"the terror of sheer bigness": Microplotting Immensity in Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901)

Abstract:

This article traces the stylistic consequences of the attempt to map seemingly infinitely expanding networks of trade and value in Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901). It focuses on the rehearsal at the level of the sentence of characters' grappling with the 'terror of sheer bigness', and the complex interrelation of public and private, political and personal, local and global inaugurated by the railroad's management of the distribution of wheat. The textures of Norris's style—his grammar, syntax, and diction—are implicated in the novel's interrogation and negotiation of these dislocations. From the failures of mimetic phrasing spiralling across lengthy cumulative sentences to patterns of phrasal repetition, the various microplots at work within the novel's verbal landscapes represent an essential and often overlooked facet of the force of *The Octopus*.

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Presley, the young poet of Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901), despite an 'insatiable ambition to write verse', is perpetually unsettled by his inability to access 'the first clear-eyed view of things' (9, 41). His plans for a 'great poem', a 'Song of the West', sit uneasily, he believes, next to his modernity: it is 'the man who is lacking', he laments; 'we have been educated away from it all. We are out of touch' (40-41). The word 'educated' is here closer to its etymological root, to 'educe' in the sense of 'lead or draw forth', than to 'schooling or tuition' (Onions 301). Presley's fear is that the social changes he witnesses around him—both the local railroad monopoly and the multiplication of global markets in the final decades of the nineteenth century—are leading him away, irrevocably, from a clarity of perspective exemplified, he suggests, by the writers of pre-modernity, such as Homer, Beowulf, and the Nibelungen poets (Norris, *Octopus* 41).

These social changes provide the background for the novel's account of a long and ultimately bloody conflict, taking place in the early 1880s, between a group of Californian wheat farmers and the representatives of the financial interests of the Pacific and

Southwestern Railroad. In a letter to Isaac Frederick Marcosson, dated 22 November 1899, Norris explains the 'situation' upon which his story is based:

> There is a certain group of farmers who, despairing of ever getting fair freight rates from the Railroad or of electing a board of Railroad Commissioners by fair means themselves, set about gaining their ends by any means available. What they want to do is to cause the nomination and election of railroad commissioners of their own choosing, with the idea that these commissioners will make proper reductions in freight rates. (Norris, *Letters* 93)

A sort of American 'social-problem novel', concerned with 'large-scale problems' caused in part by the competing interests both governing and driving industrial expansion, *The Octopus* takes as its starting point relationships that bind together 'society, the social and the individual' (Guy 67). Yet the apparent particularity of this 'situation' to Californian affairs, its grounding in local political machinations—nominations and elections, freight rates and commissioners—does not differentiate Norris's own ambitions from Presley's. Similarly to the poet's 'Song of the West', Norris had himself intended *The Octopus* to be the first of a trilogy of novels depicting what he termed 'The Epic of the Wheat', following the 'huge Niagra of wheat rolling from West to East' (Norris, *Letters* 73), from its production in the United States, through its distribution, to its consumption in Europe and Asia. This 'Epic', at once focused on the local conflict between the farmers and the railroad—the 'story of California' of the novel's subtitle—and looking past this conflict to the transnational roll of the 'huge Niagra of wheat' that overruns California's borders, itself represents an attempt to narrate complex dialectical relationships between vastly different spatial and temporal scales.

This sort of 'looking past' recurs throughout the novel. Having ascended to the 'summit of one of the hills—the highest—that rose out of the cañon', Presley attempts to look beyond the confusion of ranches and railroads, 'a mere array of accessories—a mass of irrelevant details', to the 'great earth' in its entirety (44-47):

> Then, as the imagination itself expanded under the stimulus of that measureless range of vision, even those great ranches resolved themselves into mere foreground, mere accessories, irrelevant details. Beyond the fine line of the horizons, over the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth, were other ranches, equally vast, and beyond

> these, others, and beyond these, still others, the immensities multiplying, lengthening out vaster and vaster. (46)

