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ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture, Volume 68, Number 2, 2022 (No. 267 O.S.), pp. 261-302 (Article)

Published by Washington State University
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/esq.2022.0005*

"Nothing beneath—all?": Rebecca Harding Davis' Critique of Possessive Individualism in "Life in the Iron-Mills"

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In *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-made Men, Vol.1* (1872), Harriet Beecher Stowe lauds men who, having "sprang from conditions of hard-working poverty," embody the promise of social mobility and, more importantly, the truth of American exceptionalism.[1] Appraising Frederick Douglass, for example, she asserts that "if a man *is* a man, no matter in what rank of society he is born, no matter how tied down and weighted by poverty and all its attendant disadvantages, there is nothing in American institutions to prevent his rising to the very highest offices in the gift of the country" (*LD*, 2:380–81). According to Stowe's formulation, one's successful ability to make oneself by rising from poverty and disadvantage would seem to provide the retroactive evidence of one's status *as* a man with inalienable rights. Crucially, Stowe views Jeffersonian republicanism as a political representation of Christian morality, claiming that "the American government is the only permanent republic which has ever based itself upon the principles laid down by Jesus Christ, of the absolute equal brotherhood of man, and the rights of man on the simple ground of manhood" (*LD*,1:vi). Stowe's conception of rights is, in this instance, ontological rather than practical, spiritual rather than juridical. If man as such is defined by his

equality with other men, then his inherent rights are founded upon that absolute status. Like Stowe, Rebecca Harding Davis links the notion of rights to something fundamental in humanity, an element associated with Christian grace that is essential to "solv[ing] the darkest secrets of a world gone wrong."[2] Unlike Stowe, however, Davis suggests that a conception of inalienable rights requires that we focus on the subject's hidden *cause* rather than its social effects.

First appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861 and revived by the Feminist Press in 1972, "Life in the Iron-Mills" ironically questions Hugh Wolfe's ability to scale the "ladder" of the "American system" and, exposing the hypocrisy of characters such as Doctor May (and even the narrator), promotes a conception of rights as humanity's spiritual and political foundation ("Life," 439). Davis' well-known short story distinguishes Hugh Wolfe from the benighted laborers around him by his artistic sensibility and his nascent talent as a sculptor. When Kirby, the mill owner's son, leads a group of wealthy men, including his brother-in-law, Mitchell, and Doctor May on a tour of the foundry, May appraises Wolfe's artwork as the evidence of a God-given power that endows Wolfe with the right to "make [himself] what he will" ("Life," 440). Inspired by the vague notion of his rights and the possibility that a better life awaits him outside the mill, Wolfe keeps Mitchell's wallet, which his cousin, Deborah, steals. Instead of building a new life and fulfilling his potential as an artist, Wolfe lands in prison and ultimately dies by suicide. Importantly, Davis' morally ambiguous narrative eschews the labor rights struggle's more realistic particularities in the early nineteenth century in order to promote a more fundamental vision of rights, namely what Mitchell, sarcastically invoking "Saint-Simonian doctrines," calls the "rights of the soul" ("Life," 440).[3]

While Stowe cites the self-made man's worldly accomplishments as incontestable evidence of the

subject's inalienable rights and the American system's ideal liberality, "Life" criticizes American self-making ideology and possessive individualism's empty promises. In so doing, Davis evinces a transcendental subject whose rights are guaranteed by its permanent non-inscription in the social. As the psychoanalytic theorist Joan Copjec argues, the ultimate guarantor of rights is a subject whose "very existence . . . is simultaneous with society's failure to integrate, to represent it."[4] Consequently, we should not view the subject's *cause* simply as its identification with the numerous subject positions (regarding class, race, gender, etc.) available to it but instead with its "attachment to what language cannot say, to the unspeakable double that is the indestructible support of our freedom" (*RMD*, 137). Considering the subject in these terms allows us to revolutionize our conceptualization of rights. Rather than reducing rights to a "series of *demands*, fully expressible in language," we can view them as emanating from the indeterminate and inviolable source of the subject's freedom (*RMD*, 137).

As the political philosopher Claude LeFort observes, because the conceptual basis for the rights of man "is without shape" and is "given as an interior to itself," it offers a permanent source for political resistance. LeFort explains that "from the moment when the rights of man are posited as the ultimate reference, established right is open to question. It becomes still more so as the collective wills or, one might prefer to say, social agents bearing new demands mobilize a force in opposition to the one that tends to contain the effects of the recognized rights. Now, where right is in question, society—that is, the established order—is in question."[5] If recognized rights represent the manifestation of power's operations, the mobilization of *force*, via inchoate social demands, expresses the subject's desire for rights *as such*. Constituting the "ultimate reference" for the subject's freedom, such a force threatens not only the

established order's norms and values but also its underlying conceptual logic.[6] I argue that rather than viewing "Life" only through the lens of what Tillie Olsen famously refers to as Davis' "living question"—namely, "What are rights without means?"—we should more closely examine how the narrative challenges our conventional understanding of the subject itself.[7]

In this essay, I intend to build upon and complicate previous readings of "Life" that link the issue of rights to questions about the subject's political representation and social visibility.[8] "Life," I contend, rejects the vulgar Marxian notion that rights merely reflect the "material mode of life of individuals" and "the form of a ruling will."[9] On the contrary, in both its form and content, "Life" defends a conception of the subject discernible only in the faint outlines of what Copjec describes as the "negation of the subject's attachment to the world" (*RMD*, 136). In "Life," Davis identifies the free subject, the subject of rights, neither by its proximity to some transcendental ideal nor its opposition to (or embrace of) existing social determinations. Rather, she imagines the subject's existence in relation to the repetitions that inscribe its freedom's *negative* condition of possibility. Davis suggests that this subject's recognition is precisely what is at stake in the "terrible dumb question" that is "its own reply" ("Life," 431), for without this elusive subject's existence, there can be no hope of emancipation.

