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Naturalism in Its Natural Environment?

American Naturalism and the Farm Novel

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While many works of American literary naturalism feature a distinctively urban setting, and while this setting plays a key role in the naturalistic aesthetics of these works—see, for instance, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) or Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900)—some of the most famous American naturalistic novels are, in fact, not set in the city, but on the farm.¹ Indeed, as a genre that flourished roughly from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, the American farm novel—a term that includes all novels whose main protagonists are farmers, that are set on a farm, and that also deal with agrarian or agricultural issues²—was not only influenced by realism and modernism but also by naturalism. This is not surprising, since both the farm novel and naturalistic writings often illustrate and dramatize the laws of nature. This article explores the interrelationship between literary mode and genre, between literary naturalism and the farm novel, as depicted in two of the most prominent naturalistic farm novels in American literature, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).³ Although they may seem incongruously optimistic in the light of the events narrated in the two stories, the conclusions of *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, two farm novels that can be designated naturalistic both in a deterministic and a thematic sense of the term, are sustained by the macrocosmic and/or microcosmic point of view from which their terrible events are narrated.

Hard Times on the Farm

Towards the end of the 19th century, three American writers set out to tell what they considered the truth about the farm. In *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), Hamlin Garland recalls his reaction to his editors’ plea for “charming love stories” set in a rural environment:

No, we've had enough of lies. . . . Other writers are telling the truth about the city . . . , and it appears to me that the time has come to tell the truth about the barn-yard's daily grind. I have lived the life and I know that farming is not entirely made up of berrying, tossing the new-mown hay and singing *The Old Oaken Bucket* on the porch by moonlight. (319)

Accordingly, in Garland's 1891 novel *Jason Edwards*, the eponymous hero leaves Boston to follow "the road to health and wealth" (64) to the West, only to find that a farmer's life in the ironically named Boomtown, South Dakota, is even worse than a life as a foundry worker in a Boston slum. Whereas the American Dream, the idea that industry is commensurately rewarded with prosperity, seemed "merely" seriously endangered in the East ("What's the world comin' to, Jason, when sober, hard-workin' people can't get a decent livin'?" 57-58), it is entirely crushed in the West ("Knocks an eye out of the American eagle, don't it?" 188). After only a few years on his farm in Boomtown, Edwards is poorer than ever before, "much grayer, bent and lame" (138), and his daughter Alice is "worn and weary, and looking ten years older" (134). Four years before *Jason Edwards*, the protagonist of Harold Frederic's *Seth's Brother's Wife* condescends to say that rural New York "is just splendid to be born in, no doubt of that," but, she immediately adds, "after you are born, get out of it as soon as you can" (34). The narrator heartily agrees: "The rural life is a sad and sterile enough thing, with its unrelieved physical strain, its enervating and destructive diet, its mental barrenness, its sternly narrowed groove of toil and thought and companionship" (35). Finally, even before Garland and Frederic, Edgar Watson Howe, in *The Story of a Country Town* (1882), depicted a rural world in which "[s]urrounded by decay, death, and evil, the people who came west to 'grow up with the country' are merely degraded by it" (Martin 118). Again, the ironically named Fairview—there are no such things as fair views in Fairview—is characterized by the protagonist as a "place which made all the men surly and rough, and the women pale and fretful" (Howe 40).

Their versions of the "ugly truth" about farm life have earned Howe, Frederic, and Garland the critical epithet "(proto-)Naturalist(ic)" (see, respectively, Krause 16; Howard 175; Walcutt 45); yet while this labeling might evoke the traditional notion of naturalism as a somewhat harsher, more pessimistic version of realism (see Abrams 261), it is actually based on what might be called a deterministic conception of American literary naturalism. Indeed, the term "determinism" has received considerable attention and has resurfaced again and again in critical approaches to

American literary naturalism. While generally bemoaning the absence of a coherent movement of writers “united by common aims and manifestos” (Furst and Skrine 35) and, hence, the elusiveness and “Protean slipperiness” (Walcutt 3) of naturalism in the United States (especially compared to France), critics nevertheless agree that American naturalism is a literary mode “characterized by determinism” (Mitchell 30).⁴ Stressing the influence of what has been considered the most famous naturalistic writer, the French author Émile Zola, these critics argue that American authors writing in the naturalistic mode depict their characters as “animals” whose actions are entirely determined by their “heredity, the effect of [their] environment and by the pressures of the moment” (Furst and Skrine 18).⁵ One of the most interesting aspects of this deterministic or “Zolaesque” concept of American literary naturalism is, of course, its impact on the category of the self. Dominated by forces beyond his or her control, the protagonist of a naturalistic novel, Richard Chase notes in a frequently quoted passage, “often seems to *have* no self” (199). While the notion of self and the concept of free will and choice typically have little effect in naturalistic writings, the forces of instinct, natural drives, and especially socio-economic environment are evoked to account for the behavior of the protagonists.