Beyond the 'irrelevant details' that clutter the 'foreground' of Presley's view, a 'measureless range of vision' extends itself, testing narration's limits. The use of repetition—'vast […] vaster and vaster' and 'Beyond […] beyond […] beyond'—and the 'multiplying' effect of appositives, attest to a struggle at the level of the sentence between the mimetic capabilities of syntax and phrasing: the syntactic evocation of multiplying distance is paired, awkwardly, with phrasing that stammers in face of that very distance. This struggle is further accentuated by the fact that Norris repeats phrases from this description later in the novel, when the nomadic Vanamee catches a 'distant glimpse', over 'the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth', of 'other ranches, and beyond these others, and beyond these still others, the immensities multiplying to infinity' (130). Throughout *The Octopus*, vision extends itself into blindness: perspective traces an asymptotic curve away from 'mere foreground' into what is described, later in the novel, as the 'terror of sheer bigness' (180). As the wheat farmers are drawn deeper and deeper into an expanding international network of trade, this 'sheer bigness' exposes points of friction between story, plot, and narration indicative of the novel's own struggle with the representation of causal networks that are, confusingly, at once local and global.

As such, *The Octopus*—a novel published at the turn of the twentieth century—anticipates across thematic, formal, and stylistic levels problems and anxieties of political importance today. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has recently argued that contemporary confusion between the 'global' and 'local' reflects 'a dialectic of space acted out on all conceivable levels of postmodernity, from the economic and the social all the way to culture and individual existence' (*American Utopia*, 11). 'On all these dimensions,' he continues,

> entities (seemingly of an institutional kind) which are somehow "larger than life" and thus unrepresentable in the form of individual existence move further and further away from a micro-level of human experience, in which everything seems to have been reduced to a present of time without a temporal context. The "global" becomes unimaginable, while the "local" becomes unthinkable and accessible only to bodily sensation and experience. (11)

This 'dialectic of space'—the 'unimaginable', 'unthinkable', and 'unrepresentable' macro-levels of human existence on the one hand, and the daily 'present' of micro-level existence in which the 'local' is 'accessible only to bodily sensation and experience' on the other—is central to the stylistic and formal qualities of Norris's novel. Even as Norris's farmers struggle to reinterpret their local experience in terms of invisible and seemingly infinite market forces, style's ability to invoke and induce affective responses, 'bodily sensation and experience', comes under the pressure of a narrative that seeks to represent 'global' forces and relations that are affectively inaccessible.

As such, the main argument of this article is that, far from merely registering thematically changes to social existence brought about by emerging networks of international trade, Norris's novel grapples with the unimaginable and unrepresentable scale of international trade networks, and the rapidly accelerating development of technologies capable of extending communication and interaction unevenly across the globe, 'from the verbal ground up' (Stewart, *Style* 6). The novel's sensitivity to the expanding scales of capitalist production and distribution—the 'sheer bigness' of the social networks that *The Octopus* attempts to map—produces a series of significant difficulties at the levels of the sentence, plot, and narration. Lengthy descriptions of complex local events share space on the page with a narrative arc that pulls the eye away from such scenes and refocuses it on vast, seemingly infinite networks and forces: networks of trade and exchange, telecommunication, transport, as well as market forces, wheat-as-wheat sharing space within the narrative with wheat-as-value. Yet, at the same time, these networks and forces place a strain on mimetic phrasing, as stylistic patterning is recruited to measure what often seems, from the perspective of the farmers, 'measureless'.

Consequently, I am here arguing for a stylistic perspective on the sort of approach exemplified by Richard Menke's *Telegraphic Realism* (2008), in which it is argued that the tension between expanding informational networks and the increasing 'conversion of life to information' frequently produced problems for the nineteenth-century imagination (Menke 23). Indeed, the relationship between 'life', 'information', technology and infrastructure in *The Octopus* has been well-discussed. Jeff Diamanti, for example, reads the railroad's 'technological interruption' as an expression of 'much larger transformations underwriting [*The Octopus*'s] attention to setting, the physical and cultural source of which are fossil fuels' (392). While my attention here is less on the particular technology 'underwriting' the opening up of local markets to global exchange, Diamanti's suggestion that this technology represents 'not an endogenous figure but an exogenous force on literary history' informs my arguments

about Norris's style (392). As the novel plots this opening up of local markets—and the various and opposing interests that criss-cross it—this expansionary movement is constantly renegotiated at the level of diction and syntax, and exerts an 'exogenous force' on style itself.

