

***McTeague: An Illustration of the Ironies
of Humanity's Efforts to Aspire Higher in a Naturalist Context***

The distinction between humans and animals is a recurring topic of discussion among humans. Our human egos require that we make a distinction, and this discussion, of itself, constitutes a major distinction. Our human ability to converse, a need to interrelate in language, is a primary difference between us and other animals. Language, then, with a decidedly human element of ego-centric desire to preserve the ideas we think or vocalize, evolves in us a drive to record those ideas in a more visible form than thought, a more permanent form than speech. Humans want their thoughts and ideas to endure, but unless spoken, no one else knows we had them. Can ideas endure if silent, contained only inside one body, one mind, as corruptible as all humans have proven to be? No. And so we contrive to share our ideas through speech.

Once spoken, however, the ideas, present in the instant vocalized, evaporate almost as quickly as the moisture in the respiration required to speak the words. If the spoken words are heard by another human, they still are only as permanent as the mind or body of that hearer. Human evolution of recording or reproducing language and ideas begins, then, with hand-written language, moving through a series of escalated manipulations, each a technological improvement over the last. Thus it can be argued that dexterity—an ability to use our hands better than other animals or even that we *have hands*—is an essential component of the transmission of ideas and language reproduction, an essential component of humanity.

These elements of humanity—language and the ability to manipulate a record of our language-imposed ideas—however, do not exempt us from animalistic, instinctual drives. We humans, with all our delusions of superiority, especially as seen from the deterministic

philosophy of naturalism, are driven from a base, atavistic center which runs beneath, subterranean to our consciousness—our surface selves, so that while we pride ourselves on our “humanity,” perhaps that station is not as elevated as we might like to think. At the very least, a consciousness of our subconscious, instinctive drives might lend a sense of groundedness as we humans bite, tear, hack, bash, bludgeon our superior selves through this existence, but then, naturalism, the context in which Norris places his characters in *McTeague*, allows little insight into one’s own subconscious. On the contrary, naturalism points to an instinctual, animalistic, unconscious nature of man as he is shaped by the inescapable forces of his environment. Frank Norris’s *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* exemplifies this philosophy of naturalism, offering stark images to illustrate the ironies of our quite possibly futile, though strenuous, efforts to distinguish ourselves from the animals.

As events develop, the characters in *McTeague*, initially ordinary, reasonable, only a little quirky and definitely human, begin to exhibit behaviors which can be described as deterministic and arguably animalistic. Norris gives us actual dogs in counterpoint to McTeague and Marcus. In fact, the dogs do better than the humans do when they finally confront each other. The Irish setter, Alexander, and the Scotch collie next door, always snarling through the fence, one day come face-to-face on the street. Trina cautions Miss Baker that “[t]hose two dogs hate each other just like humans” (Norris 123). The dogs circle and menace but never come to the violent clash promised through the slats of the backyard fence. Much to the disappointment of the women watching, hoping for the spectacle and entertainment of a good fight, “Alexander stalked back to the corner of the street. The collie paced toward the side gate whence he had issued, affecting to remember something of great importance. They disappeared” (Norris 123). Norris

may be guilty of a touch of anthropomorphizing in this passage but to good effect. Let us compare the animals to the humans now.

McTeague and Marcus, having just that morning been called to repent their differences and shake hands, resort to extreme brutality in their confrontation—a confrontation made in purported good-nature and friendly competition. While we would not have been surprised if the dogs had bitten each other, we are shocked when Marcus bites “through the lobe of the dentist’s ear” (132). In this instance we have an example of a common denominator between animals and humans: teeth and a willingness to use them. In response to the animal brutality in his rival’s behavior:

[t]he brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted. He sprang to his feet with a shrill and meaningless clamor, totally unlike the ordinary bass of his speaking tones. It was the hideous yelling of a hurt beast, the squealing of a wounded elephant. He framed no words; in the rush of high-pitched sound that issued from his wide-open mouth there was nothing articulate. It was something no longer human; it was rather an echo from the jungle (132).

