



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism

Author(s): Walter Benn Michaels

Source: *Representations*, No. 9, Special Issue: American Culture Between the Civil War and World War I (Winter, 1985), pp. 105-132

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3043767>

Accessed: 22/02/2011 06:05

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Representations*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism

Democracy is threatened not only by armies but by debt and austerity. We must liberalize the trade of the world and give the world again a money it can rely on, a dollar "as good as gold."

—Rep. Jack Kemp, in a speech before the Republican Convention, 1984

WHY DOES the miser save? Trina McTeague, writes Frank Norris, saved “without knowing why”—“without any thought, without idea of consequence—saving for the sake of saving.”¹ But to say that Trina saved for the sake of saving doesn’t so much explain her behavior as identify the behavior in need of explanation: why would anyone save just for the sake of saving? Psychology in the late nineteenth century had begun to question whether anyone actually did. The “common lot of misers,” according to William James, “value their gold, not for its own sake, but for its powers. Demonetize it, and see how quickly they will get rid of it.”² In fact, as the economist Ottomar Haupt wrote in January 1897, “a certain tendency of hoarding had been developing” in the United States, “brought about by the fear of free coinage of silver, and coupled with the hope that later on a substantial premium might be obtained for gold.”³ These hoarders were clearly not saving for the sake of saving and, after Bryan’s defeat in 1896, when, as Haupt puts it, “the cause for the alarm had been removed, everybody was glad to get rid of his gold coin. . . .”⁴ Trina, however, is never glad to get rid of her gold. She does, on one occasion, speak of herself as saving up “some money against a rainy day” (187), but it is perfectly clear that not even the election of William Jennings Bryan could make the day rainy enough for her to start thinking of her hoard as an investment or a speculation, much less provide an occasion for her to spend it. Why, then, does Trina save?

The power that James thinks misers love is, of course, the power to buy and, in arguing against the associationist notion that misers had developed an attachment to “gold in se,” he was insisting that the miser’s real interest was in money. But this, if true, only underlines the puzzle of the miser’s behavior, since if he just loved saving gold we could think of him as a collector who loved gold the way some people love stamps, whereas what he seems to love instead is the power to buy, while at the same time he refuses ever to exercise that power. In extreme cases, James thought, this could only be described as “insanity.” The “common” miser, however, the “excessively niggardly man,” “simply exhibits the psycholog-

ical law that the potential has often a far greater influence over our mind than the actual. A man will not marry now, because to do so puts an end to his indefinite potentialities of choice of a partner. He prefers the latter" (2:423). And this analysis was extended by Georg Simmel, who, in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), denies that the miser has any interest at all in the "possible uses of money." Rather, the miser experiences "the power that money-stored-up represents . . . as the final and absolutely satisfying value."⁵ This power would be "lost" if "it were to be transposed into the enjoyment of specific things." "Old people," Simmel remarks, become avaricious because, "subjectively," "the sensual enjoyment of life has lost its charm," and the "ideals" have lost their "agitating power." With nothing to buy and nothing to look forward to buying, they take pleasure in the "abstract power" of money itself, the "absolute means" of buying.

As a description of Trina, however, this clearly won't do—not only because Trina isn't old and because her life notoriously retains a good deal of its "sensual charm," but because Trina's miserliness, as Norris describes it, doesn't exactly consist in a refusal to spend. It is true, of course, that she won't buy clothes, and that she spends as little as possible on rent, and that she "grudged even the food that she and McTeague ate," preferring to steal scraps from a "coffee-joint" and "enjoying the meal with the greater relish because it cost her nothing" (166–67). But the moment in which Trina's "avarice had grown to be her one dominant passion" (198) is depicted by Norris not as an absolute refusal to spend any money but as an absolute unwillingness to forgo the pleasure of having "her money in hand," even if that means paying for it. Thus she gradually withdraws her capital from Uncle Oelbermann's store, "reducing her monthly income" (200) but obtaining for herself "an ecstasy of delight." Norris here represents her saving as a kind of spending, not only because she pays for her gold with her monthly income but also because refusing to use her gold to pay for food, she is spending it instead on the gold itself.

Simmel gives an example that shows why this must be so. Noting that the "wampum of the North American Indians consisted of mussel shells, which served as money but could also be worn as a decorative belt," he pointed out that the "role of the shells as jewelry" acquires "an air of distinction by virtue of the fact that it requires abstention from using them directly as money."⁶ What he seems to imagine here is something like the associationists' collection of gold. But why should we say that using the shells as jewelry involves abstaining from using them as money? Shouldn't we say instead that the shells as jewelry have been paid for by the shells as money, and that the "air of distinction" Simmel acutely ascribes to the belt derives precisely from the fact that it is at every moment of its existence as a belt being paid for by its existence as money? The only difference between Trina and the Indian is that Trina places no value on her gold as decoration, as what Simmel calls an "object." In this account, the attraction of gold is indeed its

power to buy, but a power that the miser exercises neither (like the Indian) by buying objects nor (like avaricious old people) by refraining from buying objects, but instead (like Trina) by buying money. According to Norris, then, what Marx called the miser's "asceticism" is in fact a "debauch," her hoard is a sort of perpetual buying machine, and she herself is a spendthrift.

But if the miser is a spendthrift, what is the spendthrift? Why does the spendthrift spend? This question seems at first sight less puzzling than the question about why the miser saves, no doubt because spending money, even foolishly, finds its place more easily than saving in what Simmel characterizes as the normal transaction in a money economy—the movement from "possession of money" to "expenditure of money upon the object" to "enjoyment through the ownership of the object."⁷ When, for example, Vandover, Norris's spendthrift, begins "flinging away money with both hands," he does it by chartering "a yacht for a ten-days cruise about the bay," buying "a fresh suit of clothes each month," and recklessly giving "suppers" to "actresses."⁸ And while it is easy to imagine circumstances in which such expenditures might be unwise (Vandover's, for instance), the objects and activities Vandover buys don't seem in themselves implausible sources of enjoyment. But, according to Simmel, the recklessness of expenditure is not in itself the mark of the spendthrift:

The pleasure associated with squandering is attached to the moment of spending money upon any object whatsoever, and has to be distinguished from the pleasure provided by the fleeting enjoyment of objects . . . rather it relates to the pure function of squandering without regard to its substantial content and attendant circumstances.⁹

The spendthrift buys objects, then, not really because he likes the objects but because he likes buying; he likes, Simmel says, "the moment of transposition of money into other forms of value."¹⁰

Put with Simmel's clarity, this is not a difficult point to grasp, but the difficulty of distinguishing in practice between spending for objects and spending, as we might put it, for the sake of spending may be considerable. Since even spending for the sake of spending involves buying something, how can we know that the spendthrift's "nonsensical purchases" don't appear to him as plausible objects of desire, worth buying for the pleasure they will bring? When Norris describes Vandover's pleasure in spending as a "hysterical delight," he certainly alerts us to its unusual character, but, narrating Vandover's "degeneration," he betrays a certain confusion about what kind of spending really is degenerate. Having made \$15,000 from the sale of his "old home," Vandover "gambled or flung" the money "away in a little less than a year":

He never invested it, but ate into it day after day, sometimes to pay his gambling debts, sometimes to indulge an absurd and extravagant whim, sometimes to pay his bill at the

Lick House, and sometimes for no reason at all, moved simply by a reckless desire for spending. (290)

The difficulty here is that some of these expenditures seem perfectly reasonable (he has to pay his hotel bill), some of them seem at least imaginably reasonable (the gambling debts), and some of them seem to go beyond even “nonsensical purchases” (“for no reason at all”). Only the “absurd and extravagant whim” presents a clear-cut case of spending for the sake of spending, no doubt because, although these whims clearly involve buying something, by not telling us what Vandover buys Norris focuses all our attention on the act of buying itself.

But taxonomizing Vandover’s expenses in this way may do more than indicate Norris’s confusion; it may lead to a different way of understanding the spendthrift’s efforts. Paying his hotel bill, Vandover buys an “object,” or, at least, the use of one. Paying his gambling debts, Vandover buys “excitement”: “It was not with any hope of winning that he gambled . . . it was only the love of the excitement of the moment” (289). But the excitement of Vandover’s gambling is not just any kind of excitement. It is not, for instance, the excitement of the football game that he passes up for another game of cards. It is not even the excitement of perhaps winning a great deal of money—the “desire of money was never strong” in Vandover. It is instead the excitement of losing money. What you buy when you pay your gambling debts, Norris seems to suggest, is the excitement of paying your gambling debts, a purchase that seems nonsensical only because it doesn’t seem like a purchase at all. The excitement bought by the ordinary gambler is nonsensical because, although he hopes to win, he knows he is likely to lose. He pays for the excitement of seeing what will happen to his money. But Vandover doesn’t so much pay for excitement; rather he is excited by paying. Spending his money on spending his money, he comes as close as Norris can get to spending his money “for no reason at all,” to the pleasure not exactly of buying but rather of spending without buying.

