Chapter 1
Distraction in America: Paper, Money, Poe

Mass Movements: “The Man of the Crowd”

At the beginning of “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) the narrator is in the state of mind against which Poe’s tales are directed. He is subject to that mode of distracted receptivity to “worldly interests” that the ideal short story would absorb into an “hour of perusal” during which “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control,” a period of “no external or extrinsic influences—resulting from weariness or interruption.” It is thus fitting that this narrator is reading, not a novel, which is the immediate target of the critical remarks just cited, but a newspaper: “With a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap, I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over the advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street.” This state of distracted amusement is rapidly converted into one of absorption in the tale. With the lighting of the lamps, the narrator reports, “I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without” (MC 108). What follows in this passage, as “observations” proceed from a “generalizing turn” to particular “details” of the types identified in the crowd, is the very portrait of Cartesian absorption:

were it not for the analogous instance of human beings passing on in the street below, as observed from a window. In this case I do not fail to say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax; and yet what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs? But I judge that there are human beings from these appearances, and thus I comprehend, by the faculty of judgment alone which is in the mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes.

Like the “I” of this passage from the Metaphysical Meditations, Poe’s narrator takes in a street scene in order to absorb himself in a stabilizing process of self-consciousness. In the passage from Descartes, doubtful sense-perceptions of hats and coats are overcome by the certitude of the thinking or “judging” subject, a subject that secures itself and its objects or representations through a process of reflexivity. In the absence of such a process, man threatens to become a specter, a counterfeit man
(un homme feint)—in Descartes’s Latin, an automaton—a machine, not in the Cartesian sense of an end-oriented, purposeful mechanism (like the human body), but in the post-Romantic sense of a merely mechanical, inorganic apparatus. The process of self-securing reflexivity is already underway when the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” introduces himself in the tale: “Not long ago, about the closing in of an evening in autumn, I sat at the large bow window of the D— Coffee House in London. For some months I had been ill in health, but was now convalescent, and, with returning strength, found myself in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui” (MC 108). Thus the narrator’s distracted receptivity becomes an occasion for self-recovery, convalescence. And this is precisely the action set in motion as the narrator, like the Cartesian “I,” gazes out the window at the men passing in the street.

This process is of course brought to a halt by the appearance of “the man of the crowd.” And yet the narrator also describes this interruption in terms of absorption: the “countenance” of the strange man “at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention” (MC 112). The absorption is now, however, of a different order. For, whereas taking in the crowd followed the Cartesian model of self-securing reflexivity, each “glance” reflecting back to the narrator the “returning strength” of his “peculiar mental state” (MC 108; 111), the man of the crowd refuses to be taken in. What is so absorbing in this figure, what makes the narrator “aroused, startled, fascinated,” is a sense of overwhelming narrative possibility: “‘How wild a history,’ I said to myself, ‘is written within that bosom!’” (MC 112). The man of the crowd promises, then, the kind of absorption for which Poe’s stories aim—the absorption of a reader whose “soul . . . is at the writer’s control,” a reader who knows no “external or extrinsic influences.” But even if the shift in absorption to the arresting possibility of what might be written within the bosom of the stranger does indeed seem to seize control of the narrator’s (and the reader’s) soul, this does not entirely block out impressions “of the scene without.” Indeed what the narrator picks up unreflectively, mechanically even, while he is trying to take in the man of the crowd are precisely the “worldly interests” of the London streets that were the focus of the newspaper writing of the early Dickens, writing that Poe of course followed closely. It is as if Poe’s narrator, eyes fixed on the strange man, were led through a series of street scenes from the sketches Dickens wrote under the pseudonym of Boz for the London newspapers of the 1830s: from the “densely filled” cross street, the square “overflowing with life,” the “busy bazaar” and the crowd “thronging the doors” of the theater to the “noisome quarter” at the “verge of the city” with its “tall, antique, worm-eaten, wooden tenements” and to “one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin” (MC 113–15).
Poe’s narrator seems, in other words, to track the man of the crowd through the topoi of Dickens’s newspaper writing, that is to say, through the writing that was explicitly devoted to the very mundane distractions Poe’s magazine tales were designed to screen out. For, in contrast to Poe, Dickens in his journalism and serial fiction encouraged his readers openly to pay attention to the interruptions of the world in the reception of his writing, even suggesting how this writing, far from striving for the self-contained “totality” recommended by Poe, might be seen to infiltrate the world it sought to describe.

Distracting Dickensian scenes, then, make a certain impression on Poe’s narrator while he is concentrating on the bizarre flânerie of the man of the crowd. Yet the very subject of this effort of concentration—the effort in a sense to discern the presence, the “here and now” or the “aura,” of the man in the crowd—becomes a source of distraction. For, the man of the crowd is, it turns out, more like a machine than a man, a copy machine in fact (he retraces his steps, the narrator retraces them, the reader retraces, and so on). In this sense, the encounter with him is marked by the “crisis of reciprocity” characteristic of what Benjamin calls “the decline of the aura” in the age of mass media. Repeatedly in Poe’s tale the man of the crowd fails to return the narrator’s gaze: “Never once turning his head to look back, he did not observe me” (MC 113); “At no moment did he see that I watched him” (MC 114); and finally, “I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation” (MC 116). Like the deadly gazing into the camera in the passage Benjamin cites from Nadar, which we analyzed in the preceding chapter, the narrator’s steadfast gaze here is taken up—absorbed—in the “vacant stare” of a machine (MC 114). “What is involved here,” Benjamin observes of the lyric poetry of Poe’s great follower, Baudelaire, “is that the expectation aroused by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled. Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look.” The man of the crowd has the effect of a machine that takes us in when, following the narrator, we take it for a man. In the end, absorption in the man of the crowd constitutes receptivity to, rather than rejection of, the distracting machinery of mass movement and of mass mediacy—machinery precisely marked at the beginning of the tale by the narrator’s newspaper.