In section one, I explore Davis' implicit critique of Lockean possessive individualism expressed in the rhetoric of self-made manhood. "Life," I argue, casts doubt on self-making's emancipatory potential by suggesting that, as the basis for capitalistic selfhood, possessive individualism aims to foreclose the transcendental subject by limiting the question of rights to the problem of (self-) ownership within a pre-established regime's coercive power relations. The second section examines what I refer to as Davis' *rhetoric of penetrative vision*, which both acknowledges a

transcendental subject of rights' existence while defending it from social determinism. Finally, I consider the ways in which we may view Wolfe's desire for beauty and his suicide not simply in terms of failure or self-destruction but as uncanny representatives of the subject's freedom.

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UN-LOCKE-ING THE SECRET OF RIGHTS: POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM AND THE RHETORIC OF SELF-MAKING

In a memorable episode, a group of wealthy men accompany Kirby on a tour of his family's foundry operations in Wheeling, Virginia. To the well-dressed men surveying the industrial scene, the laborers evoke the "spectral figures" in Dante's *Inferno*, and the iron cauldrons' "red smoldering lights" resemble the "half-shut eyes of wild beasts" ("Life," 437). Upon their intended departure, however, the appearance of a korl statue—a nude woman, "white, of gigantic proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning" ("Life," 437–38)—startles the men. Identifying Hugh Wolfe, a consumptive iron puddler, as the unlikely artist, a member of the party, Doctor John May, expresses his admiration for Wolfe's talent and offers a few encouraging words: "'Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man?—do you understand?' (talking down to the capacity of his hearer: it is a way people have with children, and men like Wolfe)—'to live a better, stronger life than I, or Mr. Kirby here? A man may make himself anything he chooses.' . . . 'Make yourself what you will. It is your right.'" May immediately discerns, however, that without money Wolfe's cannot develop his singular artistic (and human) potential. After a brief, self-serving moral calculation, May concludes that such support would ultimately be unjust, for "'Why should one be raised, when myriads are left?'" His refusal to financially invest in Wolfe's talent

notwithstanding, May earnestly reminds the puddler that "it [is his] right to rise" ("Life," 440, 441).

Although May preaches the gospel of individual genius and self-determination, his refusal to assist Wolfe reveals a stark truth about the conception of rights grounded in possessive individualism: the puddler, who possesses nothing—barely even himself—does not have, to borrow Hannah Arendt's succinct formulation, "the right to have rights."[10] When Wolfe later decides to keep Mitchell's wallet filched for him by his cousin, Davis' intrusive narrator reminds the reader that Wolfe's belief in "fancied rights" is merely a delusion inspired by the "madness that underlies all revolution, all progress, and all fall" ("Life," 444, 443). From a juridical perspective, it is, of course, Mitchell's rights that have been violated by the theft. And yet, the narrator's ironic (because incomplete) allusion to Matthew 7:5—"I do not plead [Wolfe's] cause. I only want to show you the mote in my brother's eye: then you can see clearly to take it out" ("Life," 443)—suggests that the situation is more complicated.

While "Life" hints that rights are *somehow* the key to understanding Wolfe's oppression (and class-based oppression in general), it also suggests that Wolfe's social environment fundamentally disables, even forecloses, his ability to articulate rights as coherent demands. If we consider Wolfe's rights claim to be fatally flawed from the narrow moral and legal perspectives prescribed by the situation (as the narrator insists that we should), we can identify no alternative discourse that explains precisely how the issue of rights pertains to his broader condition of oppression. Are we simply meant to view Doctor May's encouraging rhetoric as naïve idealism? Or, worse, should the reader take May's sentiments seriously but with the understanding that such ideas are not applicable to one such as Wolfe?

While the former position questions dearly held assumptions about American exceptionalism (since the condition of Wolfe's very existence contradicts May's universal declaration), the latter promotes such beliefs as part of an insidious hegemonic strategy (since Wolfe's vain attempt to actualize May's ideals reveals his powerlessness and ultimately leads to his imprisonment). From this perspective, the implication of Davis' allusion to Matthew 7:5 becomes clear. In the complete passage, Jesus warns his followers against hypocritically judging their brother too quickly for the mote in his eye, advising them, instead, to "first cast out the beam out of thine own eye: and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."[11] When guided by Christ's admonition, readers can equitably judge Wolfe only if they first acknowledge that May's upper-class fantasy of self-making depends upon a conception of rights that renders Wolfe's own ability to make any coherent social demands virtually impossible.

As Janice Milner Lasseter demonstrates, there is compelling evidence that Davis intended "Life" as "a thoroughgoing indictment of the Evangelical Protestant church's blindness to the life of Christ modeled and taught to his followers" and, particularly, its "superficial, materialistic faith."[12] In "The Censored and Uncensored Lives of *Life in the Iron-Mills*" (2003), Lasseter examines an omitted and subsequently revised passage from "Life," arguing that, in its original depiction of an "unveiled" Christ figure, Davis answers the question posed in the censored 1861 text by directly indicting the church for its "Calvinist materialist legacy" ("Censored," 183). Lasseter contends that in the turbulent political environment of the 1840s–60s, Ticknor and Fields likely censored the text in order to "diminis[h] the story's outrage and dramatization of social problems." The publishers sought, specifically, according to Lasseter, to avoid the "inflammatory" appearance of implicitly aligning the story with the radical socialist positions of reformers

such as Orestes Brownson, who critiqued upper-class Christianity "on the basis of inherited and private property" ("Censored," 178, 176).