Simmel’s spendthrift loves buying; he loves the “transposition of money into other forms of value.” But Norris’s spendthrift loves buying *nothing*; into what then is his money transposed? From the standpoint, at least, of the spendthrift himself, into nothing—his money simply disappears. And this indeed seems to be Norris’s point. It is as if, from the spendthrift’s point of view, the miser’s refusal to spend money represents a failed attempt to withdraw from the money economy, failed because in a money economy, the power of money to buy can never be denied. It will always at least buy itself. Going the miser one better, the spendthrift tries to buy his way out of the money economy. If the miser is always exchanging his money for itself, the spendthrift tries to exchange his for nothing and so, by staging the disappearance of money’s purchasing power, to stage the disappearance of money itself. The spendthrift thus embodies a return to what Ignatius

Donnelly in *The American People's Money* called "barbarism," the condition of having "no money at all."¹¹

For Donnelly, the threat of a society without money seemed a direct consequence of adherence to the gold standard. Having demonetized silver in the "crime of '73" and thus cut the money supply in half, the "Wall Street Misers" now wanted "to drive gold out of circulation" and to bring about a return to the "Dark Ages," which, in Donnelly's view, had originally been caused by the gradual exhaustion of the gold and silver mines of Spain. Without any new sources of money,

The supply diminished; the usurer plied his arts and the capitalist grasped the real estate; all wealth was concentrated in a few hands, just as it is becoming today; and the multitude were reduced to the lowest limit of degradation and wretchedness.¹²

Only the free coinage of silver could keep money in circulation and save the American people from a similar fate.

But if the imagination of a society without money held obvious terrors for free silverites, who feared that the world's supply of gold was disappearing from circulation, it also played a central role in the economic imagination of goldbugs, who were convinced that there was more than enough money to go around. For them, the moneyless society, "but one remove from barbarism," as David Wells put it, was the inevitable starting point for an evolutionary history of finance that culminated in what numerous writers, Wells among them, called the "natural selection" of gold as money.¹³ In his own *Robinson Crusoe's Money* (first published in the 1870s as an anti-Greenback tract and reprinted in 1896 as an attack on free silver), Wells imagines Crusoe's wreck as a Donnelly-like return to economic savagery, where nothing has any "purchasing power," but he goes on to narrate the islanders' natural development through barter to the exchange of cowries and finally to the discovery of gold, which, stumbled upon accidentally, soon became "an object of universal desire," "acquired spontaneously a universal purchasing power, and from that moment on, became *Money*" (40). Only when, under the stress of financing their war with the cannibals, the islanders begin to print paper money and then mistake that paper (the "representative of a thing") for gold (the "thing itself") do they run into trouble.

For Wells and the other goldbugs, the moral of such stories was that economic disaster could be brought on not, as Donnelly thought, by the disappearance of gold but rather by any attempt to tamper with its "natural purchasing power." At the same time, however, imagining money as a "thing itself," the sort of thing, for example, that the world might run out of, the gold conservatives and the silver radicals held in common a view of money that was in certain respects more powerful than their differences. As against the Greenbackers or fiat-money men like Tom Nugent, who advocated the use of "inconvertible paper,"¹⁴ gold and

silver men both stood for a currency backed by metal. "Nothing," Wells wrote, "can be reliable and good money under all circumstances which does not of itself possess the full amount of the value which it professes on its face to possess" (26). The value of money was thus, in Coin Harvey's word, "intrinsic,"¹⁵ the value of the thing, gold or silver, money was made of.

What is most obviously striking about this conception of money, of course, is that it identifies money as a kind of natural resource, like coal or cows. And thus identifying money with its physical form, one can come to think that the supply of money in the world is identical to the supply of gold (and/or silver) in the world. To think (as the fiat-money men did) that "paper money" could supplement or replace precious metals was to succumb to what Wells called a "mere fiction of speech and bad use of language," for paper could only represent money; it could no more be money that "a shadow could be the substance, or the picture of a horse a horse, or the smell of a good dinner the same as the dinner itself" (57). Hence Trina, dissatisfied with the "paper" that "represented five thousand dollars" given her by Uncle Oelbermann, demands what she thinks of as "the money itself" (199). And hence one of the climactic moments of *Coin's Financial School* (the most popular of the free-silver tracts) takes place when Coin, the "little bimettallist," demonstrates to a shocked audience that all the gold in the world would fit inside the Chicago wheat pit. Richard Hofstadter cites this episode as an example of Harvey's "staggering gift for irrelevancy,"¹⁶ and, in a certain sense, he is obviously right: "No one was disposed to deny that gold was a scarce commodity."¹⁷ But, given just this fact and given also the general identification of money with precious metals, Coin has made a telling point.

If money is a commodity like horses or wheat, then what he and the other bimettallists feared was a scarcity of gold precisely in the same way that people might fear a scarcity of wheat. Thus the radical polemics of the '90s are filled with detailed accounts of exactly how much gold and silver there were in the world, accounts motivated by the fear that if one day there should be no more gold or silver, then on that day there would be no more money. And conservative polemics as late as 1900 are similarly dominated by the distinction between "*Real Money*," which is "always a *commodity* of some kind," and "*Representative Money*," which is "nothing but a *promise*,"¹⁸ distinctions mobilized to warn against the folly of trying to print or coin more money than the world naturally contained.

"In civilized nations," wrote Wells, "natural selection has determined the use of gold as a standard." But this attempt, common to gold and silver men both, to see the precious metals as nature's money embodied a rather complicated sense of the place of a money economy in nature. For in insisting that "good money" must "of itself possess the full amount of the value which it professes on its face to possess" (26), writers like Wells were insisting that the value of money as money be determined by (and indeed identical to) the value of money as the

commodity it would be if it weren't money. Gold thus occupies a strange position in the movement from a barter economy, exchanging commodities for each other, to a money economy, exchanging commodities for money. As money, of course, it replaces barter, but since its value as money is only a function of its value as a commodity, the exchange of any commodity for gold as money is identical to the exchange of that commodity for gold as a commodity. All money exchanges, in other words, are also simultaneously barter exchanges, and the "intrinsic" value that fits the precious metals to be money guarantees at the same time that nothing ever really need be money. The assertion that money exists in nature is thus identical to the assertion that money doesn't exist at all. Defending gold or silver, the money writers end up articulating an economic theory that, in its most outlandish and fetishized claims on behalf of "real" or "primary" money, actually stages for itself, like Vandover giving in to the brute, the escape from a money economy.

This fantasy, in which the circulation of currency becomes a natural phenomenon and in which money itself is always either threatening or promising to return to nature, would seem to find its most powerful figure in the miser, whose savings deplete the supply of circulating money and whose perfectly fetishized love of money is already a love of the material money is made of, gold. Identifying money with its physical form, the commodity gold, the miser makes the existence of money in one sense precarious and in another sense superfluous—precarious because to take away the commodity is to take away everything, superfluous because to add anything to the commodity is to add nothing. Hence the threat is that money will disappear and the world will lapse into "barbarism," while the promise is that only a money that might disappear could possess the "natural purchasing power" required by "civilized nations." But we have already seen how Trina's saving fails to deter her money from being money, and, as *McTeague's* plot develops, she can't even keep her gold out of general circulation. McTeague, with his "old-time miner's idea of wealth easily gained and quickly spent" (75), steals it, causing Trina "unspeakable anguish" as she correctly imagines him "spending her savings by handfuls; squandering her beautiful gold pieces that she had been at such pains to polish with soap and ashes" (198).