By subjecting Norris's representation of various forms of 'technological interruption' to stylistic analysis, this article will draw attention to various interfaces between *The Octopus*'s thematic preoccupations and its distinctive aesthetic surface, between its plotting and what Garrett Stewart terms its 'microplotting' (*Style* 132). This is not, however, to ignore Jameson's warning that 'there exists no ready-made corridor between the sealed chamber of stylistic investigation and that equally unventilated space in which the object of study is reconstituted as narrative structure' (*Fables,* 7). As Jameson continues to argue, 'there is always [within criticism] an uncomfortable shifting of gears in the movement from one of these perspectives to the other' (7). This article traces this 'uncomfortable shifting of gears' within *The Octopus* itself. As I will demonstrate, Norris's reliance on mimetic phrasing—on language tuned to imitate or reflect aurally or visually what it describes—regularly comes into conflict with his narrative's interest in expanding networks of trade that resist mimetic representation. Similarly, the narrative's recourse to repetition within scenes characterised by vivid and lengthy descriptive passages comes into conflict with Norris's desire to write a gripping and fast-paced story. Shifting gears between an investment in style's ability to delineate clear pictures, and a narrative intent on bringing into play forces and networks for which no clear pictures exist, Norris's novel grapples in important ways with a 'discontinuity' that, for Jameson, is an 'objective reality' in American culture (7).

As such, this article hopes to shed light on the ways in which the novel itself makes difficult any shifting of gears between stylistic and narrative-based analysis, and how this foregrounds an essential and often overlooked aspect of Norris's achievement. What follows, therefore, moves, with *The Octopus,* between several significant confrontations—between mimetic phrasing and 'sheer bigness', plot and scene, different ways of imagining and mapping infinity—and attempts to focus attention on the slippages, frictions, and tensions that characterise the experience of its reading.

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The textures of Norris's sentences—the 'microplotting' of his narrative—frequently attest to a significant preoccupation with the rate and consequences of expanding networks of trade. Early in the novel, for example, the office of Magnus Derrick's Los Muertos ranch—one of

the largest in the area—is represented as 'the nerve-centre of the entire ten thousand acres' (53). Among its furnishings—alongside a safe, typewriter, letter-press, etc.—is a 'great map' of the ranch, depicting 'every water-course, depression, and elevation, together with indications of the varying depths of the clays and loams in the soil, accurately plotted' (53). In contrast with this local specificity, however, the 'most significant object in the office' is the 'ticker' that connects local production to a global network of exchange that extends, unimaginably, into the distance (53-54):

> The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world's crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos, to that of the Quien Sabe, to Osterman's, and to Broderson's. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (54)

The verb 'thrill', which tows its older meaning—'perforation, hole, aperture': to pierce—behind its evocation of excitement and rapidity, emphasises both the immediacy and violence with which the 'enormous whole' perforates the experience of everyday life (Onions 920). This 'whole', this 'vast agglomeration', absorbs Harran and Magnus into a causal network whose scale far exceeds the processing capacities of the individual mind: and at 'such moments they no longer felt their individuality.' As Diamanti argues, the ticker 'provides a mimetic image not of fields of wheat', themselves concrete and individual, 'but fields of value'—that 'vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round' (398). This 'mimetic image' is itself 'worked through' rhetorically. The frequency of stylistic 'ticks' such as alliterative descriptions ('distant […] drought […] Dakota'; 'wheat […] whole world'), internal rhyme ('rain […] plains'), and repeated rhetorical patterning ('a drought on […] a rain on […] a frost on […] a hot wind on') enact a sort of stylistic recognition of the

connections that the 'ticker' manifests. Narrative discourse evokes affectively the multiplication of causal relationships 'the whole world round'.