While Lasseter's explicit aim is to demonstrate that the holograph text is closest to Davis' true artistic vision, her argument is significant here because it confirms Davis' awareness of contemporary moral debates regarding private property; her professional familiarity with initiatives involving a "nascent socialism"; and her desire, through her writing, to "effect structural changes within the capitalist economic system" ("Censored," 177, 184). Moreover, I argue that the efforts to dilute Davis' message inadvertently highlight the contradictions pertaining to self-making ideology and the nature of rights under capitalism. In its censored form, "Life" does not simply "disclos[e] an answer" to its own question ("Censored," 176). Instead, by drawing the reader into its contradictions, "Life" more subtly intimates that the forms of alienation inherent to possessive individualism potentially foreclose inalienable human rights.

The term "possessive individualism," coined by the political philosopher C. B. Macpherson, refers to the political ontology discernable in John Locke's philosophy that emerged alongside the seventeenth century's capitalistic economic transformations. With the ascension of private property,[13] the individual adopted a new basis for identity as "essentially the proprietor of his own person" and, as such, "an owner of himself."[14] Importantly, because property is "not things but *rights*, rights in or to things," one's capacity for (self-) ownership serves as the implicit basis for one's natural rights.[15] However, because one's proprietary status is not fixed but constituted by the social relations and economic processes that pertain to private property, one's rights under possessive individualism are actually social rather than natural, historical rather than inalienable.

In his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Locke argues that equality was originally linked to individuals' common access to natural resources in an idyllic time "before the desire of having more than man needed had altered."[16] Clearly, however, for Locke, rights depend upon the inequality pertaining to the constitutive condition of private property ownership itself. He observes, for example, that "every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself." One's labor, too, transforms the common into one's exclusive, private property by adding "something" to what was common and thereby "exclud[ing] the common right of other men."[17] The original, natural law that governs rights attests to the fact that rights are inherently linked to a state of mutual coercion, since the possibility always exists that one might infringe upon another's "life, health, liberty, or possessions."[18] As the political scientist William Paul Simmons observes, the "autonomous ego claiming a priori rights that guarantee the ego's freedom also require a check on the ego's freedom as they encounter the freedom claims of all others."[19]

The inherently social orientation of Locke's natural rights theory becomes explicit as he describes the transition from the state of nature to political society. Although the law of nature that governs one's originary rights is "permanent" and serves as the basis for civil law, one must resign one's "natural powers," namely, one's "title to perfect freedom and uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature," in order to enter into political society.[20] Consequently, one's "condition of life" and, by extension, the social articulation of one's natural rights, "varies."[21] In political society, rights (to one's property, one's labor, one's body, one's happiness) explicitly depend upon the material conditions of one's social existence and the peculiar ways in which rights are distributed within that milieu. As we have seen, however, even so-called natural rights are unimaginable outside the quasi-historical contexts of social

coercion and alienation in which they are situated. Nature does not transcend the historical in Locke's theory of rights; rather, his theory *naturalizes* possessive individualism, a seventeenth-century invention, as the basis for rights. Davis demystifies bourgeois narratives of self-determination and disconnects rights issues from the context-specific, real-world struggles of nineteenth-century mill workers. She thereby allows the reader to see possessive individualism's ideological foundation for what it is. This exposure, in turn, enables the reader to better perceive how possessive individualism may effectively foreclose freedom for many even as it promotes *a priori* natural rights as a source of universal equality for all.

As Wolfe initially prepares to locate Mitchell and return his wallet, May's rhetoric of self-making echoes in his mind. In particular, the word *right* "struck him" and "cl[u]ng to him . . . obstinately" ("Life," 443). Ultimately, the symbolism of a powerful aesthetic experience influences Wolfe's decision to keep Mitchell's money. In a passage worth quoting at length, the narrator relates Wolfe's fevered response to a brilliant sunset, which he misinterprets as the legible sign of God's will:

> God made this money—the fresh air, too—for his children's use. He never made the difference between poor and rich. The Something who looked down on him that moment through the cool gray sky had a kindly face, he knew,—loved his children alike. Oh, he knew that! . . . The fog had risen, and the town and river were steeped in its thick, gray, damp; but overhead, the sun-touched smoke clouds opened like a cleft ocean,—shifting, rolling seas of crimson mist, waves of billowy silver veined with blood-scarlet, inner depths unfathomable of glancing light. Wolfe's artist-eye grew drunk with color. The gates of

> the other world! Fading, flashing before him now! What, in the world of Beauty, Content, and Right, were the petty laws, the mine and thine, of mill-owners and mill-hands? ("Life," 443–44)

Davis' narrator, in framing this scene, describes Wolfe's dilemma as a choice between what to the nineteenth-century reader would have been a familiar opposition: conventional Christian piety ("self-restraint" and "voluntary suffering for truth's sake") on the one hand and transcendentalist egoism ("full development" and "the fullest flow of spontaneous harmony") on the other.[22] On the night of his crisis, however, Wolfe justifies the theft not only by nursing his conviction that the money is "something straight from God's hand" but, more importantly, by evoking something vaguely resembling the Lockean state of nature when he claims, "God made this money—the fresh air, too—for his children's use" ("Life," 443). In his ecstatic vision, the brilliant sky seems to offer a glimpse through "the gates of that other world." Wolfe believes that he is witnessing the Absolute's revelation, the divine confirmation that Right is an abstract universal grounded in the prelapsarian condition of common use, which morally transcends the "petty laws, the mine and thine of mill-owners and mill-hands" ("Life," 444). Wolfe imagines that God sanctions his theft not only because the aesthetic pleasure produced by the sunset appears to be a self-evident indication of divine will but also because he mistakenly believes that money is a natural resource that possesses inherent use value (like fresh air). In Wolfe's mind, the sunset's seductive beauty implicitly links money to man's primordial condition of equality.[23]