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from Trina's failure that the miser's theory of money goes unenforced in *McTeague*. Instead, it is McTeague himself, despite his temperamental (and, as a former miner, professional) inclination to circulate gold, who bears the responsibility for staging its disappearance and so confirming its natural value. For one thing, he is a dentist—in the iconography of the 1890s, a kind of anti-miner. "There is good reason to believe," worried a speaker at the Bryan Silver Club of Berkeley, "that the annual additions to our stock of the precious metals have been insufficient to counteract their increased use in the arts. For instance, dentists now use large quantities of

gold for filling teeth; considerable amounts are used for signs and like purposes, none of which is recovered.”¹⁹ McTeague, with his “tapes” of dentist’s gold and especially with his “big gilded tooth” (47), the “immense” “golden molar” he uses as a sign, is a nightmare embodiment of the Bryanites’ fears, draining gold out of the economy more quickly than the miners can bring it in. In fact, even when, forced to give up dentistry and in flight from the law, McTeague returns to mining in Placer County, he remains economically an anti-miner. Having stolen Trina’s entire hoard this time, he carries it up into the mountains as if the point were not to put the money back into circulation but instead to put it back into the ground. The “miner’s idea of money quickly gained and lavishly squandered” (172) is irrelevant here, partly because, although Norris claims it “persisted” in McTeague’s mind, he seems, in fact, to have forgotten all about it, and partly because whatever is in his mind doesn’t seem to matter much to Norris, who is himself determined to take the gold out of circulation, to put it in people’s teeth, or under their beds, or back in the mines, or finally in the middle of Death Valley, where no one will ever be able to get at it.

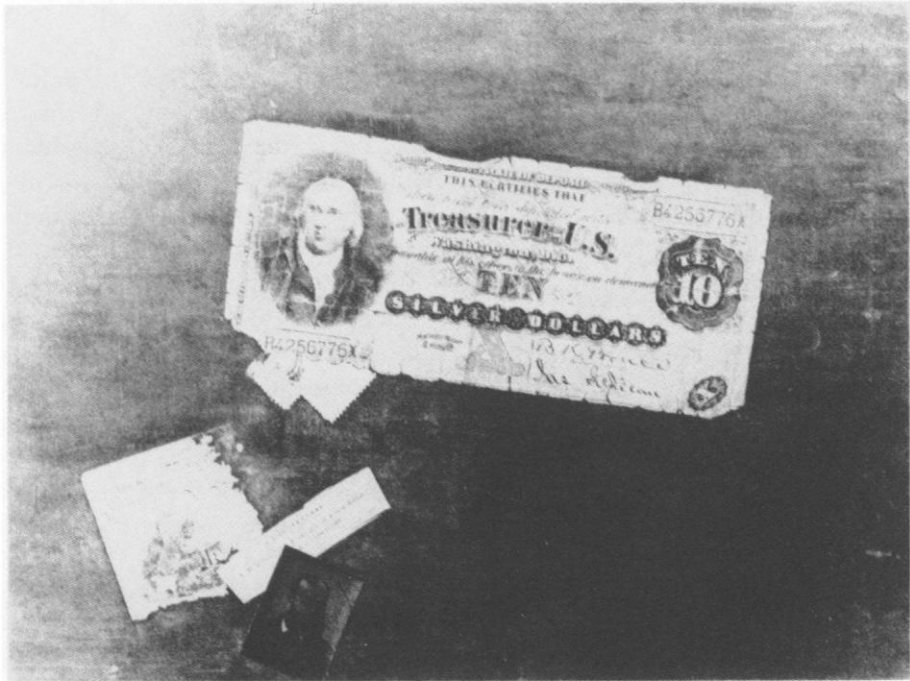
This notorious ending—McTeague and Marcus Schouler destroying their water, fighting over a treasure that neither of them can live to spend—restages as melodrama the “lesson in political economy” taught by *Robinson Crusoe’s Money*, where, wrecked on an island almost as “desolate” as Death Valley, Crusoe begins by noting that all the gold and silver he takes off his ship is not worth as much as a single one of the knives. The point of his story, as Wells characterizes it, is to show how gold can “acquire value” (13), how something “useless” can become “good and true money” (118), but, as we have already seen, this characterization is, in certain crucial respects, misleading. Since the value of gold as money is determined, in Wells’s view, by its value as a useful commodity, Crusoe’s bags of money never really *acquire* value, they just lie there waiting for the value they already have to be discovered. The real point of *Robinson Crusoe’s Money* is to show that nothing ever acquires value, that no money can become good and true unless it already is good and true, and therefore that nature’s money, like Robinson Crusoe’s, must be made of gold.

What then is the real point of McTeague’s dying in the desert with his five thousand gold dollars? In what might be called the Erich von Stroheim interpretation, the point is that greed kills. But it isn’t exactly greed that gets McTeague into Death Valley and, besides, Norris is careful to postpone the fight between him and Marcus until after they have lost their water—neither of them is fighting to be rich. Perhaps, instead, reading Death Valley as the last stage in gold’s disappearance from circulation, we should understand it as a kind of ironic alternative to the coffers of the Wall Street Misers. On this view, *McTeague* invokes the free-silver specter of a contracting currency, but rather than putting all the money into eastern banks, Norris abandons it on a western desert, thus staging the great

fear of the silver men as a fatal triumph for them. Greed doesn't kill; the gold standard does.

But to read *McTeague* as a silver tract would be finally to miss the point of gold and silver's shared fantasy, "real" or "primary" money. Stressing the importance of this fantasy, I don't mean to slight the difference between the gold and silver interests; socially, politically, even economically, they were substantial. Rather, it is just these differences that make the shared commitment to precious metals so striking. Neither the goldbug fear of inflation nor the free-silver desire for it can quite explain the nearly unanimous hostility to fiat money since, of course, the essence of legal tender is that its supply can be controlled by the government that issues it to produce either of these effects. Indeed, it is just this fact that excited the most hostility. Nast's famous illustration for *Robinson Crusoe's Money* (Fig. 1),²⁰ juxtaposing a piece of paper made into milk by an "act of Congress" with a piece of paper made into money in the same way, brilliantly captures Wells's sense that fiat money was nothing but dangerous "hocus pocus" (84). And the government's ability to enforce its hocus pocus is, of course, precisely what starts McTeague on his journey into the desert. The "authorities" at "City Hall" forbid him to practice dentistry because he hasn't got a diploma, a "kind of paper," as Trina describes it to the bewildered dentist, without which "you can't practice, or call yourself doctor." "Ain't I a dentist? Ain't I a doctor?" (147), McTeague protests, appealing finally to the gold tooth she herself gave him as proof of his identity and insisting that he "ain't going to quit for just a piece of paper" (149). But, in the event, McTeague can't practice dentistry, he can't *be* a dentist, unless he has the diploma, the piece of paper on his wall that says, "This is a dentist," like the piece of paper drawn by Nast that says, "This is money." Paper here is more powerful than gold; dentists can only be made by precisely the kind of governmental alchemy that Wells imagined in the making of milk.

It is more accurate, then, to say that McTeague dies for the gold standard than to say that he dies from it. He and Trina are united in their distaste for "representative" paper. At the same time, however, as Norris's plot works to remove all gold from circulation and so authenticate it as nature's money, his language pulls in the opposite direction. Few critics have failed to bemoan the unrelenting accumulation of gold imagery in *McTeague*: "The gold tooth, the \$5,000, Trina's twenty-dollar gold pieces, the imaginary gold plate of Maria Macapa, the absurd canary in the gilt cage. . . . The wonder," wrote Vernon Parrington, "is that he didn't give Trina gold hair instead of black."²¹ In some respects, of course, this proliferation of gold is compensatory. Having lost her money, Trina takes a temporary pleasure in the sunlight that falls "in round golden spots" on the floor of her room, "like gold pieces" (197), she says to herself. Nature, which provided the gold in the first place, now offers to replace it with sunlight. But what exactly is the "like"-ness between "golden spots" of light and gold coins? In



(Reproduced by special permission of the Secretary of the Treasury.
Further reproduction in whole or in part is strictly forbidden.)

FIGURE 1. John Haberle. *Reproduction*, ca. 1889. From Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt* (Berkeley, 1953).

affirming this likeness, is Trina (like a prospector) discovering a mine of nature's money? Or is she (like Congress) making money by fiat? Does *McTeague's* language of gold compensate for gold's narrative disappearance or does it, like bad money driving out good, actually help to produce that disappearance?

