McTeague -- managed dramatically to enlarge (so William Dean Howells at once pointed out) the scope and possibilities of American literature. Norris ranks with Stephen Crane, whom he regarded with respect touched by envy and ambivalence, and Theodore Dreiser, whose novel Sister Carrie he persuaded Doubleday & McClure to publish, as a young writer trying to bring new depth, honesty and catholicity of content to American fiction, then largely captive to either the restrictions of escapist historical romance or the reticences of a literary realism whose first premise was the genteel tradition. From an international perspective, Frank Norris can be seen in retrospect as responding as best he could -- not consistently as a thinker, but viscerally and imaginatively as an artist -- to that late nineteenth-century unleashing of deterministic insights that told the human race that it was even more of an ape and even much less of an angel than it had once thought itself to be. With total courage and with a force born of sheer talent and a capacity for the direct apprehension of life as enlivened by idea and symbolic event, Frank Norris sought to express through narrative art the mysteries of heredity,

environment and sexuality, the promptings of the unconscious, the conditionings of class and caste. In doing this, in telling such stories as McTeague, which he considered his best work, Frank Norris won for himself the right of having the best of his work, especially his story of Polk Street, San Francisco, to be read and re-read by ensuing generations.

Norris' journey to such significant creativity was, all things considered, rather direct, as if he might have had some foreboding that his time would be brief. Norris' novels, to include McTeague, all appeared in the last four years of his life, between 1898 and 1902; but his writing career began nearly a decade earlier. Paris, Berkeley, Cambridge, New York, Chicago, and above all, San Francisco, nurtured Norris' talent and provided him with subject matter. Norris' short life divides itself easily into five stages: his Chicago and San Francisco boyhood, 1870-1887; student days in Paris, Berkeley, and Cambridge, 1887-1895; the years of journalism and literary apprenticeship, 1895-1898; and four final years of achievement and fame. McTeague was not Frank Norris' first novel. That honor belongs to the posthumously published Vandover and the Brute (1914). Nor was McTeague Norris' first novel to be published. The slighter achievement of Moran of the Lady Letty (1898) appeared first. McTeague was, however, the novel that Frank Norris lived longest with -- for at least five years, possibly more, from inception to publication -- and these were the five years during which Frank Norris found himself as a writer. The writing of McTeague enabled

a talented apprentice to discover his considerable literary powers.

1

Born in Chicago to a wealthy wholesale jeweler and his artistic wife, a former actress, Frank Norris was raised amidst the opulence of the Gilded Age. The Norrises maintained six private horses and a carriage in which they rode on Sundays and holidays, attended by a servant in livery. Both an older and a younger sister died in infancy, and so young Frank lived an an only child until the age of seven when another boy, Lester (dead from diptheria in 1887), was born. Another brother, the novelist Charles Gilman Norris, arrived in 1881. Frank Norris was, then, the oldest son of a hard-driving self-made father who when barely into his teens had begun his business career on the road as a traveling jewelry salesman and clock repairman, and a mother, Gertrude Doggett, a beautiful and bookish Episcopalian of Massachusetts and Virginian ancestry, who had relinquished a promising career as a Shakespearian actress to marry a no-nonsense Presbyterian businessman from Chicago.

The parental polarities of Frank Norris's boyhood and adolescence were characterized by a schematic division between male and female, business and aesthetics, which Henry James, William Dean Howells and others considered at the heart of American culture itself. Mrs. Norris, a former teacher as well as an actress, would read aloud from Scott, Dickens, Browning and Meredith in the evenings, as her husband, exhausted from a day's business, lay on the couch, smoking cigarettes. Empowered by her

husband's income, Gertrude Norris insisted upon luxury, refinement, and culture in the Norris household: the mansion, the carriage and liveried servant, the best private schools for her children (to include a stint at the Bonique's Dancing Academy for young Frank), and in 1878 when Frank Norris was five, a grand tour of the museums and art galleries of Europe, where Gertrude Norris purchased furniture, rugs, paintings for the mansion she and her husband at first intended to build new, before deciding to purchase an already built grand affair on Michigan Avenue at Park Row. From his mother, Frank Norris absorbed a sense of social caste and a bias towards the life of art over business. Gertrude Norris was a ferocious advocate of her son's aesthetic ambitions. She sent him to Paris to study painting, subsidized the publication of his first book, personally accompanied him to Harvard for a fifth collegiate year of literary study.

Norris Senior, on the other hand, however much he enjoyed his wife's reading after a hard day at the office, believed that literature and art were not a man's proper work. He wanted Frank to follow him into the wholesale jewelry business. In his last novel, The Pit, posthumously published in 1903, Frank Norris would return to his boyhood memories of a mismatched man and wife in a Chicago mansion. For the time being, however, he absorbed, as all children must, conflicting parental polarities into his own personality and imagination. In 1892, wearying of struggle with his wife, feeling rejected by a son who showed no interest in a business career, Benjamin Franklin Norris Senior left

his family in San Francisco and returned to Chicago, where he eventually remarried. He also ceased to support his son Frank. When he died in 1900, he left his second family $1 million. He left his first family nothing. Refusing to identify with his father, choosing his mother's way, and being in turn bitterly repudiated by Norris Senior, Frank Norris nurtured within himself a lifelong fascination with dominant male energy -- a hero worship, for instance, of football players, colonial empire builders, ruthless capitalists, of wilfull Anglo-Saxons of every sort -- through which figures he sought to become, imaginatively at least, his father's true son. In imagining and depicting the primally male Dr. McTeague of Polk Street, San Francisco, Frank Norris found the fullest possible imaginative release for his simultaneous fascination and repulsion with brute male force.

Meanwhile, California beckoned. In 1884, Mr. Norris Senior, troubled by the effects of Chicago winters on a bad hip, moved his family to Oakland for a year in the sunshine, before deciding in 1885 to settle permanently in San Francisco in an ornate Italian-style Victorian, with great bay windows to catch the morning sun, at 1822 Sacramento Street near Van Ness Avenue, just two blocks above Polk Street. Thus at age fifteen Frank Norris was introduced to the Pacific Coast metropolis whose ambience, by turns exotic and prosaic, fog-shrouded and sun-drenched, he would capture so brilliantly as a journalist, short story writer, and novelist. Within a short time, the Norris family was established among the social elite of San Francisco. Frank spent a term at the

Belmont Academy down the peninsula, a prep school intended to prepare Bay Area boys for Harvard, but was forced to withdraw after severely breaking his arm playing football. At his father's insistence, he was then enrolled in the more egalitarian Boys' High School, San Francisco, where he lasted but a few weeks before prevailing upon his parents to allow him to enroll in art classes at the San Francisco Art Association.

Only Paris, however, would do for the aspiring young artist; and when in 1887 Mrs. Norris lost her son Lester to diptheria, she was glad of the distraction of packing up her two surviving children and settling with them in an apartment on the Boulevard Haussmann, overlooking the Paris Opera, while her husband remained in San Francisco. Frank Norris enrolled as a student in the Atelier Julien, where he remained after his mother returned with his younger brother Charles to San Francisco in 1888.