As Karl Marx observes, money possesses use-value; however, it is a "formal use-value, originating in its specific social function." Money arrives at its ideal use-value in the "double process" of conversion that occurs during exchange.[24] At the same moment that a commodity

takes on its ideal value form through money, money itself becomes a commodity. However, because the exchange process is abstract, people view money fetishistically. Slavoj Žižek suggests that the exchange structure supplements money's material substance with a "*sublime* material" that "persists beyond the corruption of the body physical."[25] Thus, the exchange process mystifies social relations in such a way that money's value may seem entirely independent of them (hence Mitchell's quip that money is "the cure for all the world's diseases" ["Life," 440]). Wolfe further mystifies oppressive social relations because his fantasy misrepresents money as a natural, God-given resource for common use. Through a circular logic, Wolfe believes he has a right to Mitchell's money, not simply for what it can bring him, but because, in his fantasy, money symbolizes natural Right. Davis' depiction of Wolfe's moral crisis and its ironic resolution highlights the fact that rights emerge from social relations, not natural ones, thereby calling into question possessive individualism as an immutable source of inalienable rights.

Kirby appropriates the workers' individual labor and the value of the labor force itself and treats the mill "hands" as a prosthesis that extends his own capacity for (self-) possession. Inversely, through the capitalistic acquisition of surplus value, the mill workers lose the inherent Lockean basis for their selfhood and rights: *self*-ownership via their own bodies and labor. Rather than possessing identities as individual men with unique lives and histories, the workers become the "duplicates" of all the other "hands," past and present, who "swar[m] the streets" ("Life," 431). While Kirby's wish that the laborers "should be machines" reveals his perverse desire to foreclose the possibility of a transcendental subject with "rights of the soul" ("Life," 439, 440), May's affirming rhetoric represents a more nuanced hegemonic operation.

Because Wolfe's life appears to directly refute the notion that "the American system [is] a ladder which any man can scale" ("Life," 439), the myth of self-making would seem to confirm the Marxian observation that coercive rights are instrumental to the ruling class's power and the key to possessive individualism's mystifying ideological operations.[26] Accordingly, May's speech to Wolfe concerning the inalienable right to self-making obscures the capitalistic relations that have led to their respective social conditions. The rhetoric of universal rights implicitly privileges self-ownership while repressing the fact that unequal material circumstances ensure a corresponding inequality of rights. In this sense, May's observation that Wolfe's artistic ability gives him "stronger powers than many men," including himself, mystifies the true ideological basis for possessive individualism and treats self-ownership as a self-evident, universal moral condition rather than a contingent feature of one's social existence ("Life," 440). May clings to self-making ideology not only to justify his own relative privilege but also to bolster his belief in the morality of the "American system" itself, despite his sympathy for Wolfe ("Life," 439).[27]

Notably, at the story's conclusion, the fact that Wolfe, now in prison for theft, has turned out to be a mere "scoundrel" rather than a thwarted artistic genius and a true man of virtue, assuages May's own guilt ("Life," 445). The public notice of Wolfe's punishment offers May a confirmation of his doctrine's truth and covers over its internal contradictions with a judgment about Wolfe's moral fitness. Nineteenth-century self-making rhetoric offers anecdotal examples of how ordinary men rise to wealth and influence and effectively treats extraordinary accomplishments as the basis for inferences about an individual's moral character. Stowe argues, for example, that what defines the self-made man is not his "exceptional gifts of genius or culture" but those "more

attainable ones which belong to man's moral nature" (*LD*, 1:vii). Similarly, as Charles C. B. Seymour's *Self-Made Men* (1858) illustrates, the ideal of self-made manhood associates one's capacity for self-ownership with virtuous acts of "self-sacrifice," "self-command," "self-possession," and "self-control."[28] Fundamental notions about identity and possession are thereby metaphorically grafted onto upper-class Christian virtues. This process reflects what the political philosopher Étienne Balibar describes as Lockean selfhood's "essential *circularity*," which "links together . . . questions of identity and identification" with those of "the proper and property."[29] In short, if the self-made man's social and entrepreneurial successes evince moral certainty, it is because they tautologically link his capacity for propriety (to "know and do the RIGHT" [*LD*, 1:viii]) with his condition of proprietorship (the ability to *have* rights).

Wolfe's fantasy radically inverts his relationship to money such that he views his economic oppression from the illusory perspective of a mythic fall. Through the distorting ideological lens of May's self-making rhetoric, Wolfe rationalizes his theft as a means to recover his self-evident (because God-given) right to basic human dignity: the freedom to "work, to live, to love!" ("Life," 444). As a consequence, he makes himself an unwitting scapegoat for capitalists and bourgeois Christians alike. Davis suggests that if we, like Doctor May and his wife, refuse to untangle the dense network of mystifications within which Wolfe is caught, then we fail to remove the "plank from our eye" as Christ commands. Like the Mays, we may also unjustly judge Wolfe for his crime and simply wonder at "the ingratitude of that kind of people" ("Life," 445).

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LOOKING DEEPER: DAVIS' RHETORIC OF PENETRATIVE VISION AND THE SUBJECT OF RIGHTS

In the story's opening scene, the narrator looks out on the street from behind a windowpane in the Wolfes' old house and describes "masses of men, with dull, besotted faces" who bear the contaminating effects of an environment ubiquitous with "slow folds" and "black, slimy pools" of foundry smoke. The narrator's description of the workers who make their way to and from the mills as a "slow stream of human life" symbolically links them to a nearby "negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden" and, by implication, to enslaved African Americans ("Life," 430). While Eric Schocket suggests that this racialized representation of the industrial workers reflects the "large-scale absence of a critical language of economic exploitation" in the mid-nineteenth century, the conflation suggests that Wolfe and those of his class maintain the status of what Simmons refers to as "cauterized" Others, those who exist beneath humanity and are therefore "branded as rightless."[30] The social environment appears to fully overdetermine these men whose "flesh [is] begrimed with smoke and ashes," and who have been "breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot." The narrator asks, if we view the workers' conditions of existence as "vileness for soul and body," is there "nothing beneath," no surplus dimension of the subject that might escape such environmental corruption? ("Life," 430, 431). If such a subject exists, what are its features, and how might one represent it?

