Entropy in the Circuits: 
*McTeague’s* Apocalyptic 
Posthumanism

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McTeague resolved to make a circuit of the 
valley, keeping to the south, until he should 
strike the Armagosa River. He would make a cir-
cuit of the valley and come up on the other 
side. He would get into that country around 
Gold Mountain.

—Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San 
Francisco* (1899)

In a brief but revisionary characterization 
of Émile Zola’s naturalism, Frank 
Norris prizes the excessive and monstrous elements of his pre-
decessor’s literary imagination: “Everything is extraordinary, 
imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quiv-
ering throughout. . . . It is all romantic. . . . We have the same 
huge dramas, the same enormous scenic effects, the same love 
of the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous, and the tragic. 
Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of
Although Norris intuits and expresses a tension within the categories of literary criticism—describing Zola’s work ambiguously as “a form of romanticism,” yet shortly thereafter blatantly claiming that “this is not romanticism”—his statement might be read in terms of a struggle to distill a concrete literary program from his own unique style and vision. Norris’s definitive break with realism is, indeed, difficult to categorize, for his descriptions of his predecessor’s style and themes focus specifically on extending representationalism to its breaking point. And yet here the “monstrous” is not the stuff of the Kantian sublime—that momentary terror of a failing imagination followed by the reassurances of transcendental reason. For the Kantian subject, such experiences serve as a provisional evidence of humanity’s providential apotheosis in the cosmos; Norris contrarily utilizes the “extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous”—or what he vaguely termed the “romantic”—as indicators of a reality terrifyingly antithetical or indifferent to the cherished tenants of rational humanism.

Among the works comprising Norris’s unfortunately small oeuvre, McTeague: A Story of San Francisco (1899) dramatically challenges notions of human exceptionalism and autonomy through its monstrously alien, but also surprisingly prosaic, visions of people, civilization, and nature. The tale of McTeague, the onetime miner become cheap San Francisco dentist, and his eventual brutal murder of his wife Trina and former friend Marcus gradually becomes a grotesquerie of Gothic horror. Characters appear either as simian brutes or mechanical automata; all seem fated, however, to destroy each other viciously for a small fortune in gold. McTeague concludes on a lethally hot day in the

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2 For a brief but informative discussion of Norris’s complex understanding of naturalism, see Donald Pizer’s “Frank Norris’s Definition of Naturalism,” in his Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, revised ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 107–11.
midst of Death Valley, where, handcuffed to the body of the murdered Marcus, the dentist waits to die with his characteristic dull incomprehension. Here Norris’s description of the desert expresses a distinct impersonalism, if not a metaphysical hostility of being toward humanity—a destructive and ubiquitous sublimity otherwise registered in the novel’s monstrous characters and the narration of their gradual annihilation.

If naturalism’s essence lies, as Norris claimed, in its aesthetics of the “monstrous” and the “extraordinary,” then these concluding images are the novel’s most intensely naturalistic. Although the abrupt shift from the streets of San Francisco to the rugged desert marks a striking transition in thematic focus, tone, and imagery, the critical literature on *McTeague* has consistently ignored the conclusion’s dramatic depiction of environments indifferent or antithetical to human existence.\(^5\)

Beginning with the dentist’s return to the Big Dipper Mine, and then narrating his fatal journey into Death Valley, the final chapters situate humans within immense and barren landscapes constructed by primeval forces. The dentist’s gargantuan physicality dominates earlier sections of the novel, but the mountains of Placer County decisively dwarf McTeague, and the salt flats quickly best him. The flats, a seemingly infinite white inferno or “hideous sink of alkali,” appears devoid of all signs of life. If the mountains “had been merely indifferent to man,” the alkali is “openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant.”\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Influential critical approaches to the novel tend either to characterize its conclusion as an extension of the San Francisco chapters’ aesthetic, narrative, and thematic concerns, or to ignore it altogether. Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987) focuses on the nineteen chapters chronicling life in San Francisco. Although he briefly discusses the conclusion, Michaels also claims that “the plot’s two main events are Trina’s marrying Mac and then being murdered by him” (*The Gold Standard*, p. 123)—an assertion that would readily describe the novel if it had ended with Trina’s murder. Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* focuses almost exclusively on the San Francisco chapters, with almost no mention of elements from the conclusion. Donald Pizer’s *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966) briefly analyzes the conclusion as a reinforcement of earlier themes of atavistic decay, but primarily describes the salt flat scenes as a “melodramatic chase,” with little “thematic or structural relevance” (*Novels of Frank Norris*, pp. 81–82).

Despite these concluding representations of an impersonal universe—if not one overtly antithetical to human identity, survival, and progress—no posthuman interpretive reappraisal of the novel has appeared in scholarship on Norris or American naturalism. This essay will provide one such possible reading of the novel from a specific and nonexclusive sense of the term. What I will hereafter describe as *McTeague*’s “apocalyptic posthumanism” might be understood in terms of its absolute opposition to the anthropocentric cosmic evolutionism of, among others, the philosopher Herbert Spencer, which was remarkably popular in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century.\(^7\) Beyond simply providing a counterimage to the optimistic apotheosis of “man” or “reason” central to such philosophies, however, *McTeague* imagines a cosmos in which all futures lead to the alkali abyss, thereby foreclosing the possibility of any restorative anthropocentric gesture. As I demonstrate in this essay, these “iniquitous and malignant” environments evidence a prehistoric devolutionary teleology operating throughout and against material and human nature in the novel. The narrative follows this ubiquitous principle of destruction as it guides the dentist’s personal and social deterioration and death, thereby figuring the eventual extinction of all life and the gradual deterioration of the earth’s multiple forces and systems into the homogenous alkali flats.

\(^7\) As Ronald E. Martin suggests in his *American Literature and the Universe of Force* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1981), Herbert Spencer’s immensely popular “Synthetic Philosophy” applied aspects of evolutionary science indiscriminately to virtually all physical, social, and intellectual phenomena (p. 40). Spencer claimed that nature increased in complexity, always evolving to a greater and more beneficial order (see Martin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, pp. 36, 43–44). Joseph LeConte, Norris’s professor at Berkeley, attempted to wed Christianity with a similarly optimistic evolutionism. The results are largely indicative of much popular philosophical thought at the time; LeConte suggested that man, although arising from an entirely “material” evolution, now continues a “spiritual” development grounded in reason and oriented toward the apogee of spiritual perfection, namely Jesus Christ (Joseph LeConte, *Evolution: Its Nature, Its Evidence, and Its Relation to Religious Thought* [New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905], p. 360). Although Martin understands LeConte’s direct influence on Norris as one of inspiration (Martin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, p. 148), *McTeague*’s vision of nature seems almost intentionally crafted to controvert the popular evolutionism of the day.
In his *Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature*, Matthew A. Taylor observes how such veritably “posthuman” visions expose the anthropocentric tendencies informing much scholarship nominally identified by the term.  