The well-supported art student did not pursue a penniless la vie boheme during these three Parisian years; nor did he pursue painting beyond obligatory mornings at the Atelier Julien. HIs real passion was the study of the Middle Ages. He haunted museums, sketching medieval armor and weaponry for a book he planned on the subject. He set up a huge canvas in his apartment and began sketches for a monumental Battle of Crecy, which he never painted. He virtually memorized Froissart's Chronicles and learned enough Old French to read The Song of Roland in the original. The immediate literary result of this medieval

obsession, the narrative poem Yvernelle -- sumptuously published as an 1891 Christmas gift book by J.P. Lippincott, with a subsidy from Mrs. Norris -- obviously does not stand in any direct literary line to McTeague; nor, however, is it or Norris' other medieval pursuits totally beside the point. In his relatively minor way, Frank Norris was joining such Americans as architect H.H. Richardson, historian Henry Adams, and artist John La Farge in discovering the power and directness of medieval art. Frank Norris found a boldness, a oneness with experience, a capacity for swift and direct narration in Froissart and The Song of Roland sadly lacking in the contemporary literature of the genteel. His imagination fired by medieval literature, Frank Norris began to envision for the first time a mode of literature energized by direct observation and primal power.

2

For a wealthy young dilettante, age twenty -- given to Parisian tailoring, sideburns and mustache in the French style -- the University of California at Berkeley, where Norris enrolled as a student of limited status in 1890, having failed to meet entrance requirements in mathematics, at first seemed a dreary provinical place. In his first months at Berkeley, Norris affected the Continental dandy amidst callow Californians: sleeping late, yawning politely at lectures, showing up to required gymnasium classes in black leotards, decorating his edition of Horace's Odes with such exquisite Art Nouveau patterns that the instructor offered to buy the book. Norris soon abandoned this

posture, however, as he became re-Americanized by campus life. Joining the fraternity of Phi Gamma Delta, the Continental dandy, with his boyish enthusiasm for role-playing, soon transformed himself into the paradigm of the banjo-playing, pipe-smoking 1890s fraternity man. Moving into the Phi Gamma Delta house on Dana Street, Norris set about enjoying his college years. He conceived a passion for football, for one thing, watching one California/Stanford Big Game from atop a hired Wells-Fargo stagecoach which he and his fraternity brothers drew up to the sidelines. He served on the Blue and Gold yearbook as an illustrator; wrote for the undergraduate newspaper; served as class historian, class playwright, and class orator; helped to establish Skull and Keys, a thespian society, and acted in its plays; wrote the Junior Day farce and composed a humourous ritual for an annual fraternity dinner of roast pig still celebrated each year as "The Norris" in chapters of Phi Gamma Delta across the United States. Joining his fraternity brothers for cocktails on Kearny Street in San Francisco; bringing a large telescope into a San Francisco theater to train on a chorus line of kicking girls; playing his banjo in his fraternity digs; strolling about the Berkeley campus in knicerbockers and cardigan, a drooping briar pipe clenched between his teeth and followed around by Monk, the fraternity's battle-scarred bulldog -- Frank Norris, like F. Scott Fitzgerald would do a decade and a half later at Princeton, left behind a legend that was its own form of art creation. After his death, Norris' fellow Fijiis (as members of Phi Gamma Delta call themselves) installed a stained

glass window in his honor in their Berkeley chapter house and made "The Norris" an annual national event because Norris, again like F. Scott Fitzgerald, seemed to epitomize in his person a certain charm of collegiate time and place.

The comparison to F. Scott Fitzgerald has other extensions as well; and it is not surprising that Fitzgerald himself later regarded Norris with what Edmund Wilson has termed the shock of recognition that sometimes springs up between kindred American artists. Both writers, collegiate men par excellence, were shaped profoundly in their lifelong attitudes and style by their undergraduate years. Both began their writing careers with college novels: Norris with a Harvard novel, Vandover and the Brute (1914) and Fitzgerald with This Side of Paradise (1920), a Princeton story. Fitzgerald read and admired Norris, feeling that the Californian's bold and direct style helped him to fight a tendency to lushness in his own prose. In The Beautiful and the Damned (1922) Fitzgerald retold Norris' Vandover and the Brute, a story of an upperclass Harvard man who squanders his artistic talent through dissipation: both Norris and Fitzgerald warning themselves in these novels not to allow themselves to become mere playboys. Californian and Minnesotan respectively, both men were very much on guard in the matter of class, always an anxious situation in America. Scions of new money and the West, Norris and Fitzgerald each had a tendency to shore up uncertain upperclass credentials through college and club identifications. In a letter to critic Isaac F. Marcosson, for instance, Norris introduced himself as "graduated

from Harvard with the class of '95" -- which was simply not true and he knew it. The author's note at the end of the first edition of McTeague, moreover, advertizes Norris as "a Harvard man, class of '95" -- a second prefabrication. When it came time to marry, both Norris and Fitzgerald chose debutante types: in Norris' case, Jeannette Black (1878-1952), a Gibson Girl beauty whom Norris met at a sub-debutante party in San Francisco.

Unlike his brother Charles, however, Frank Norris had too much empathy and had made too prfound an identification with the larger life of America, especially California, to become a total snob. A slight suggestion of anti-Semitism, the worst fault of his caste and era, lingers in certain scattered phrases and hovers around the villian of The Octopus (1901); but in general, Frank Norris -- profoundly shaped by the reAmericanization process he had experienced at the University of California at Berkeley -- developed into a handsome and adventurous American gentleman in the style of novelist and foreign correspondent Richard Harding Davis, Gibson Man extraordinary, whom Frank Norris revered as a role model. Five feet eleven inches tall, imperially slim and always well-tailored, his hair already graying by his mid-twenties (and totally gray by thirty), Frank Norris emanated, so William Dean Howells thought when he first met him, a quality of enthusiastic healthfulness, a charm born of high spirits and good breeding. "Virile, vital, and buoyant" was how literary critic Isaac F. Marcosson, one of the first to recognize the merit of McTeague, later remembered Norris, whom he considered a paragon of polished

American Renaissance breeding, at once intellectual and keen with an appetite for action. "He was an ideal club man," recalled a Berkeley classmate; "he had the social gift beyond any man I have known."

Such social gifts might have swamped Frank Norris the writer, except for the fact that throughout his life Norris sustained a fierce dedication to the vocation of writing. So satisfying socially, Berkeley disappointed Norris as a place to learn his chosen craft -- at least in the classroom. His literary enthusiasms met with the raised eyebrows of his English professors. Norris left Berkeley in 1894 without a degree because -- despite special tutors, despite interminable cramming sessions in which he literally memorized formulas -- he could never pass the university's basic mathematics requirement. Norris' inability to think mathematically on even a basic level obviously sprung from a subconscious refusal to prepare himself for a business career, as his father was urging.