The dogs resist their animal instinct to fight, but in his fury, McTeague grabs Marcus’s arm in both hands and snaps it. Considering the behaviors of the humans in contrast with the animals characterized in this story, it is difficult to account for the human behaviors. What, then, defines *human or animal?*

The discussion on the distinctions between humans, admittedly members of the animal kingdom, and non-hominid animals is voluminous. It would be preposterous to try to describe that entire discussion within the parameters of this single essay, but it is relevant to speak to the basic distinctions since Norris so directly juxtaposed these images in his narrative and because making the distinction blends into the discussion on naturalism.

It can be argued that most animals do not value material things. It could never have bothered Marcus's dog that he did not win the lottery. But I have seen the contents of a crow's nest, and I have seen a dog protect food, a favorite bone or toy with grim dedication. My daughter's cat was so acquisitive that if a small toy or item were to go missing or someone suddenly noticed the contents of their sock drawer had diminished, we learned to look in Shadow's favorite corner under Kate's bed. So the tendency toward materialism is not the distinction. Animals like things too; they *want* them, just as humans do.

One might submit that animals do not make war or attempt to deliberately annihilate or enslave another group of animals, but there are ant species who march on other ant colonies for acquisition of nurseries and slaves and to plunder food stores. Of course most animals do not behave in this fashion, but war, enslavement, pillaging and plundering are not exclusive to humanity.

Some might say that animals are incapable of wisdom or discretion, but my dopey cocker spaniel once gently dragged our new kitten back into the house through the open front door when he perceived that the resident humans had not noticed the problem. He had never concerned himself with her forays into the fenced backyard, and he was usually the first to take advantage of an open front door for his own walk-about adventures. So wisdom is not exclusive to humans.

It is safe, however, to state that animals have yet to exhibit a quality or sustainment of conscious abstraction, insight, synthesis, or any pursuit thereof. Non-hominid animals do not appear to grasp inner, ethereal concepts such as spirituality, the mysteries of existence, or scientific truths, nor can they apply any of these to a practice or to the development of complex technology—machines. While primates do have opposable thumbs, they still have not evolved the sustained mental focus to use their grasp for anything more complex than simple tools.

If these distinctions in the intangible realm can be attributed exclusively to humans, to what factor can they be attributed? Linguistics professor Derek Bickerton in his essay, “Resolving Discontinuity: A Minimalist Distinction between Human and Non-human Minds,” proposed, with fellow linguist William H. Calvin, that due to evolutionary selective pressures leading to “linguistic elaboration” in combination with a “factor X,” “the capacity of the brain to sustain complex coherent signals over what are (for the brain) significant time periods” (Bickerton 6) is increased. Bickerton and Calvin assert that this is a plausible explanation for the major distinction between humans and animals. In simple terms, not only is a human’s brain bigger, but we have a higher “degree of connectivity [. . .] between most brain areas” so that, through a series of factors and consequences too involved to dissect here, we developed an ability to sustain or store “in episodic memory” the things we learned. Over time, humans understood, and retained, differentiation which led to a distinction in our minds between agent/actor and goal/recipient—between subject and object. We had grammar. From protolanguage, where “utterance is completed when the speaker has finished saying whatever he wanted to say, regardless of whether any structural requirements are met,” we had evolved to structured, “modern syntacticized language” (Bickerton 5). “African grey parrots, bonobos [primates closely related to hominids], chimpanzees and orangutans can master quasi-linguistic symbolic codes and produce propositional utterances that are structurally similar to human versions of protolanguage, such as pidgin ‘languages’ and the speech of infants” (Bickerton 5), but for whatever reason, parrots and primates, among others, missed the evolutionary selective pressures responsible for language development, “a pressure that applied [apparently, and so far] only to hominids” (Bickerton 5).

So humans developed the primary distinction of language while other animals did not. Factors which enabled sustained thought, discernment of subject versus object, thus created egoic consciousness. This egocentric human not only had a need and a desire to communicate, but a need and desire to remember, to record. It is possible to extrapolate that this factor or some combination of factors led to the use of tools to make communications visible and permanent: charcoal on a rock face, stylus in clay, and chisel on marble, evolving in some order to pencil, quill or brush and ink, mechanical pen, printing press, typewriter—manual, then electric, word-processor.