Yet these sorts of accordances between plotting and narration—in which social transformations themselves transform rhetoric—share space in *The Octopus* with various tensions between these two levels. In the second half of the novel's first book, for example, acknowledging that 'there's things I got to do in Bonneville before the first of the month' (172), Annixter—'who worked the Quien Sabe ranch' (24)—has his horse saddled and rides to the town, repeating to himself his intention to 'see Magnus, Harran, old Broderson and some of the business men' (172), with the particular objective of convincing Magnus (or at least his son Harran) to support the ranchers' Committee financially. His route takes him through Los Muertos by way of Hooven's holding and Broderson's Creek, enabling numerous opportunities for Annixter to cast his eye over the 'limitless, mud-coloured ocean' of wheat fields (176):

> Then, at length, Annixter's searching eye made out a blur on the horizon to the northward; the blur concentrated itself to a speck; the speck grew by steady degrees to a spot, slowly moving, a note of dull colour, barely darker than the land, but an inky black silhouette as it topped a low rise of ground and stood for a moment outlined against the pale blue of the sky. […] As the spot grew larger, it resolved itself into constituents, a collection of units; its shape grew irregular, fragmentary. A disintegrated, nebulous confusion advanced towards Annixter, preceded, as he discovered on nearer approach, by a medley of faint sounds. Now it was no longer a spot, but a column, a column that moved, accompanied by spots. (176)

The opposite of Presley's 'first clear-eyed view of things' (41), Annixter's 'searching eye' struggles—the syntax laden with gradually more specific appositives—to discern exactly what it is that it sees. The 'blur'/'speck'/'spot' is, grammatically, the agent of its own various metamorphoses: Annixter watches as a passive observer, separated by a vast distance from otherwise familiar local activities (the sowing work of grain-drills) that here appear instead as a 'disintegrated, nebulous confusion'. His trip to Bonneville—and, it seems, the ordered chronology of plot—is interrupted, and in the meantime style plots its own association of proximity with clarity: the closer something is, the easier it is to recognise.

The spots finally resolve themselves into horses working on Magnus's ranch, and with the narrowing of distance, cacophonous mimetic phrasing replaces descriptive indeterminacy:

> The horses were in lines, six abreast, harnessed to machines. The noise increased, defined itself. There was a shout or two; occasionally a horse blew through its nostrils with a prolonged, vibrating snort. The click and clink of metal work was incessant, the machines throwing off a continual rattle of wheels and cogs and clashing springs. The column approached nearer; was close at hand. The noises mingled to a subdued uproar, a bewildering confusion; the impact of innumerable hoofs was a veritable rumble. (176-7)

Patterns of repetition—the 'in' sounds of 'lines […] machines […] increased […] defined', and the hard 'c' sounds of 'click […] clink […] work […] continual […] cogs […] clashing'—suggest both the regimented regularity of the 'bewildering confusion', and the music of its mechanical cogwork. As the description continues, litanies of mimetic phrasing expand the sentence structure. The machines advance, we hear,

> like an array of chariots—clattering, jostling, creaking, clashing, an interminable procession, machine succeeding machine, six-horse team succeeding six-horse team—bustling, hurried—Magnus Derrick's thirty-three grain drills, each with its eight hoes, went clamouring past, like an advance of military, seeding the ten thousand acres of the great ranch; fecundating the living soil; implanting deep in the dark womb of the Earth the germ of life, the sustenance of a whole world, the food of an entire People. (177)

The cumulative energy of this periodic sentence, its clashing onomatopoeia, its array of gerunds, variety of similes, its parenthetical prolongation of description, contrasts explicitly with the abstract and tentative way Annixter's first glimpse of the scene is described, its language searching for a means to describe an indeterminate referent. Style's own elaboration of the connection between proximity and clarity, however, is counteracted by the end of the sentence. Syllepsis—the verb 'implanting' is divided between three objects—structures successive noun phrases so as to emphasise a rapid expansion of connotation. This expansion, its reassertion of 'sheer bigness', hinges upon the transformation of wheat-as-wheat into

wheat as an abstract value (as abstract, it seems, as the 'entire People' it will feed). Style's own comfort with proximity—the proliferative intensity of mimetic phrasing that accompanies description of concrete phenomena—jostles with the plot's tendency to pull the reader's focus *away* from the concrete, refocusing it on relationships that extend across the 'whole world'.