But no matter: all universities function best as opportunities for self-education, and at the University of California, Norris, the apprentice writer with one book already to his credit, made excellent use of his time. On a very deep level of his imagination, for instance, he assimilated the lectures on evolution given by Professor Joseph Le Conte, a student of the great Louis Agassiz at Harvard whose courses dealt with the delicate balance between man's evolutionary heritage and ethical behavior: a balance violently upset in the case of McTeague. Of equal

importance to his unfolding career as a writer, Norris devoured French fiction, which he read in the original: Flaubert, De Maupassant, whose work inspired him to write and publish two short stories in his junior year at Berkeley, and Emile Zola, whose novels Norris constantly carried about campus on his person, the yellow covers of paperbound French editions sticking conspicuously out of his jacket pocket in the time-honored manner of the undergraduate literary cult.

Emile Zola (a man destined like Norris to be cut down in 1902 in the full tide of his powers) pointed Norris towards his unfolding vocation: to deal with the drama of contemporary life with a Zola-like amalgam of romantic boldness and observational exactitude. As he would later write in the Wave for 27 June 1896 ("Zola as a Romantic Writer"), Norris believed that Zola was a romantic chronicler of his times, akin in spirit, if not method, to the medieval chroniclers he had read and loved as a young student in Paris. Zola's naturalism, Norris argued, was a question of technique -- scientific observation informed by an encompassing understanding of social and psychological processes. Behind the technique, however, seethed Zola's sense of life as grand and heroic, a stage on which vast historical forces -- to include the all-important forces of heredity and environment -- were at work: not among the nobility and upperclasses, perhaps, as in the case of medieval poems and chronicles or early nineteenth-century romantic fiction, but among the lower classes, where life was yet elemental, capable of sordidness, savagery, tragedy, and heroic action. Zola, moreover, introduced Norris to the powerful,

often grotesque dram of heredity and environment. L'Assommoir (1878), Zola's novel of inherited alcoholism, had a special effect on Norris, becoming in his imagination the prototype of McTeague. The example of Zola also encouraged Norris to look to the contemporary, not the medieval, for a mis en scene adequate to his desire to create something big, terrible, and gripping with power. Upon reading Zola, Norris began to observe more closely the petit bourgeois and workingclass life on Polk Street, just a few blocks east of his home. He noticed the shop girls and the streetcar conductors, the small tradesmen, the faces of those brutalized by unremitant labor and strong drink. In October 1893, during his senior undergraduate year, he noted with special fascination newspaper reports chronicling the brutal murder of a kindergarten janitress by her drink-crazed estranged husband. Like McTeague, the murderer was young, in his early thirties, and like McTeague also, he had harassed his wife for money, brutalizing her when she would not hand over her earnings for him to squander on drink.

Frank Norris left Berkeley in 1894 and headed East for Harvard with something big, albeit vague, seething inside of him: the desire to do a massive San Francisco novel with the sweep and scale of Zola. Harvard would help Norris define his project -- to break it down, in fact, into three separate stories -- but the example of Zola had given birth to the idea of taking the day-to-day life and characters of Polk Street, San Francisco, and making of this a novel in which, as in the case of Zola, "everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a

vague note of terror quivering throughout like the vibration of an ominous and low-pitched diapason."

At Harvard the degree-less postgraduate Norris experienced the very reverse of his Berkeley situation. As an undergraduate fraternity man in a brand new state school, Norris had status -- and distraction. Fair Harvard hardly noticed that he existed, except in the most important way of all, encouraging his work. While Norris' room at Phi Gamma Delta was cluttered with curios, trophies, Parisian pictures, stolen street signs, Gray's Hall 47, Norris' Harvard room, was furnished simply with a bed, a desk, and a chair. Both as a matter of preference and his inability to connect immediately with the more complicated social situation of Harvard, Norris associated mainly with fellow Californians, whom he would entertain at his mother's nearby flat. Enrolled as a special student, Norris took three French literature courses (in which he received B's), George Lyman Kittredge's Shakespeare coure (a C+), and English 22 (B+ at midyear, A for the full course). Norris' A in English 22 suggests what happened: Norris finally found the instructional experience in writing that he had missed at Berkeley, enough to keep him steadily at his desk in Gray's Hall, with time out for meals in Memorial Hall and visits to his mother. Another Californian, incidentally, Gertrude Stein of Oakland, took the Radcliffe version of English 22 and received a C.

Technically, English 22, Sophomore Composition, was not an advanced course; but thanks to the method employed in the course and to the encouragement he received from Professor Lewis E. Gates, Frank Norris made of English 22 an occasion of fruitful

literary apprencticeship. Then thirty four years of age and in the best vigor of his teaching powers, Lewis E. Gates, encouraged by English Department chairman Barrett Wendell to advance the art of teaching composition, believed that the best way to teach writing was to have students write as much as possible. English 22, which Norris took with two hundred and forty seven other students, mostly sophomores, met on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoons, at approximately the same time that Trina Sieppe had her dental appointments with Dr. McTeague, Norris' wry joke. Students were required to write something every day -- a page, a paragraph, even a sentence -- and to submit these daily entries to Gates or one of his course assistants for correction. Every two weeks, a longer composition was due. In the last six weeks of the course, an ambitious piece of writing, due in six weekly installments, was handed in as a form of final examination. In contrast to the pedantic metaphor-counting at Berkeley, Norris later wrote, Gates' method brought students close to the techniques behind much good writing -- observation, constant practice and the demands of deadline.

Professor James D. Hart, director of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, where the Frank Norris papers are now housed, has meticulously tracked down Norris' English 22 submissions. In his study A Novelist in the Making (1970), Hart disproves the contention, first advanced by Charles Gilman Norris in 1914 and fixed for a long while as accepted folklore, that Norris had McTeague in manuscript by the time he reached Harvard, submitting portions of it to his English 22 instructors because he was too lazy to keep up with his assignments; or, in a more complimentary

version of the story, that he wrote the novel in his room at Gray's 47 in the 1894/1895 academic year. Actually, as Hart proves conclusively, Norris arrived at Harvard with an ambitious, albeit unformed, idea about a major novel set in San Francisco. In the course of writing his submissions for English 22, Norris refined and separated his material. On 8 March 1895 Norris turned in a plot outline which showed that he had divided his Polk Street story from his narrative of upperclass bohemia. In the summer of 1895 Norris left Harvard for San Francisco with three works in progress: the trunk-line novel Vandover and the Brute, the separated McTeague, and Blix, a third separation of sub-plot from the Ur-novel Vandover. Norris also left with a profound sense of gratitude to Professor Gates, which he expressed four years later in the dedication of McTeague.