Read All About It: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”

Poe’s detective stories also begin in a sense with the image of the newspaper as a medium of distracting receptivity. In “The Murders in the Rue
Morgue” (1841), Dupin and the narrator become aware of the murders of Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye while “looking over an evening edition of the *Gazette des Tribunaux*” (MRM 418). The readers of the tale are made to follow this lead as the narrator simply transcribes, paragraph by paragraph, the newspaper article detailing the facts of the case. These paragraphs, the narrator reports, “arrested our attention” and their transcription is designed to have the same effect on the readers. Yet it is this very absorption that distracts us from what is significant, as Dupin’s initial reaction to the newspaper account suggests:

To look at a star by glances—to view it in a side-long way, by turning towards it the exterior portions of the *retina* (more susceptible of feeble impressions of light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly—is to have the best appreciation of its lustre—a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision *fully* upon it...it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct. (MRM 426)

Things, we learn, are overlooked through concentration, and not only by the police. While absorbed in the perusal of the newspaper article, the tale’s narrator and now, in turn, its readers receive, without knowing it, impressions of the character of the crime. As Dupin instructs the narrator, “there was something to be observed” in the newspaper (MRM 429), something that could form the basis of a syllogism: since, according to the newspaper, “the denizens of the five great divisions of Europe could recognize nothing familiar” (MRM 429) in the “shrill voice” that issued from the room in which the murders were committed, and since, presumably according to Aristotle, man is the animal of meaningful speech, then the “shrill voice” must not have been human.11 What distracts the narrator, and again the readers, is the very possibility that this unintelligible voice could have been human, that this inhuman act could have been carried out by a human and, more broadly, that the fundamental distinction between the non-human and the human could have been suspended in this case. This is the fear on which the tale plays, after all. There is, for example, the blurring of this distinction in the story of the sailor and the Ourang-Outang: captured by the sailor during “an excursion of pleasure,” the animal is sharing lodgings with the sailor in Paris when, upon returning from yet another act of bestial self-indulgence (a “sailors’ frolic on the night”), the sailor discovers “the beast occupying his own bedroom” and with “razor in hand, and fully lathered, ... sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the keyhole of the closet” (MRM 441–42). The confusion of man and beast continues as the latter, having murdered the women, shows itself
to have a moral conscience: it is “conscious of having deserved punish-
ment” (MRM 443).

If these details play on the readers’ anxieties about the distinction be-
tween the human and the nonhuman, Dupin seems to draw on similar
fears exhibited by the narrator. “If now,” Dupin is reported by the nar-

ator to have told him,

you have properly reflected upon the odd disorder of the chamber, we have
gone so far as to combine the ideas of an agility astounding, a strength superhu-
man, a ferocity brutal, a butchery without motive, a grotesquerie in horror abso-
lutely alien from humanity, and a voice foreign in tone to the ears of men of
many nations, and devoid of all distinct or intelligible syllabification. What result,
then, has ensued? What impression have I made upon your fancy?”

I felt a creeping of the flesh as Dupin asked me the question. “A madman,” I
said, “has done this deed—some raving maniac, escaped from a neighbouring
Maison de Santé.”

“In some respects,” he replied, “your idea is not irrelevant.” (MRM 423)

The anxiety called forth by Dupin’s dramatic questioning distracts the

narrator. Absorbed by the beastly possibility, his flesh creeps and he

leaps to the conclusion that this is a case of the human crossing over

into the non-human—of a mania that transforms a man into “a mad-

man.” The mania here is of course the narrator’s and, as Dupin sug-
gests, this “idea [of mania] is not irrelevant,” since it is precisely such an
idea that leads the narrator astray. Or rather, it is the “impression” Dupin

makes on the narrator’s “fancy”—an impression that provokes an idea

of mania in the workings of this mechanical faculty—that is distract-
ing.12 Dupin distracts the narrator. But he also replaces the impression

of mania—the idea in the narrator’s “fancy” that a human could act

with a madness “absolutely alien from humanity”—and puts in its place

a more rational, more humane impression. For, this endeavor seems to
call for another support. Instead of making his own human bearing into
the medium of the humane impression (as he does when he poses the
absorbing questions that give the narrator the inhumane impression that
man could become manic enough to commit the crime), Dupin reaches
for a piece of paper. “Glance at this little sketch I have here traced upon
this paper,” he directs the narrator. “It is a fac-simile drawing of what
has been described in one portion of the testimony as ‘dark bruises,
and deep indentations of finger-nails,’ upon the throat of Mademoi-
selle L’Espanaye, and in another (by Messrs Dumas and Etienne), as a
‘series of livid spots, evidently, the impression of fingers’” (MRM 437).
Once again, there was something in the newspaper. In order to concen-
trate on it, however, a support is needed—a support that bears closer
scrutiny. A sheet of paper placed around the throat of the victim enables
Dupin to take an impression of the marks left by the Ourang-Outang’s
stranglehold. Like a photographic impression, this facsimile drawing freezes, and makes it possible to enlarge upon, the descriptions cited by Dupin from the *Gazette des Tribunaux*: the “dark bruises, and deep indentations of finger-nails” and the “series of livid spots, evidently, the impression of fingers” on the victim’s throat. With these prints in one hand and Cuvier’s zoological account in the other, Dupin can definitively assign the death-grip to the non-human and substitute a more humane impression for the inhumane one he had just made with his questions.13