One of the consequences of this is that *The Octopus* frequently manifests what Jameson describes as a 'tension between plot and scene, between the chronological continuum and the eternal affective present' (*Antinomies,* 83). While Norris's 'scenes' are characterised by an exploration of the textures of style's mediation of local depiction, the 'chronological continuum' of his plot depends upon casting a 'searching eye' past the horizon of the local, toward the mapping of global forces that resist style's mimetic capabilities. In another letter to Isaac Marcosson, dated 13 September 1900, Norris addresses, obliquely, these tensions:

> Well, the thing is mostly done now and I know when it slumps and I know when it strikes and I think the strikes are the most numerous and important. I know that in the masses I've made no mistake. You will find some things in it that for me—are new departures. It is the most romantic thing I've yet done. One of the secondary sub-plots is pure romance—oh, even mysticism, if you like that sort of allegory—I call it the allegorical side of the wheat subject,—and the fire in it is the Allegory of the Wheat. The movement of the whole business is very slow at first—don't really get under weigh till after the first 15,000 words (it's about 200,000 words long), then, with the first pivotal incident it quickens a bit, and from there on I've tried to accelerate it steadily till at the last you are—I hope—just whirling and galloping and tearing along till you come *bang!* all of a sudden to a great big crushing END, something that will slam you right between your eyes and knock you off your feet—all this I *hope* for. Sabe? (Norris, *Letters* 123)

Despite Norris's confidence in its 'whirling and galloping and tearing' pace, *The Octopus* remains characterised by a tension between the steady acceleration towards a 'great big crushing END', and the tendency for 'slumps'—whether long scenes of little narrative consequence, or intricate 'secondary sub-plots'—to upset this acceleration. Annixter's barn dance, for example, occupies nearly fifty pages of an 'affective present', and requires the eventual arrival of 'a messenger from Bonneville' (270), bearing news of the railroad's latest

strategy, to reintroduce 'the chronological continuum' of plot. Similarly, it is only Vanamee's 'sheet of note paper', again detailing the railroad's having 'stolen a march' on the ranchers (506), that interrupts Osterman's 'jack-rabbit drive'—an event explicitly compared to Annixter's barn-dance (488). The process of abstraction suggested by Norris's 'Allegory of the Wheat' serves to exemplify these tensions. Local depictions of concrete events—frequently paired with a rhetorical intensity of narration—constitute 'slumps' insofar as they resist the sort of allegorical interpretation (wheat-as-value) that Norris's plot, culminating with appeals to the abstract 'mighty world-force' of 'WHEAT', foregrounds (651).

What are 'slumps' from the perspective of plot often involve moments of intense stylistic clarity. As we have seen, moving from the kind of mimetic phrasing characteristic of Norris's descriptions of the daily lives and acts of the farmers to a perspective capable of situating these acts within global networks of trade and transport frequently involves losing focus—rapid expansions of connotation tear the reader's attention away from the ticking and clattering of machinery, foregrounding instead the abstract fields of value that lurk ominously behind them. The 'slumps' Norris describes therefore reflect in important ways the tensions between local description and 'sheer bigness' discussed above. Given the relationship established in the novel between proximity and clarity, distance and blindness—and the association of the latter pair with the negative impact of rapid societal change—these 'slumps' also come to represent, at both the level of style and narrative, an encoding of the farmers' resistance to the octopus of international capitalism. They also help to shed new light on some of the idiosyncrasies of Norris's novel. For instance, the narrative's tendency to indulge in these 'slumps'—to privilege, momentarily, 'scene' over 'plot', to develop intricate descriptions of an 'affective present'—provides one explanation for Norris's uses of repetition. The quantity of repeated phrases throughout the novel is indicative of a sort of resistance—congruent to the farmers' resistance—to the teleological pull of the 'great big crushing END'. During Annixter's barn-dance, for example, we learn that '[t]here was a babel of talk in the air' (238); later in the scene, we learn again that a 'babel of talk was in the air' (250). Whereas the first babel is 'varied by an occasional note of laughter' (238), the second is 'mingled with gusts of laughter' (250). Surprisingly, later in the novel, Osterman's 'jack-rabbit drive' also features 'a babel of talk' (503). Other repetitions occur throughout the novel, such as the image of 'grooves': 'Outside there, far off, the great grim world went clashing through its grooves' (140); 'the city swarmed tumultuous through its grooves' (287); wheat itself 'moved in its appointed grooves' (448). Each repeated phrase (itself a repetition—as quotation—of Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall') contributes a small interruption to