But first -- South Africa. For Frank Norris as well as for an entire generation, the Philadelphia-born novelist, journalist, and foreign correspondent, Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916), epitomized the unambiguous arrival of the adventurous American gentleman on the international scene. Handsome, assured, well-bred, the Gibson Man personified, Davis was forever dashing off from his post on the New York Evening Sun or (later) Harper's Weekly to file colorful dispatches from some remote battlefield or colonial uprising. In between times, he wrote entertaining fiction -- Gallegher and Other Stories (1891) and Soldiers of Fortune (1897), for instance, -- fashioned, in part, from his reportage. Aside from the appeals of class and social distinction, Davis confirmed Norris' ardent belief that only action, life itself and plenty of it, could lead to literature; and so in the fall of 1895 Norris sailed for South Africa

with the intention of trekking up the Dark Continent from Cape Town to Cairo, sending back Richard Harding Davis-like dispatches that would earn him an immediate reputation. He got as far as Johannesburg in the Transvaal, whre he arrived on 15 December 1895. For the next month, Norris, despite his efforts to get into the fighting, played a largely peripheral role of observer as an abortive coup engineered by Cecil Rhodes in an effort to drive the Boers from power in favor of the largely English Uitlanders played itself through to a disastrous conclusion. The Uitlanders siezed Johannesburg all right, and the Boers left. But the armed force led by L.S. Jameson, a friend of Rhodes, which was supposed to dash to Johannesburg from British South Africa never arrived. Outmaneuvered by Boer commandos, the Jameson column surrendered and the coup collapsed.

When it was over, Norris was handed his passport by a Boer police official in the reoccupied city and given twenty four hours to get out of the Transvaal as a penalty for his brief service in an Uitlander company. Norris barely had the strength to drag himself to the police station, so devasted was he by an attack of South African fever that left him barely able to uncap his fountain pen. He sailed for England on the same ship as the temporarily defeated Mr. Cecil Rhodes. He had carried dispatches for the rebels, been shot at by Boer cavalry, and gathered material for seven articles in the San Francisco Chronicle, two in the Wave, and one in Harper's Weekly. These dispatches were excellent: full of color and movement and framatic action. They were not enough to make him as famous as Richard Harding Davis, however, or even to establish a reputation as a journalist. Only one of them was published in

a national journal. The fever he had contracted, moreover, would severely shorten his life.

Returning from England to New York and then to San Francisco, Norris recovered his strength in California at the Big Dipper Mine in the Sierra Nevada above Colfax, at Iowa Hill on the American River, where his fraternity brother and close friend Seymour Waterhouse, whom he would later portray as Annixter in The Octopus, served as superintendent. We find Norris at the Big Dipper in April 1896, dressed smartly in his Uitlander costume as he lolls about in the Sierran sunshine or strolls about the mining site. Sixteen months later he would return here to finish McTeague.

3

Frank Norris joined the Wave as an assistant editor in April 1896 and worked for the magazine for nearly two years. The Wave was uniquely part of a time and a place -- San Francisco in the 1890s -- and when this special mood passed, the review collapsed. Ironically, from the point of view of Norris' later novel The Octopus, a novel that is at least in part anti-railroad, the Wave was founded in 1887 by Southern Pacific press agent Ben Truman as a way of promoting the Southern Pacific-owned Del Monte Hotel in Monterey. Even after its move to San Francisco in 1890, the Wave ("a weekly for those in the swim") continued to battle it out on behalf of Collis P. Huntington and the Southern Pacific against the anti-railroad tirades of William Randolph Hearst in the San Francisco Examiner. Then in the beginnings of a resurgence of literary energy after the collapse of its Literary Frontier in the 1870s, San Francisco supported three ambitious reviews throughout the 1890s:

The Overland Monthly, pushed to national reputation a generation earlier with the short stories of Bret Harte; The Argonaut, an 1877 entry, prickly and satiric like its editor Frank Pixley, former Attorney General of the United States in the Grant Administration; and the Wave, the challenger among the three, brilliantly edited from 1890 to 1900 by the Melbourne-born John O'Hara Cosgrave, whom Norris considered his best mentor and guide after Professor Gates of Harvard.

Himself in his mid-twenties like Norris, Cosgrave gathered the young wits and aspiring writers of the Bay Area around him and bade them cover San Francisco and the allied arts as if the city were the most important place in the world. As long as Cosgrave was there, the magic held. When he left for New York in 1900, the Wave barely survived the year. There was one venerable Wave contributor, the acerbic Ambrose Bierce, who mailed his copy in from his mountain retreat in Sunol across the Bay; but most contributors and all of the staff were in their twenties, destined for fame or obscurity, but all of them feeling for the moment the special bohemian promise of fin de siecle San Francisco. Norris and Frank Gelett Burgess, a Boston-born MIT-trained engineer in love with whimsy and aesthetics, whom Norris first met when Burgess was teaching at Berkeley, served as assistant editors and in many issues supplied the majority of the copy; but contributions came in as well from such young men as Jimmy Hopper, a University of California football hero destined for fortune, if not lasting fame, as a writer of fiction for magazines and the founder of the

bohemian art colony in Carmel; Yone Noguchi, a half-Japanese poet whom Norris later satirized in The Octopus as the perpetrator of unintelligible verse; Will Irwin, an undergraduate at the newly opened Stanford University and later one of the best journalists of his generation; and Jack London, who contributed to the Wave after Norris' departure -- not that it would have made any difference; for there is no record of Norris and London ever coming face to face. Between the two young men ran a deep antipathy based on class -- Norris the wealthy college man, London the self-educated son of the proletariat, ablaze with ambivalence and resentment -- that kept them in totally different circles, despite the fact that their mutual San Franciscos intersected at a number of points.

Norris preferred to pal around with young men of his own class, fellow memebers, many of them, of the Bohemian Club at the corner of Post Street and Grant, in whose sunny bay windows Norris would laze of an idle afternoon, making comments on the comparative merits of passing girls to companions playing cards within. He also belonged to an informally organized Thirteen Club, fraternity men who gathered for football games, followed by riotous suppers at the Poodle Dog. Through his fellow Wave assistant editor Frank Gelett Burgess and Ernest Peixotto, a brilliant artist and writer of a noted Sephardic San Francisco family who had studied art alongside Norris in Paris, he became informally affiliated with Les Jeunes, the Young Ones, a circle of young wits on the town that included Burgess, Peixotto, Bruce Porter, a muralist, landscape designer, and artist in stained glass, who got Norris interested

in mysticism and eventually married William James' daughter, and Willis Polk, an architect who had served his apprenticeship under Daniel Hudson Burnham in Chicago, and along with Norris the most impressively talented of the circle. Frank Norris, to put it briefly, was on the town in 1896 and 1897. Hours must have been stolen for the composition of Vandover and McTeague in his room at 1822 Sacramento; but Norris' social appetites were running at full tide.