Norris's most serious attempt to address, if not precisely to answer, this question involves his depiction not of Trina but of his other miser, the red-headed Polish Jew, Zerkow. Zerkow is a junk dealer, a trade that seems somewhat odd for a miser, since the junk dealer tries to wring every last bit of exchange value out of nearly worthless commodities, while the miser seeks to deny the exchange value of the most precious commodity. But Zerkow, it turns out, doesn't really deal junk, he collects it. Described by Norris as "a man who accumulates, but never disburses," he buys junk without ever selling it, and so his "shop" is not a shop at all but rather "the last abiding-place, the almshouse, of such articles as had outlived their usefulness" (25). His real "passion," of course, is for gold, but instead of trying to turn his junk into gold by selling it, he keeps it around him

as if it already were gold. Neither a means to an end nor an end itself, Zerkow's junk serves instead as a representation of the end. It represents gold by substituting for it, but in that act of substitution it also suggests something about the nature of gold and of the miser's peculiar passion for it. For, if junk becomes junk by outliving its "usefulness," then, in the hands of the miser, gold becomes junk, outliving its value in use by being deprived of its value in exchange. Junk can represent gold, in other words, because the miser's passion for gold is itself a passion for junk.

Demonetize gold, James thought, and the miser will lose interest. In one sense, he was obviously wrong. The miser is not, as James imagined everyone was, interested in gold simply as money. Indeed, in one sense, as we have seen, no one was really interested in gold as money; the miser's attempt to escape the money economy was simply emblematic of everyone else's attempt to deny that there was any such thing. Gold as "money itself" was gold as no money at all. But there is an important sense also in which James was right, for the miser isn't exactly indifferent to gold as money either. Trina doesn't just like to collect things, she likes to collect money. And Zerkow likes junk, but only because he sees in it a representation of gold, or rather because in its relation to gold he sees something like the possibility of representation itself. If gold, to be money itself, need never be money at all and so, as I have argued, *can* never be money at all, then what Zerkow likes is a way of seeing gold that, identifying it as junk instead of money, allows it for the first time actually to become money. Here the figure of the miser is turned inside out; instead of marking the continuity between nature and the economy, between a natural money and no money, he marks the sudden emergence both of money out of junk and of a puzzling question: if there is no value in nature, how can there be value at all?

It is just this question that the commitment to precious metals is designed to answer or, better, to forestall—forestall it by insisting that there is value in nature and answer it by suggesting that should the value in nature run out, then there would indeed be no value left anywhere. Thus stories about the origin of money tend to be stories about the remarkable physical properties of gold and about the natural "instinct" that leads men to appreciate them. Henry Poor, for example, begins his *Money and Its Laws* by imagining the discovery of precious metals not only as the discovery of money but as the discovery of exchange itself:

The first lump of gold or silver dug from the earth, as soon as its beauty and uses were displayed, became the object of universal admiration; each beholder sought to become its owner by exchanging therefor such articles of merchandise or property as he possessed, not necessary to his immediate wants. This preference expressed nothing less than an instinct or sentiment common to mankind.²²

Furthermore, as if to emphasize the primitive status of our desire for money, Poor and Wells both insisted on the priority of gold's aesthetic attraction over its

metallurgical utility. “Of all objects those are most prized that minister in the highest degree to our sense of beauty;”²³ Poor declares, and Wells describes his islander discovering a metal of “remarkable brightness and color” and bringing it home to his wife, who immediately hangs it “by a string about her neck as an ornament” (38). Grounding the economic in the aesthetic, both writers imagine that our response to money is virtually physiological, on the order of our natural response to beauty. The existence of value in nature is thus nothing more than an instance of the existence of beauty in nature, and our love of gold is as instinctive as our love of a beautiful sunset.

James himself, arguing in the *Principles of Psychology* for the possibility of an instinctive “desire” to “appropriate,” insisted on the primacy of the “aesthetic sense.” Everyone, he wrote, could feel the attraction of “glittery, hard, metallic, odd pretty things.” “The source of their fascination lies in their appeal to our aesthetic sense, and we wish thereupon simply to *own* them” (2:679). Despite his earlier skepticism about misers, James asserts here that we can have some desires “quite disconnected with the ulterior uses of the things” desired, and he insists, against Herbert Spencer and the associationists, that these miserly desires are “entirely primitive.” Spencer agreed that the “act of appropriating” could be “pleasurable irrespective of the end subserved,” but only because the act of acquisition would itself evoke “agreeable associations”²⁴ with useful objects previously acquired. Thus, saving money could produce a pleasure of its own, but a pleasure that was ultimately compounded out of pleasant associations with all the things money had previously bought, and so logically and chronologically dependent on a more common and less miserly conception of the instrumental value of money. James, on the other hand, insisting on the “primitive” status of our desire for the useless, denies that it is dependent on our memories of having acquired useful things and, insisting on its “aesthetic” status, locates, like Wells and Poor, the attraction of these objects in their materiality. The aesthetic offers him a way out of the instrumental and the economic both; we like the glittery objects for what they are, not for what they will buy or what they represent.

But while it is clear that Norris’s misers don’t follow the Spencerian model (loving their gold as a kind of mnemonic for the pleasures it has brought them), it is equally clear that Zerkow, at least, doesn’t love gold because it is pretty either. And, as James goes on to give a more detailed account of the objects of our primitive desires, he begins to provide some sense of what it is that Zerkow loves. For, as much as or even more than we love “pretty things,” James says, we love

curious things . . . natural objects that look as if they were artificial, or that mimic other objects—these form a class of things which human beings snatch at as magpies snatch rags. They simply fascinate us. What house does not contain some drawer or cupboard

full of senseless odds and ends of this sort, with which nobody knows what to do, but which a blind instinct saves from the ash-barrel? (2:679)

At the simplest level, James is distinguishing here between what it means to love a sunset and what it means to love the representation of a sunset. But the difference is not simply between beauty and represented beauty; it is instead the difference between “pretty things” and things that “mimic other objects,” between beauty and mimesis. When we love glittery objects, we love beauty; when we love objects that look like other objects, we love representation. Furthermore, the suggested paradigm of objects that “mimic other objects” is “natural objects that look as if they were artificial.” Thus the representation that originally fascinates us is the natural reproduction of a man-made artifact, not the man-made reproduction of a natural one. It is as if we can either love the sunset as a sunset or love it as the representation of a painting. In this analysis of our love of representation, the mark of human agency is simultaneously produced, effaced, and reproduced: produced because we see in the sunset a representation, effaced because it turns out to be nature that is doing the representing, and reproduced because nature is representing something that was itself made by man.

From the standpoint of the money controversies, this account of the “primitive” desire to “appropriate” is doing some fairly complicated ideological work. For if the difference between loving “glittery” things and loving things that look like something else is the difference between loving beauty and loving representation, then, for the miser, this is the difference between loving gold because it *is* money and loving gold because it looks like money, because, in other words, it is a natural object (metal) that looks like an artificial one (money). To think of gold simply as being money is, as we have already seen, at the same time to deny the existence of money, to turn all the money exchanges into barter exchanges by deriving the value of gold as money exclusively from its “intrinsic” value as a commodity; whereas to think of gold as looking like money is to distinguish between what it is and what it represents and so, admitting the discrepancy between material and value, to admit the possibility of money and a money economy. Hence the fact that gold isn’t in itself money but only looks like money would be what allows it finally to become money. But while James’s logic repudiates the hard-money fantasy of nature as a kind of mint, it by no means denies nature a role in the production of money. For although, according to James, we are not originally attracted by nature, we are not originally attracted by artifice either. What attracts is the natural representation of the artificial. Such representation must by definition be accidental—James goes on to call it a *lusus naturae*—but without this accident, it seems, there would be no “primitive form of desire.” We don’t want things in themselves, but we can’t begin by wanting representations

of things in themselves either; we want things in themselves that look like representations. We begin, in other words, with the illusion that representation itself is natural, and without this illusion we would never develop any interest either in representation or in nature. To the question as to how there can be value at all if there is no value in nature, James thus responds by locating the genesis of value in an accident, a moment when nature seems unnatural. Imitating something made by man, nature sets man the example of imitation and produces in him the primitive desire for mimesis.