Taylor suggests that poststructural and posthuman discourses frequently “situate the human subject within impersonal, inhuman systems (whether material or discursive) to deconstruct its givenness and priority,” but “then marshal these irruptive forces in the name of a free play that allows for the return of our agency, if not ourselves” (*Universes without Us*, p. 76). If, in other words, posthumanism often connotes the synthesis of self with a dynamic environment, then it may simply perform our desire fully to “assimilate” environment to self (*Universes without Us*, p. 6). While *McTeague*’s relentless logic of deterioration and disintegration also locates humans within an “impersonal” process, it categorically denies the sublimation (dialectical or otherwise) of this alienation, leaving the reader to contemplate a self both united with and truly destroyed by its environment.

Taylor locates a similarly apocalyptic sensibility in a few works of American literature, but most significantly in the late writings of Norris’s contemporary Henry Adams. Particularly in his *A Letter to American Teachers of History* (1910), Adams promulgated the notion of a gradual entropic disintegration of the universe from which no creature, thing, or process is immune.  

The scientific discourse from which Adams drew his dire conclusions—that of the first law and especially the second law of thermodynamics—also provides a striking backdrop against which to view *McTeague*’s comparable vision of cosmic desolation. The first law of thermodynamics asserts that the total amount of energy in the universe remains constant, regardless of the kinetic or potential forms it may take (Martin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, p. 28). The second and far more disturbing law, articulated by Lord Kelvin (William Thomson) and other scientists in the early 1850s, describes the

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inevitable degeneration of all mechanical energy from more to less complicated forms and the impossibility of restoring the former without a reciprocal increase in the latter. Speculating from these premises, Kelvin predicted the eventual entropic degradation of the universe into a uniform state of lifeless energy—a notion that soon came to be popularly described as cosmic “heat death.” Adams similarly prophesied a cadaverous final state of reality, a “dead ocean of energy” (Letter to American Teachers, p. 145)—a description that closely recalls the oceanic homogeneity of McTeague’s desiccated alkali flats. Like Adams’s apocalyptic discussion of mutual human and cosmic collapse, McTeague pairs a narrative of individual and social degeneration with a glimpse of a destroyed earth, suggesting a similar totalizing application of the second law. And while there were other highly influential discourses of devolution and degeneration promulgated in the late nineteenth century, the novel’s rich parity with such apocalyptic uses of thermodynamics warrants describing this ubiquitous principle of

12 Donald Pizer traces the significant influence of Cesare Lombroso’s and Max Nordau’s highly popular theories of atavistic degeneration on Norris. Both claimed that socially “undesirable” individuals were products of reversions to earlier stages in evolution (see Pizer, Realism and Naturalism, pp. 56–59). Other popular theories of degeneration, like that expressed by E. Ray Lankester in his Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), describe a tendency of life—including humans—to devolve when remaining inactive (p. 33). There is little doubt that Norris’s well-documented racism was influenced by such theories, and elements of his racial sensibilities have been recognized in McTeague (see, for example, Jared Gardner, “What Blood Will Tell: Hereditary Determinism in McTeague and Greed,” Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 36 [1994], 51–74). However, focusing solely on issues of biological degeneration in McTeague diverts attention from its remarkable exploration of a larger material degeneration of nature, which has significantly different implications. Indeed, pseudoscientific theories focused on animalistic reversion often contained racial or social scapegoats, or practical methods—such as the dutiful development of reason and science—that indemnified a selective sense of human exceptionalism and progress (see Lankester, Degeneration, pp. 59–62). There is, on the contrary, no escape from the entropic decline that produces the alkali flats, and this ubiquitous force overshadows the relative importance of biological and racial devolution in the novel.
degradation as entropic—or, as it will be hereafter referred to, as entropic force.\footnote{Entropy, properly understood, is not a force; it is a measure of the disorder in systems, or their tendency toward disorder. I nevertheless describe it hereafter as a “force” in order to reflect Norris’s tendency to attribute ontological substantiality, and at times even agential quality, to the ghostly puppeteer orchestrating the downfall of the characters and nature in Norris’s novel. It should also be noted that fears regarding the eventual dissipation of the universe typically envisioned, as Henry Adams did, a lifelessly frigid sea of energy (\textit{Letter to American Teachers}, p. 145). Although the salt flats are lethally hot, the issue of temperature is less important as an indicator of thermodynamics’ influence on Norris than is his general image of an irredeemably degraded environment. In his brief analysis of Erich von Stroheim’s films in \textit{Cinema 1: The Movement Image}, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), Gilles Deleuze identifies an “entropic” principle informing Stroheim’s cinematic “naturalism” and \textit{Greed}, his 1924 adaptation of \textit{McTeague} \textit{pp. 126–27}).}

I first investigate \textit{McTeague}’s understudied conclusion in order better to define Norris’s sense of entropic force and to witness its simultaneous effects on “human” and nonhuman systems. Norris’s dramatic foregrounding of this devolutionary principle nevertheless raises an important question with respect to its interpretive significance for the majority of the novel: how does the rather extraordinary yet prosaic tale of McTeague and Trina relate to this immense vision of deep time? Although \textit{McTeague}’s conclusion emphasizes the destructive teleology of entropic force, the San Francisco chapters provide a vision of the equally impersonal systems produced in order to resist this descent. I suggest that entropy operates in these chapters through and upon something resembling a \textit{circuit}—an organization meant productively to diversify and sustain an order of forces through a codified system of channels.\footnote{The circuit and a similar concept, the network, have recently gained significant interpretive attention, particularly in the context of scholarship on literary modernism. For example, Mark Goble’s \textit{Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life} (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010) analyzes how communication technologies created novel modes of enjoyment based upon their specific material structures as mediums (p. 12). In \textit{The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud} (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), Maud Ellmann explores the threat posed to a sense of autonomous subjectivity by the networking of technologies that came to infiltrate the private sphere in the early twentieth century (p. 2). Goble’s and Ellmann’s rich analyses describe different network or circuit-logics than the one found in \textit{McTeague}. A logic of collapsing multiplicities, rather than Ellmann’s sense of modernism’s anxiously spreading multiplicities, characterizes the novel.} The circuit prevents the violent collapse of forces with
a series of partitions, in this case spatial barriers, social institutions, and temporal patterns, although its diverse structures ultimately succumb to the sway of the singularly destructive entropic force foregrounded in McTeague’s conclusion.

I then trace the devolutionary effect of entropic force on the physical and social relationships in the novel—primarily those between Trina, McTeague, and Marcus—mapping a series of violent collapses, or short circuits. The agent triggering this collapse is, ironically, the current or currency on which the circuit depends. The novel identifies gold, functioning as it does to connect parts in electrical circuits today, as the material facilitating the exchanges out of which American civilization arises. In McTeague gold also refers back directly to entropy’s destructive teleology, as though its productive capacities rested on a Faustian bargain. This is because gold is a material object that submits, like all others, to the rule of entropic force, but more importantly because, as the primary agent through which the materially and socially “productive” and “diversifying” work of American modernization is accomplished, gold represents the rapid increase in total degraded energy resulting from the attempt to construct complex systems. In this sense gold’s circulation functions in a manner not unlike the consumption of fossil fuels today, which make possible complex and diversified economies and goods while generating ever more “degraded” carbon waste. Norris represents the social and psychic effects of entropic force in terms of the characters’

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15 My reading of McTeague is partly inspired by Reza Negarestani’s Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), which presents a view of the earth, its history, and present culture as entirely narrated by oil (p. 19). Although it is unclear if entropic force possesses any robust sense of consciousness in McTeague, as oil does in Cyclonopedia, the role of gold as the agent of destruction resonates strikingly with Negarestani’s depiction of oil.