Amazingly, for one so busy with debutante parties, football, poker games at the Bohemian Club, dinners at Martinelli's and the Poodle Dog, excursions up and down the cocktail route on Kearny Street -- not to mention the writing of Vandover and McTeague -- Norris also found time in these two years to write a healthy amount of journalism. No complete file of the Wave survived the earthquake and fire that destroyed much of San Francisco in April 1906. Some 120 Wave pieces, nevertheless, have been identified as being written by Norris between 1891 and 1898, with the vast majority of them appearing in the 1896/1897 period. Ever desultory in everything save the writing of ficition, Norris might loaf through one weekly issue of the Wave, then virtually write the next. He signed some pieces, wrote others anonymously, or used the pseudonym Justin Sturgis so as to add diversification to Wave bylines. Norris interviewed actresses and society hostesses, reviewed books, wrote critical essays, did talk-of-the-town commentary and social satire, covered football games, spent New Year's Eve in San Quentin Prison, stood by silently as a convict left San Quentin after thirty

years. Just as he had used earlier Wave material at Harvard, he now recycled Harvard material through the Wave in the time-honored journalistic tradition of making everything count, but also as a means of discovering the final forms and uses of his subject matter. In one of his "Western Types" series, for instance, Norris describes Jonesie, a Polk Street plumber's apprentice who, like McTeague, drinks steam beer and crosses the Bay by ferryboat on Sunday for picnics. Other Polk Street types described in this series include a girl who clerks in a candy store and a streetcar conductor. In "Fantiaisie Printaniere" (6 November 1897), the slum life of McTeague and Trina is described in detail, as if Norris were using the deadlines of journalism to spur on the composition of the novel.

Frank Norris had grown weary of working on the Wave by the spring of 1897, but for a critical year and more magazine journalism had assisted the growth of his talent. Norris learned to observe the comings and goings of San Francisco and to translate what he saw into a succession of cinematic images. Zola had given him a taste for social observation. The Wave put him on deadline as an observer. What he saw, he assimilated and partially used -- and stored in imagination for more important purposes. Journalism helped teach Norris how to "work up" an unfamiliar subject through quick research and how, after assimilating the information, to use recently unknown details -- such as the techniques of crown-and bridge-making gleaned from A Text-book of Operative Dentistry -- with insouciance. Journalism, moreover, confirmed Norris in his disposition to write rapidly, as the manuscript shows he wrote

McTeague, and this in retrospect was a valuable ability in a writer destined to die at thirty two. The penalty for such rapidity was a failure of final polish, of perfection of phrase, and the repetitions that came from haste. The benefit of journalism was that Norris -- as a matter of both theory and practice -- could relate to writings as a process of bringing life, observed or experienced, into words, phrases, sentences as easily and naturally as possible. Turn-of-the-century American journalism, a seedbed of pre-literary energies, nurtured the careers of Norris' fellow naturalists Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, among others, precisely because it forced a confrontation with experience that went beyond the limits of tasteful selection enforced by the genteel. Both literary naturalism and good reporting saw vast forces at work behind the facts of a case -- but only through these facts, precisely observed, densely reported, could the patterns of these forces be properly suggested. Norris' reporter's notebook, which as his brother tells us he was continually pulling out of his inner coat pocket to jot down phrases overheard in conversation or incidents observed on crowded streets, served the purposes of both journalism and literature. Imagination and narrative power, applied to the facts, transformed reportage into art.

Half of Norris' Wave contributions, moreover, were fictional short stories. "The studio sketches of a novelist in the making," Wave editor Gelett Burgess later called them; "a study in the way genius takes to find himself," according to Will Irwin. Inspired by Stevenson, Kipling, Zola and De Maupassant,

Norris' Wave short stories are very much, as Burgess suggests, studio sketches en route to Vandover, McTeague, and the later writing. Many of them are rich in the local atmosphere that helps to make McTeague such a triumph. From the naturalist French writers, Norris had absorbed a conviction that fiction should serve as a diagnostic science, a probing of life and underlife, psychological and social. The French side of Norris' imagination involved a certain grim materialism, a view of life as a thwarted process, devoid of higher meaning, in which men and women, like Trina and McTeague, fall victim to dark forces beyond their comprehension. The writer's job, in this French view of things, was to research the facts and then to chronicle, often through the ironic juxtaposition of events, the destruction of hopes, the smashing of lives.

And yet, all was not strict determinism either. Reviewing Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George's Mother, two grim tales of slum life published as one book in 1896, Norris praised Crane as a phrase-maker but criticized him for taking too clinical a relationship to his characters, for coldly setting in motion a machine of destruction. In the side of his nature that led him to revere Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson, Frank Norris yearned for romance, which for him meant the love relationship, but more than this also: the vision of life as passionate, instinctual, transformed by imagination into something breathless, exotic, and mysterious -- with dashing men and women of action at the center of adventurous events. Such romantic primitivism can be considered retrogressive, adolescent even -- which is true. Frank Norris never

really had time completely to grow up. Had this happened, had he lived to seventy, to 1940, he might have lost that boyish enthusiasm that breathed such vigorous freshness into his writing, even if occasionally at the cost of a totally polished style. "What pleased me most in your review of McTeague," he wrote Isaac F. Marcosson on 14 March 1899, "was the 'disdaining all pretentions to style.' It is precisely what I try most to avoid. I detest 'fine writing', 'rhetoric,' 'elegant English,' -- tommyrot. Who cares for fine style! Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil. We don't want literature, we want life."

4

Before McTeague could be brought to life, however, a crisis was necessary. It involved the cutting of apron strings. At the age of twenty seven, Frank Norris was still living at home, supported by his mother and under her dominance. His meager Wave salary could not have sustained him in such an elegant manner. Living at home could. Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, wanted Frank to conform to the proprieties of upperclass San Francisco life, the Howellsian life of "small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea" which he ridiculed in the Wave as the staple of genteel fiction. He also satirized the trivialities of Society in his Justin Sturgis/Leander dialogues for the Wave, in which momentous questions as to when a woman could be kissed, or should she smoke cigarettes, or could a gentleman wear a sack suit in the evening, were discussed. Norris feared becoming an idle

social fop, a Mamma's Boy in Kenneth Lynn's brutal but somehwat telling phrase, puttering about the San Francisco social scene. He also feared wasting his talent in ephemeral journalism for the Wave and, more darkly, of squandering his energies in more dangerous distractions -- sex, liquor, general dissipation -- that he had perhaps more experience of than either his mother knew, or he cared to admit. The novel he wrote during this time, Vandover and the Brute -- the story of a Harvard-trained upperclass San Francisco artist who debauches himself into lycanthropic madness, howling on his knees at the novel's end like a wolf -- was Norris' melodramatic warning to himself not to go too far down the primrose path.

Enter a woman, seventeen years old and very pretty, Jeannette Black, whom Norris met at a sub-debutante party in the fall of 1896, noting at once her full-figured five feet ten inches, her brown eyes and luxuriant Gibson Girl hair, piled high on her head, her ambience of radiant health. Norris fell in love, not at once, but across a two-year period of a lighthearted flirtation that was transformed into companionship before developing into something even more, all this being charmingly chronicled in the novel Blix. Mrs. Norris resisted. Wasn't Miss Black a little flashy? Wasn't her father born in Ireland? But Norris resisted and by the spring of 1897 the couple was very close.