In order to address these questions, we must first examine Davis' strategic use of the rhetoric of penetrative vision. When deployed as a structural device (and not merely as a trope), the narrator's incitement to penetrative vision formalizes a peculiar reading practice intended

to graft the reader's desire onto the text via his or her quest to discover the answer to a secret. As I will show, Davis' aesthetic strategy exploits the formal repetitions induced by deferral and failure. Rather than confronting some *ultimate* truth about the workers' condition and the possibility of hope, the reader witnesses missed encounters with the workers' souls via external appearances and the constitutive failure of representation to reach beyond itself. As William Dow aptly observes, Davis' narrator "create[s] a drama of the approximate, the ineffable."[31] The text reveals no missing signified that would explain *all* from a God-like perspective; we witness only the metonymic sliding of signifiers around a central void, namely an undisclosed secret. Instead of testifying to signification's fundamental openness, this circling of signifiers formalizes an *internal* limit. While this limit serves as a ballast around which individuals can contest or deconstruct conflicting moral positions and rhetorical figures, it also inscribes a crucial prohibition. The subject of rights—about whom we can never say all within the symbolic order—requires that such a prohibition exists.

Throughout "Life," Davis' narrator suggests that penetrative vision is both the key to accessing truth and the metonymy for an individual's freedom and spiritual fitness. The narrator declares, "If your eyes are free as mine are to look deeper, no perfume-tinted dawn will be so fair with promise of the day that shall surely come" ("Life," 431). Moreover, because Davis organizes the story both formally and conceptually around the narrator's repeated imperative that the reader "look deeper into the heart of things," the text appears to oscillate between not only two aesthetic modes—literary realism and romanticism—but also two distinct, and potentially contradictory, epistemological positions that serve as the foundation for moral judgment. "Life," according to the realist position, grounds notions of justice in empirical experience. To "be just" is to

recognize that Hugh Wolfe's crime is the effect of a corrupt environment that stunts and disorients the workers' higher natures. Even though Wolfe possesses a "fierce thirst for beauty" and talent as an artist, the "slow, heavy years of constant, hot work" have transformed him into little more than a "dumb, hopeless animal" ("Life," 434, 435, 437). The industrial environment has left his "brain . . . greedy, dwarfed, full of thwarted energy and unused powers" ("Life," 443), leading to his moral and spiritual arrested development. The narrator suggests that the wealthy fail to understand their moral responsibility because they are unable to clearly see *how conditions actually are* for people like Wolfe. Looking deeper, in this instance, implies gaining access to knowledge through an act of demystification and examining the true organizing principles of social reality.

According to this realist logic, readers might view Wolfe and his cousin Deborah as *types* (the narrator observes that they "were like those of their class") and serve as fitting representatives for "their duplicates swarming the streets to-day" ("Life," 431). Positioned as an idle observer behind a windowpane in the upper floor of the Wolfes' old house, the narrator announces an intention to make the working poor's "massed, vile, slimy lives" a "real thing" to the upper classes, whose presumed "lazy, *dilettante*" habits of education and privileged indifference have blunted their moral sensibilities. As we "see [Wolfe] as he is," the narrator tasks the reader with viewing the unfolding narrative with the "clear, sad eye" of "God's judging angel." We should, like the angel, see Wolfe's crime from a holistic perspective that takes into account the myriad hidden causal relationships shaping his life, and judge him with a greater sympathy than is afforded by "man's law, which seizes on one isolated fact" ("Life," 430–31, 431, 435). From a realist perspective, then, "look[ing] deeper into the heart of things" demands that the reader overcome the bourgeoisie's willful blindness and "come right down . . . into the thickest of the fog and

mud and foul effluvia" and bear witness to the material circumstances that breed "soul starvation" ("Life," 434, 431, 434).

At the same time, however, the narrator suggests that justice depends, more crucially, upon the reader's ability to look *beyond* appearances toward the possibility of some inner, spiritual reality.[32] Davis' narrator asserts:

> I dare not put this secret into words. I told you it was dumb. These men, going by with drunken faces and brains full of unawakened power, do not ask it of Society or of God. Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply. I will tell you plainly that I have a great hope; and I bring it to you to be tested. It is this: that this terrible dumb question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the very extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come. ("Life," 431)

While the narrator's reference to a "Hope to come" promises some spiritual or temporal beyond in relation to the present's degradation ("Life," 431), the romantic embodiment of such hope, in the clichéd image of the dawn depicted throughout the text, perpetually collapses under contradictions. Critics point out that "Life's" prominent religious reform rhetoric seems aimed less at assisting the reader in imagining some form of divine deliverance or spiritual salvation than in exposing such rhetoric's manipulative potential. As Sharon M. Harris observes, the story's religious symbolism is often intentionally ironic, indicating that "the Word" can easily be "corrupted by the capitalist and reformer alike."[33] Harris maintains that Davis transitions from romanticism to realism precisely by strategically ironizing the romantic imagery deployed by

nineteenth-century Christian reformers, especially images of the dawn, in order to criticize their empty promises. So when Davis' moralizing narrator concludes the story by proclaiming, against the emotive backdrop of a "flickering, nebulous crimson" sunrise, that "God has set the promise of the Dawn," we should be suspicious ("Life," 451).