Development and use of such implements required opposable thumbs, but the manual dexterity to use the hands, opposable thumbs notwithstanding, for more than simple tools and tasks required sustained thought which led to language. It might also be argued that, to some extent, a specific level of egoic awareness of agency—subject action upon object—was necessary if progressively more complex tools were to be developed. But self-awareness, like the use of the hand for higher functions, is also derived from that shift in evolutionary selective pressure which favored sustained thought leading to language development in the first place.

Still, the hand and its role in the process of recording language—transcribing the thoughts and ideas into visible, tangible, audible, permanent (an imprecise use of the word since I have learned the hard way that *no* bit of data is *permanent*) forms is demonstrably inextricable from the uniquely human trait of language. In his essay “Parmenides,” Martin Heidegger declares, “Man himself acts through the hand; for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man. Only a being which, like man, ‘has’ the word, can and must ‘have’ ‘the hand.’ [. . .] [T]he hand holds the essence of man, because the word as the essential realm of the hand is the ground of the essence of man” (Heidegger 1). Heidegger recognized the inextricable

nature of language and dexterity as well as their exclusivity for humans. We see an ironic reversal, however, of the human versus animalistic behavior as Norris portrays the role of the human hand in *McTeague*.

Hands, so active in the realm of agency with which humans egotistically credit themselves, figure prominently in *McTeague*, but not necessarily in any sense of the humanity with which Heidegger or Bickerton imbued them. It is, perhaps, not surprising that this physical feature, among others, plays such a dominant role in Norris's naturalism since hands highlight, so effectively, the ironies of humanity. Let us examine some of the hands found in Norris's book.

McTeague, the dentist, for example, is repeatedly described as some variation of a "young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously." Continually, some mention is made of his hands which were "enormous [. . .] hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy" (Norris 6). While perhaps not the finest of operators, McTeague offered a brute strength: "Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. [. . .] Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient" (Norris 6). Norris specifies that "there was nothing vicious about the man" (Norris 6), yet when enraged, pushed to his extremity, he uses his hands to break Marcus's arm and, later, to bludgeon his wife, Trina, to death. Marcus's hands warrant an examination as well.

Disappointed at losing Trina and her money to McTeague, Marcus leaves San Francisco to become a cowboy. This dream, at least, he is able to realize, even "[t]o his intense satisfaction [. . .] involv[ing] himself in a gun fight [. . .], with the result that two fingers of his left hand were

shot away” (Norris 237). Twice now, Marcus has suffered damage to a handed appendage. Thus disfigured, Marcus confronts McTeague on the fifth day of his flight into Death Valley and, having the upper-hand, so to speak, orders, “Hands up!” (236, 239) in an attempt to level the playing field—using a gun as an extension of the arm more powerful, even, than McTeague’s mallet-hard fists. It is not difficult to draw the connection to a gendered aspect of hands inside the relationship between these two men, especially considering Norris’s strong feelings about hands and handwriting, so intrinsic to his own livelihood.

Norris wrote in a time when the typewriter had been in common use for a generation, yet he insisted in hand-writing his books, true *manuscripts* with no imposition of the machine—at least, *that* machine—between himself and the expression of his ideas. In his book, *Enduring Words*, Michael Wutz speaks to Norris’s “obsession with the scene of writing,” indicating that “his work suggests a premechanized investment in the hand and the consequent triangulation between mind, hand, and paper, that is, the compositional fluidity between conception, articulation, and self-expression” (Wutz 12). Norris’s sense of “loss of agency and authority, the loss [or injury] of limb leading to a loss of self and power,” as Wutz puts it, indicates the aforementioned gendered aspect. If, as Wutz suggests, “Writing by hand is for Norris an act of authorial mastery and aesthetic self-expression, of physical and stylistic control over the materials of writing, and a virile exercise of self-generation, and hence part of what Amy Kaplan has called the naturalist ‘spectacle of masculinity’” (Wutz 13), then McTeague’s deliberate injuring of Marcus’s arm—that limb which extends the hand—is a deliberate emasculation, a broken phallus. And while Marcus may have been, on some level, pleased at the tough cowboy image of losing his fingers in a gunfight, that “manual disfigure-, or, rather, *disfinger*-ment”

would represent a further emasculation in McTeague's eyes, and a representation of same, "the loss of agency and authority" (Wutz 12), in Norris's estimation as well.