It is thus, perhaps, a sign of Zerkow's "atavism" that his passion for gold finds its most powerful expression in his love of Maria's story about her lost set of gold service. "The story," Norris says, "ravished him with delight" (28). Indeed, as Zerkow's passion progresses, it focuses more and more on "Maria's recital," which becomes "a veritable mania with him" (73). He compels her to tell the story over and over again, each repetition enabling him to "see that wonderful plate before him, there on the table, under his eyes, under his hand," sharpening both his desire and his disappointment when Maria finally refuses to tell it another time. "What a torment! what agony! to be so near—so near, to see it in one's distorted fancy as plain as in a mirror." Indeed, it is the eventual withholding of the story that provokes the crisis in Zerkow's relations with Maria and leads to her murder. "Sweating with desire," Zerkow himself begins to tell the story of the gold—"It was he who could now describe it in a language almost eloquent" (137)—while at the same time escalating his violent efforts to "make" Maria "speak." The distinction between his desire for the gold and his desire for the description gets lost here, a confusion anticipated in Maria's own early accounts of the gold service, when she describes it both as a source of light and as a reflector: it was "a yellow blaze like a fire, like a sunset"; it was "like a mirror . . . just like a little pool when the sun shines into it" (27). It is as if the gold reflects itself and so really is its own reflection, an object that becomes what it is by representing itself. Thus, it isn't so much that the distinction between the gold and its representation is lost as it is that the representation is here understood to be an essential part of the gold itself. If Zerkow's fancy is a mirror that reflects the gold, and if Maria's language is a mirror that reproduces it in simile, then the gold itself is also a mirror, so that in taking the representation for the thing itself, Zerkow is not making some quixotic mistake about fictions and the real but is instead rightly recognizing the representation as an ontological piece of the thing. Zerkow is a miser of mimesis, and when he dies clutching "a sack full of old and rusty pans—fully a hundred of them—tin cans, and iron knives and forks" (180), he dies happy. He seems, like Wells's islanders, to have mistaken the worthless artifacts of men for nature's gold, but that mistake is, in reality, only a kind of tribute to the mistake embodied in gold itself, to the necessary resemblance of material object to representation. Junk, like language, can represent gold only because,

for Norris, gold, like language, is already a representation. Loving language and loving gold, Zerkow also loves the junk that is the material condition of their representability and hence of their identity.

At work, then, in *McTeague* are two very different conceptions of the miser and his love of gold. In one, the miser loves gold because he thinks of it as “money itself”; like the gold Republicans and the silver Bryanites, he identifies the value of money with the value of the material it is made of. In the other, the miser loves gold because it emblemizes the impossibility of anything being “money itself.” Seeing gold in junk, he transforms the claim that nothing can be money into the imperial possibility that anything can be money, and he does this by insisting with James not only on the potential discrepancy between material and value but on the potential discrepancy between what a thing is made of and what it is. For it is this that excites the Jamesian miser’s “primitive” desire “to own,” the separation between materiality and identity that must be possible if one thing is ever to be able to count as an imitation of another. This is why, as James recognizes, it isn’t enough simply to say that we like objects that “mimic other objects.” How do we come to think of one as mimicking the other? Physical resemblance is obviously an inadequate criterion; we don’t think of one sunset or one tree as an imitation of another sunset or another tree. Two natural objects that look just like one another are simply two examples of the same thing—two sunsets, two trees. But James’s natural objects that look artificial cannot be understood on the model of two trees that look just like each other because they are, in a certain sense, the same. Rather, the distinction between natural and artificial itself constitutes an immaterial but ineradicable and defining difference. This difference in origin makes it possible to imagine a sunset that not only looks like but imitates another sunset, a sunset, in other words, that, looking just like another sunset, isn’t really a sunset at all, but a representation of one. Imagining our fascination with natural objects that look like artificial ones, James is thus imagining the moment in which we discover a resemblance that cannot be an identity and so discover the possibility of representation. And it is, of course, this discovery in nature of accidental representation that first makes available to us the possibility of intentional representation.

Gold, at once a precious metal and, to Zerkow, a reflecting one, embodies both the natural value of the hard-money men and the accidental appearance in nature of value as representation. But if, from Zerkow’s standpoint, the accident of mirrors in nature constitutes the possibility of representation and so of money, from the standpoint of the hard-money men, it constituted the possibility of deception and so of counterfeit. Thus Nast’s cartoon juxtaposes the picture of a cow bearing the legend “This is cow by the act of the artist” with the picture of a dollar bill bearing the legend “This is money by the act of Congress,” suggesting that paper money should be understood as an illusionistic painting of real money,

an attempt to fool people into mistaking the “representative for the real” (94). And Wells’s text describes how, in the wake of adopting paper money, the islanders extended the domain of exploitative mimesis:

They employed a competent artist, with a full supply of paints and brushes, and when any destitute person applied for clothing, they painted upon his person every thing he desired in way of clothing of the finest and most fashionable patterns, from top-boots to collars, and from blue swallow-tailed coats to embroidered neckties, with jewelry and fancy buttons to match. (93–94)

Just as the counterfeiting Congress can make worthless paper look like valuable money, so the competent artist can conjure up a costly suit of clothes “without the waste of any raw material more expensive than paint.” Accepting the derivation of value from raw material, the illusionistic goal of both these representations is to disguise themselves and by looking “so exactly like the real articles” to “make the shadow of wealth supply the place of its substance” (114).

There are, on this view, two kinds of objects that a painting can be: by some artistic “hocus pocus,” the object that it represents or, in the demystifying vision of the goldbug, the paint and paper it is made of. Money theorists sought to prevent the ontological transformation of paper into currency but, as the vogue for *trompe l’oeil* during this period indicates, American artists were eager to exploit the illusionistic potential defined by the money theorists’ terms. The *trompe l’oeil* goal, of course, was to conceal itself as representation; *trompe l’oeil* painters like William Harnett and John Haberle measured their success in the numerous stories of viewers mistaking, as Wells might have put it, the “representative for the real.” Wherever they were exhibited, as Alfred Frankenstein has noted, Harnett’s paintings were protected with “guards and rails . . . to keep people from pulling off their ‘real’ envelopes and newspaper clippings.”²⁵ *Trompe l’oeil* paintings of paper money were especially successful in this regard. Frankenstein records, for example, a story in which Haberle is supposed to have been persuaded by “intimates of Grover Cleveland, in the spirit of practical joking . . . to paint a five-dollar bill on a library table at the White House. When the President happened to pass, he, of course, tried to pick it up.”²⁶ This particular joke may have derived some of its force from the fact that Cleveland was a notorious hard-money man and so already committed to seeing paper money as a kind of illusion, but Frankenstein is no doubt correct in attributing the general popularity of money as a *trompe l’oeil* subject more to its physical qualities than to its status as a symbol of “the American love of filthy lucre in the Gilded Age.”²⁷ The “representation of flat or very shallow objects is of the very essence of *trompe l’oeil*,” according to Frankenstein, since the reduction of depth in the subject reduces “the discrepancy between the muscular experience required for the perception of nature and that which is required for the perception of painting” and so

heightens the “pictorial illusion of reality.”²⁸ The choice of flat subjects is a device for reproducing in the perception of representations the physiology of perceiving the objects they represent.

But it would be a mistake to think that this technical, even physical, explanation of money’s popularity with *trompe l’oeil* painters empties it of its economic significance. Rather, it is just this insistence on the physical that marks the economic character of *trompe l’oeil* money and of the other usual *trompe l’oeil* subjects: envelopes, photographs, newspaper clippings, even paintings. Focusing on objects so flat that they are physically similar to the support on which they will be represented, the *trompe l’oeil* painter repeats the goldbug demand for a material equivalence between the representation and the objects represented, an equivalence that guarantees the representation’s authority by minimizing the degree to which it is a representation. Flatness, not money, carries the weight of *trompe l’oeil*’s economic commitments. And nowhere is this more evident, even if somewhat paradoxically so, than in the hostility to *trompe l’oeil* and to illusionism in general that would become (was, indeed, already becoming) a central preoccupation of modernist painting.

The history of this painting, as Clement Greenberg characterized it in a series of brilliant and influential essays of the 1950s and 1960s, is a history of the gradual abandonment of “three-dimensional illusion” (1954)²⁹ in favor of “the relatively delimited illusion of shallow depth” (1958)³⁰ until finally (1962),

It has been established . . . that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one.³¹

Flatness here signifies modernism’s break with illusion, its insistence that before we see what is “in” a picture, we see the picture “as a picture.” Grover Cleveland reaching for the painted five-dollar bill provides a limit case, perhaps, of seeing what is *in* the picture first while Greenberg’s own example of the tacked-up canvas provides the limit case of seeing the picture *as* a picture. In fact, Greenberg explicitly opposed the possibility of such a picture to the work of Jasper Johns, which he compared to Harnett’s and Peto’s in its use of flatness only to produce the “vivid possibility of deep space.”³²

But if *trompe l’oeil* flatness operates primarily to produce the illusion of three-dimensionality, it does so only by suggesting how little space is required for space to become deep. In Haberle’s *Reproduction* (Fig. 2), for example, the edges of the ten-dollar bill are folded toward the beholder, establishing on a plane that is flat and contains a representation of flatness at least three different levels of deep space. The photo overlapping a newspaper clipping, which in turn overlaps



MILK-TICKETS FOR BABIES, IN PLACE OF MILK.