We should not, however, view Davis' ironic treatment of reform rhetoric as a paralytic version of romantic irony whereby the "driv[e] to create aesthetic order" represents not only the "means of embodying a vision but also . . . [the] shatter[ing] [of] that order as an inadequate betrayal of that vision."[34] Amy Schrager Lang argues, in this vein, that the narrator's rejection of "all modes of representation as forms of appropriation" reflects a refusal to "to take possession of her human subject."[35] From this perspective, Lang maintains that "the questionable capacity of art . . . to represent, much less redeem, the iron puddler becomes itself the story's subject."[36] By contrast, I argue that as "Life" differs, displaces, and negates the interior truth that would be finally revealed to the reader's penetrating gaze, Davis not only highlights the textual surface's status as a mediating artifice (one riddled with ironies and contradictions) but also privileges the secret's dimension as a site of the real (in the Lacanian sense). Rather than emphasizing the difference between deceptive surface appearances and hidden (though fully legible) empirical or spiritual truths, "Life" obsessively maintains the epistemological boundary between empirical reality and the unknowable via an undisclosed secret.

As Andrew J. Scheiber observes, the secret functions in "Life" as an "unknown infrastructure," an "element not directly accessible or evident in the surface of the discourse," but one that underwrites the text's "deconstructive energies."[37] I contend, moreover, that secrecy represents a surplus element of negation that radically disrupts the tendency to view Wolfe's and Deborah's lives as overdetermined by the causality of historical and social

forces (as might be the view of Social Darwinism), on the one hand, or limited by the failure to achieve (unachievable) moral or social ideals (as might be the view of Christian reformers), on the other. Davis, instead, compels the reader to make a judgment about the existence of a subject whose preservation coincides with its symbolic *negation*. By instituting a structure of repetition and failure, "Life" prohibits access to—and thereby preserves—an unknowable subject, an unrepresentable subject without predicate whose inalienable rights ontologically precede their symbolic articulation.[38] In "Life," this desire (and failure) to see represents a peculiar way of knowing.

The narrator initially invites readers to view Deborah with disgust and pity before "look[ing] deeper" to "read the faint signs" of what is written on her heart ("Life," 434). While she is still a young woman, Deborah appears to be "deformed, almost a hunchback" ("Life," 432). Although we have just witnessed Deb selflessly bringing Hugh his supper, the narrator informs us that her form, lying atop a pile of ashes "like a limp, dirty rag," is "not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime." However, the narrator suggests that truth or the "heart of things" lies beyond isolated surface appearances. When one begins to gather together and analyze the superficial details of her "colorless life," Deborah represents a "type of her class." To "see" her in this way is merely to know her type; if one were to look "deeper yet," however, one might discover the "story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, [and] fierce jealousy." Davis' narrator explicitly promotes penetrative vision in order to disclose the osseous contours of a shared humanity. According to the narrator, Wolfe's failure to respond to Deborah's generosity and sacrifice with more than the kindness he shows "even to the very rats that swarmed in the cellar," might account for the "apathy and vacancy" in her visage. When we attempt to decipher what is "hidden beneath the

pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face," the reader glimpses another image: her own. As the narrator explains, "one sees that dead, vacant look steal sometimes over the rarest, finest women's faces,—in the midst, it may be of their warmest summer's day" ("Life," 434).

If Deborah's "thwarted woman's form" conceals the drama of an unfulfilled human longing for recognition, we find evidence that many wealthy women also harbor a "secret of intolerable solitude" underneath their "delicate laces and brilliant smile[s]." Yet, we can ultimately only "guess at the secret" hidden beneath these surface appearances. Each penetration of the textual surface leads, via analogy, only to more surface effects. The narrator shifts from third to second person in order to anticipate the reader's objections to such a comparison ("You laugh at it?") and the tentative certainty of shared affect. The narrator assumes that "pain and jealousy" are "savage realities" for women like Deborah *and* women like the reader; they strike the same note even if the octave is "high or low" ("Life," 434). Rather than reveal a (fully-knowable) subject overdetermined by its life circumstances, Davis, on the contrary, parallels women's emotional experiences, making a judgment, not simply about gender, but about the existence of a *universal* subject whose suffering (inscribed in its stories, its facial expressions, its repetitive social gestures) evinces its desire.[39]

Later in the same scene, the narrator adopts a similar strategy when considering the workers as a whole. After describing the mills' hellish conditions, the narrator asserts,

> If you could go into this mill where Deborah lay, and drag out from the hearts of these men the terrible tragedy of their lives, taking it as a symptom of the disease of their class, no ghost Horror would terrify you more. A reality of soul-starvation, of living death, that meets you every day under the besotted faces on the street,—I can paint nothing of this,

> only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man: whatever muddy depth of soul-history lies beneath you can read according to the eyes God has given you. ("Life," 434–35)

This remarkable passage fuses the physical, aesthetic, and spiritual via a supplementary logic that continually remodels textual surfaces. Seeing—mediated through a series of displacements—becomes virtually indistinguishable from reading. Because the reader cannot "go into the mill where Deborah [lies]," he or she does not directly encounter the "reality of soul-starvation" and "living death . . . under the besotted faces on the street." Since the reader lacks direct access to the physical conditions of such suffering, the narrator must offer an artistic representation, knowing that even a realistic artifice will inevitably fail to convey the workers' true spiritual condition. However, if we were to "drag" the tragic stories from these men's and women's hearts, we would still only glimpse the external "symptoms" corresponding to "the disease of their class." Likewise, the narrator must admit that he or she "can paint nothing of" soul-starvation's interior reality but only offer the "outside outlines" of one man's story. We cannot know this "living death" or disease directly, but can only ever know its external manifestations, and even then, in only a fragmentary way. In short, when we peer beneath the "besotted faces," we find only more contaminated layers: the "muddy depth" of the workers' "soul-histor[ies]" ("Life," 434, 435).