Out of all this -- dissatisfaction with the wastefulness of journalism and San Francisco social life, his developing relationship with Miss Black, his desire to grow up and to make his own way in the world as a professional writer independent of his mother's

support -- arose the motivation to complete McTeague. Taking a leave of absence from the Wave in October 1897, Norris headed once again to the Big Dipper Mine in the Sierra Nevada, where he had regained his health in 1896 upon returning from South Africa; and there he pushed McTeague to conclusion. Earlier, the novel had bogged down after McTeague's murder of his wife Trina. Norris now brought McTeague up to the Big Dipper for the resolution of the action, just as he had brought himself up there. He even gave himself a cameo appearence in McTeague as "a tall, lean young man, with a thick head of hair suprisingly gray, who was playing with a half-grown great Dane puppy." As in the case of most everything Frank Norris did, Norris found time thoroughly to enjoy himself. He might in the mountains, pushing to conslusion the big novel that would enable him to inaugurate his serious career, free him from his mother's support, win Miss Black; but he also hiked and rode about in his leisure time, fashionably attired in jodhpurs, sleek riding boots, a heavy sweater, and a Baden Powell hat, in the company of his Phi Gamma Delta friend Seymour Waterhouse, mining superintendent. Ever fun-loving, Frank Norris made even the finishing of McTeague seem easy.

By November perhaps, certainly by Christmas 1897, McTeague was ready for the publisher. Getting McTeague published, however, took another fifteen months. Realizing that both his manuscripts, Vandover and McTeague, were controversial, Norris set about next to write an adventure story, Moran of the Lady Letty, that would win him immediate popular attention. The gambit worked.

Moran appeared weekly in the Wave from 8 January to 9 April 1898 and was picked up by the New York Tribune. Reading Moran in both the Wave and the Tribune, S.S. McClure offered to publish it in book form. McClure also offered Norris a position as a manuscript reader at Doubleday & McClure in New York.

Leaving his mother behind in San Francisco, Frank Norris moved to New York. He was immediately off to cover the Spanish-American War in Cuba, however, and there he came under fire, wrote excellent dispatches, and suffered a serious attack of malaria that compounded the damange done to his system in early 1896 by the South African fever. It took another six months for Norris to recover from this second bout of fever, part of this time being spent at home on Sacramento Street in San Francisco, where he worked on two further novels, Blix and A Man's Woman (1900). Moran of the Lady Letty had appeared while he was in Cuba. He was back in New York, living in a rented room at 61 Washington Square, Greenwich Village, when McTeague appeared.

5

From the vantage point of the American literary tastes of 1899, McTeague was a shocking story. Explicitly or by suggestion, Norris depicted a gruesome range of depravities and obsessions: rape-fantasies, garment fetishes, sado-masochistic behavior (to include McTeague's chewing of his wife's fingers), morbid avarice, and garden variety drunkenness. Chronicling the declining fortunes of a self-taught Polk Street dentist and his avaricious wife, McTeague involves three murders, a torture scene, two fights (one of them to the death), and in the last third of the book, an ambience of

brutality, to include sexual dominance and psychological terror. No wonder, then, that such established journals as the Nation, the Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Scribner's, and Century ignored McTeague altogether as beneath notice. The New York Sun reviewer (as well as the wife of Norris' publisher) were especially offended by Little August's pants-wetting. "Stamp out this race of Norrises," the headline over the Sun review screamed. In the Bookman for June 1899, Nancy Huston Banks castigated Norris for reintroducing the corrupting foreign vogue of Zolaism back into American fiction, just when its morbid realism seemed to have been vanquished by "the sudden on-rush of ideality and romance which arose like a fresh, sweet wind to clear the literary atmosphere". That same month, the Review of Reviews styled McTeague "about the most unpleasant American story that anybody has ever ventured to write". Out in San Francisco, the reviewer on the Argonaut, losing no chance to attack a writer from the rival Wave, opined that "seven tenths of the story the normal reader will peruse with a mixture of depression and disgust". "We have heard Zola called 'A pôtre de ce qui pue,' sniffed the Argonaut reviewer. "Similarly, Mr. Norris riots in odors and stenches. He might have changed his sub-title and called his book, 'McTeague: A Study in Stinks'." San Franciscan Charles Howard Shinn wrote in The Forum for October 1899 ("Literature of the Pacific Coast") that most Pacific Coast critics found McTeague no improvement over Moran of the Lady Letty; and even the generally effusive Los Angeleno Charles Fletcher Lummis, writing in The Land of Sunshine for July 1899, hedged his usually lavish praise for

Californian authors. McTeague, Lummis wrote, had a hideous story, but it was well done. Reviews in The Book Buyer (April 1899), The Independent (April 1899), The New York Times (11 March 1899), The Outlook (18 March 1899), and Public Opinion (16 March 1899) all echoed this same opinion: as promising as Norris might be as a writer, the subject matter of McTeague was loathesome. As The Outlook review put it, McTeague was a novel without spiritual significance, peopled by brutal and vulgar characters, repulsive in habit and quality.

Fortunately for Norris, there were some dissenting opinions, one of which -- that of William Dean Howells, the dean of American letters -- had a considerable countervailing effect on the more universal chorus of castigation. John D. Barry, a New York critic, warmly reviewed McTeague in the Boston-based The Literary World for 18 March 1899. McTeague, Barry wrote, made Norris a major American novelist, worthy of ranking next to William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Lavish praise indeed! Unfortunately, the Boston editors of The Literary World were prompted by this review to read Norris' novel. Scandalized, they issued a repudiation of Barry's opinion. Support also came, surprisingly, from Jeannette Gilder, a very proper uppercrust reviewer on The Critic, a lively New York magazine of fashion and the arts. Gilder reported on McTeague as a social event ("everybody is talking about this strange and impressive story") as well as making some favorable critical comments. "It is not a pleasant story," she admitted, "but when I began reading it I went to the end without

laying it down, though the clock warned me that the small hours had set in. It is a realistic story, horribly realistic, but it is never coarse; it is also a strong story, and yet it has none of those peculiarities that some young authors, and some old ones too, I regret to say, seem to think the ear-marks of strength. Mr. Norris, who I believe is only eight and twenty, has a future before him. As we are so fond of names of comparison in this country, I should say that he might be called the American Balzac. A re-reading of the chapter describing the wedding of McTeague and Trina has confirmed me of this opinion."

William Dean Howells -- America's leading novelist and critic, molder of an entire generation's literary taste -- had been a backer of Norris from the start. Reading Moran of the Lady Letty as a newspaper serial, Howells praised it in Literature, an unexpected boon for an adventure story by an unknown San Franciscan which only three other major magazines took even the briefest notice of. Three weeks after his arrival in New York, Norris donned white tie and tails to call upon Howells at his home. Ever kindly when it came to encouraging new talent, Howells agreed to read the manuscript of McTeague. When Howells had read the book, he invited Norris over for another evening. Casually attired this time in smoking jacket and lounging slippers, Howells sat with Norris before a cosy fire in his study, telling the young writer what a fine book he had written and that it should be published as soon as possible. Norris -- the unknown author of one published novel, a month in New York -- was ecstatic.