Hence, it is the depiction of the enormous impact of the farm environment on their protagonists—Howe’s *Fairview* making “all the men surly and rough, and the women pale and fretful,” Frederic’s rural New York being only fit “to be born in,” and Garland’s *Boomtown* rendering Jason Edwards “much grayer, bent and lame”—that led critics to classify Howe, Frederic, and Garland as (proto-)naturalistic writers in the deterministic sense of the term. As Charles C. Walcutt observes, “Here . . . are early attempts at case studies of the depressing effects of impoverished or culturally narrow environments upon the lives of representative Americans” (45).⁶ At least theoretically, however, a deterministic view of the farm need not necessarily be pessimistic. To be sure, *The Story of a Country Town*, *Seth’s Brother’s Wife*, and *Jason Edwards* have interested critics precisely because they are considered depressing “attempt[s] to debunk the myth of the farm” (Meyer 29), “deflation[s] of the pioneer myth” (Krause 19), or “attacks [on] the cult of the yeoman” (Smith 285)—yet that is exactly what they are: mere reversals of the garden myth, that is, of the “notions that there is a peculiar merit in agricultural labor and that farmers are more virtuous than other men” (Smith 285). The latter notions are, however, just as deterministic as their “pessimistic” and depressing reversal, the “counter-myth” evoked by Howe, Frederic, and Garland in their writ-

ings: Whether a farm novel celebrates or attacks the cult of the yeoman, it necessarily depicts the farm as a deterministic environment, stresses the (positive or negative) influence of the farm on the characters, and may therefore be labeled "naturalistic."

Moreover, one may argue that in fact any farm novel can be considered naturalistic in the deterministic sense of the term. Identifying repetition as one of the chief characteristics of deterministic naturalistic writings, Lee Clark Mitchell notes in *Determined Fictions* that "naturalism reveals directly through its repetitive patterns how fully character is wrenched into shape by the indifferent logic of determinism" (22): "naturalist characters repeat themselves with little variation . . . a clear cyclic pattern places characters over and over in like situations" (26). In the farm novel, it is above all the "clear cyclic patterns" of the cycle of seasons and the cycle of day and night that place characters "over and over in like situations." Through what may be called the agricultural variant of economic determinism, nature structures the farmer's life both on a yearly (seedtime, haying, harvest, etc.) and on a daily (milking, feeding, etc.) basis. Of course, one may argue that the underlying theme of most American farm novels, the pioneer's material progress (see Freitag), undercuts nature's repetitive patterns and thus its control over the farmer—in fact, the very idea of agriculture is that of controlling and channeling nature's forces into the production of specific plants and animals.

However, nature's deterministic impact on the pioneer farmer and the latter's material progress are inextricably linked in American farm novels. In Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), for instance, Alexandra becomes the most successful farmer on the Divide precisely because she follows nature's distinctive patterns and rhythms, while her brother Oscar "liked to begin his corn-planting at the same time every year, whether the season were backward or forward. He seemed to feel that by his own irreproachable regularity he would clear himself of blame and reprove the weather" (22). Needless to say, as a farmer Oscar is far less successful than his sister. Alexandra's material success, however, is bought at a price. Putting "so much personality into her enterprises" (79), she "loses herself in the land" (Harvey 38; see O'Brien 194) and becomes a part of the land and of nature's eternal cycle of death and reincarnation: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (122). By thus depicting nature's deterministic impact on the farmer, the farm novel becomes an almost "natural" form of expression for a deterministic concept of naturalism. Genre and literary mode comple-

ment each other perfectly, and the phrase “a naturalistic farm novel” becomes a mere pleonasm.

Not all literary critics, however, have accepted the notion that American literary naturalism is characterized by a deterministic view of the human condition. In a number of articles and books, Donald Pizer, for instance, has noted that especially in comparison to France, literary naturalism in the United States not only lacked a “social base or center” (“Introduction” 4), but also “philosophical coherence” (*Realism* 36; see also Fluck 207). Instead, Pizer suggests, American literary naturalism uses a large variety of recurring tragic themes and forms to dramatize “‘hard times’ in America—hard times in the sense both of economic decline and of spiritual malaise” (“Introduction” 14). One of these recurring themes or forms is, according to Pizer, the novel of group defeat, “in which a powerful social or economic force causes the fall of a particular class or group of men” (“Three Phases” 34). Interestingly, two of the three examples that Pizer gives for this particular form of American literary naturalism are farm novels—namely, Norris’s *The Octopus* and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁷ These examples indicate that the “powerful social or economic force” that causes the fall of a particular class or group of men (the farmers) is represented not, as one might perhaps assume, by nature and the farm itself, but rather by corporations and trusts that may be adequately described as “machines in the garden.”⁸

To be sure, one might argue that similar to nature with its cycles of seasons and night and day, corporations and trusts, too, are environmental forces that inevitably and, even more importantly, disinterestedly determine the protagonists’ lives. And indeed, this is precisely how the corporations are depicted by their respective representatives in both *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath*: as inevitable, disinterested, impersonal, and soulless forces. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, the “owner men” characterize the banks as inevitable forces that simply cannot be controlled:

No, you’re wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it. (45)

And towards the end of *The Octopus*, Shelgrim, the president of the Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, explicitly ranks the railroad as a force of the same order as nature/the wheat:

“You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. . . . The Wheat is one force, the Railroad,

another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business.” (395)⁹

Using a discourse of determinism and depicting corporations and trusts as inevitable and disinterested forces, similar to nature, the representatives, of course, aim to discourage any action against these forces. What characterizes the “novel of group defeat,” however, is the fact that at least some members of the group do not accept the representatives’ point of view, instead regarding the supposedly intangible and disinterested force as a man-made, interested, and even malevolent construct that, in contrast to forces such as nature, can—and must—be fought. The fact that the “group” ultimately loses its struggle against the corporation may be seen as a confirmation of the point of view that the latter is an inevitable force, but it can also be considered a testimony to the fact that the group’s resistance has not been strong enough.