the 'chronological continuum' of plot, foregrounding a self-referential loop that snags narrative momentum.

These kinds of oppositions and tensions—plot and scene, stylistic intensity and a rapid expansion of connotation, societal change and rhetorical stasis—are central to *The Octopus*'s engagement with its geopolitical context. Even scenes that appear completely removed and sheltered from the machinations of the farmers and capitalists often reflect a desire to probe the interfaces between local experience and global networks and forces. Take, for instance, the novel's juxtaposition of two different kinds of infinity—a juxtaposition that unites several themes discussed thus far: repetition, narrative 'slumps', and the 'sheer bigness' of expanding networks of trade. Vanamee, whose wanderings and lengthy spiritual romance do not contribute in any way to the plotting of the business dispute between the farmers and the railroad, spends several scenes in the Mission garden—a place whose timelessness is itself suggested by a 'sun dial', which is 'green with the beatings of the weather, the figures on the half-circle of the dial worn away, illegible' (140). Walled off from the frantic political machinations taking place in the nearby ranches, the 'quiet, the repose, the isolation of the little cloister garden was', the narrative insists, 'infinitely delicious' (140). Later in the novel the garden's 'infinite repose' is once again described as 'delicious beyond expression' (389). This repeated sense of isolation in an eternal present, in which time-telling devices are themselves illegible, is explicitly opposed to the teleological energy of life 'outside'. 'Outside there', the narrative suggests, 'far off, the great grim world went clashing through its grooves, but in here never an echo of the grinding of its wheels entered to jar upon the subdued modulation of the fountain's uninterrupted murmur' (140). The infinity of an 'eternal affective present'—such as the garden's 'infinite repose'—is juxtaposed with the infinity of global trade's complex networks of power and control. Style underlines this juxtaposition. The sibilant and soothing 'infinite repose', 'delicious beyond expression', of the Mission garden opposes the harsh insistence—'great grim […] grooves […] grinding'—of the 'world' outside.

Ultimately, these oppositions and tensions reflect Norris's characters' confusion about the ways in which aspects of their immediate experience (the wheat that they grow, for instance) can simultaneously represent or participate in forces that seemingly cannot be represented (wheat-as-value). The relationships between different infinities, between local depiction (style) and the global forces that shape and are shaped by local events (plot), become problems which various characters grapple with directly. The mismatch between these levels, the blindness that accompanies characters' attempts to extend their sight from

their farms to the forces and networks which rule over them, frequently leads to fantasization regarding the relation between an individual and capitalism's 'sheer bigness'.

This fantasization is reflected in the novel's foregrounding of forms of mapping that test style's ability to provide clear pictures. Its characters continually struggle to discover methods of mapping the intersections between individual experience and ever-expanding social networks. The engineer Dyke for example, who, we learn, had been 'fired' by the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad for refusing to 'do first-class work for third-class pay', decides to 'take up this hop ranch', with hopes of making a small return on savings he had accumulated 'in the last ten years' (18-20). These hopes are gradually destroyed by the Railroad, whose power Dyke, with increasing desperation, attempts to map and understand:

> Abruptly Dyke received the impression of the multitudinous ramifications of the colossus. Under his feet the ground seemed mined; down there below him in the dark the huge tentacles went silently twisting and advancing, spreading out in every direction, sapping the strength of all opposition, quiet, gradual, biding the time to reach up and out and grip with a sudden unleashing of gigantic strength. (346)