This two-handed operation is likewise at work in the narrator’s portrayal of Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”: the inhumane impression made by the detective’s apparent madness—what the narrator initially allows may “perhaps” be the “result” of his “diseased intelligence” (MRM 415)—is replaced in the reading of the tale by the seemingly humane impression made by his ratiocinative solution to the troubling crime. Both cases, that of the elusive murderer in the Rue Morgue as well as that of the mysterious Dupin, call for concentration and require for this a material support capable of becoming the medium of an impression (of the murderer and of Dupin). Like Dupin’s reflections, the literary medium of the tale cannot do without paper. For the tale to make its impression—to exercise its absorbing effects—it needs a material support: it must be drawn into an “outside” world, the public world, in this case the mass medium of the serial press, that cannot be simply external to it. In this sense, as with “the man of the crowd,” Dupin marks the encounter between Poe’s literary work and the materiality of the mass media.14 “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” demonstrates the process by which Dupin and Poe convert the distractions both of the newspaper in the story and of the serial press in which the story appears into a medium of unifying impressions. These impressions serve to integrate the humanity of the individual and the collective. But the tale also shows that this process unfolds as a series of “effects” produced by “mental features” that can never appear “in themselves” (MRM 397). And because these unifying “effects”—of the detective as well as of the tale—depend upon an appearance in a world that, as Poe puts it, “destroys” the “unity of impression,” the impression must occur on a peculiar kind of material support, specifically, one that withdraws from the world and suspends its disarray.15 Concentration demands a material support to bear the loss of worldly distraction. For, only on the basis of such a support can “the affairs of the world” be avoided and the semblance of unity be seen to emerge. The world must become a stage for an appearance liberated from “worldly interests.”

Poe went on correcting the newspaper in an attempt to convert the worldly distractions of the serial press into the unifying form of his fiction
in a second Dupin story, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842–43). The results were mixed: the sequel to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” drawn from journalistic accounts of a real murder in the world, turns on the collation and comparison of conflicting information taken from newspapers and incorporated into the tale. But at this time Poe also pursued his aesthetic project in the other major sphere where the distractions of “worldly interest” are connected to paper—that of economic life and in particular monetary exchange. In “The Gold Bug” (1843) Poe suggests that the very medium of “worldly interest,” paper money, can become the basis of an appearance that breaks free of “the affairs of the world.”

Money in America

As Marc Shell has impressively shown, Poe’s “The Gold Bug” contributes to the debates between the “paper-money men” and the “gold bugs” in the aftermath of Andrew Jackson’s failed attempt to establish a national bank of the United States at the end of the 1830s. Rather than take sides, though, Poe’s tale explores the grounds for the debate and extends the reflection on paper we just considered in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” to the controversies over money and national identity in America. By turning to the distraction of monetary exchange based on paper, Poe implicitly adopts the parallel suggested by Carlyle’s remarks on “Book-paper” and “Bank-paper” in The French Revolution. Yet “The Gold Bug” shows the American writer rejecting the well-established satirical tradition in British letters, from Alexander Pope and Edmund Burke to Thomas Love Peacock and Carlyle, that projects paper exchange onto some foolish foreign—revolutionary French or American—other in order ostensibly to protect British national identity from economic and aesthetic inflation but also, more covertly, to paper over the questionable financial origins of the modern British state itself. Offering a counterpoint to the standard view expressed by Carlyle’s derisory announcement of the “Paper Age,” the treatment of paper in “The Gold Bug” gives a more positive account of semblance in collective life and associates it with America. In this sense, Poe’s account hints at an alternative approach to paper money in American history and raises an aesthetic question that is of fundamental importance to America’s sense of itself.

As it happens, the proposition that America starts to be born when paper becomes a material support for economic exchange in the colonies was the thesis of a remarkably overlooked interpretation elaborated by the American historian Alexander Del Mar at the end of the nineteenth century. By approaching colonial American monetary history as a study in the politics of representation, Del Mar’s interpretation
of the role played by paper money in the origins of America suggests a historical parallel to the positive account of paper worked out aesthetically in Poe’s “The Gold Bug.” Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Del Mar observes, the relationship between England and its American colonies was dominated by what the former considered the latter’s illegitimate monetary schemes. An early culprit was the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Beginning in 1652, due to shortages of money, the Massachusetts Colonial Legislature authorized John Hull’s mint in Boston to begin striking Pine Tree Shillings in denominations of 12, 6, and 3 pence (and in 1662 also of 2 pence). This practice continued through 1686, when the Pine Tree Shilling was suppressed by order of the King of England. As Del Mar notes, “upon being shown one of the Pine-tree shillings struck by the mint, [Charles II] became greatly offended at the assumption of the coinage prerogative by the Americans, a prerogative which, it must be remembered, he had already sold to the East India Company.” It was this suppression of the Pine Tree Shillings that led to the emergence of the first paper money in Massachusetts where in 1690 Colonial Bills of Credit were printed (Figure 3). These Bills in fact followed several unsuccessful attempts to introduce private promissory notes between 1686 and 1690. Originally, these bills were not legal tender but promises to pay money issued by the Colony. In July of 1692, however, again because of the scarcity of English money, they were made legal tender by the legislature. These bills of credit circulated in the Colony until 1727 when, in the wake of the French experience of the Mississippi Bubble, the English government instituted, as Del Mar says, “that series of repressive measures which furnished the first distinctive provocation to the American Revolution.”