While at times Pizer’s alternative, thematic approach to American literary naturalism seems to exhibit the very same “Protean slipperiness” that other critics have ascribed to naturalism itself,¹⁰ it nevertheless constitutes a useful critical tool for an analysis of the American farm novel, mainly because it actually allows the phrase “naturalistic farm novel” to regain a meaning. According to the deterministic approach to naturalism, the genre of the farm novel would have to be considered inherently naturalistic, and among the farm novels discussed so far only *Jason Edwards* can be termed naturalistic in Pizer’s sense of the term. Indeed, ultimately the “fall” of Jason Edwards, the failure of his pioneering venture in the West, is not caused by the hailstorm that destroys his wheat crop but by the “syndicate” (160), the land-holding company that not only prints and distributes the misleading “gaudy poster[s]” (61) which lure Edwards westward with promises of free land, but that also forecloses his mortgage (159). Garland’s work, however, can hardly be classified as a “novel of group defeat” since it generally works with personifications rather than abstractions. Just as Edwards represents the “particular class or group of men,” the farmers whose fall the novel depicts, the corporation that causes this fall is personified by Judge S. H. Balser, who simultaneously represents the law, the land-holding company, and even the insurance company (183). To be sure, upon foreclosing Edwards’s mortgage, Balser professes that he is merely an “agent of the syndicate” and repeatedly uses an impersonal “we” (160); yet overall, he is depicted as the quintessential evil “Western land-shark” (128), and the novel thus seems to portray a struggle between two individuals rather than between a “group of men” and a corporation.¹¹ By contrast, *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* take this struggle

to a new level of abstraction, at which all individuals are, or profess to be, “caught in something larger than themselves” (Steinbeck, *Grapes* 42).

Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California*

In a way, *The Octopus*, Norris’s penultimate novel and the first of his projected “Epic of the Wheat” trilogy,¹² is the classic example of the novel of group defeat. Based on the so-called Mussel Slough Affair,¹³ *The Octopus* indeed depicts a supposedly “powerful social or economic force” (the monopolistic Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, the eponymous “Octopus” and a veritable “machine in the garden”) causing the “fall of a particular class or group of men” (the wheat farmers of the San Joaquin Valley in southern California organized in the “League”). Yet it is not Norris’s depiction of the conflict between the Octopus and the League itself, but the highly curious “Conclusion” to his novel that has dominated criticism of *The Octopus*. In this final passage, Presley, the focal point of the novel, recapitulates the conflict between the farmers and the railroad and concludes:

But the WHEAT remained. . . . Through the welter of blood at the irrigating ditch . . . , the great harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India. Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far-distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (448)

Most critics have strongly objected to Presley’s utilitarianism and optimism, considering it “incompatible” (Petterson 86) and utterly inconsistent with “the terrible events in the narrative,” “uncommonly upbeat for a naturalistic text” (Austenfield 36), “outrageous,” and “as hollow, as unconvincing as the typical Hollywood happy ending” (Duncan 56). Simultaneously, critics have employed a variety of strategies to account for Presley’s seemingly unmotivated “cosmic optimism” (Folsom, “Social Darwinism” 393), evoking structural flaws in the novel’s design (Norris’s failure to “create a structure that combined epic and romance in a pattern sustained throughout the narrative,” resulting in a “disjunction of modes” [Machor 52]), Norris’s philosophical background (where “naturalism, Calvinism and American philosophies of evolution provided conflicting impulses” [Petterson 77]), and even his private life (“marital bliss” supposedly coloring the author’s outlook on life [Austenfield 43]).

Whereas these and other critics have taken Presley's optimism at face value, James K. Folsom has suggested that "the conclusion of *The Octopus* might be highly ironic" ("Social Darwinism" 393). And indeed, the novel and especially its Conclusion are singularly reminiscent of Voltaire's 1759 satiric novella *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*. In the latter's "Conclusion," the philosopher Pangloss, after having witnessed most cruel hardships in a picaresque trip around the world, proclaims: "Tous les événemens sont enchainés dans le meilleur des mondes possibles" (Voltaire 224; "All events are concatenated in the best of possible worlds," my translation). Yet, while *Candide* cuts his instructor short and radically narrows the latter's point of view to the farm where he and his friends are now living ("Cela est bien dit, répondit Candide, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin," Voltaire 224; "That is well observed, answered Candide, but we have to cultivate our garden," my translation), Presley does exactly the opposite. Widening his perspective from a focus on the farms of the San Joaquin Valley to a global view that encompasses the "Sierras" and the "Himalayas," California's Central Valley as well as the "barren plains of India," Presley fully endorses the teleological or Leibnizian optimism that *Candide* dismisses and that Norris's critics have complained about. And it is precisely this change in point of view that may be argued to ultimately account for the much-maligned "Conclusion" of *The Octopus*, which, hence, is far from being ironic. In the course of the novel, Norris repeatedly enlarges and constricts Presley's—and the reader's—perspective, sometimes making readers focus on the events close at hand and sometimes allowing readers to see beyond the borders of the San Joaquin Valley. Norris thus creates a "complex vision" (Duncan 57) that, in the end, also sanctions an entirely utilitarian and optimistic reading of the "terrible events in the narrative."