Throughout "Life," Davis' narrator insists that the reader must discover the truth through textual excavation. Underneath each veiled surface (a face, a story, a symptom, a physical location), however, lies yet another surface to be penetrated. An endlessly externalizing narrativization process defers the traumatic revelation of the workers' souls. Likewise, readers can approach the truth that lies behind Deborah's grotesque appearance, "the story of

[her] soul" as a woman ("Life," 434), only through layered supplementation: first, by referring to the reflected image of other, different women (including, potentially the reader herself), and then through metaphors, which retroactively signify sameness in an imagined universal condition. As Sheila Hassell Hughes observes, at one level Davis invokes the mystery of the other so it can be "experienced through imaginative realization."[40] It is, however, only through sustained acts of penetrative vision, which enact *our* desire to know *her* desire, that we can begin forming an identification with her hidden cause *as a desiring subject*. The focus of such an identification concerns neither Deborah's desired object (Wolfe's recognition and appreciation) nor her historical subject position (as an impoverished cotton-mill worker); rather, the repetitions enacted by penetrative vision preserve the subject (and compel our judgments about it) precisely by inscribing it as a limit to knowledge.

The narrator's imperative for us to bear witness to the other is bound to the notion that reading is not only an active form of seeing but also the formal enactment of grace. The pronouncement that we can "read [only] according to the eyes God has given [us]" echoes Jesus' message to his disciples in Matthew 13 ("Life," 435). When asked why he speaks to the masses in parables, Jesus responds, "because they seeing, see not: and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand."[41] Madeline Boucher argues that parables constitute "language events" in that "they have the power to move the hearer to decision or action."[42] "Life's" capacity to function as a parabolic "language event" resides not merely in its poetics, its disclosure of symbolic meaning, but in the peculiar way its guiding imperative to *look deeper* hails readers at the level of their desire. If Jesus' disciples are blessed because they can see and hear spiritual truth, the parable instructs others (through a brief symbolic narrative or allegory) in ways that seek to formalize grace. For, as Günther Bornkamm notes, the ambiguity of Jesus'

parables was not meant to alienate his listeners but embody a mystery, namely the mystery "of the hidden dawn of the kingdom of God itself amidst a world which to human eyes gives no sign of it."[43]

As I have already mentioned, Davis generally treats conventional representations of divine revelation (such as the dawn) ironically. I suggest that "Life" introduces to the reader a *parabolic*, or curved, relation to the text and reality, one that opens a space for the circulation of the subject's desire and, consequently, transcendence via the real.[44] If, according to Copjec, "the [Lacanian] real is, by definition, that which has no adequate signifier," we can declare its existence only via formal repetitions, "through the signifier's repeated attempt—and failure—to designate itself." It is, in other words, because of the signifier's "radical inability to signify itself" that the real is circumscribed within the symbolic as *impossible* (*RMD*, 121). The rhetoric of penetrative vision does not promote a belief in some transcendent "hidden dawn" that will halt the endless drift of *différance*. [45] On the contrary, as the reader descends through layers of supplemental imagery, the metonymic flow of signifiers circumscribes and thereby *in*scribes the real as a desire-inducing surplus: that which, to use Jacques Lacan's phrase, "doesn't stop not being written."[46]

According to Jesus in the verses from Matthew cited above, in order for the people to be healed, they must declare the miraculous (i.e. the impossible) and maintain faith in its possibility via a transformed, dynamic relation to the law. For Davis, neither the Divine will's aesthetic embodiment nor the conventional tropes of spiritual salvation signify the promised "Hope to come" ("Life," 431). Rather, this hope rests in acknowledging an indeterminate subject whose very existence, we might say, is *miraculous*. Such a subject disrupts the causal chain of symbolic reality and, therefore, mirrors the ontological and conceptual significance of the "Rights of Man" for citizens. As Balibar observes, because such a

conception of rights "clearly exceeds the 'property rights' of one people," it establishes a notion of rights "without any *pre-established* limitation." The subject's relation to the law is, therefore, "radically inverted."[47] No longer determined by its subjection to the law, the subject self-legislates through acts of free will.

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BEAUTY AND THE SUBJECT'S NEGATIVE CONDITION OF FREEDOM

According to some critics, Wolfe's artistry represents exploitation equivalent to industrial production, while his intense desire for beauty reflects the internalization and perpetuation of bourgeois values. Scheiber contends that because Wolfe apparently models the korl woman on Deborah's female form, it embodies the appropriative violence of capitalistic exploitation. He insists we view the sculpture as "but another made object, concealing as much as it reveals of the brutalities that have attended its creation." Wolfe's identity as an artist, from this perspective, parallels Mitchell's "quality as [a] *consumer*" of art.[48] Harris broadly notes that Wolfe's "potential is corrupted because he accepts society's prevailing standard of beauty" or, more precisely, the "capitalists' vision of Beauty."[49] While such readings usefully examine the role beauty plays in supporting dominant perspectives with regard to social norms, rights, and values, or what Lacan calls the subject's enlistment in service of the "economy of goods,"[50] they fail to consider beauty's more radical function: its role in preserving the subject by designating the *negative* condition of its freedom.

In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant argues that the beautiful represents "something that is both in the subject himself and outside him, something that is neither nature nor freedom and yet is linked with the basis of freedom."[51] The beautiful does not reflect human freedom

by serving as the supreme Good's positive emblem. Rather, beauty as such (or "free" beauty) is, according to Kant, "linked with the basis of freedom" because "in judging the beautiful, we present the *freedom* of the imagination."[52] By designating judgments of beauty as both universal and reflective of the subject's free will, Kant posits the subject as constitutively indeterminate, its desire inarticulable. Crucially, the subject's free will not only exempts it from nature's predictable cycles but also endows it with the capacity for radical evil. To this point, Lacan observes that beauty and the economy of goods serve as barriers for the subject that "sto[p] us, but also poin[t] us in the direction of the field of destruction" signified by the death drive (*Ethics*, 217). According to Kant, the prescriptions and prohibitions of a law embodying the Good (natural or divine) do not precondition the subject's freedom; instead, the law emerges *with* the subject, who must impose limits on its unique power to "destroy himself, his fellows, and the whole of nature."[53] In this context, if Wolfe's "fierce thirst for beauty" expresses his wish for something beyond the "vile, slimy life [that has been forced] upon him" ("Life," 435), it also points toward the existence of what Lacan describes as the "unspeakable field of radical desire" that serves as the condition of possibility for the subject's emancipation (*Ethics*, 216).