Del Mar’s interpretation of the colonial paper money experiments as a political struggle over representation illustrates a point that the French economists Michel Aglietta and André Orléan have made recently on a more explicitly theoretical level: “monetary crises are always crises of sovereignty.” Charles II was thus not mistaken in regarding the colonial experiments as a threat to his authority. The colonists may not have had this intention. For them it may well have been merely a practical matter—the lack of money. But by granting credit to one another in economic transactions on the basis of promissory notes and paper money guaranteed only by themselves, the colonists were starting to appear as a collective in their own right, as distinct from the right granted to them by the English crown. The colonists were, in short, asserting a right to appear as an autonomous collective and suspending the king’s authority over the space of economic representation. The emergence in these monetary experiments of a collective that was a matter of nothing but appearance—the mere semblance of a collective—would prove unbearable
to the renegade states that eventually became the United States. The need for more self-assurance was expressed after the American Revolution, not only in the repeated demands for a supposedly more substantial gold money, but also in the writing of United States economic historians in the nineteenth century who looked back with some embarrassment on the colonial paper money experiments. The clearest example of this view is the work of nineteenth-century economic historian, Charles J. Bullock. Based on a belief in the wholesomeness of the gold standard, Bullock denounced the pre-Revolutionary experiments, and especially those involving paper money, as a “curse” and as contributing to the “carnival of fraud and corruption” of the period (32 and 43). Bullock makes a similar point about the Continental Bills authorized by the Colonial Congress in 1775: “The paper money opened the door to the most shameful frauds upon all who were so unfortunate as to be in the position of creditors. Dishonest debtors were enabled to pay their debts in worthless currency” (69). Even more forgiving nineteenth-century economic historians, such as Samuel Breck and Henry Phillips, Jr., looked with shame on the monetary practices of colonies and the insurgent United States.

Twentieth-century economic historians like Richard A. Lester and John Kenneth Galbraith dismiss the disdain for paper expressed by their nineteenth-century precursors. But the more recent economic historians have been interested mainly in conferring legitimacy, from the vantage point of a full-blown credit economy, on the financial practices of the American colonists—Galbraith, for instance, writes with admiration of the “astonishing skill and prudence” of paper money experiments in the Middle Colonies. In other words, the twentieth-century economists advocating paper money, like the nineteenth-century economists promulgating gold money, tend to discount or even overlook the way sovereignty is connected to representation in the paper money experiments. Del Mar’s work stands out for its interpretation of the financial practices of the colonists as responses to a crisis of economic and political representation. This crisis precipitated the appearance of paper devices that challenged the sovereignty of the king and led to the American Revolution. “Lexington and Concord,” as Del Mar notes, “were trivial acts of resistance which chiefly concerned those who took part in them and which might have been forgiven; but the creation and circulation of bills of credit by revolutionary assemblies in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, were the acts of a whole people and coming as they did upon the heels of the strenuous efforts made by the Crown to suppress paper money in America, they constituted acts of defiance so contemptuous and insulting to the Crown that forgiveness was thereafter impossible.”
To the British authorities, the bills of credit were simply counterfeit. But, as we have already indicated, there is plenty of evidence that the Americans themselves were not entirely ready to accept something so seemingly insubstantial as paper money as the basis of their collective existence. Many shared the sentiment informing the tradition of paper satires that emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century and continued well beyond that period.

Yet evidence of a divergence from this tradition in American letters and of an awareness of the link between money and representation discerned by Del Mar in his historical writing can be found in the work of the colonial American poet Ebeneezer Cooke, in particular in his poem *Sot-Weed Redivivus* (1727). In this work, Cooke fashions himself as a sort of wise fool or “sot” and offers his poem to the colonial reader as what he ambiguously calls “Waste Paper” (meaning both trash and “rough accounting book,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*). With these “Home-spun Weeds” (l. 60), Cooke urges his colony (Maryland) to abandon its use of the besotting currency of “Indian Weed” (l. 106)—tobacco “secure in Bags”—in favor of “Paper made of Rags” (ll. 113–14). The relatively little attention paid to Cooke has, it seems, failed to note this aspect of his work. Perhaps because of the desire to find similarities to mainstream Augustan poetry that would legitimate Cooke, scholars of this work have not scrutinized the surface of the poet’s “Waste Paper” intently enough to appreciate how the poem marks an important departure from the standard Augustan tendency to satirize paper from the supposedly secure ground of land and precious metal. In the *Epistle to Lord Bathurst* (1733), for example, Cooke’s English contemporary, Alexander Pope, writes of paper:

Blest paper-credit! last and best supply!  
That lends Corruption lighter wings to fly!  
Gold imp’d by thee, can compass hardest things,  
Can pocket States, can fetch or carry Kings;  
A single leaf shall waft an Army o’er,  
Or ship off Senates to a distant Shore;  
A leaf, like Sybil’s, scatter to and fro  
Our fates and fortunes, as the winds shall blow:  
Pregnant with a thousand its the Scrap unseen,  
And silent sells a King or buys a Queen.