16 In Letter, Adams similarly identifies humanity’s putatively superior exertions with a net increase in disorder: “As energy he [man] has but one dominant function:—that of accelerating the operation of the second law of thermodynamics” (Letter to American Teachers, p. 230).

17 Allen MacDuffie’s Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014) explores a strong parity between thermodynamics’ discourse of energy degradation and the crisis of nonrenewable energy resources confronting the age of fossil fuel consumption (p. 35).
tendencies rampantly to accumulate gold, thereby violently disrupting the flow of currency in the circuits of civilization.18

Before applying these central concepts—the circuit, gold, and entropic force—in a close reading of the novel, I want to make a brief summary of influential scholarly investigations of *McTeague*, because many readings focus on some of its fantastic or grotesque elements. Early interpretations emphasized the legacy of French naturalism and Darwinism—particularly notions of biological determinism and sexual selection—as strongly informing Norris’s work.19 In similar fashion Donald Pizer identifies the grotesque and “romantic” elements of *McTeague* with the effects of hereditary determinism and atavistic reversions to destructive “animal qualities” (*Realism and Naturalism*, pp. 15–16).20 New historicist criticism on *McTeague* departed sharply from this tradition, identifying specific and contemporaneous American political and social contexts as the primary focus of the novel.21

18 Schematizing the text according to these three concepts—gold, the circuit, and entropic force—produces a reading also applicable to strands of contemporary posthumanist thought inspired by systems theory. Cary Wolfe’s *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), similarly understands posthumanism as the investigation of the autopoesis of impersonal systems out of complex environments (pp. xx-xxiv). However, the novel’s teleology of universal degeneration diverges significantly from the emphasis on plurality and autopoesis often associated with these approaches.


20 The novel undoubtedly represents a reality in which instinct and heredity have significant and often deleterious effects. Against the overwhelming backdrop of the alkali flats, however, the distinction between “animal” and “human” appears relatively inconsequential. And in a universe gaining entropy exponentially, and into which all things will eventually collapse, the effects of putatively atavistic traits are far less significant than the ghostly entropic logic orchestrating a general extinction.

21 Michaels’s canonical new historicist reading of *McTeague* in *The Gold Standard* relates the characters’ pathological attraction to gold to the hysteria surrounding fiat currency in the late nineteenth century. Although Michaels briefly comments on the novel’s conclusion (*The Gold Standard*, pp. 149–50), he fails to account for the text’s abrupt shift in focus to the entropic drama of titanic forces—a transition that suggests Norris’s attempt to contemplate a crisis transcending the logic of a particular social or historical milieu. Another important interpretation, that of Jennifer Fleissner in her
Other recent interpretations recognize thermodynamics and related movements as central influences on Norris’s texts, but generally interpret them as narratives in which entropy is productively overcome. Ronald Martin illustrates how the contemporaneously popular concept of force provided Norris, and several other naturalist writers, with the intellectual means to unify diverse phenomena under a single metaphysical notion.\(^{22}\) While his interpretation investigates the closely related discipline of thermodynamics and the cosmic apocalypticism it sometimes provoked, Martin primarily illustrates how, in Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), force provides optimistic support for a progressive evolutionism along the lines of Herbert Spencer and Joseph LeConte (*American Literature and the Universe of Force*, p. 148). Here *The Octopus* is also understood as representative of Norris’s worldview—one in which forces generally work in Spencerian fashion toward humanity’s “fulfillment, betterment” and “growth” (*American Literature and the Universe of Force*, pp. 148, 173).\(^{23}\) Mark Seltzer’s rich biopolitical investigation of American naturalism also draws heavily on the concept of force and the laws of thermodynamics, in order to illustrate how the apotheosis of machinic productivity in Norris’s work represents an image of the effective regulation of entropic degradation—and even the productive transformation of degradation into generation.\(^{24}\) Although characters in Norris’s fiction frequently devolve, their situations serve to support the project of realist fiction—what Seltzer describes as “the internal genesis

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22 See Martin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, p. 155. Within the first half of the nineteenth century, force provided a useful descriptor for the entity transformed and conserved in certain material changes, such as those in which motion generates heat (see Martin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, pp. 13–14). Although quickly replaced by the more scientifically sound and specific concept of energy, theories of force contributed significantly to the development of thermodynamics (pp. 27–28).

23 Martin interprets *McTeague* only briefly, characterizing it primarily and somewhat dismissively as a conventional “adventure novel,” and attributing the “degeneration” of its characters to their “biological nature” and “social milieu” (see *American Literature and the Universe of Force*, pp. 157–61).

and evolution of character in society” (Bodies and Machines, p. 43). The images and narratives of regulated degeneration indicative of naturalism are thus—in contrast to Norris’s claim about his chosen literary genre—merely a “mutation,” and not a challenge, to realism’s heavily controlled logic of generation.25

Although Seltzer’s and Martin’s readings of individual texts within Norris’s oeuvre and the themes they raise are unmistakably important for understanding aspects of his work and American naturalism generally, these approaches fail to address McTeague’s unique significance for similar reasons: because they mean for Norris’s texts to serve as exemplars of broad intellectual and historical paradigms, these critics either largely ignore McTeague because it does not seem to support the issue in question, or they briefly reference it as an illustration. While in this essay I do not intend fundamentally to challenge Seltzer’s or Martin’s approaches to Norris or American naturalism, I do ask that we consider McTeague as a significant “posthuman” exception to them. Characterizing somewhat reductively and in different terms, Seltzer’s and Martin’s readings suggest that Norris utilized concepts threatening to anthropocentrism in order to salvage it through a literary dialectic or economy dealing in both evolution and entropy. I suggest, contrarily, that at least in this novel, Norris considered and foregrounded the apocalyptic absence of any such economy. Indeed, within the novel’s imaginary, there is no machine, circuit, or natural force capable of transforming the alkali flats—and thus entropic force—into a positive or progressive possibility for humanity.