The novel's beginning is a case in point: The subtitle of *The Octopus—A Story of California*—restricts the reader's perspective to the state of California; the "Map of the country described in 'The Octopus'" inserted between the title page and the first chapter further narrows this perspective to a section of Tulare County in the San Joaquin Valley in southern California. Within this heavily circumscribed microcosm the Southwestern & Pacific Railroad indeed appears to act like a "machine in the garden" in Leo Marx's sense of the expression. In a highly symbolic scene at the end of chapter 1, a train runs into a herd of sheep crossing the railroad tracks through a broken fence. Despite its cliché, the scene is powerful, effectively depicting the locomotive—and, by extension, the Railroad Trust—as violently intruding into the agrarian garden and mercilessly destroying its peace and innocence:

Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, Cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path, the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (36)

Throughout *The Octopus*, there are several more images “of the machine’s sudden appearance in the landscape” (Marx 16); again and again the railroad—in the shape of an actual train or in the shape of the corporation that runs it—appears upon the scene when the pastoral mood is at its height. In chapter 2 of book 2, for instance, Hilma, a milkmaid from the Queen Sabe Ranch, contemplates bathing her feet in a creek on her way home, a scene carefully prepared by the description of a thoroughly pastoral painting displaying “a couple of reddish cows, knee-deep in a patch of yellow poppies” and “a girl in a pink dress and white sunbonnet” (213) in the preceding chapter. But suddenly a train “thunder[s] past overhead” (224):

It stormed by with a deafening clamour, and a swirl of smoke, in a long succession of way-coaches, and chocolate-coloured Pullmans, grimy with the dust of the great deserts of the Southwest. The quivering of the trestle’s supports set a tremble in the ground underfoot. (224)

The train literally upsets the pastoral world. Similarly, the news of the Railroad’s regrading of its land grants, henceforth basing their price not on the value of the unimproved but on that of the improved land, reaches the farmers precisely during a huge barn dance at one of the ranches (187). And finally, when all the farmers have left their ranches to celebrate a barbecue in the fields, the Railroad takes advantage of their absence to put its dummy buyers in possession of one of the farms (347), a move that will directly lead to the climactic shootout. Note that all of these scenes take place within the San Joaquin Valley; the only exception here is the death of Mrs. Hooven, which is set in San Francisco. While Presley attends the lavish dinner party at Gerard’s, Mrs. Hooven roams the streets of the city, begging and looking for food for herself and her six-year-old daughter. In paragraphs that grow shorter and shorter, Norris contrasts extremely detailed descriptions of the various dishes served at the dinner party with an almost pathological analysis of Mrs. Hooven’s slow starvation, until at the moment when the guests thank Mrs. Gerard “for a delightful dinner” (421), Mrs. Hooven dies.

Yet the dinner party is also one of the scenes in which Norris suddenly

broadens Presley's perspective. Between the fish course and the entrées, Mrs. Gerard announces to Presley that she has "started a movement to send a whole shipload of wheat to the starving people in India" (416). Taken on its own, the contrast between the feasting dinner guests and the starving Mrs. Hooven would, of course, merely render this statement highly ironic, but it is significant that this incident occurs in San Francisco, outside the microcosm of the San Joaquin Valley. Indeed, whenever Presley actually leaves the valley, his—as well as the reader's—image of the Railroad as an all-powerful and destructive machine in the garden is somewhat disturbed. It is in San Francisco that S. Behrman, the seemingly intangible and indestructible local agent of the Railroad in the San Joaquin Valley and the "arch-enemy" (332) of the farmers, who miraculously survives two assassination attempts, meets an unexpected—and, for the reader, emotionally cathartic—death when he falls into the cargo hold of a wheat ship and is buried under the grain. And it is in San Francisco that Presley enters the (to him) surprisingly unpretentious General Office of the Pacific & Southwestern Railroad to meet the Trust's president, Shelgrim. But whereas to the farmers in the valley, the latter embodies the "machine" of the Railroad even more than S. Behrman does, Presley is disturbed to discover that the president is not "an ogre, a brute, a terrible man of blood and iron," but "a sentimentalist and an art critic" (394), who instead of firing an employee prone to drunkenness doubles the latter's income to "see how that will do" (393). Perhaps even more important, it is also in San Francisco that Presley discovers that in fact, "there is no real moral opposition between the ranchers on the one hand and the railroaders on the other" (Folsom, "Wheat" 68). Indeed, the farmers in the valley are no "bucolic agrarianists" (Zalkan 38), but, like the Railroad, they too act like "machines in the garden":

They had no love for the land. They were not attached to the soil. They worked their ranches as a quarter of a century before they had worked their mines. . . . To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. (204)

Hence, the monopoly of the railroad complements rather than contrasts with the reckless monoculture of the farmers. Presley's point of view having thus been widened from a local to a more global perspective during the time spent in San Francisco, his notions of "good" and "evil" are destabilized and he is forced to realize that the struggle between farmers and Railroad may not actually be as morally clear as it seemed to be within the microcosm of the valley.