In direct contrast to Pope, Cooke’s poet fools with the stock Augustan ridicule of the fraudulent deceptions of paper. After dramatizing the silly feudal preference of the Maryland Assemblymen for “Predial Tythes” (l. 113), Cooke turns to contemporary writers who also suffer from the feverish superstition against paper:
The Scribes likewise, and Pharisees,
Infected with the same Disease,
On Paper Money look a squint,
Care not to be made Folls in Print. (I. 115–18)

For the standard Augustan satire of paper, epitomized by Pope, Cooke substitutes an argument for, and indeed a poetic demonstration of, the real effectiveness of what may look like mere tromperie. By urging the abandonment of a “commodity currency” (see Einzig, 278–87) and by conflating the possibilities of paper money with its own literary presentation, the poem that appeared in the colony of Maryland foreshadows the work of the writer who would die just over a century later in what had become in the meantime the state of Maryland, Edgar Allan Poe.

The colonial poetry of Cooke and the historical writing of Del Mar provide examples of an alternative attitude in America toward paper as the material support for economic exchange. In each case, rather than a metaphor for mere insubstantiality or fraud, paper appears as a fragile material ground for real effects. To illustrate the influence of this aesthetic principle in an American context Shell has extended his interpretation of paper money in Poe to an analysis of an American genre of trompe l’œil paper money painting in the nineteenth century. In works such as Victor Dubreuil’s Don’t Make a Move! (Figure 4), Shell argues, some nineteenth-century American painters became interested in exploiting the play of surface and depth in a manner that related visual representation on the surface of a canvas with monetary representation of value on the surface of a bill. Of Dubreuil’s painting, Shell observes, for example: “Dubreuil extends the monetary trompe l’oeil’s representational house of mirrors a step further in his Don’t Make a Move! Here a man with one eye closed points the barrel of a revolver at the viewer. A woman bank robber grabs trompe l’oeil paper money bills from the money drawer. You, the viewer, are absorbed into the painting as the teller in this pawnshop or moneychanger’s stall. In the larger composition of Don’t Make a Move! the pull ring on the money drawer answers to the gun’s barrel or the looter’s eye. This eye, or œil, is the trompe l’œil of the piece, figuring both the eye of the robber whose mate withdraws paper money from the drawer and also the I of the artist who draws his material from the visual realm.” In this way, Shell argues, the viewer is being cheated or fooled (trompé) when taking the surface of the painting for depth. The viewer feels really threatened by the gun, but the hole in the gun barrel is really nothing. While being tricked into believing there is depth, the viewer is distracted from seeing something taking place on the surface of the painting—the viewer is in le point mort, the dead spot, of the work. It is as if something were, rather incongruously,
in the surface of the painting—as if three dimensions were folded or implied in two. The distracting “something” that takes place here is on the order of a referential illusion—the unfolding of three dimensions out of two. Yet in a sense when a two-dimensional surface is taken, as in the painting by Dubreuil, for three-dimensional depth, the real effect may be comparable to what happens when, for example, the Maryland colony takes itself to be real and authorizes itself to trade in paper. This may be what Cooke’s poet-fool well foresaw—the coming to light, as he announces at the end of his poem, of “an Independent State” (l. 79). As it turned out, Cooke and his colonial readers were not merely kidding. Something similar is to be observed in the treatment of paper in Poe’s fiction, as we will now see.37

Just Fooling: “The Gold Bug”

Everything begins in “The Gold Bug” with a “foolscap.” Legrand, the narrator’s friend, we are told, “drew from his waistcoat pocket a scrap of what I took to be very dirty foolscap, and made upon it a rough drawing with

Figure 4. Victor Dubreuil, Don’t Make a Move, ca. 1900. Private collection.
the pen” (GB 74). The narrator, it seems, knows something now that he did not know when this event occurred. This is suggested in the choice of the word “foolscap,” since the selection of this word appears to be informed by a knowledge of the very aspect of the paper to which the narrator was blind in the scene and about which now the reader is being kept in the dark. The *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us that “foolscap” means “1. A cap of fantastic shape, usually garnished with bells, formerly worn by fools or jesters . . . b. A dunce’s cap”; “2. The device of a ‘fool’s cap’ used as a watermark for paper”; “3. A long folio writing- or printing-paper, varying in size.” The first sense of the word “foolscap” is self-explanatory, but for the second, and by metonymy the third, the dictionary’s editor provides the following comment: “It has been asserted that the fool’s cap mark was introduced by Sir John Spielman or Spilman, a German who built a paper-mill at Dartford in 1580; but we have failed to find any trustworthy authority for this statement.”