Norris begins McTeague’s lengthy conclusion with a striking vision of nature as a set of colossal forces—an image initially without signs of humanity in a novel heretofore dominated by them:

25 Seltzer focuses briefly on McTeague, primarily using the novel as one example of the manner in which naturalist texts worked to produce a biopolitical regime that reconfigured production in terms of machinic masculinity (see Bodies and Machines, pp. 34–35).
The day was very hot, and the silence of high noon lay close and thick between the steep slopes of the cañons like an invisible, muffling fluid. . . . The vast, moveless heat seemed to distil countless odors from the brush—odors of warm sap, of pine needles. . . . As far as one could look, uncounted multitudes of trees and manzanita bushes were quietly and motionlessly growing, growing, growing. A tremendous, immeasurable Life pushed steadily heavenward without a sound, without a motion. At turns of the road, on the higher points, cañons disclosed themselves . . . suggestive of colossal primeval forces held in reserve. . . . In Placer County, California, she [nature] is a vast, unconquered brute of the Pliocene epoch, savage, sullen, and magnificently indifferent to man. (McTeague, p. 528)

The passage depicts Placer County in terms of a rich, sensuous diversity—the manifestation of a multiplicity of forces and their ancient relations. A variety of specific sensorial referents emerge—the “odors of warm sap, of pine needles”—along with images of the cañons, manzanita bushes, and pine trees. Each of these entities, while characterizing a specific identity, is nevertheless quickly absorbed by larger and more indistinct unities. Odors merge with heat, and plant and insect life dissolve into “a tremendous, immeasurable Life.” The cañons’ “primeval forces held in reserve” blend, along with all other objects and sensations, into a monstrous mass, which although described as “indifferent,” acquires a feminine agency characterized by savageness and sullenness. Norris effectively conveys a sense of nature as a multiplicity of structures and forces, which, while “indifferent to man,” appear united in a struggle to expand and evolve “heavenward.”

From here the novel quickly returns to images of humanity and civilization, although now with a more ambiguous sense of their distinctiveness or significance. The scale of perspective shifts dramatically, providing an impersonal vision of anonymous men as miniscule points in a titanic landscape: “there were men in these mountains, like lice on mammoths’ hides, fighting them stubbornly, now with hydraulic ‘monitors,’ now with drill and dynamite, boring into the vitals of them, or tearing away great yellow gravelly scars in the flanks of them, sucking their blood, extracting gold” (McTeague, p. 528). Norris’s
description does not simply produce a general diminishment of “human” space; instead it confuses the division between human and natural zones of force. Indeed, in a few lines the narration descends from this distant bird’s-eye view, suddenly depicting a product of human ingenuity—the ore crusher—in terms suggesting a sense of size and strength akin to the mountains: “On near approach one heard the prolonged thunder of the stamp-mill, the crusher, the insatiable monster, gnashing the rocks to powder with its long iron teeth.... Its enormous maw, fed night and day with the car-boys’ loads” (pp. 528–29). The rapid shift in perspectives and the parity of diction between descriptions of nature and man seem to collapse the latter into the former. McTeague is drawn back to the Big Dipper mine like a “homing pigeon” (p. 532)—an image suggesting a natural and appropriate habitat for the dentist. For the duration of his brief stay, he seems content: “The life pleased the dentist beyond words. The still, colossal mountains took him back again like a returning prodigal, and vaguely, without knowing why, he yielded to their influence—their immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflecting themselves in his own nature” (p. 533). McTeague’s work appears to merge with the brutal indifference of the forces surrounding him: “He passed his nights thus in the midst of the play of crude and simple forces—the powerful attacks of the Burly drills; the great exertions of bared, bent backs overlaid with muscle; the brusque, resistless expansion of dynamite” (p. 533).

While the intense physicality of mining resonates with the “enormous power” of the mountains, another force decisively opposes the work of extraction: “the silent, vast, Titanic force, mysterious and slow, that cracked the timbers supporting the roof of the tunnel, and that gradually flattened the lagging till it was thin as paper” (McTeague, p. 533). Norris tellingly capitalizes “Titanic,” distinguishing this force from those associated with excavation—drills, muscles, and dynamite—and attributes to it a “mysterious and slow” quality capable of reducing the tunnel system to nothing. This force not only destroys the lagging (the steel plates used to build the walls and ceilings of mining shafts) but also flattens it, suggesting a power working
in total opposition to the miner’s logic of disaggregation and dispersal.

These initial descriptions of “Titanic,” or entropic, force in McTeague’s conclusion, while dramatically enlarging the perspective and scale of the San Francisco chapters, provide a macrocosmic and simplified image of systems and their interactions with environments in the novel. The complex dialectic of unity and diversity structuring these passages speaks to the relationship of systems and the forces enabling their self-perpetuation. Although described in rather impersonal terms as the miners’ “play of crude and simple forces,” their disaggregation of minerals from the earth produces the fundaments of civilization, which in turn produce a putatively separate sphere of the “human.” Norris similarly describes the distinct identity of Placer County in terms of a system—a structure of “primeval forces.” And yet the crushing “Titanic force” that threatens to flatten tunnels, men, and machines also threatens the mountain, as though their simple verticality were the rudiments of a system it opposed. Placer County’s “immeasurable Life” pushes “steadily heavenward” while the “mysterious and slow” progression of entropic force devolves its diverse phenomena. The lagging’s flatness—its paper-thin surface—foreshadows a state in which timbers, tunnels, and mountains will dissolve and acquire the uniform flatness of the alkali. Although the conclusion thus begins with images of diverse systems (mountain and man), its enlarged perspective quickly identifies the teleology of entropy over deep time, marking these structures as temporary, inessential, and ultimately without the capacity to resist.

A strange and persistent inclination guides McTeague’s hasty departure from the mine and his flight into the desert. Although it may be tempting to conceptualize this impersonal compulsion in terms of biological instinct (Norris describes it as both “mysterious instinct” and “animal cunning” [McTeague, pp. 558, 535]), it becomes increasingly clear that entropic force drives him far more than any inclination for self-preservation. The “unseen hand” propelling McTeague leads him advantageously away from his pursuers, but it also forces him into the heart of Death Valley. The same force compressing and deforming the
lagging operates on McTeague, and not only because he, like the mountains, will eventually dissipate into a lifeless sea of energy, but more importantly because his profession as a miner represents a general human struggle with entropy. Although it might seem a contradiction to describe the monstrous McTeague as a proponent of civilization, the gold standard, within the historical moment of Norris’s novel, enabled a basic although not unproblematic faith in currency, helping to construct a diverse and burgeoning western economy. The opposition of “Titanic force” to mining, and ultimately to a “developing” American civilization, might thus be read as the opposition to McTeague that guides his fatal journey. It follows that the old carboy’s final days are spent transporting gold, but this time as far away from civilization as possible. The invisible “spur” forcing McTeague into the desert seems to desire that Trina’s five thousand dollars become lost, thereby depleting the standard and working to disrupt the order of exchange (McTeague, p. 552).

It is gold, however, and not simply entropic force that drives McTeague to kill Trina and then to flee back to the mine and eventually to Death Valley. The struggle between Marcus and McTeague—one that structures and provokes the novel’s depiction of gradual breakdowns in social and material structures—revolves around the rightful owner of Trina, but also, more importantly, of her money. The concluding fight between the men occurs because Marcus wants the sacks of gold he claims “by rights,” and the two meet suddenly and almost inexplicably along McTeague’s delirious path to “Gold Mountain” (McTeague, pp. 565–66). Most of the novel’s numerous examples of social devolution and physical violence occur because of and often in the mysterious physical presence of the element.