FIGURE 2. Thomas Nast, *Milk Tickets*. From David A. Wells, *Robinson Crusoe's Money* (1896; reprint: New York, 1969).

another, makes four, and two layered stamps sticking out from under the ten-dollar bill raise the number to five. The point of this virtuoso display is precisely to demonstrate what everyone, of course, already knows, that even the flattest objects are irreducibly three-dimensional. Insisting on the impossibility of an image that can escape three-dimensionality, *trompe l'oeil* produces a flatness that can never be conceived as just a surface. Indeed, *trompe l'oeil* paintings of money and photographs work precisely by staging the triumphant failure of even those objects that are nearest to being nothing but surface ever actually to be nothing but surface.

Greenberg's blank canvas, despite (or, rather, because of) its repudiation of all illusion, participates directly in the *trompe l'oeil* production of three-dimensionality.³³ By virtue of its blankness, it has no surface, or rather—since everything has a surface just as everything has depth—one might say that it has a surface that it won't allow to be a surface. What makes it so flat is that there is nothing on it, but the fact that there is nothing on it is what makes it at the same time nothing more than a (very flat) three-dimensional object, like any other object. Thus, while the blank canvas provides, in a certain sense, a rather spectacular alternative to the *trompe l'oeil* ideal, it is an alternative with a well-established place in the *trompe l'oeil* economy, the place, quite literally, of the “raw material” that Wells opposed to the representation. Replacing the illusion of three-dimensionality with the physical fact of three-dimensionality, the blank canvas identifies value with material, picture with support. The painting that can represent nothing and still remain a painting is “money itself,” and the modernist (or, perhaps, literalist) aesthetic of freedom from representation is a goldbug aesthetic.

This by no means contradictory progression from painting as illusion by way of flatness to painting as object, whatever relevance it may have for twentieth-century art history, clearly finds an antecedent in what Norris depicts in *Vandover and the Brute* as Vandover's regression from man to beast. Vandover, like Norris himself in his youth, is a painter who begins by sketching out of books, but whose “style improved immensely the moment he abandoned flat studies and began to work directly from Nature” (25).³⁴ Convinced, after a long period of neglecting his “art,” that it alone can “stay the inexorable law of nature” that is turning him into “a blind, unreasoning . . . animal” (309), he sets to work on his “masterpiece,” only to find that his “technical skill” has mysteriously vanished; the “forms he made on the canvas were no adequate reflection of those in his brain” (224). And this inability to reproduce on canvas the figures he sees in his imagination becomes almost immediately an inability to imagine the scene he wants to represent: a “strange numbness” grows “in his head”: “All the objects in the range of his eyes seemed to move back and stand on the same plane” (226). The failure of Vandover's imagination is a failure of perspective, and the brute appears as a flatness

that turns what should have been the depiction of a dying soldier and his (also dying) horse into a “tracing” of “empty lines.”

The fact that not even Norris regarded Vandover’s failure to complete *The Last Enemy* as a loss to art should not distract us from the interest of the process. For even though Vandover at his best is no master of illusion, the disappearance of his art is exclusively identified with his loss of painting’s chief illusionistic device, perspective, and the appearance of the brute is, by the same token, identified with the flattening transformation of living figures into charcoal lines: “The very thing that would have made them intelligible, interpretive, that would have made them art, was absent” (224–25). As a painter, then, the brute is a minimalist; where Vandover excels at painting nature, the brute replaces the painting with nature itself. But this, as I have suggested, is ultimately a distinction without a difference. Vandover the artist can so easily devolve into Vandover the brute precisely because both artist and brute are already committed to a naturalist ontology—in money, to precious metals; in art, to three-dimensionality. The moral of Vandover’s regression, from this standpoint, is that it can only take place because, like the invention of money on Robinson Crusoe’s island, it has already taken place. Discovering that man is a brute, Norris repeats the discovery that paper money is just paper and that a painting of paper money is just paint.

In the course of reproducing Wells’s and Nast’s aesthetic economy, however, Norris also introduces a crucial variation on their *trompe l’oeil* materialism. Vandover’s most cherished possessions are the furnishings he acquired for his fashionable rooms on Sutter Street: a tiled stove, a window seat, casts of three Assyrian bas-reliefs “representing scenes from the life of the king” and a “wounded lioness,” “photogravures” of Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* and a Velázquez portrait, an “admirable reproduction of the ‘Mona Lisa’” (178). Contemplating his reproductions, he has replaced what Wells thought of as *trompe l’oeil* pictures of money with *trompe l’oeil* pictures of other pictures.³⁵ But as the brute gains the upper hand, Vandover is forced to sacrifice his things and to move from his apartment to a hotel room where the “walls were whitewashed and bare of pictures or ornaments” (270). Only months before, the sight of “the heavy cream-white twill” of his “blank” and “untouched” “stretcher” (223) had inspired him to try to save himself by painting again; now the empty walls of his room produce a similar response: “His imagination was forever covering the white walls with rough stone-blue paper, and placing screens, divans, and window seats in different parts of the cold bare room” (280). But this time, when it comes to producing on those walls an “adequate reflection” (224) of the forms he has imagined, he pins up “little placards which he had painted with a twisted roll of the hotel letter-paper dipped into the ink stand. ‘Pipe-rack Here.’ ‘Mona Lisa Here.’ ‘Stove Here.’ ‘Window-seat Here.’” (280). Instead of drawing the forms “in his brain,” he writes them.

This substitution of writing for illusion is also a substitution of writing for paint or charcoal. Unlike Nast's posters, the painted words on Vandover's walls are neither *trompe l'oeil* nor raw material. They can't be *trompe l'oeil* because they don't, of course, look like what they name, and they can't be raw material because they do name something other than what they are. Writing here becomes, in other words, a model for representation without illusion and for a flatness that isn't simply a shallow three-dimensionality. As opposed to both the *trompe l'oeil* reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and to the minimalist wall left bare by that reproduction's absence, "Mona Lisa Here" is all surface, the art not only of a brute but of a brute that can write. Thus, if in one of his manifestations the brute represents the possibility of reducing everything to nature, here he represents the impossibility of reducing everything to nature. Norris's tendency to define the change in Vandover's art as a replacement of the "true" illusionistic "children of his imagination" by unintelligible "empty lines" gives way to an image of the children become "changelings," transformed but by no means unrecognizable: "It was as if the brute in him, like some malicious witch, had stolen away the true offspring of his mind, putting in their place these deformed dwarfs, its own hideous spawn" (229). The problem is not that these children don't represent you but that they do. Where the naturalist brute reduces the illusion of the man to the material of the beast, the malicious witch, producing unnatural offspring, gives birth neither to beasts nor to illusions. No longer the demystification of representation, the brute appears here as representation itself.

Of course, there are at least two ways in which those painted words could be reclaimed for *trompe l'oeil*: instead of painting *as* writing, they could be thought of as painting *of* writing, and so could be construed as an extension of the physical flatness involved in paintings of money and of other paintings; or they could, following the lead of Vandover's first teacher, who, "besides drawing," "taught ornamental writing" (13), be emptied of their meaning as words and so understood solely as ornament. But there is one other example of the conjunction of writing and visual representation in *Vandover and the Brute* that makes it clear that this is not what Norris intended. Reading through the morning paper, Vandover sees a report of the suit being brought against him by the father of Ida Wade (who killed herself after discovering she was pregnant) and sees "his name staring back at him from out the gray blur of type, like some reflection of himself seen in a mirror" (233). Imagining print as a reflecting surface, Norris gestures here toward a presentation of the self that would involve neither the illusion of the artist nor any mark of his physical presence. Vandover finds himself represented in the newspaper not by a self-portrait (which would look like him) or by a signature (which would, as an extension of him, in a certain sense, be him) but by a set of mechanically produced marks that, having no illusionistic likeness to him and no material identity with him, nevertheless mirror him vividly to himself.

Painting must be transformed into script and script into type to produce this image of the brute.