Moreover, even in the confines of the San Joaquin Valley Norris repeatedly broadens Presley's perspective to a more global view, in which the wheat, and not the Octopus, represents the true, beneficial force of the story. Already in the first chapter, for instance, shortly before the train kills the sheep, Presley climbs up a hill from which he can overlook the entire valley. From this point of view, the 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" (33). And from this somewhat global perspective, Presley suddenly realizes that it was "the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, . . . slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world" (33).¹⁴ Upon two more occasions (307; 435–36), Presley figuratively and/or literally climbs the hill and looks beyond the borders of the San Joaquin Valley; and each time he stresses the role of the wheat as the God-given nourishment of the people, the "primordial energy flung out from the hand of the Lord God himself, immortal, calm, infinitely strong" (436).

However, Presley's "complex vision," combining both his global, macrocosmic, and his local, microcosmic, perspectives on the "terrible events in the narrative," calls for and indeed yields two different conclusions. While still in the valley, Presley writes a socialistic poem, "The Toilers," and holds a fiery speech at the last meeting of the farmer's League. Ironically, in the poem as well as in the speech, he expresses precisely the moral outrage and indignation at the Railroad's conduct that critics have found so lacking in Presley's "Conclusion" at the end of the novel. It is important to note that at the time Presley gives his speech, the San Joaquin Valley is still isolated. Lest the farmers should tell their own version of the shoot-out to the press, the Railroad has cut off all train, mail, and telegram traffic from and to the valley: "The story of the fight, the story creating the first impression, was to be told to San Francisco and the outside world by S. Behrman, Ruggles, and the local P. and S. W. agents" (371). Just as no information can emanate from the valley, however, none too can come in—Presley's speech stems from an entirely local, microcosmic perspective of the events. Similarly, when he draws his final, optimistic and utilitarian "Conclusion" after his visit to San Francisco, Presley is on board the ship that is carrying the wheat of the San Joaquin Valley to India, a position from which he cannot even see the valley anymore, from which it is (geographically and mentally) "already far distant from him" (446).

In a way, then, *The Octopus* features two "Conclusions," both of which, incidentally, have fallen flat with their respective audiences. Just as after his speech, Presley "knew that . . . he had not once held the hearts of his audience" (379), critics of Norris's novel have accused the final "Conclusion" of not being "emotionally convincing" (Pizer, *Novels* 146). Yet, as has been shown, this conclusion is no longer (solely) concerned with the "terrible events" that have happened within the San Joaquin Valley but rather stems from a global, macrocosmic perspective that also takes into account what is happening outside—most importantly, the story of the wheat's being sown, harvested, and shipped to India to save "a thousand lives" (448). And while such an optimistic and utilitarian conclusion may indeed seem inconsistent and inadequate with respect to a naturalistic "Story of California," it fits perfectly into the "Epic of the Wheat."

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Like *The Octopus*, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps still, as John H. Timmerman wrote in 1986, "the most thoroughly discussed novel . . . of 20th-century American literature" (102), may also be classified as a novel of group defeat. In fact, the novel even features two typically "naturalistic" struggles which are, however, both located or set outside the novel proper. One is the struggle between the newly formed group of people and the corporations that the novel is warning its readers against (a struggle, however, which never occurred, post-Depression history having proved Steinbeck wrong); the other is the farmers' fighting for "their" land in Oklahoma, a fight they have already lost at the beginning of chapter 1 but that nevertheless serves as the background of the novel. Yet the main theme of *The Grapes of Wrath* is arguably not the naturalistic struggle between a group of men and a corporation or trust, but group formation, "the education of the Joad family . . . towards an ideal of cooperation" (Chametzky 36). Indeed, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Warren French insists, the Joads "learn that survival depends upon their adapting to new conditions" (25)—in order to survive, they need to learn to replace the old concept of "famby . . . fust" (606) with a concept of "all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang" (110). The family's education towards "pluralization" (in the literal sense of the term, "from 'I' to 'we';" 206) culminates in the final scene of the novel, in which Rose of Sharon, formerly the (expectant) mother of one child, symbolically becomes the foster mother of all mankind through her breastfeeding a starving stranger. This ending has baffled readers and critics at least as much as Frank Norris's "Conclusion" to *The Octopus*—

and, one may assume, for exactly the same reason. In the face of terrible events (Rose of Sharon's stillbirth and the flood in *The Grapes of Wrath*; the deaths of Magnus Derrick, Annixter, and others in *The Octopus*), the endings of both novels testify to Steinbeck's and Norris's optimism, that is, their belief in the perseverance and progress of mankind or the "indestructible life force of the people" (Groene 130). Just as Presley maintains that though the individual may suffer, "the race goes on" (448), Rose of Sharon's selfless act and especially her mysterious smile (619) beautifully illustrate what her mother proclaimed earlier in the novel:

"Why, Tom—us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people—we go on." (383)

Yet, in contrast to *The Octopus*, the optimistic ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* is not motivated by a change of perspective. Just as does Norris, Steinbeck provides the reader with two different points of view on the events—or rather, the economic and social situation—he wishes to depict, a "macrocosmic" and a "microcosmic" point of view. Unlike Norris, however, Steinbeck, in order to achieve this effect, does not use a character with a "complex vision," a character whose perspective—depending on his or her geographical location—repeatedly constricts and enlarges. Instead, he employs a more formal or structural device, the so-called intercalary chapters or interchapters. Starting with such an interchapter, Steinbeck regularly alternates intercalary and "Joad" chapters (except for the interchapters 11 and 14, which are both followed not by a "Joad," but rather by another interchapter), with the "Joad" chapters usually taking up the setting and the subject matter of the preceding intercalary chapter, but replacing the (mostly nameless) characters of the interchapters with individual members of the Joad family. The effect thus achieved is one of constantly zooming in and out. As Louis Owens notes,

[T]he most obvious value of the intercalary chapters is to provide the big picture, to ensure the reader's awareness of the panoramic dimensions of this socioeconomic tragedy. . . . Through the interchapters we feel the scope and dimension of the Dust Bowl drama; through the narrative chapters we experience the tragedy of one family on a personal, intimate level. (109)

Using the medium of film, Steinbeck would employ the same technique two years later in *The Forgotten Village* (1941), a documentary film about a small Mexican village for which he wrote the screenplay (Hansen 111–12). In the introduction to the book version of *The Forgotten Village*, Steinbeck notes:

A great many documentary films have used the generalized method, that is, the showing of a condition or an event as it affects a group of people. The audience can then have a personalized reaction from imagining one member of that group. . . . In *The Forgotten Village* we reversed the usual process. Our story centered on one family in a small village. We wished our audience to know the family well, and incidentally to like it, as we did. Then, from association with this little personalized group, the larger conclusion concerning the racial group could be drawn with something like participation. (1)

To be sure, establishing such a clean-cut distinction between the intercalary chapters and the "Joad" chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*—the former exclusively using a macrocosmic perspective to provide the reader with historical background information, the latter zooming in to personalize the story in order to make readers feel empathy—is not always possible or accurate. Already in the first two paragraphs of the first (intercalary) chapter, as Louis Owens observes, Steinbeck uses not only a broad, panoramic perspective ("To the red country and part of the grey country of Oklahoma the last rains came gently" 3) but also extreme close-ups ("a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet" 3; see Owens 113). This close-up perspective is continued in the next interchapter (the famous chapter 3), which focuses on a turtle trying to cross a highway. As the story continues, however, the turtle, as virtually no critic has failed to notice, reveals itself as a symbol of the will to survive that somehow instinctively leads the Oklahoma farmers—including the Joads—to California. When the turtle reappears in chapter 4 (a "Joad" chapter), it thus not only announces the Joads' migration, of which both Tom and Casy are still ignorant at this point, but also invests this "close-up" chapter with a "panoramic" point of view. Generally, however, from intercalary chapter to "Joad" chapter and back to interchapter, the movement of the narrative perspective is indeed one of constriction and subsequent enlargement or expansion, from macrocosmic to microcosmic point of view and back.

In stark contrast to *The Octopus*, however, the microcosmic perspective of the "Joad" chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* does not conflict with the narrative's "cosmic" optimism; and neither is this optimism exclusively sustained by a macrocosmic perspective on the "terrible events." Focusing on the first (intercalary) chapter, Louis Owens argues that from a distance,

the drought-wasted land is lovely, a sweeping panorama of pastels; up close, the picture becomes one of horror, but only in human terms. For the sharecroppers this is a tragedy; the larger picture suggests that the

tragedy is limited, transient, that the earth abides beyond man's errors and shortsightedness. (113)

This may partly apply to the first chapter, but already in the first sentence the "lovely" land of pastels is disfigured by scars (3). What the "larger picture" of the interchapters really suggests, in fact, is not that "the tragedy is limited," as Owens concludes, but rather that it is not limited to the Joads. In contrast to *The Octopus*, the macrocosmic perspective of *The Grapes of Wrath* does not offer the readers "a thousand lives" on the "barren plains of India" (Norris, *Octopus* 448), where the lives saved counterbalance the deaths of a few Californian farmers; it only offers them more Joads, more suffering people. Indeed, the tragedy of *The Grapes of Wrath* is a universal tragedy, in which everybody is "caught up in something larger than themselves" (42).