Although McTeague envisions gold as the lifeblood of the developing California economy, its pervasive destructive influence links it directly to the teleology of entropic force envisioned in the conclusion. One might thus describe gold as the demon of

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26 This observation resonates with Michaels’s suggestion that the relationship to gold in McTeague is one of accumulation and withdrawal. Michaels views McTeague’s removal of the gold to the mountains, and then to Death Valley, as an attempt to put it “where no one will ever be able to get at it” (The Gold Standard, p. 149), although I identify entropic force as the orchestrator of this removal.
McTeague, or, in the language of chaos theory, as something akin to its “strange attractor.” Gradually coming to possess or attract the characters through its ecstatic power, gold’s mysterious and destructive will orchestrates the collapse of circuits, thereby gesturing toward the eventual dissolution of nature glimpsed in the alkali flats. Demons often appear in literature as producers of ecstatic states—moments in which structures and selves diverge from reified patterns, although frequently as a first step toward chaos or destruction. Indeed, McTeague, who will certainly die on the path to “Gold Mountain,” and Marcus, who dies fighting McTeague for gold, are led to a dramatic but ironic state of ecstasy—the body’s final collapse into death (McTeague, p. 572). Just as demonically orchestrated are the conditions setting the stage for the moment of the final battle, in which the gold-carrying mule “act[s] as if possessed,” leading the men and itself to certain death (p. 569).

A discourse of mysterious possession accompanies many descriptions of gold in McTeague, perhaps explaining why the miner’s path plunges back and forth wildly between moments of hoarding and distribution. As the novel draws to its end, McTeague falls increasingly under gold’s entropic influence, but his journey from San Francisco to Death Valley is conspicuously punctuated by gold mining—both in the Placer County Mine, in the Panamint Range with Cribbens, and, if he were to survive Death Valley, presumably on “Gold Mountain.” Walter Benn Michaels’s suggestion that McTeague’s journey is an attempt to put the gold “where no one will ever be able to get at it” (The Gold Standard, p. 149), while proving ultimately to be

As they are used here, the terms “demon” and “demonic” do not refer to a specific theological or religious formulation, although the sense of a false or “demonic” bargain describes the attempt to overcome disorder by building the circuit of exchange. As Harriet Hawkins suggests in Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture, and Chaos Theory (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), within chaos theory strange attractors are the element of an environment that pull a system away from its regular recapitulation, producing unpredictable and shifting patterns (pp. 126–27). For a similar understanding of the demonic, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 243–47. In McTeague gold attracts divergences from the regular functioning of the circuit, but the comparison ends here, for gold’s influence does not so much alter the recapitulation of systems as eventually annihilate systems completely.
true, does not explain why, along the way, McTeague seems compelled to continue disaggregating and dispersing it. If the return to the Placer County Mine is an attempt to “put it [gold] back into the ground,” as Michaels claims (The Gold Standard, p. 149), then it is a poor one, for McTeague works laboriously there to produce more of it for circulation. And yet, whatever resistance this labor mounts against the pressure of entropic force and gold’s power of suggestion proves entirely futile; McTeague’s last endeavor to locate and extract gold with Cribbens, while initially successful, is thwarted by an irresistible and mysterious compulsion to move directly into the desert (McTeague, p. 552).

While gold orchestrates the final collapse of social, spatial, and biological structures in McTeague, this devolutionary narrative is woven into a larger set of images relating to entropic force’s ultimate effect on matter. McTeague’s journey describes his and civilization’s fate, but it also follows the transformation of matter from states of diverse and complex order to a formless, homogenous remainder. In Placer County, matter is configured into a rich multiplicity of systems, which threaten, nonetheless, to collapse into a colossal, formless mass. Along the train route to Death Valley, Norris’s landscape descriptions convey a sense of delirium, as this dialectic of unity and multiplicity fades into a fusion of matter and heat in the desert. Here the novel gains an impressionistic quality, downplaying material structure in favor of fields of color: “At length the mountains began again, rising up on either side of the track; vast, naked hills of white sand and red rock, spotted with blue shadows. Here and there a patch of green was spread like a gay table-cloth over the sand” (McTeague, p. 538). As McTeague’s journey continues, illustrating through a minor change of spatial position a vision of deep time’s future, even this visual diversity subsides into the utter homogeneity of Death Valley:

League upon league the infinite reaches dazzling white alkali laid themselves out like an immeasurable scroll unrolled from horizon to horizon; not a bush, not a twig relieved that horrible monotony. Even the sand of the desert would have been a welcome sight; a single clump of sage-brush would have fascinated the eye; but this was worse than the desert. It was abominable,
this hideous sink of alkali, this bed of some primeval lake lying so far below the level of the ocean. The great mountains of Placer County had been merely indifferent to man; but this awful sink of alkali was openly and unreservedly iniquitous and malignant. (p. 560)

The flat “immeasurable scroll” recalls the paper-thin lagging, compressed and deformed by the “Titanic force” working to level the mountains. Not only has entropic force here destroyed all traces of organic life, it furthermore deconstructs matter, flattening all vertical structures into a uniform, chalky floor. The alkali, which is later described as “leper white,” seems a dead husk, more a remnant than a substantial entity (p. 570). The other characteristic of the valley, its terrible heat, supports a sense of force as reductive and transformative; the destruction of complex order seems to equate with a general and ubiquitous change in the thermal environment. One might imagine McTeague’s impending demise in this country, while certainly from a lack of water, as a complete combustion of his body. Upon stopping for a nap and briefly touching the ground, he finds the alkali “oven-hot” (p. 561).

Although Norris leaves McTeague’s rapidly approaching demise to the imagination, it seems, within the conclusion’s mapping of vast scales of time and space, a momentary and insignificant occurrence, and one terrifyingly prophetic of the human future. In either case, as perhaps it was for William Thomson when he contemplated a similarly bleak collapse of life and world into a uniform field of radiation, the terror instilled by such an image results from the unseen entropic force or thermodynamic laws that make its realization inevitable. While this cosmic vision of “the extraordinary, the vast, the monstrous” seems unrelated to the domestic dramas played out on Polk Street, it is within his depiction of San Francisco that Norris provides a different but equally posthuman vision. Here the sublime evidence of entropic force does not yet dominate the environment, but its power combats the complex circuits comprising the city.

A striking contrast between McTeague’s conclusion and its San Francisco chapters is the preponderance of heavily structured and diverse spatial and temporal systems found
within the San Francisco setting, and their almost total absence in the conclusion. Death Valley does not appear to contain a single wall, living organism, or machine; whatever enters seems destined quickly to dissolve. From its first sentences, however, chapter 1 depicts a heavily organized space and set of routines: “It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors’ coffee-joint on Polk Street. On his way back to his office, one block above, he stopped at Joe Frenna’s saloon and bought a pitcher of steam beer. It was his habit to leave the pitcher there on his way to dinner” (McTeague, p. 263). Time appears immediately as “Sunday”—a day that will soon return with its associated patterns of behavior. Space is divided according to a system of “blocks,” and Norris’s reference to cable cars hints at a carefully regulated pattern of movement indicative of urban life. Although San Francisco furnishes an array of diverse experiences (far more than those offered to the carboys of the Big Dipper mine), its existence seems predicated on the regimented channeling of forces—the shuttling of people and things from one place to another in accordance with the hour appearing on the “power-house clock” (p. 268).