The unauthenticated statement refers to the “Spilman” or “Spielman” of Thomas Churchyard’s *A Sparke of Friendship and Warme Goodwill* (1588). Albeit untrustworthy, this identification of the “foolscap” mark with the subject of a poem in praise of paper turns out to be entirely fortuitous. For the foolscap in question in Poe’s story is certainly worthy of praise: this “writing- or printing-paper” (sense 3) does indeed bear a “watermark” (sense 2) that leads Legrand to the buried treasure, while the narrator and now the reader are left wearing in a sense the “dunce’s cap” (sense 1). Just as he was about to discard it as waste-paper, Legrand literally “perceived” (GB 93), as he later says, that it contained a sort of watermark: “a distinguishing mark or device impressed in the substance of a sheet of paper during manufacture, usually barely noticeable except when the sheet is held against strong light” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Having discovered the value of this paper, Legrand “took from his coat-pocket a wallet, placed the paper carefully in it, and deposited both in a writing desk, which he locked” (GB 76). In fact, when he originally discovered the paper, Legrand tells the narrator, its value already registers, as we would say, unconsciously: he “deposited” it in his pocket “without being conscious of it” (GB 94). What comes to light in the substance of the paper’s surface, as the narrator and we later learn, are the outlines of “death’s-head” and then something else as we discover later in this passage from the tale that begins with Legrand narrating to the narrator:

there became visible, at the corner of the slip, diagonally opposite to the spot in which the death’s-head was delineated, the figure of what I at first supposed to be a goat. A closer scrutiny, however satisfied me that it was intended for a kid. “Ha! ha!” said I, “to be sure I have no right to laugh at you—a million and a half of money is too serious a matter for mirth—but you are not about to establish a third link in your chain—you will not find any especial connection
between your pirates and a goat—pirates, you know, have nothing to do with goats; they appertain to the farming interest.” “But I have just said that the figure was not that of a goat.” “Well, a kid then—pretty much the same thing.” “Pretty much, but not altogether,” said Legrand. “You may have heard of one Captain Kidd.” I at once looked upon the figure of the animal as a kind of punning or hieroglyphical signature. I say signature; because its position upon the vellum suggested this idea. The death’s-head at the corner diagonally opposite, had, in the same manner, the air of a stamp, or seal. (GB 96–97)

The “kid” appears, then, like a “foolscap,” a watermark, and in fact the goat was, it seems, a common watermark in Renaissance Europe. The narrator may well laugh derisively at Legrand here and throughout the story as a fool, but his friend is no more fooling than Captain Kidd was kidding. For, as is noted here, the Captain’s “punning or hieroglyphic signature” or “seal” leads Legrand to real money. And, what is more, as the narrator will learn, Legrand has, partly in imitation of the foolery of the Captain (another meaning of “foolscap” perhaps), merely been making a fool of himself in order to kid the narrator in a rather serious, if somewhat paternalistic, manner. Explaining the gratuitous theatrics of swinging the gold bug to point to the treasure, Legrand reveals to the narrator: “Why, to be frank, I felt somewhat annoyed by your evident suspicions touching my sanity, and so resolved to punish you quietly, in my own way, by a little bit of sober mystification” (GB 107).

So, once again, the narrator knows something when he selects the word “foolscap” at the beginning of the tale, something that he did not know at the time of the event and something that he withholds from the reader now. 
And it is this withholding that brings us back to the historical context of the debates over paper versus gold money at the time. That this debate is clearly in evidence in the tale is already indicated by the importance of watermarks, which are used for the authentication of both literary and monetary paper. But this context can be made still clearer by referring to two related statements in the tale. The first one is made by Legrand’s servant, Jupiter, who says of the gold bug: “I catch him wid a piece of paper” (GB 78); and the second is from the narrator who says of the treasure: “all was gold of antique date and of great variety. . . . There was no American money” (GB 91). Taken together these two statements would seem to suggest that treasure is old gold and American money is new paper. Indeed, such an interpretation is bolstered by the distinction made in the tale, one that I have deliberately glossed over up to now, between paper and parchment or vellum. When, for example, Legrand finds the map, he specifies that it was a “scrap of parchment, which I then supposed to be paper” (GB 94). This would seem to indicate a distinction between different kinds of graphic support that is analogous to the one made between different kinds of money—
parchment is to old gold as paper is to American paper money. This appears to lead to the following conclusion: the main point of the story is that treasure is to be distinguished from the gold bug as genuine parchment from counterfeit paper?

It is precisely this straightforward interpretation of the tale’s meaning that Legrand’s elaborate deception troubles. For this fiction fabricated by Legrand seems to have as its aim not so much the demonstration of the authenticity of the parchment by successfully arriving at its meaning and winning the treasure. Rather, Legrand’s fiction seems designed to impress upon the narrator something else, hinted at by a second reading of the narrator’s description of his second visit to Legrand on Sullivan’s Island in the company of Jupiter:

Legrand had been awaiting us in eager expectation. He grasped my hand with a nervous emprise which alarmed me and strengthened the suspicions already entertained. His countenance was pale even to ghastliness, and his deep-set eyes glared with unnatural lustre. After some inquiries respecting his health, I asked him, not knowing what better to say, if he had yet obtained the scarabaeus from Lieutenant G—. “Oh, yes,” he replied, colouring violently, “I got it from him the next morning. Nothing should tempt me to part with that scarabaeus. Do you know that Jupiter is quite right about it? “In what way,” I asked, with a sad foreboding at heart. “In supposing it to be a bug of real gold.” He said this with an air of profound seriousness, and I felt inexpressibly shocked. “The bug is to make my fortune,” he continued, with a triumphant smile; “to reinstate me in my family possessions. Is it any wonder, then, that I prize it? Since Fortune has thought fit to bestow it upon me, I have only to use it properly, and I shall arrive at the gold of which it is the index.” (GB 79–80)

Now of course, unbeknownst to the narrator, at this point Legrand knows that it is the “foolscap” and not the gold bug that is the point. He is acting in this exchange for the benefit of his friend. The theatrics have already begun: Legrand is fabricating or counterfeiting the authenticity of the gold-bug, or as Jupiter says “ghoul bug,” and suggesting that the gold (bug) is not in fact the “index” of the gold (treasure)—the secret writing on the parchment is. And as a result of Legrand’s fabrication, the narrator is made to repeat the error of being distracted by the gold bug in his first visit to Sullivan’s Island when he fails to see that there was something in the paper after all.