Howells thus had about a year to meditate upon McTeague before reviewing it in Literature on 24 March 1899 ("A Case in Point"). As in the case of all of Howells' literary observations, the review considered McTeague as an individual work of art and as a development in the unfolding process of literature. Frank Norris, Howells argued, was enlarging the possibilities of American fiction by novelizing in the European manner. American novelists, Howells contended, by and large observed the proprieties of civilization. Many European novelists, by contrast, especially the French, used the novel to strip away the proprieties and to plum the depths of personal and social experience. California, as represented by Norris and others, so Howells contended, seemed to be nurturing a fiction, now powerfully represented by McTeague, strongly motivated by the European ambition to use the novel as a diagnostic tool, no matter how repelling the subject matter encountered. Like Zola, moreover, Norris has the ability to communicate a sense of life as romantic epic, even when that epic occurred strictly within the confines of Polk Street among ordinary and less-than-ordinary people. Frank Norris had Zola's ability to convince the reader, most of the time, that his fictive world, however narrowly defined, was real and of total importance. "He does not, of course, go to Zola's lengths, breadths, and depth," Howells admitted; "but he goes far enough to difference his work from the old-fashioned American novel."

Admitting that "polite readers" might find the people and events of McTeague repulsive, Howells proceeded to praise Norris'

characterization: "It abounds in skill at observation and touches of character at once fine and free, in little miracles of observation, in vivid insight, in simple and subtle expression." With the exception of the aged lovers Old Grannis, the veternarian, and Miss Baker, the retired dressmaker, whose romance he considered silly, Howells found the secondary characters of McTeague subtly and powerfully realized. And yet, Howells concluded, echoing the sentiments of lesser critics, McTeague suffered from a narrowness of range, a restricted vision of human experience on Norris' part. "His true picture of life is not true," Howells concluded, "because it leaves beauty out. Life is squalid and cruel and vile and hateful, but it is noble and tender and pure and lovely, too."

6

Eight decades and more after Howells handed down this judgement, so approving despite its reservations, McTeague yet satisfies new generations of readers, despite reservations that encompass those of Howells and some new ones besides. McTeague is grim and brutal and restricted in its vision. There is a total lack of interiority on the part of the central character, the hulking dentist of Polk Street, destroyed by forces beyond his comprehension and becoming, in turn, a destroyer. McTeague's lack of inwardness, of even the remotest self-awareness, prevents Norris' novel from escaping the designation Minor Classic. And besides: if what Edmund Wilson remarked in conversation just before his death is true, namely, that no novel based on the humiliation of its central character can attain the first rank, then McTeague is

doubly hobbled; for the hulking dentist is heaped with humiliation from start to finish.

Yet what is the source of power of this admittedly minor classic? Why have critics, despite protests at its restricted vision, its repetition, its crudities of style, considered McTeague an arresting piece of fiction and an important text in American literary history? Kenneth Rexroth, I believe, comes closest to an answer when he ascribes to McTeague a certain Aristotlean objectivity of character and action. As in the case of Aristotle's prescriptions for Greek drama, McTeague begins with a quasi-legendary, near-mythic protagonist -- in this case, Nietzsche's Blond Beast reduced to the simplicity of folklorice statement -- and sets in motion a remorseless engine of cause and effect, motivation and action, from which springs the life of drama. The dentist McTeague, from this point of view, is so dumb, so unaware, that his stupidity approaches a mode of reverse heroism before tragic fate. Sensing his tragic flaw -- stupidity and an inherited inability to handle drink -- we pity McTeague despite our own better judgement; for by the time that he begins his persecution of Trina, he is a most loathesome character indeed.

From another point of view, Norris regards his characters from the lofty perspective of naturalism -- in which the narrator is the god-like observor -- which dovetails nicely with Norris' psychology of caste and class. The people of Polk Street, after all, are being observed from the perspective of 1822 Sacramento Street. Their distresses -- greed, drunkenness above all --

proceed from their class condition. They are in great part doomed, so runs a vein of subtle suggestion in this book, because they are men and women of the lower orders; and this is somehow their fault. From this perspective, Norris is punishing his characters, McTeague and Trina especially, strictly for being what they are, petty bourgeoisie with few options in life. There is, on the other hand, some compassion on Norris' part, despite the Zolaesque machine he has set in motion. Were there more compassion, more of Virgil's sunt rerum lacrimae, McTeague would undoubtedly be a greater novel. Yet in Norris' depictions of Trina asking Mac if he loved her, loved her big; of Trina sitting by a bay window of an afternoon in the first happy years of her marriage, carving wooden animals; of Mac and Trina's little dinners together -- we encounter the beginnings of a vision transcending the tendency of naturalism automatically to destroy. We encounter an incipiently tragic pathos that sees all attempts at happiness as brave little gestures in the face of larger doom. The deterministic universe of Emile Zola's L'Assommoir was obviously very much on Norris' mind as he fashioned McTeague; yet as much as Norris sought to emulate Zola (to the point of signing himself half-humorously "The Boy Zola"), the ultimate detachment of naturalism eluded him. The influence of Charles Dickens, another favorite of Norris', prevented an attitude of complete detachment. The courtship of Miss Baker and Old Grannis, for instance, together with the comic family life of the Sieppes, is Dickensian in inspiration, an attempt on Norris' part to relieve the larger naturalist gloom with comic sentiment.

The overt thesis of McTeague, the primacy of hereditary traits, is realized magnificently. Cultural and intellectual historians turn frequently to McTeague as a central statement of evolutionary awareness in late-nineteenth-century America. Profoundly influenced as an undergraduate by Professor Joseph LeConte of Berkeley, Norris internalized LeConte's concern for the dialectical battle between ethical and evolutionary forces in human behavior (to include de-evolution back to animalism) as the central perspective of his own imaginative and psychological apprehension of human life and conduct. For various reasons, Frank Norris was fascinated by the beast within. As an artist and not a logical thinker, Norris could be gloriously inconsistent in his responses. He coult exult in strength and brute force, as he did whe he indulged himself in triumphant Anglo-Saxonism; or he could fear it, as he feared the sexual instinct run rampant. From the moment McTeague hovers over Trina anesthetized in the dental chair, through all his gross kissing of her full on the mouth (Norris seems himself a little obsessed with this), through the embraces McTeague forces upon Trina and her submission to a marriage bed that degenerates to a mis en scene of overt and implied sado-masochism, there is in McTeague a conviction of sex as brutality and aggression, dominance and submission. The psychopathology of McTeague, so violent, so clinically presented, yet possesses the power to astound us and to make us wonder just how much Norris knew what he was doing, so contemporary are his insights into the more obscure regions of human behavior. The evidence -- the

frank sketch of a sado-masochistic sexual relationship he published in the Wave in April 1897, for instance -- suggests that Norris knew very well what he was doing. However inconsistent he was as a thinker, Norris nevertheless struggled to wrestle with the big issues of his day (and the era before that and our day as well), all of which were terribly intensified in the wake of Charles Darwin, as reformulated and popularized by Herbert Spencer. Just how free are we? McTeague attempts to ask. What possibilities of choice does our animal heritage leave us? In McTeague's case, not much at all! From this point of view, McTeague is not so much stupid or carnal or given to drink as he is an extreme case study in adverse heredity. Such dialectical dumbness might work against roundness of character, but as in the case of those medieval romances and histories Norris loved as a student in Paris, McTeague's clarity of character, together with the vividness of the novel's supporting cast (each of them, like McTeague, the victim of a single obsession) makes for a story possessed of gripping narrative power.