Norris’s descriptions of “swarm[ing]” multitudes moving purposefully within well-defined boundaries suggest something closely resembling the regulative structures of a circuit (McTeague, p. 391). The cable car tracks, while not forming an electric circuit, nonetheless describe a similar structuring of forces, and their frequent appearance in these sections suggest a pattern of motion regulated by a grid. All aspects of life on Polk Street run in “grooves” (p. 403)—an image combining the circuit’s careful organization with its sense of flowing motion and repetition. McTeague further marks the rapid growth of San Francisco’s electrical circuits and grids in the form of Polk Street’s first set of electric lights (p. 403). Like the streets and patterned behaviors of the city, circuits distribute otherwise

dangerous or useless forces into diverse and productive activities; San Francisco’s regulated exchanges of goods and energy generate the rudiments of Western American culture and refinement. The circuit thus resists the more general work of annihilation and homogenization wrought by entropic force in McTeague’s conclusion. Nothing attests to this prohibitive work more basically than the city’s networks of walls and rooms, which ideally prevent the entropic tendencies of crowds, while diversifying the economic and social lives of individuals.

The term “circuit” appears infrequently in McTeague, but at highly significant moments, and in a manner helpful for understanding San Francisco’s circuit-system. As he fights the “invisible hand” guiding him into the desert, McTeague decides “to make a circuit” of Death Valley, suggesting a confined and determined path—one that might even be repeated in the future (McTeague, p. 554). Of course, McTeague fails to trace this minimal structure, as the entropic force driving him breaks his intended circuit, leading inevitably to a violent confrontation with Marcus and to death. The sheriff tracking McTeague seems implicitly to understand the minimal need for a systematic approach, and suggests almost identically that he and his men “make a circuit round the valley” (p. 566). Like these circuits around Death Valley, San Francisco’s complicated system of boundaries endeavors to prevent a general collapse of order, but they fail ultimately to resist gold’s entropic influence. The course of events comprising the narrative of life in San Francisco thus traces the devolutionary logic of force as it shorts various circuits (walls, customs, and bodies), and in each of these cases gold guides the work of destruction.

Although the extent to which Norris was aware of the use of gold as a contact, or conducting agent in electrical circuits, is unclear, a similar notion appears in McTeague’s conclusion. Cribbens’s theory of gold as a “contact” between two types of stone is verified as he and McTeague discover trace amounts of the mineral in a line between diorite and slate (McTeague, p. 546). One can only speculate as to whether or not Norris intended to reference electrical circuitry here, but the image of gold as a connector speaks both to its essence as a demonic attractor—a link between entropy and matter—and to its
destructive power; gold creates brief contacts between men, such as Cribbens and McTeague, which often quickly devolve into violence. Even before they can verify if their sample of quartz contains gold, Cribbens, who now behaves as if possessed, instructs McTeague to “plug” anyone he sees in the area (p. 547). Only a few days later McTeague and Marcus—another relationship brought together by currency—collide and destroy each other. Beginning with the promise of plenty founded on the deferral of violence, gold creates a “contact” and a structured set of relations, but it quickly prompts hoarding and thus the violent withdrawal of currency and current.

Gold’s annihilating effects in San Francisco are, however, more subtly deployed than in the conclusion’s drama of cosmic destruction. Within the city, gold is both the currency—the current circulating through the circuitry of exchange—and the demonic attractor working to obliterate the circuit. This dual role figures a reciprocal relationship between entropy and the attempt to produce systems of greater complexity; the circuitry of civilization requires immense expenditures of energy that ultimately increase the rate of entropic degradation, as though every attempt to rise out of the desert were a Faustian bargain—a promise of life founded on the demon’s illusory power to deny death. If the “Titanic” force intuited in the mountains operates through creeping eons of cosmic time, then the life of cities appears immensely to accelerate its effects. Exchange would seem to replace violence with order, but the order is a mere detour, a circuitous route or hesitation, on the path to the alkali flats. Marcus, McTeague, and Trina are brought together by the city and its circuitry of exchange, but the currency structuring their relations orchestrates their eventual collision.

McTeague’s simple weekly routine within the ordered spaces of Polk Street appears peacefully complete; lacking any point of contention, he and Marcus build a friendship structured by common experience—meals at the conductor’s coffee joint—and the exchange of gratis dental services for the expansion of McTeague’s narrow social world (McTeague, p. 269). Little more than a single story and a few doors separate them spatially—an arrangement facilitating a relationship
of structured proximity and privacy. The friendship seems a stable and productive example of the circuit’s capacity to reverse the destructive power of force, but even before Trina’s arrival there are signs of an essential lack in the simple order of the dentist’s life: “But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. . . . It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive” (p. 265). From its beginning, the novel associates gold with a lack in the circuit, with something whose supernatural attractiveness prompts a need to disrupt the status quo’s stability, and McTeague’s personal history serves as an ideal example of the mutually exclusive demands that gold places on civilization. As the old-time carboy turned dentist, McTeague serves the movement of gold from mine to mouth, and more generally from the mountains to circulation (Michaels, *The Gold Standard*, p. 149). McTeague’s work as a dentist reflects the logic of this economy on its most literal level: his clumsy attempts to fix teeth reflect a general social endeavor to substitute gold for the absences left by inevitable physical decay—a temporary material remedy to a problem inherently material in its origin. The dentist literally trades in gold, but his dream of the gilded tooth is one of noncirculation, for it demands that gold be removed from the paths of exchange and from the holes it might fill in mouths. Although Michaels is correct to relate the fear of hoarding to fears about a cataclysmic downfall of the monetary system, the cause of hoarding—of putting gold into a dental sign—originates in the entropic force shorting the circuits of exchange and substitution (*The Gold Standard*, p. 149). The monstrous golden tooth intimates the unseen, demonic influence of this force; at this early point in the narrative McTeague’s dream of the “gilded tooth” already commands his ambition and imagination, foreshadowing its eventual power to possess his agency entirely.

Gold disrupts swiftly and thoroughly the spatial and temporal orders of McTeague and Marcus’s friendship, suggesting the destructive work of some mysterious agency. After his nearly fatal disagreement with Marcus about the ownership of Trina’s five thousand dollars, McTeague “storm[s]” home in a murderous
rage, smashing the lock on Marcus’s door (McTeague, p. 366). Finding Marcus not at home, the dentist returns to his parlors, where the discovery of his monstrous birthday present quickly pacifies him:

How immense it looked in that little room! The thing was tremendous, overpowering—the tooth of a gigantic fossil, golden and dazzling... Even McTeague himself, big boned and enormous as he was, shrunk and dwindled in the presence of the monster. As for an instant he bore it in his hands, it was like a puny Gulliver struggling with the molar of some vast Brobdingnag.

The dentist circled about that golden wonder, gasping with delight and stupefaction, touching it gingerly with his hands as if it were something sacred. (p. 367)

Norris casts the effect of the tooth on McTeague in terms of a battle for possession already lost; the “overpowering” object immediately reduces the giant and his room to nothing. McTeague’s usually commanding gigantism is noted, but only to be immediately dwarfed by this glittering monstrosity. The dentist “gaz[es] ecstatically at his treasure” for an hour (p. 367), enthralled by a substance that seems to possess its own source of power and light. Language of the sacred seems to relate “the brilliance of this greater glory” to something beyond the dullness of the dentist’s parlor (p. 368). Norris concludes the same chapter with an image relating gold to a mysterious power: “Trina’s gift, his birthday present from his little woman—a huge, vague bulk, looming there through the half darkness in the centre of the room, shining dimly out as if with some mysterious light of its own” (p. 369).