Here, the cumulative sentence serves to suggest a sort of semantic amplification—absolute constructions 'twisting and advancing' with the octopus's tentacles—even as its mimetic representation of subterranean 'ramifications' merely multiplies Dyke's inability to picture the Railroad's power in a way that might help him to navigate it. The word 'ramifications', deriving from the classical Latin *rāmus*, or 'branch', sits uneasily next to 'colossus', with its connotation of singular enormity. The plurality of shape-shifting branches, the 'multitudinous ramifications' of innumerable 'tentacles', each manifesting itself in local demonstrations of 'gigantic strength', remain difficult to correlate with the notion of the Railroad as a singular entity. Consequently, Dyke, 'caught and choked by one of those millions of tentacles', is only capable of understanding the 'sordid injustice' he experiences through the conspiratorial image of the octopus (352).

For Jameson, writing about postmodern film, this conspiratorial attempt to map, this paranoid indulgence of the geopolitical imagination, is symptomatic of precisely this inability to unite the local with the global:

> In the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary, to which 'nothing occurs' (Karl Kraus) when confronted with the ambitious program of fantasizing an

> economic system on the scale of the globe itself, the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life, as a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility; or in other words: the collective and the epistemological.
>
> (Jameson *Geopolitical*, 9)

Throughout *The Octopus*, characters struggle to unite their awareness of 'a potentially infinite network' with a 'plausible explanation of its invisibility'. This is the case even when they are confronted with maps depicting the Railroad's network on a local scale. As Lyman Derrick studies the 'commissioner's official railway map of the State of California, completed to March 30th of that year', the narrative voice explains that the 'whole map was gridironed by a vast, complicated network of red lines marked P. and S. W. R. R.', which (echoing Dyke's diction) 'centralised at San Francisco and thence ramified and spread north, east, and south, to every quarter of the State' (288):

> From Coles, in the topmost corner of the map, to Yuma in the lowest, from Reno on one side to San Francisco on the other, ran the plexus of red, a veritable system of blood circulation, complicated, dividing, and reuniting, branching, splitting, extending, throwing out feelers, off-shoots, tap roots, feeders—diminutive little blood suckers that shot out from the main jugular and went twisting up into some remote county, laying hold of some forgotten village or town, involving it in one of a myriad branching coils, one of a hundred tentacles, drawing it, as it were, toward that centre from which all this system sprang. (288-289)

The style, here, is characterised by a proliferative energy, successive words often appearing to have been suggested by the sounds of previous words, as in the sequence 'feelers, off-shoots, tap roots, feeders', or the rhyme of 'San' and 'ran', and the chime of 'Coles' and 'coils'. The image of the octopus, overlayed with a second anatomical metaphor ('plexus', 'blood circulation', 'jugular', etc.), animates the railway map:

> The map was white, and it seemed as if all the colour which should have gone to vivify the various counties, towns, and cities marked upon it had been absorbed by that huge, sprawling organism, with its ruddy arteries converging to a central point. It was as though the State had been sucked white and colourless, and against this pallid

> background the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth. (289)

Once again, absolute constructions—'swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting'—offer a mimetic representation of the organism's 'sprawling', while remaining incapable of providing more than a mixed metaphor for understanding the ways in which the 'monster' serves as a zone of interrelation between local and global events ('reaching out to infinity'). Style thickens only to thicken the sense of confusion surrounding the precise mechanisms by which the Railroad operates. Yet this thickening itself serves to foreground the ways in which, to borrow a phrase from Mark Currie, 'the only real vision involved in reading is the vision of printed words' (26). The textures of narration provide their own form of paranoid mapping: the 'vision of printed words' registering mimetically the 'sprawling organism'. If, as Stewart claims, the 'prose of prose fiction manifests the central nervous system of narrative writing' (like Norris's 'plexus'), then its phrasing rehearses precisely those systemic connections the novel's characters learn to fear (*Style*, 126). But this rehearsal is insufficient. As Walter Benn Michaels suggests, 'instead of describing the railroad as controlling the flow of wheat from producer to consumer, Norris describes it as if it were itself the consumer, competing with rather than profiting from' consumers (185). And it is this confusion—distribution as consumption, producers themselves consumed—that is microplotted in Norris's syntactic complexity, the cumulative shifting of his narrative's attempts to pin down the movements of value, the 'terror of sheer bigness' provoked by oscillations between wheat-as-wheat and wheat-as-value.