In consideration of hands and the importance Norris placed on them, it could be argued, then, that McTeague's loss of licensure to practice dentistry was a turning point for him. As Miss Baker commented to Trina, "It's just like cutting off your husband's hands, my dear" (Norris 155). He might have been able to withstand the privations of living with a miserly wife indefinitely if not for the "loss of agency and authority" he suffered when his livelihood was taken from him through a retributive emasculation, compliments of Marcus. Having lost his authority to practice dental surgery, he "secured a position with a manufacturer of surgical instruments, where his manual dexterity in the making of excavators, pluggers, and other dental contrivances stood him in fairly good stead" (Norris 159), but ultimately he was fired from that position as well, leaving him not only unable to wield the tools but even disallowed from *manufacturing* them.

Thus McTeague and Trina enter the final stage in their relationship where there are no more expressions of affection, no healthy physical relations, and no hope of productivity. McTeague begins to drink, Trina becomes increasingly stingy at the lack of income, and McTeague becomes abusive, sometimes extorting money from Trina by biting her finger-tips, "crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest" (Norris 171). In Freudian terms it could be said that McTeague has reverted to an earlier, oral stage of sexuality because he feels impotent at the loss of his hands—his ability to work. It is not accidental that Norris refers to Trina and Maria's shared confidences about their respective husbands' abusiveness as "mishandling" (Norris 172). Spousal abuse is a perversion of that for which a man's hands were intended.

The condition of Trina's hands, too, is an important indicator of her station and power. As long as she is able to work for her uncle, carving wooden animals for Noah's ark, she has a certain manageable level of authority over her life, but when she loses her fingers to bite-induced infections exacerbated by contact with "non-poisonous" paint, she is reduced to "a solitary, abandoned woman, lost in the lowest eddies of the great city's tide—the tide that always ebbs" (Norris 193). From that point on, her condition steadily ebbs to her last hiccup. She takes a job as a scrub-woman, abandons the idea of taking her money and going to live with her family, and eventually resorts to withdrawing the entirety of her principal, rendering even the inanimate gold incapable now of producing interest—essentially impotent, and taking a perverse "pleasure in the touch" (Norris 198) of the impotent gold on her naked skin.

Norris further comments on the significance of the loss of Trina's fingers when she receives yet another letter from her mother lamenting their financial woes. Trina realizes that her family cannot help her and that they will only be a constant drain on her precious principal. More to the point, however, in her extreme and ever-growing greed, Trina does not even mourn the fact that her mother's letter is in response to "one she herself had written just before the amputation of her right-hand fingers—the last letter she would ever be able to write" (Norris 194). While Norris portrays Trina with a marked dissociation from the idea evidenced here, a complete disregard for the loss of an important aspect of her own humanity, it is not lost on his reader that she has been divested of her individuality through the loss of her hands. She is no longer capable of the very act he, Norris, engages in by writing her—the expression of thought, of individuality. Norris notes that "One can hold a scrubbing brush with two good fingers and the stumps of two others even if both joints of the thumb are gone," but he goes on to state that "it takes considerable practice to get used to it" (193). Through Trina's injury, Norris has

illustrated the point that although she has managed to develop the use of what remains of her hands, her quality of life is substantially diminished by her loss. The ability to use one's hands corresponds to articulation. The mutilation of her fingers equals a loss of articulation, whether through her inability to write a letter, through her loss of dexterity—the use of her hands to work, create, provide, or finally, even as a thinking person. She has been rendered inarticulate, less than human.

Her disarticulation or “*disfinger-ment*” is an ultimately fatal progression of the machine's subsumation of Trina as seen earlier when she carves only animals because she cannot compete with the turning lathe, a machine which renders human figures more efficiently than she can. This can be read as further evidence of Wutz's assertion that Norris was indicating a “fear of technological disempowerment [. . .] in a technologized world” (Wutz 46).