Although it would seem that gold functions here purely to pacify McTeague, the night’s contention began with an argument about its possession—an argument leading to a violent disruption of the system of partitions sustaining the living space. The broken door does not merely indicate a symbolic rupture; walls and doors sustain the order of the circuit, and this forceful interruption leads to a general instability in the system. The honest, predictable routines comprising the friendship devolve into unpredictable outbreaks of antipathy,
as when Marcus notifies city officials about McTeague’s lack of proper professional credentials (McTeague, p. 443). The loss of his practice—a loss orchestrated by gold—foreshadows and facilitates the gradual loss of routines and partitions occurring throughout the story of Trina and McTeague’s brief marriage.

Not long before the dramatic and violent conclusion of their relationship, McTeague and Trina almost succeed in sustaining something like a bourgeois home, and momentarily dream of contributing to the progress of the larger social order. Old Grannis comments to McTeague that marriage is “the foundation of society” (McTeague, p. 374), and their wedding seems to suggest that society relies on careful delineations of space and time. Mr. Sieppe even makes chalk marks on the floor in order to reach specific positions at the appropriate moment in the ceremony (p. 378). The link between evolutionary progress and the generation of partitions and routines is further reflected in the couple’s new flat, which boasts three rooms—a definite improvement on McTeague’s parlor and Trina’s little room with its “tiny” contents (p. 317). The division of space into a sitting-dining room, bedroom, and kitchen corresponds to an increase in the diversification of activities—something the circuit of the city facilitates more generally. The separation of McTeague’s workspace from his living space represents another important change, as he begins to rise above the constraints of a life defined by the routines of basic labor. Along with his subscription to a dental magazine, McTeague begins to diversify his activities, attending church occasionally and even beginning “to have opinions, convictions” (p. 398).

The dentist dreams of owning an entire house with Trina—a veritable mansion with “six rooms and a bath”—where he will raise generations of educated children (McTeague, p. 398). Containing twice the number of rooms in which they now live, the dream house represents an introduction to a world of relatively high culture, and the possible perpetuation and improvement of human life. The teleology of existence for the crude miner-become-dentist would seem directed toward increasingly sophisticated circuits pregnant with diverse rewards, and all due to the mysterious power of gold’s circulation. In sharp contrast to McTeague’s comic vision of “himself as
a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren” (p. 398), however, stands the final reality of entropy’s effects—the barren, formless alkali of Death Valley.

The McTeagues never come into possession of their dream home, or any other home, thanks to Trina’s obsessive saving, McTeague’s loss of employment, and his violent alcoholism. In both cases gold’s possession of the characters, or what amounts to their need to possess gold, leads to the breakdown of the systems integral to their fledgling “humanity.” After Marcus notifies the city of McTeague’s illegal practice, the entropic degradation of the system increases rapidly, suggesting its essential fragility. The McTeagues move to a one-room flat—a space that quickly reduces and destroys the range of their activities (McTeague, p. 453). Although the couple forms new routines, they represent unsustainable and increasingly unstable patterns; McTeague is found again on Sundays “crop-full, stupid, warm, smoking his huge pipe, drinking his steam beer” (p. 463). The return of old habits also brings with it McTeague’s terrible penchant for sadism and violence (p. 476). Trina’s love of gold prompts her to search continuously for an even cheaper living space, and she finds a dingy flat located prophetically in the rear of Zerkow and Maria’s former house (p. 497).29

29 The relationship of Old Grannis and Miss Baker deserves some comment here, if for no other reason than it appears to have broken free of the logic of gold and force driving virtually all the other narratives in McTeague. Leonard Cassuto, in “‘Keeping Company’ with the Old Folks: Unravelling the Edges of McTeague’s Deterministic Fabric,” American Literary Realism, 1870–1910, 25, no. 2 (1993), 46–55, suggests that their gradual union is a “fully realized portrait of free will” that should cause us to question reading McTeague as a novel of inexorable determinism (p. 46). Although Grannis and Baker appear to construct a relationship capable of functioning as a sustainable circuit-system, they can do so because they are “old”—a term attached to Grannis’s name—and not because they are, as Jared Gardner suggests, Norris’s prized Anglo-Saxons (“What Blood Will Tell,” p. 58). Their relationship then, far from emerging as an example of human freedom or progressive civilization, rather darkly suggests that their union may only function because it will function briefly. J. C. Levenson suggests a similarly grim interpretation of the couple in “The Red Badge of Courage and McTeague: Passage to Modernity,” in The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism, ed. Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 171. John J. Conder in Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1984) claims that this story, like the others in McTeague, revolves around conflicts between the forces of hereditary environmental determinism and sexual force (p. 83). Naturally healthy instincts seem warped by social traditions inimical to life—a situation Conder attributes to what he describes as the novel’s “wall symbolism.”
Norris’s descriptions of this back room indicate the terrifying inevitability of a further collapse of borders and its consequences: “All the filth of the alley invaded their quarters like a rising muddy tide” (McTeague, p. 498).

In the midst of the dramatic spatial, habitual, and social transformations of the final months of Trina and McTeague’s marriage, gold’s influence remains a constant. Both characters hold trenchantly to their noncirculating hoards—McTeague to his golden tooth and Trina to her growing savings. Norris’s descriptions of gold’s mysterious effects appear frequently here and with greater intensity. Trina’s fixation on gold pieces becomes strangely sexual, recalling the language of demonic possession elsewhere associated with gold in the novel. She cleans her gold obsessively, gaining an orgiastic pleasure from its touch and from the sight of it in large heaps (McTeague, p. 478). In one memorable moment Trina literally climbs into bed with her wealth: “she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night upon the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body” (p. 515).

McTeague eventually sells his gilt tooth, although he quickly disappears with Trina’s savings, marking the end of the marriage and the beginning of a life lived in chaotic dissipation (p. 517). Gold brings the couple together one last time for a brutal fight over Trina’s precious five thousand dollars. In a scene strikingly similar to the first rupture of partitions in the novel—the smashing of Marcus’s door—the dentist rips “lock and bolt guard” from Trina’s door, repeating and completing the interruption of boundaries and routines guided by social barriers pervert the natural inclination for creatures to live in harmony with their kind—an analysis that Conder then applies to the problems of heredity faced by Zerkow, Trina, Maria, and McTeague. While issues of hereditary and sexual determinism appear in McTeague, when related to the concept of entropic force they reflect a different sense of determinism than is usually attributed to Norris. Human relationships in the novel have no possibility of a “healthy” or “natural” form or conclusion. While the characters are certainly conditioned by their racial and cultural backgrounds, McTeague’s concluding nihilistic vision suggests that no form of life—even one racially “pure”—can overcome the effects of entropic force.
the logic of entropic force in the San Francisco chapters (p. 523).