One thing these transformations suggest is that the brute, like Frank Norris, has ceased to be a painter and has become instead a writer. But they suggest also a last set of variations on the question and answers with which this essay began. Why does the miser save? He saves to escape the money economy; he saves to reenact for himself the origin of that economy. How can metal become money? How can paint become a picture? One set of answers to these questions repeats the escape from money: metals never do become money; they always were; hence they never are; a picture is just paper and paint pretending to be something else. The logic of these answers is the logic of goldbugs and Bryanites, *trompe l'oeil*, and a certain strain of modernism. The attraction of writing is that it escapes this logic. Neither a formal entity in itself nor an illusionistic image of something else, it marks the potential discrepancy between material and identity, the discrepancy that makes money, painting, and, ultimately, persons possible. But how are persons possible? Or, to put the question in its most general form, how is representation possible?

Norris's favorite teacher at Berkeley, the geologist Joseph Le Conte, had raised this question in these terms in the second edition of his *Evolution* (1892): how were "physical phenomena" like the "vibrations of brain molecules" related to "psychical phenomena" like "thoughts"?

There are, as it were, two sheets of blotting paper pasted together. The one is the brain, the other the mind. Certain ink-scratches or blotches, *utterly meaningless* on the one, soak through and appear on the other as *intelligible writing*, but how we know not and can never hope to guess.³⁶

Le Conte's is the tone of those who, as William James mockingly put it, "find relief . . . in celebrating the mystery of the Unknowable" (1:178), but James himself had no more convincing account of the relation between mind and brain, and he ends his own discussion of the subject by imagining impatient readers muttering, "Why on earth doesn't the poor man say *the soul* and have done with it?" (1:180). The difficulty with just saying "the soul" and having done with it is, of course, the confusion this would cause for a psychology that was seeking "to avoid unsafe hypotheses," to "remain positivistic and non-metaphysical." Thus James resolves, at least until "some day" when things have been "more thoroughly thought out," "in this book" to "take no account of the soul" (1:182). But, simply in acknowledging the distinction between brain and mind, James has already admitted the existence of something very like the soul and, in fact, we have already begun to see in his discussion of our "primitive" love of objects that "mimic other objects" how little he was able to honor the resolution to remain "non-metaphysical." The point of that discussion was to explain the "acquisitive-

ness” of such people as misers and, in keeping with his positivist commitment, James emphasized the “entirely primitive” status of the miser’s desire, describing it as a “blind instinct,” a “blind propensity,” and comparing the way human beings collect “curious things” to the way “magpies snatch rags” (2: 679). Magpies snatch rags, however, because they think they look nice or because they can use them for something, whereas beachcombers save “curious things” not for their beauty or utility but for their mimicking likeness to other things. Hence the conclusion we drew from James was that the miser loves gold neither for its beauty as a metal (cf. Wells) nor for its buying power as money (cf. Spencer) but for its resemblance as a natural object (metal) to an artificial one (money). Misers love gold because they love representation, and when we, like misers, bring curious things home from the beach, we are testifying with our own instinctive behavior to the primitive possibility of representation and the equally primitive possibility of a money economy.

The presence of the magpie in this example marks James’s ambition to keep the instincts as “non-metaphysical” as he can, but just as no magpie can love something that is neither beautiful nor useful, so, by James’s own account, no human being, loving representation, can ever remain as non-metaphysical as a magpie. In nature—which is to say, from the positivistic and material standpoint of the brain—objects may look like one another but never represent one another. Only the unnatural makes representation possible, and it makes it possible by imagining the natural as artificial. In a certain sense, of course, this proves to be a mistake; the objects we find on the beach aren’t really mimicking other objects. But in imagining that they are, we imagine for the first time the possibility not just of other brains but of other minds. Indeed, we imagine for the first time the possibility of our own minds. The mistaken love of representation that makes representation possible must first appear as a mistake about itself, as when we take the magpie’s love of beauty for the human love of mimesis. In this respect, the love of natural things that resemble artificial ones is itself an instance of that resemblance, epitomizing the immaterial distinction between what we are made of and what we are. Thus our primitive love of natural things that look artificial turns out to be nature’s way of revealing to our brains the existence of our minds. And when the brute in Vandover paints “writing on the wall” (220), it horrifies him by reflecting not his body but his beastly soul. Or, to put it another way, seeing himself reflected in writing, he sees in the failure of his own materiality the inevitability of paper money.

The interchangeability of these terms—soul and money—is itself mirrored on the goldbug side by a somewhat more elaborate set of transformational possibilities. The love of precious metals is just the fear that men will regress into beasts, which is, in turn, the fear that money will disappear, which, transposed and inverted, is the love of *trompe l’oeil* painting. It would be possible, in my view,

to extend these transformations—in the case of painting (as I have already suggested), forward into minimalism; more typically, as in the case of anarchist labor agitation, laterally: “the human *law*-maker,” wrote Albert R. Parsons in 1886, is (like the human moneymaker) “a human humbug” because “laws” (like gold and silver) “are discovered, *not* made.”³⁷ Parsons, convicted for murder in the Haymarket trial, is even farther from Grover Cleveland than John Haberle is from minimalism, but they are all equally committed to hard money—which is not to say that they were all aware of this commitment or even that they would necessarily have recognized or acknowledged it if it had been pointed out to them. Such speculations are somewhat beside the point. What I mean to say is that, having taken up a position (on the similarity of men to animals, say) or having adopted a practice (for example, illusionist painting), they had involved themselves in a logic that, regardless of their own views, entailed a whole series of other commitments, and that it is this logic and these commitments that locate them in the discourse of naturalism.

There are at least two such logics running through this discourse, or rather, two such logics that constitute it. One could, perhaps, best describe naturalism as the working-out of a set of conflicts between pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul. But this doesn't mean that the naturalist writer is someone who has chosen the beastly side of these dichotomies (the side literary history ordinarily associates with naturalism)³⁸ or even that he is someone who has chosen with any consistency either side. The consistency, indeed the identity, of naturalism resides in the logics and in their antithetical relation to one another, not necessarily in any individual, any text, or even any single sentence. Le Conte, for example, describes the relation of animals to men in terms that repeat the goldbug description of the relation between paper and precious metals: “The resemblance is great, but the difference is immense. . . . It is the shadow and substance, promise and fulfillment”; but he goes on to finish the comparison, “Still better, it is like embryo and child.”³⁹ The weirdness of this set of similes is that while it begins by imagining animals as *trompe l'oeil* representations of men (understanding the words uttered by a trained magpie, to use a Jamesian example, as *trompe l'oeil* representations of language), it ends by imagining the reflecting shadow turned into an anticipating embryo (as if the talking magpie were not imitating human speech but originating it). In the first instance, animals are deceptive representations of humans; in the second, they have already become humans precisely because of their capacity to represent. And this opposition is repeated more penetratingly in *Vandover and the Brute*. Vandover, prowling about his room on all fours, utters “a sound, half word, half cry, ‘Wolf—wolf!’” (310). In the mouth, or rather the “throat” of the brute, the name of a thing is revealed to be really the sound the thing makes. Norris presses home the denial of representation by way of onomatopoeia; words are reduced

to the sounds they are made of and, instead of the magpie imitating language, language imitates the magpie. But, at the same time, Vandover's gambling companion, a deaf-mute known as "the Dummy," is made so drunk that, as Vandover does his "dog act," the Dummy begins to "talk," "pouring out a stream" of "birdlike twitterings" among which one could "now and then . . . catch a word or two" (298). Never having spoken any words, never even having heard any, the Dummy (like the magpie) nevertheless produces sounds that inexplicably turn out to be language.

Vandover and the Brute does not resolve these contradictions and, more importantly, it does not thematize them either—it isn't *about* the conflict between material and representation, it is an example of that conflict. And it doesn't exemplify the conflict because literary language (at a sufficiently high level of sophistication) characteristically enacts some such conflict. To think this is only to imagine a thematics in which authors have been replaced by language, the characteristic gesture not of literature but of a certain literary formalism so eager to preserve the ontological privilege of the text that it becomes in its most desperate moments indistinguishable from goldbug materialism. But my point here is not to criticize that literary materialism per se any more than it is to attack the notion that democracy needs a dollar "as good as gold." I want only to locate both these positions and their negations in the logic, or rather the double logic, of naturalism, and in so doing, to suggest one way of shifting the focus of literary history from the individual text or author to structures whose coherence, interest, and effect may be greater than that of either author or text.