By contrast, the microcosmic perspective, far from exclusively focusing on the tragedy as in *The Octopus*, does offer reasons to believe in the perseverance and progress of mankind. As has been noted, in *The Grapes of Wrath* the survival of the people depends on their ability and willingness to share and cooperate, resulting in a "pluralization" of the people. The famous passage describing the beginning of this movement is located in the intercalary chapter 14: "Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. . . . This is the beginning—from 'I' to 'We'" (206). The process "from 'I' to 'We'" is beautifully illustrated in the following chapter—also an intercalary chapter—when Mae sells bread and candy for much less than their original price and when the two truck drivers leave a generous tip. The perspective of this interchapter, however, can hardly be called "panoramic" or "macrocosmic"—once again, Steinbeck has zoomed in. More importantly, the very first time that cooperation is mentioned as a means of survival and struggle in the novel occurs in chapter 8, a "Joad" chapter, when Ma urges,

"Tommy, don't you go fightin' 'em alone. . . . Tommy, I got to thinkin' an' dreamin' an' wonderin'. They say there's a hun'erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all made the same way, Tommy—they wouldn't hunt nobody down—" (104)

A few pages later (but still in chapter 8), Casy expresses the same thought while giving grace:

"I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing. . . . But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy." (110)

Starting with these remarks by Ma and Casy, one by one the other members of the Joad family are converted to the new ideal of cooperation and the group-family, while those members who resist conversion are successively eliminated from the novel. Even before the family arrives in California, Grampa and Granma, representing a somewhat ruthless pioneer individualism, both die, Noah disappears down the river—not unlike the apple box containing Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby, but in contrast to the baby, Noah is not expected to "[g]o down an' tell 'em" (609)—and Connie, unable to take on responsibilities, simply disappears. The other family members, however, learn their lesson: Tom commits himself to the socialist cause, Uncle John offers some of the money he has saved to get drunk, Pa gets the men organized to build a dam ("We could do her if ever'body helped" 594), Al agrees to stay with the family at least until spring and builds a platform to keep the family possessions dry (607), and even little Ruthie, following the croquet incident at the government camp, is now willing to share her flower petals with Winfield (615–16). This succession of conversions culminates, of course, with that of Rose of Sharon in the barn scene in chapter 30. In this scene Rose of Sharon, who had previously been totally oblivious to the others' needs and completely absorbed in her pregnancy and her grief about Connie's leaving, becomes part of the group-family and thus completes the Joads' education toward "pluralization" by nursing a starving stranger. Incidentally, it is highly significant and fitting that the last scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* is set on a farm, in an (abandoned) barn. As George Bluestone observes, "The deprivation of the native land, and the alienation of the new, become more than economic disasters; they threaten the only social organization upon which Ma Joad can depend [the family]" (86). Back on the farm and on land that is, at least temporarily, their own, however, the Joads not only gain a new identity as members of the group of mankind, but they also reach a new level of human dignity by saving the life of a complete stranger and, symbolically, the life of all mankind.

Most importantly, however, this scene, the ultimate confirmation of Ma's prediction that the race will "go on" (383), occurs in a "Joad" chapter and even ends on an extreme close-up, when Steinbeck focuses on Rose of Sharon's lips and her mysterious smile (619). In addition, the corresponding intercalary chapter, chapter 29, also ends on a positive note, using a broad panorama and, again, pastel colors:

And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right—the break had not come . . . Tiny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning year. (592)

Hence, in stark contrast to Norris's *The Octopus*, the optimism of *The Grapes of Wrath* is not restricted to and does not solely depend on a "global," "macrocosmic" perspective—that is, structurally, the intercalary chapters. Quite in contrast, Steinbeck effectively juxtaposes and reconciles tragic suffering and optimism in macrocosmic and microcosmic perspectives alike.

Corpses and Corporate Fictions

The endings of both *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* feature depictions of corpses. In *The Octopus*, the dead body of S. Behrman is lying in the cargo hold of a wheat ship, which is floating in the Pacific Ocean on its way to India, where the wheat will save "a thousand lives" (448). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the apple box that contains the dead body of Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby is floating down the river to the street, where it will "tell 'em" (609) about the sufferings of the migrant farm workers. Taken on their own, and irrespective of their actual meanings within the contexts of the two novels (for instance, S. Behrman, the victimizer, becoming his own victim), the images of the corpses of S. Behrman and Rose of Sharon's baby floating in water symbolize the human condition within a deterministic naturalistic universe, perhaps even more so than Theodore Dreiser's comparison of Sister Carrie to "an anchorless, storm-beaten little craft which could do absolutely nothing but drift" (237): Completely bereft of a free will and driven exclusively by forces beyond their control, these corpses can, indeed, do nothing but drift.¹⁵

In the context of the American farm novel, a deterministic conception of literary naturalism, however, as has been argued in this article, ultimately leads to a sort of critical dead-end. With their lives structured by the yearly and daily rhythms of nature, farmers are constantly confronted with (natural) forces quite beyond their control; and hence, the farm novel, depicting nature's deterministic impact on the farmer, may be argued to represent an inherently naturalistic genre. In other words, the farm novel can be argued to show (deterministic) naturalism not only in *a*, but, indeed, in *its* natural environment.

In order to avoid this theoretical "trap" and keep the expression "a naturalistic farm novel" from becoming a mere pleonasm, this article has turned from deterministic to thematic conceptions of literary naturalism. With the help of the work of literary critics such as Donald Pizer, corporate fiction (the "novel of group defeat") has been identified as one of the most important (novelistic) forms of expression of literary naturalism in America. And in fact, only two farm novels may be considered naturalistic

according to this particular conception of literary naturalism, *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. According to this approach, too, the drifting corpses in *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* play an essential role. After all, the corpse floating in the sea of wheat in the cargo hold of the wheat ship in Norris's novel is that of S. Behrman, who (among others) personifies the Pacific & Southwestern Railroad, the corporation that ultimately causes the fall of the wheat farmers of the San Joaquin Valley. And the corpse of Rose of Sharon's stillborn baby will, just as does Steinbeck's novel itself, tell about the fall of the migrant farm workers in California.