What is more, this distraction by the gold bug has a double meaning in the tale, for the narrator is also distracted by the “gold bug” when he observes his friend, in an unfriendly manner, as an example of “Southern superstitions” and of “a mind disposed to lunacy” (GB 87). This is what the narrator seems to suspect in the passage just cited when Legrand alludes to Jupiter’s ambiguous description of the bug as a “ghoul bug,” which the narrator appears to interpret as meaning “ghost” and which
Legrand specifies as meaning “gold,” but which of course, in keeping with Legrand’s counterfeiting posture throughout, is in a certain sense neither simply a phantasm nor a weighty matter. Thus the narrator concludes that Legrand has been “infected” (GB 87) by the “gold bug” when in fact it is he, the narrator, whose mind is clouded by the gold bug. The narrator believes mistakenly that he is the doctor—he presents himself at the outset as Legrand’s “physician” (GB 81)—while, in fact, he is the patient: he is being cured of the disease he attributes to Legrand who is truly administering the (counterfeit) antidote—the “sober mystification.” The illness is a punishment, the narrator will learn, for treating Legrand like a lunatic instead of like a friend (GB 107). This is the point of Legrand’s fabrication: the gold bug is not an “index” of the true meaning of Legrand’s behavior, at least not in the sense the narrator believes.

But if it is not the feverish desire for gold and for the reinstatement of his “family possessions” (GB 80), then what does motivate Legrand? Perhaps it is, as already suggested, the aim of demonstrating to the narrator what friendship is. But then what does this have to do with the allusions in the tale to the debates over paper and gold in the United States during this time? There are some indications. Friendship in the story, as we have seen, is based on trust: the narrator’s lack of trust, his “suspicions touching [Legrand’s] sanity” (GB 107), are a breach of the friendship “contracted,” as the narrator begins the tale by saying (GB 72), between Legrand and himself. Indeed, it is this lack of trust that is expressed in the narrator’s first visit to Legrand: instead of trusting Legrand and accepting his drawing of the bug, the narrator distrusts Legrand and his design, declaring that substantiation is required: “I must wait until I see the beetle itself” (GB 75), demands the narrator. In other words, distrust here amounts to an unwillingness to accept a semblance and an insistence that something more substantial be delivered. In financial terms, this is the insistence on gold, hence the appropriateness of the gold bug in the scene. In fact, as we have seen, Legrand sets about making the gold bug appear in the rest of the story, both in the sense that he himself fabricates the gold-bug fever for the observation of his friend and in the sense that his fabrication makes the gold bug manifest itself in the narrator’s mind, which does indeed become “infected” by the fever. But, of course, Legrand makes the gold bug appear quite different from what the narrator believes. For the gold bug appears in all three cases (the actual bug, Legrand’s fabrication of the fever, and the narrator’s unfriendly contracting of it) as a distraction from the significance of promising and trust, a flight from the necessity and the necessary uncertainty and risk of such contracts. In this sense, Poe’s “The Gold Bug” faces us and perhaps, by extension, Americans with the difference between contracting friendship and contracting the infection.
of suspicion. In this seeming advocacy of paper over gold, Poe could be suggesting that in economic exchange Americans must behave, not as brothers, but as friends.\textsuperscript{40} Or is such a thought incredible when it comes to Poe?

Exposure: “The Purloined Letter”

The question of trust in exchange is a prominent, if somewhat overlooked, crux in the fiction of the author of \textit{Tales of Mystery and Imagination}. The issue of trust repeatedly surfaces in Poe’s stories on an inscrutable plane associated with paper. Paper would seem to be the metaphor for the various material surfaces on which marks or impressions come to light in Poe’s tales: the wall in which appears “as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat” in “The Black Cat” (567), published in 1843, the same year as “The Gold Bug”; or the face of the hills with engraved figures, the “chasms” with “Ethiopian characters so mysteriously written in their windings” in \textit{The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket} (242).\textsuperscript{41} Yet paper in Poe is secretive in the sense that Derrida has elaborated in connection with the prose poem “Counterfeit Money” by Poe’s French translator, Charles Baudelaire:

Such a secret [the secret meaning of the exchange between the narrator of the poem and his friend who says he has given a beggar counterfeit money] enters literature, it is constituted by the possibility of the literary institution and revealed by that institution in all its possibility of secret only to the extent to which it loses all interiority, all thickness, all depth. It is kept absolutely unbreakable, inviolate only to the extent to which it is formed by a non-psychological structure. This structure is not subjective or subjectible, even though it is responsible for the most radical effects of subjectivity or of subjectivation. It is superficial, without substance, infinitely private because public through and through. It is spread on the surface of the page, as obvious as a purloined letter, a post card, a bank note, a check, a “letter of credit”—or “a silver two-franc piece.”\textsuperscript{42}