When Presley, late in the novel, passes by the 'General Office of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad', he begins to contemplate this 'stronghold of the enemy'(569). It represents—once again echoing Dyke's diction—'the centre of all that vast ramifying system of arteries that drained the life-blood of the State; the nucleus of the web in which so many lives, so many fortunes, so many destinies had been enmeshed' (569). In plotting oscillations between different conceptualisations of space (global/local) and value (use/exchange), *The Octopus* foregrounds the ways in which its characters remain 'enmeshed' within a network responsible for innumerable points of intersection between private and public, individual and collective, personal and political existence. Yet these points of intersection remain obscured by the frequency and ferocity of these oscillations, and Presley's 'first clear-eyed view of things' is consequently rendered practically unattainable.

It is Presley himself that receives 'the sense and significance of all the enigma of growth', the 'explanation of existence' (634). In an aggressive celebration of the power of abstract value, the narrative voice declares 'Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed' (634). Unable to return to the concrete perspective of Homer, Beowulf, and the Nibelungen poets, Presley sees only 'the vast rhythm of the seasons, […] the eternal symphony of reproduction' and its 'primordial energy […], immortal, calm, infinitely strong' (634). The impossibility of representing mimetically relationships on infinite scales is solved by means of an abandonment of the visible and the local.

This is not to say, however, that exchange value and use value never coincide in the novel. In fact, the 'great big crushing END' that Norris describes is itself the most dramatic example of this coincidence, of a rare moment of clarity in which concrete and abstract cease to pull in opposing directions. S. Behrman decides, at the novel's conclusion, to inspect the 'vast hold of the ship' into which came 'rushing a veritable cataract of wheat' for distribution to the Eastern markets (641). Watching the wheat 'plunge into the roomy, gloomy interior of the hold', it seemed as though no 'human agency' was responsible for 'the movement of the wheat', which instead 'seemed impelled with a force of its own, a resistless, huge force' (641). Echoing Presley's 'explanation of existence', S. Behrman is impacted by the infinite energy of wheat-as-value, spreading across the world's surface through the arteries of rapidly expanding markets, connecting locations across hitherto unimaginable distances. Yet his curiosity proves fatal, as, leaning too far over the railing, he falls into the hold:

> Then he began that terrible dance of death; the man dodging, doubling, squirming, hunted from one corner to another, the wheat slowly, inexorably flowing, rising, spreading to every angle, to every nook and cranny. It reached his middle. Furious and with bleeding hands and broken nails, he dug his way out to fall backward, all but exhausted, gasping for breath in the dust-thickened air. Roused again by the slow advance of the tide, he leaped up and stumbled away, blinded with the agony in his eyes, only to crash against the metal hull of the vessel. He turned about, the blood streaming from his face, and paused to collect his senses, and with a rush, another wave swirled about his ankles and knees. Exhaustion grew upon him. To stand still meant to sink; to lie or sit meant to be buried the quicker; and all this in the dark, all this in an air that could scarcely be breathed, all this while he fought an enemy that could not be gripped, toiling in a sea that could not be stayed. (645)

After several minutes of struggle, all that is left is 'the rushing of the Wheat that continued to plunge incessantly from the iron chute in a prolonged roar, persistent, steady, inevitable' (646). Following the novel's logic of justice, S. Behrman is crushed by wheat-as-wheat after having imposed the dislocations of wheat-as-value on the farmers of Bonneville. The same stylistic markers—absolute constructions, cumulative sentences, shifting patterns of gerunds—that typified characters' confusion regarding the workings of financial markets on global scales here serve to lend mimetic intensity to 'that terrible dance of death', as the concrete and local weight of wheat crushes the railroad's representative. This justice itself accentuates the importance of the counterpart of Vanamee's departing advice—'Never judge of the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see' (636): just as the 'whole' cannot be judged according to the 'segment', we should never cease paying attention to the dynamic network that connects the 'segment' to the 'whole'.

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