Yet what really unites *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* is the stunning contrast between the "terrible events in the narrative[s]" and the seemingly incongruous and inconsistent optimistic endings. The two novels offer their readers different macrocosmic and microcosmic perspectives on these "terrible events," panoramic shots and close-ups. But whereas Presley's optimistic and utilitarian "Conclusion" is motivated by a change from a microcosmic to a macrocosmic perspective, both points of view—and especially the microcosmic point of view—sustain the optimistic conclusion of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* show that despite the fact that literary naturalism may have been "in ill repute" (Pizer, *Twentieth* x) in the United States, American writers have nevertheless produced intriguing and fascinating naturalistic farm novels. Perhaps naturalism works best in a/natural environment.

NOTES

1. Most notably, Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Interestingly, this also applies to the two other "national" literatures of North America, the literatures of English and French Canada. See, for example, Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) and Frederick Philip Grove's *The Yoke of Life* (1930), in the case of English-Canadian; and Rodolphe Girard's *Marie Calumet* (1904) as well as Albert Laberge's *La Scouine* (1918), in the case of French-Canadian literature.

2. For a wider definition of the term "farm novel," see Vernois 16; for a narrower definition, see Meyer 7–12.

3. Both *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are somewhat "unusual" farm novels in the sense that they are not set on owner-operated homestead farms but on wheat bonanzas (in the case of *The Octopus*), and that their protagonists no longer work as independent farmers, but as dependent workers in agribusiness surroundings (in the case of the "California" section of *The Grapes of Wrath*). Ultimately, however, the Joads go to California with the hope of owning a farm again. And in fact, this hope is not as

illusory as it may seem, since in the history of American agriculture, hiring out, tenancy, and sharecropping were often but steps in the process towards farm ownership (see Atack, et al. 321).

4. See Walcutt 23; Åhnebrink vi; Furst and Skrine 18; Fried and Hakutani 17; Conder vii.

5. Note that in his preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, where he first uses the term “naturalisme,” Zola stresses, above all, the influence of heredity and the pressures of the moment on his characters (262).

6. Howe, Frederic, and Garland were by no means the first American writers to dismiss the cult of the yeoman. As early as in 1852, the narrator of Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* notes that supposedly purifying and spiritually renewing farm work merely turns his thoughts “cloddish” (61).

7. Pizer’s third example, Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), is a war novel. Pizer does not mention John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*. Published three years before *The Grapes of Wrath*, this novel depicts a strike among itinerant farm workers in California. However, Steinbeck focuses less on the conflict between the farm workers and the landowners and more on the motivations of Jim and Mac, the two members of the Communist Party who organize the strike. Arguably, *In Dubious Battle* is a political rather than a farm novel.

8. In his approach to American literary naturalism, Walter Benn Michaels dedicates an entire chapter to what he refers to as “corporate fiction,” a chapter that focuses, incidentally, on Norris’s *The Octopus* (see 181–213). Michaels, too, does not mention Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*.

9. S. Behrman even depicts himself as a disinterested and intangible force: “Tut, tut, Presley, you know you can’t make me angry” (430).

10. For instance, if, as Pizer maintains, literary naturalism in the United States does not consistently subscribe to a deterministic view of the human condition, why does the movement’s core, as he claims, still appear “to rest on the relationship between a restrictive social and intellectual environment and the consequent impoverishment both of social opportunity and of the inner life” (“Introduction” 13)?

11. For a similar analysis of Josiah Royce’s *The Feud at Oakfield Creek* (1886), see Michaels.

12. The “Epic of the Wheat” was to consist of three novels which would be “in no way connected with each other save only in their relation to (1) the production, (2) the distribution, (3) the consumption of American wheat” (Norris, “Note” n.p.). However, shortly after he had published the second novel of the series, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1902), and before he was able to begin research on *The Wolf: A Story of Europe*, Norris died, leaving the project unfinished.

13. The Mussel Slough Affair was a highly publicized 1880 dispute over land titles between farmers in the San Joaquin Valley, California, and the Southern Pacific Railroad in which seven men were killed and which inspired not only Norris’s *The Octopus* but also Josiah Royce’s *The Feud of Oakfield Creek* (1887) and other fictional writings; see Beers.

14. Here Norris refers to the earth as “colossus”: He uses precisely the same term—albeit capitalized—three pages later to refer to a train.

15. The two most important Canadian naturalistic farm novels, Albert Laberge's *La Scouine* (1918) and Frederick Philip Grove's *The Yoke of Life* (1930), likewise feature dead bodies floating in water, namely, in *La Scouine*, the body of Le Schno, whose grave is slowly flooded by the rain (Laberge 100), and, in *The Yoke of Life*, the bodies of Len Sterner and Lydia Hausman, who travel down the rapids in a boat, "floating towards their destiny" (Grove 301) on a trip "in which they have very little personal control over their direction" (Ricou 53) and which is to end in a violent death.

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