And, we might add, a foolscap. The absolutely superficial “structure . . . responsible for the most radical effects of subjectivity or of subjectivation” described by Derrida here resembles as well the nineteenth-century American \textit{trompe l’œil} money paintings like Dubreuil’s \textit{Don’t Make a Move!} Indeed the allusion Derrida makes to Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” published, as we said, just two years after “The Gold Bug,” seems to bear this resemblance out and to point in yet another direction. By associating the gun barrel with depth—a distracting illusion of depth—while the paper (the surface) is taken away, Dubreuil’s painting reproduces visually Dupin’s purloining of the letter while the Minister in that story is distracted by the blank fired in the street, just as the narrator is distracted by the gold bug from the paper in our story. The gold bug in the
tale, like the gun barrel in the painting, is a blank, every bit as much as the scene in the Minister’s apartment is a hold up. Like Legrand, Dupin, we learn, has the purloining power of fabricating depth while fathoming surfaces. Duplicating the action of the Minister, who pretends to be immersed in deep political matters when he steals the Queen’s letter, Dupin is a genius, albeit with the difference that, again like Legrand (and seemingly unlike Kidd), he is a man of principle. But the restoration in the earlier tale was, as we saw, not of wealth or “family possessions,” but of friendship and trust among equals (friendship in the Aristotelian sense). In “The Purloined Letter,” though, this does not seem to be the case. In the later story we have, not a reinstatement of equality in exchange, but a restoration of an official inequality. While in the former counterfeiting appeared as benevolent sign of friendly exchange (a sobering mystification, as it were), in the latter it surfaces as furious sign of vengeance and a vehicle of personal gain.

The elaborate card game of “The Purloined Letter” really does seem to be all about money and in a way that contrasts with “The Gold Bug.” The Queen, who tries to take the King, is deceived or trumped by the Minister—to be understood as the “Jack” perhaps, since the Minister is certainly a knave, or maybe since “knave” derives from the German Knabe, and the Minister is, like the suspicious narrator in “The Gold Bug,” just a “kid.” In any case, the Minister is in turn trumped or duped by Dupin, the “Joker,” both in the sense of “a playing card usually printed with a picture of a jester, used in certain games as the highest ranking card or as a wild card” and in the sense, quite simply, of a jester—or, in other words, once again the fool. But if it is the joker Dupin who restores the hierarchy and reinstates the authority of the Queen over the Minister, this is done with a display of power that exposes this very hierarchy as a house of cards. Maybe then, as in the game of whist that is offered as an example of the “analytical” in the first Dupin story, the fool’s game is in the end about money, which is to say bread—a possibility suggested by the name Dupin (du pain). This would account for the “seal formed of bread” (PL 510)—like the seal of the kid in “The Gold Bug”—affixed by Dupin to the counterfeit letter he leaves for the Minister in “The Purloined Letter.” And yet perhaps what is being exposed on the final pages of the latter tale—by the friendly narrator—is not just counterfeiting, but in fact a violation of the sort of just fooling in which Legrand engages, the kind which brings about a state of equality and mutual trust that is the true aim of independent democratic states. Then, it seems, in his unjust desire to repay himself with false paper, Dupin would be the real fool.

Thus, while in the earlier detective tale and in “The Gold Bug” distracted reception, the trompe l’œil of paperwork, cures the narrators of
their inhumane suspicions (about crimes and the diseased intelligences of their friends), in the case of “The Purloined Letter” Dupin’s paperwork leaves a decidedly more inhumane impression. “I just copied,” reveals Dupin, “into the middle of the blank sheet the words—Un dessein si funeste, / S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste” (PL 511). In place of friendship, then, fraternal vengeance—the paper becomes the medium of a deadly design into which the Minister will already have been drawn by the time he sees Dupin’s hand. But let us try not to be distracted with the Minister: Dupin’s handling of the paper also draws him into the dead spot of the device. The marks are of no human hand. Here Dupin unfolds. And if this unfolding repeats the exposure to which Dupin’s device subjects the Minister, then the tale itself, by doubling Dupin, also becomes in turn exposed, threatened by its formal resemblance to the unfolding of Dupin and his paper device—exposed as a mere machine, a machine for distracting representational illusions, just a game, a trick. Paper is once again the dead spot in the tale: death and finitude within the literary medium. For, just as Dupin’s deception relies on the distraction of the phony gunshot in the street, the medium of the tale depends upon a diversionary device (here the detective) in order to make its impression. It draws on distraction: on the paperwork that, unbeknownst to the readers, exposes them as much as it does the Minister and Dupin. At this point of distraction, the work of art may be said to sink itself into readers absorbed by a mass medium from which the tale was supposed, through concentration, to distinguish itself.

“The Gold Bug,” as we have seen, invites its readers to compare such distraction to the historical experience of paper as money in America, perhaps even to a certain experience of American sovereignty and independence. The allusion to American history deceptively suggests that the medium of the tale is similar to convertible paper money, the treasure in the tale being like the precious metal into which the paper money of the literary medium is converted. From this perspective, the aesthetic medium of the tale would distract the reader from its true character which would then be understood to resemble the inconvertible currency (based on nothing but trust) that marked the real historical experience of paper money in America. The American experience of paper as money—the real experience simulated, or the simulated experience realized, by a reading of Poe’s tale—would be that of an inconvertible medium drawing on the distraction of convertibility. Declarations of American-ness based on such a medium, or on an experience of it, themselves succumb to referential distraction to the extent that they affirm the self-identity and substantiality of a national subject. This occurs
when the medium of Poe’s tale is converted into the positivist historical terms of an American experience of paper as an inconvertible or virtual medium. At such a point a certain American reader is frozen in the sights of a referential illusion, fooled just enough for the medium of the tale to leave its distracting impression.