Norris continues his comparison of the “technologized world” with the hand-written goodness of Selina's letter. The ominous, oblong, official-looking letter arrives from City Hall, informing McTeague that he is “forbidden to practice his profession any longer” for lack of a “diploma from a dental college” (Norris 145). We never learn the content of Selina's letter, so completely overwhelming is the news in the other. While Selina's letter is in “elegant handwriting,” the other is “typewritten [. . .] stamped in one corner with the seal of the State of California, very official; the form and file numbers superscribed.” It falls through the mail slot, “flat-wise to the floor with a sodden, dull impact,” indicating its burden of fear and consequence; it contains “a printed form with blanks left for names and dates,” illustrating its impersonal, implacable, unremitting nature. In his book, *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology*, author Michael Wutz points to the idea that the typewritten nature of the letter, as distinct from Selina's handwritten message for example, accounted for part of the alienating

force it represented. Wutz refers to Norris's dramatizing of "the conflicting modes of textual production," calling it a "discursive bifurcation [. . .]: the rupture between handwriting and typewriting" and calls attention to Norris's "investment in his *handwriting* and a corresponding resistance to typewriting" (Wutz 48).

This "investment in manual embodiment" (Wutz 13) attributed to Norris explains the dominant preoccupation with bodily descriptions, especially of hands, throughout the text of *McTeague*. Another pointed example of a hand image is seen in Norris's description of Zerkow. He is a Polish Jew with fiery red hair, a "dry, shriveled old man" with the "thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx [. . .] and claw-like, prehensile fingers—the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never disburses" (Norris 28). He is greed personified—embodied. And as such, he is driven by his innate, hereditary nature to grasp and accumulate to his death. He has no choice in the matter as dictated by the deterministic philosophy of naturalism.

Old Grannis gives us yet another set of active hands to examine. His shyness inclines his hands to trembling or tapping nervously about his chin. He still runs an animal hospital, but his primary occupation as his veterinary practice winds down is the obsessive binding of pamphlets which he accomplishes on a machine of his own invention. When he sells his apparatus, "his happiness," to a book-binding firm, however, he is left with nothing to occupy his hands. His hands are idle, and he is fearful that now he will have no further interaction with Miss Baker. As it turns out, the change in routine tweaks Miss Baker into bringing tea to Grannis rather than her custom of "keeping company" by having her tea so close to the wall that Grannis can hear her dress "brushing against the wall-paper" (Norris 181). Old Grannis is suddenly moved to occupy his hands in another manner, taking her hand in his. Now, "with nothing to separate them, they

can finally “keep company” in “a little Elysium of their own creating,” walking “in a delicious garden where it [is] always autumn” (Norris 181).

Perhaps Grannis’s innate drive is to be busy, so his busy-ness—which he is powerless in this natural context to alter—keeps him happy, but alone. His one impulsive, non-instinctive act of selling the machine allows this same busy-ness to solve his loneliness, although too late in the game to be of any biologically productive consequence. At least he contributes to society at the last with his book-binding invention.

So humans might not be entirely without hope if Grannis could break, even momentarily, out of his instinct-driven manner, but even that impulse was largely unconscious on his part, not thought out or chosen. He simply behaved like a leaf on water when the ripple—the book-seller with a proposal to buy his invention—swelled under him. In each character’s hands, we are left with the sense that everything that transpired was inevitable, humanity notwithstanding. The distinction of language is moot. In a naturalist world, driven increasingly by technology, the distinction hardly matters. The humans have barely more choice in the outcome than the animals, and any power they do wield is contained entirely in a person’s ability to use his or her hands effectively.

Works Cited

Bickerton, Derek. "Resolving Discontinuity: A Minimalist Distinction between Human and Non-human Minds," *American Zoologist* 2000, 40(6): 862-873;

<http://icb.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/40/6/862>, 11/27/2009.

Heidegger, Martin. "[On the Hand and the Typewriter]," *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992, 80-81, 85-86.

<http://faculty.weber.edu/mwutz/MUENCHEN.Sommer09/Texts>, 10/12/2009.

Norris, Frank. *McTeague A Story of San Francisco*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997.

Wutz, Michael. *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2009.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek_Bickerton