It might appear that Trina’s hoarding, while irrational, could have proved a sustainable form of life if it were not for McTeague’s final visit. The descriptions of Trina suggest, however, that her obsession would have quite independently caused her demise, and with the same inevitability as it does for McTeague and Marcus: “she grew thin and meagre; her flesh clove tight to her small skeleton” (McTeague, p. 510). Trina is quite literally disappearing, and without much concern on her part; the loss of two fingers and most of her thumb are treated in the shockingly unsentimental opening of chapter 19 as little more than an inconvenience (p. 509). While it would seem that McTeague’s earlier hedonism runs counter to this hoarding compulsion, by the novel’s conclusion his insatiable need to accumulate proves to be at least as strong as Trina’s, and with similar results. Reminded of her piles of gold, he returns to the kindergarten and murders her, but without the clear intention of spending it (p. 525). Rather than lightening the load of his mule—the creature that, “as if possessed,” bolts from the men, sealing their doom—McTeague forces it to carry his five thousand dollars into the desert, where Marcus has been following him in a desperate search for the same gold (pp. 567–69).

Beyond providing a new approach to McTeague, this essay should demonstrate the productive interpretive applicability of this and similar posthuman approaches for select works of American naturalism. Matthew Taylor’s analyses of Adams’s The Education of Henry Adams (1907) and Letter to American Teachers of History clearly evidence a strong apocalyptic posthuman vision similar to the one explored here. These examples suggest that a significant thematic element of American naturalism may have been underanalyzed or partially ignored in scholarship on the period. The scholarly dismissal of Adams’s later works suggests a general interpretive proclivity to reject such perspectives out of hand (Taylor,
Universes without Us, pp. 66–67). Posthuman approaches similar to the one I employ here may thus disclose shades of meaning and interpretive possibilities in a wide range of late-nineteenth-century works. Much like McTeague’s conclusion, Jack London’s 1908 version of “To Build a Fire” depicts, for example, a man and his “companion” animal fighting a desperate and losing battle with the hostile and changing energies of the thermal environment in the Yukon. London describes the man’s sensations as his body gradually freezes, leaving an indelible impression of human frailty and vulnerability within an unpredictable and indifferent cosmos. There is nothing redemptive or romantic about the human struggle for survival here—only the unsentimental narration of death in terms of impersonal forces that might suddenly and mechanically annihilate humanity.

The practical and social impact of such vivid apocalyptic narratives is doubtlessly varied and difficult to ascertain. Considering the terms that Norris utilized to describe naturalism (the “monstrous,” “vast,” and “grotesque”), the defamiliarizing force of shock and terror may be apocalyptic posthumanism’s greatest productive possibilities. McTeague’s vivid and uncompromising narration of human and cosmic decline can


31 Like McTeague, “To Build a Fire” abruptly shifts context from the personal, to the planetary, and beyond in order to represent a “human” reality overwhelmingly determined by exterior forces: “His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow” (“To Build a Fire,” p. 288). Although this final cosmic “blow” to a lone man lacks the inevitable apocalypticism of McTeague, London’s image of stellar frigidity striking the earth produces a similar impression. The reader senses that a minor shift in the planet’s position or climate would erase humanity with the same alacrity glimpsed in the narration of the protagonist’s death.
engender a startling awareness of natural alterity, while revealing our violent attempts to cast it in images that confirm a sense of human exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{32} Allen MacDuffie recognizes in the discourses surrounding thermodynamics a similar dawning ecological sensitivity expressed in several works of British literature from the same period. MacDuffie observes how predictions of the sun’s eventual extinction provoked anxieties about the rapid depletion of energy resources and the growing problem of dangerous and useless industrial waste.\textsuperscript{33} Here, as in the American context, the utter shock engendered by scientific predictions of material cataclysm began, at the very least, to trouble anthropocentrism’s practical and theoretical future.

Yet posthuman apocalypticism had limited utility as a source of ecological awareness and sensitivity for nineteenth-century British and American sensibilities. As MacDuffie demonstrates, thermodynamic discourses were utilized by champions of industry to derogate nature’s wastefulness and to justify increasing human manipulation of it.\textsuperscript{34} It seemed to many observers that ecologically detrimental industrial technologies and practices might provide some purpose for Kelvin’s devolving universe. For many of the brilliant energy scientists of the period, including Thomson, their findings could also be moralized or theologized in terms of the coming biblical apocalypse without particularly novel implications for the status quo (MacDuffie, \textit{Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination}, p. 98).

Although McTeague’s especially pessimistic apocalypticism, with its narrative of inevitable cosmic and human degeneration, would seem effectively to resist any such restorative anthropocentric gestures, its uncompromising bleakness also constitutes its limitation. While arresting all senses of human exceptionalism, it completely degrades the validity and efficaciousness of

\textsuperscript{32} Speaking of the authors he analyzes, Taylor similarly claims that “rather than finally reintroducing a form of human control over the nonhuman world, they all suggest that a fearful recognition of the human costs of living in an ahuman, indifferent universe may not be inappropriate; indeed, it could be a necessary check on the impulse toward self-universalization” (\textit{Universes without Us}, p. 25).


any effort to reformulate human practices. This critique undoubtedly locates a problematic aspect of McTeague’s apocalypticism, although applying it unquestioningly to a work of fiction presumes that Norris’s authorial intentions were purely and crudely representational. There is, in other words, no reason to assume that Norris regarded McTeague as a definitive literary representation of his cosmological beliefs. Nevertheless, the novel’s narrative of inevitable entropic decline suggests that Norris was contemplating one possible and important version of what it means to exist in a universe without providential design or intent. Although McTeague’s apocalyptic vision describes only one iteration of such a project, it reveals an inescapable possibility inherent to a properly posthuman perspective: the destruction of ourselves and the world we know may be the inevitable consequence of living in a cosmos that is not our own.

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ABSTRACT

Erik Larsen, “Entropy in the Circuits: McTeague’s Apocalyptic Posthumanism” (pp. 509–538)

This essay reinterprets Frank Norris’s novel McTeague: A Story of San Francisco (1899) as a depiction of the annihilating effects of entropy on human and material systems. Focusing on McTeague’s lengthy and underanalyzed conclusion, in which McTeague flees into the heart of Death Valley, I argue that Norris’s descriptions of the desert identify an irresistible and destructive force guiding the disintegration of individuals, relationships, and ultimately the Earth itself. Drawing on the record of cultural anxieties surrounding the laws of thermodynamics in the nineteenth century, the essay demonstrates how McTeague exemplifies an “apocalyptic posthumanism” with implications far more disruptive to human exceptionalism than those of traditional biological determinism. The essay also interprets social, biological, and material systems in the novel as attempting, unsuccessfully, to resist entropic decline by channeling and diversifying forces through systems resembling electrical circuits. In this context, gold is read as the “current” or “currency” subtending California’s economic and social worlds, but also that which drives them to greater and greater states of entropic disorder and eventual collapse.

Keywords: Frank Norris; McTeague; entropy; posthumanism; circuit

35 Taylor claims similarly of Adams that he “dash[es] anthropocentricism on the rocks of our own obsolescence,” but the price is an ontological quietism without clear ethical imperatives (Universes without Us, p. 82).