It was this stark and colorful immediacy of character and place that Theodore Dreiser, whose novel Sister Carrie (1900) Norris recommended for publication while serving as a reader at Doubleday & McClure, praised in May 1927 in the course of writing a new preface. When he first read it, Dreiser wrote, McTeague leapt into his imagination and fixed itself there for life. (Film director Erich von Stroheim had a similar experience.) From the first scene, McTeague napping of a Sunday afternoon in his dentist's chair after a heavy lunch and a pitcher of steam beer, Norris convinces us that his world is real and coherent and of impending

importance, which is what the art of the novel is all about.

Scholarly research has disclosed just how densely particular is the frame of reference in McTeague, a point first noted by Howells. The novel's coherence, its conviction of reality, arises in part out of Norris' total assimilation of particulars. His characters and their setting come alive in their detail: McTeague's dental equipment, Trina's proper shirtwaists, the pictures hung by the young couple in their first home, the wallpaper running from room to room that so excites Old Grannis and Miss Baker with the possibility that these adjoing rooms were once a single suite. The great gold molar which McTeague hangs outside his office has, so critic Richard Chase has pointed out, the intensity of those transcendental symbols beloved by an earlier generation of American romanticists, Hawthorne and Melville especially. The molar, and to an equal extent the canary in the gilded cage, externalize for McTeague all that he might give voice to, had he the capacity to reflect and to speak. As in the case of the earlier American romance also, the symbolic molar and canary cage threaten constantly to detach themselves from context, to attempt to mean too much and hence to wind up meaning nothing at all. All in all, however, the molar and the cage objectify the mood of doomed obsession that pervades McTeague. The dental profession (the molar) is the order, the meaning, the romance of McTeague's life. Fate (the cage), however, cruelly strips him of the shoring identity, and the beast within is unleashed. Norris told Howells that he once considered calling his novel The Golden Tooth,

so wrought with meaning did he find the gigantic molar. Sadly, Norris would never live to see Erich von Stroheim's 1923 film Greed in which Gibson Gowland Garland, playing an ecstatic McTeague, stands before the molar -- made almost unearthly by tinting it laboriously from frame to frame with gold leaf, as was all the gold in the film, so that it would glow against the black and white -- like a mute worshipper before a graven idol.

The visual intensity of these symbols and of what Rexroth describes as the "relentless photographic veracity" of Norris' writing in general -- scene after scene unfolding before the all-seeing eye of the novel's verbal camera -- gives McTeague a quality of proto-cinema. Filmed as early as 1915 (as Life's Whirlpool), McTeague worked as the great silent films would soon be working -- from scene to scene, take to take, each episode at once rounded in its own action and contributing to the forward movement of the plot. So cinematic did Erich von Stroheim find McTeague, he filmed it virtually page by page in an effort to translate Norris' epic intention to the screen. In terms of its excessive length, von Stroheim's Greed -- forty two reels, ten hours of playing time, filmed over nine months at a then-astronomical cost of $470,000 -- is itself an expression of obsession totally worthy of Norris' obsessive characters. The extravagance of Greed was also the tribute of one artist to another; for the German-born director correctly sensed the affinity between Norris' naturalism and the epic cinema von Stroheim dreamed of creating.

Von Stroheim was so taken with Norris' depiction of

fin de siecle San Francisco, moreover, that he refused to use studio sets. Greed was filmed on location in San Francisco. Since the earthquake and fire of April 1906 had destroyed Polk Street, the nearby Hayes Street, left untouched by the conflagration, was used for the street scenes. Von Stroheim scouted out the original kindergarten on Laguna Street where the drunken Pat Collins had brutally stabbed his wife Sarah to death (the autopsy revealed twenty nine wounds) -- thus planting the seed of McTeague first in Norris' mind -- and used the house to film McTeague's murder of Trina. McTeague is the finest novel ever to be set in San Francisco. Few novelists have ever made such effective use of a particular cityscape. As Robert D. Lundy has shown in his regretably unpublished University of California doctoral dissertation, "The Making of McTeague and The Octopus" (1956), Norris based every detail of his portrayal of Polk Street and the larger San Francisco upon precise fact, although he did indulge a novelist's license to move the dental parlors of the real-life Dr. L.A. Teague -- gilded tooth and all! -- up from the downtown corner of Geary and Kearny out to Polk Street in the Western Addition. The car conductors' coffee joint where McTeague took his heavy meals of meat, potatoes, and suet pudding; the grocery store and saloon, where McTeague, deprived of his right to practice dentistry, takes to drink; the confectionary store serviced by the beribboned female clerk with the missing thumb; the bell-hanger's shop, the dancing academy, and the water tanks of the public baths, all of which Trina sees as she sits at her bay window, carving toy animals; the names of the Polk

Street denizens -- Frenna, Heise, Loughhead, Gerstle; the fiesta organized by the Polk Street Improvement Club -- all these details check out under antiquarian scrutiny, but not in the manner of exact reportage. "Frank Norris knew Polk Street from without, not from within," wrote San Francisco journalist Charles Caldwell Dobie, a friend of Norris, in The American Mercury for April 1928. "It was a street where he changed cars on his way home from a football game or the theatre; it was a street where he bought ice-cream sodas for the debutantes he took to fortnightly cotillions; it was a street where he purchased lead soldiers for his younger brother. It was to him a thoroughfare of oyster grottos, florist shops, drug-stores, of petty shop-keepers wearing the smiling mask of their calling." While the Polk Street of McTeague is perhaps not the real Polk Street, Dobie admits, in terms of precise facts, "it was something infinitely more profound -- the Polk Street of Frank Norris. It was his interpretation, his creation. And, in the end, it became what he had made it. Nature again imitated art."

In the course of writing McTeague, Norris challenged his fellow San Franciscans in a Wave essay (22 May 1897) dealing with the ability of San Francisco to nurture a major novelist. London had found its Charles Dickens, Norris wrote; New Orleans, George Washington Cable; New York, Richard Harding Davis; Boston, William Dean Howells; Paris, Zola -- but San Francisco yet awaited its great novelist. As a culture, however, San Francisco was perhaps too immature, Norris admitted, to inspire grand novels. "The conditions of our life are suited finely to the short story,

but not as yet to the novel. We are growing and living, as it were, in spots, here a little and there a little, scattered bits of life and movement, quite independent of each other -- short stories that are happening every day. But we are not settled enough yet for the novelist, who demands large, co-ordinated, broad and simple lines upon which to work, something far more unified than we can yet give him." Was Norris anticipating defeat here? He had, after all, dreamed of doing such a grand and complex urban novel when he packed his bags for Harvard three years earlier. If so, then he was being too harsh on himself. McTeague might lack that balance of broad coherence and sociological diversity Norris hoped one day to achieve. But what was this in light of what he was managing to accomplish at his desk in his room at 1822 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, or in his cabin at the Big Dipper Mine? McTeague is not perfect -- true. But what a magnificent beginning!