Notes

1. Frank Norris, *McTeague*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York, 1977), 72. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.
2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890; reprint: New York, 1950), 2: 424. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.
3. Ottomar Haupt, "Is Gold Scarce?" in *The Gold Standard: A Selection from the Papers Issued by the Gold Standard Defence Association in 1895–1898* (London, 1898), 56.
4. *Ibid.*
5. George Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (Boston, 1978), 245.
6. *Ibid.*, 155.
7. *Ibid.*, 248.
8. Frank Norris, *Vandover and the Brute*, intro. by Warren French (1914; reprint: Lincoln, 1978), 290. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text. Although *Vandover* wasn't published until after Norris's death, James D. Hart argues convincingly that it was "pretty well finished" in 1895, the year that also saw most of *McTeague*

- completed (Frank Norris, *A Novelist in the Making*, ed. with an intro. by James D. Hart [Cambridge, Mass., 1970], 27).
9. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 248.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ignatius Donnelly, *The American People's Money* (1895; reprint: Westport, 1976), 34.
 12. Ibid., 45
 13. David A. Wells was a civil servant (chairman of the Special Revenue Commission from 1865 to 1870) and journalist who wrote widely on the money question. Readers interested in the oedipal question in American history may wish to consult Wells, *The Silver Question: The Dollar of the Fathers Versus the Dollar of the Sons* (New York, 1877). My own reference here is to *Robinson Crusoe's Money*, with illustrations by Thomas Nast (1896; reprint: New York, 1969), 5. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.
 14. Thomas L. Nugent, in a speech delivered to the state meeting of the Farmers' Alliance at Campasas, Texas, in August 1895, reprinted in part in *The Populist Mind*, ed. Norman Pollack (New York, 1967), 326. Nugent argues that there must be no silver "compromise" between the populists and the gold men: "Populists favor the free and unlimited coinage of gold and silver at the present rate, and the emission of inconvertible paper to supply any lack of circulation. . . . We cannot compromise on the perilous plan proposed by silver democrats."
 15. William H. Harvey, *Coin's Financial School*, ed. with an intro. by Richard Hofstadter (1895; reprint: Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 164. Coin is actually quoting Webster: "It has been said that silver and gold have no intrinsic value; this is not true. They are the only things used by Webster in the copy of his dictionary which I have to illustrate the meaning of the word 'intrinsic.'"
 16. Ibid., 34.
 17. Ibid.
 18. David Jayne Hill, "An Honest Dollar the Basis of Prosperity" (Chicago, 1900), 3.
 19. General Theo. Wagner, in a speech delivered before a meeting of the Bryan Silver Club of Berkeley (Berkeley, 1896), 6.
 20. This illustration is also reproduced in Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* (Berkeley, 1982), in the context of an interesting and informative discussion of Poe's "The Gold Bug."
 21. Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920* (1930; reprint: New York, 1958), 331.
 22. Henry V. Poor, *Money and Its Laws* (1877; reprint: New York, 1969), 1.
 23. Ibid., 2.
 24. Herbert Spencer, "Review of Bain," quoted in William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, 1950), 679-80.
 25. Alfred Frankenstein, *After the Hunt* (Berkeley, 1969), 81.
 26. Ibid., 120. There are numerous stories of this kind, most involving beholders who fail to realize that the money is fake, that it is just a painting, but some involving critics who set out to expose the *painting* as fake by showing that it is just money. An art critic for the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, for example, described Haberle's "alleged still life," U.S.A., "supposed by some to be a painting of money," as a "fraud": "A \$1 bill and the fragments of a \$10 note have been pasted on canvas, covered by a thin scumble of paint, and further manipulated to give it a painty appearance" (quoted in *After the Hunt*, 117). The career of Emanuel Ninger (alias Jim the Penman), the most famous

American counterfeiter of the late nineteenth century, is exemplary in both these regards, since after his arrest the hand-drawn \$100 bills that he had been passing as money were worth more as works of art, thus raising the possibility that real \$100 bills might be put into circulation as forgeries of the forged \$100 bills that Ninger had been circulating. For an entertaining account of Ninger and other counterfeiters, see Murray Teigh Bloom, *Money of Their Own* (New York, 1957).

27. Frankenstein, *After the Hunt*, 43.
28. *Ibid.*, 54.
29. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), 137.
30. *Ibid.*, 211.
31. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6, no. 8 (October 1962), 30. My attention was first drawn to this example by a footnote in Michael Fried's seminal essay "Art and Objecthood" (in *Minimal Art*, ed. with an intro. by Gregory Battcock [New York, 1968], 116–47). My use of the term "surface" in the following paragraphs, my sense in particular of "surface" as a plausible alternative to "flatness," derives largely from a certain tension in Fried's wonderful description of Jules Olitski's sculpture *Bunga*: "The use of tubes, each of which one sees, incredibly, as *flat*—that is, flat but *rolled*—makes *Bunga's* surface more like that of a painting than like that of an object; like painting, and unlike both ordinary objects and other sculpture, *Bunga* is *all surface*" ("Art and Objecthood," 139). My own experience of recent paintings by Olitski and of the photographs of James Welling convinces me that surface remains crucial, and I note that Fried has recently remarked that while "the concept 'flatness' . . . has lost much of its urgency," the "pressure" to "come to terms with issues of *surface* . . . is more intense than before" ("How Modernism Works," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. with an intro. by W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago, 1983], 232 n. 16).
32. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," 26.
33. In discussing Greenberg here, I should make it clear that I am concerned only with the consequences of this particular example. My quarrel, in other words, is not with his attack on minimalism's commitment to "the third dimension" ("Recentness of Sculpture," in *Minimal Art* [see n. 31], 182), but only with his failure to recognize the congruence between the values of minimalism and the values of flatness as embodied in the unpainted canvas.
34. For a good discussion of *Vandover* in the context of early 'nineties aestheticism, see Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris* (Columbia, 1978), 16–42. Graham's sense of the "subversion of art by economic power" (29) in *Vandover*, however, is about on a par with the "filthy lucre" interpretation of *trompe l'oeil* money paintings.
35. Discussing Haberle's *Torn in Transit* (the picture of a painting wrapped for shipping from which most of the wrapping has been torn to reveal the painted landscape underneath), Frankenstein notes suggestively that the remaining paper, string, and shipping labels are all "illusionistic" but "occupy a minimum of space": "When one arrives at the point at which the nonillusionistic elements in a work of *trompe l'oeil* occupy nearly all the space, one can go no further; this is the end of the line" (*After the Hunt*, 121). But, following the *trompe l'oeil* logic that I have been tracing here, we can see that the end of the line doesn't quite consist in reducing the *trompe l'oeil* elements to the minimum but instead in eliminating them altogether—painting nothing but painting or (as with the blank canvas) painting nothing at all.
36. Joseph Le Conte, *Evolution* (New York, 1892), 310. The best general discussion of Le

- Conte's influence on Norris is by Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), 12–22.
37. Albert Parsons, "Autobiography," in *The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs*, ed. with an intro. by Philip Foner (New York, 1969), 44. Parsons goes on to imagine a society in which "natural leaders" replace government and "self-preservation becomes the actuating motive as now, minus the . . . domination of man by man" (45).
 38. In his chapter on Norris in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York, 1957), for example, Richard Chase describes McTeague as an "animal like man" and the "naturalistic novel" as one in which "the beast shows through the human exterior" (188), while describing Norris himself as a sort of literary McTeague, who succeeds because "he is able to write instinctively out of his natural genius" (191). And Donald Pizer, determined to rescue naturalism from Chase's witty determinism and to secure for it "an affirmative ethical conception of life," nevertheless follows Chase in asserting Norris's primary commitment to "the strength of man's animality" (Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* [Carbondale, Ill., 1966], 14, 19). My own point is not so much to quarrel with these characterizations as to suggest an understanding of naturalism in which their negations would also have a place.
 39. Le Conte, *Evolution*, 324. In addition to Wells, see, for example, Edward Atkinson, who (against the term "fiat money") urges that money be defined "in such a way that the substance cannot therefore be confounded with the shadow—the thing for the promise of the thing carrying no obligation for the performance of the promise" (Edward Atkinson, *The Distribution of Products* [New York, 1885], 5–6). I owe this reference to Howard Horwitz. For directing my attention to several other documentary texts, I would also like to thank Gillian Brown, and for more general discussion of the questions explored here, I want to thank Frances Ferguson and Steven Knapp.