Throughout "Life in the Iron-Mills," Davis suggests that the link between conventional beauty's manifestations and the supreme Good is often deceptive. The narrator states, for example, that although Wolfe is "touched, moved . . . uncontrollably" by the aesthetic experience of a church service in a Gothic pile, he undergoes no moral awakening ("Life," 444). Further, Davis intimates that Wolfe's mistaken belief in his right to Mitchell's money is a result, largely, of his error in equating beautiful appearances with a divine or natural law's legible inscription. Davis extends this critique not only to the narrator's use of the clichéd imagery of

salvation's dawning at the story's conclusion but also to her/his designation of domestic ornaments as the "homely fragments, in which lie the secrets of all eternal truth and beauty" ("Life," 451). Such imagery appears intentionally ironic because, in appealing to bourgeois sentimentality, it perpetuates a hierarchy of tastes and values that promote class reification. In this way, Davis explicitly links these contrived appearances of beauty to a predetermined concept, or what Kant calls "objective purposiveness," rather than a "merely formal purposiveness," which he famously describes as "free" beauty's "purposiveness without a purpose."[54] Such images promote the subject's enlistment in the economy of goods by associating bourgeois consumerist aesthetics with virtuous self-possession, a hallmark of upper-class sanctity and its version of the supreme Good. However, "Life" also imagines a more dynamic representation of beauty, one interlaced with uncanniness and associated with (self-) destruction.

As the narrator describes Wolfe's work as an artist, we again encounter a scene of repetition and failure. In his spare time, Wolfe carves "hideous" and "fantastic" sculptures from korl that even the other mill workers recognize as "sometimes strangely beautiful."[55] After "working at one figure for months," however, Wolfe would "brea[k] it to pieces perhaps, in a fit of disappointment" ("Life," 435). The beauty described here is complex, strange, and decidedly not fixed to some predetermined concept. Instead it stuns the observer, appearing suddenly and unexpectedly amid other unpleasant and even disturbing impressions. This beauty's fragility and transience seems inseparable from the violence that attends its creation and subsequent destruction. Davis' narrator offers an intentionally limited view of the subject, equivocating about the reasons Wolfe destroys his completed sculptures; "perhaps" he does this "in a fit of disappointment" ("Life," 435), but we (and perhaps he) can never really know for certain. Consequently, Wolfe's

repetitive cycles of creation followed by destruction may speak less to his immobilizing allegiance to unobtainable (although legible) social ideals than provide evidence of what Lacanian theorist Alenka Zupančič describes as the subject's "ontological negativity." Specifically, Zupančič contends that the subject's manifestation within social relations must also include its "positing . . . together with itself, its own negativity, its own negative condition/impossibility."[56] If "Life" posits the free subject by inciting the reader's penetrative gaze, it limns the subject's negative condition or impossibility by establishing crucial linkages between Wolfe's groping desire for beauty and the symbolic representation of his death.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the appearances of the beautiful that Davis implicitly critiques throughout "Life" reflect the pleasure principle's operation in maintaining the subject's devotion to the "economy of goods" (*Ethics*, 216). Lacan observes that such an economy reflects an interrelation between goods—"everything that exists"—and ethical systems concerning the meaning of *the* Good (*Ethics*, 212). By contrast, Wolfe's "strangely beautiful" artworks ("Life," 435), and his repetitive cycles as an artist, represent the link between beauty and freedom in the death drive's disruptive operations, or what Lacan refers to as the "field of absolute destruction" beyond the pleasure principle (*Ethics*, 216). As Lacan explains, the signifying network produces, as its effect, the "field of the Thing . . . onto which is projected something beyond . . . in which doubt is cast on all that is the place of being" (*Ethics*, 214). The signifying chain creates the illusion of an *outside* that seems to designate both an origination point for meaning and the supreme Good.

In his critique of the Western (specifically Platonic and Aristotelian) philosophical traditions that sustain this belief, Lacan maintains that the supreme Good, which appears to exist in a realm beyond empirical reality (and

beyond the signifying chain), should be "situat[ed] . . . on the level of the economy of goods" (*Ethics*, 216). As such, we should view it as a discursive element that anchors socially-perpetuated norms and ideals. Lacan instead locates the subject's true being at the level of the *impossible* real, in the death drive's operation, which institutes radical doubt by "challeng[ing] everything that exists" and thereby embodying a "will to create from zero, to begin again" (*Ethics*, 212). From this perspective, the assurance of a (Lockean) natural law represents a tempting "evasion" when considering the "elucidation [of the subject's] desire" (*Ethics*, 221). If the subject were bound to a natural law, it would mean that some governing perspective (some Other) could satisfy all of the subject's desires if only *natural* relations between subjects and things could be (re)established.[57] At worst, humans would enter a state governed by instinct, or what Kant calls a "subjectively necessitating principle," in accordance with which, order prevails in nature (*Lectures*, 122). In that case, nature would overdetermine the subject positioned *under* its law. Moreover, presuming a natural law's existence legitimates a particular ordering perspective concerning not only goods but also *the* Good. As Lacan points out, the "domain of the good is the birth of power" because it concerns not merely conditions of use but access to enjoyment. For "to exercise control over one's goods," via possessive individualism, "is to have the right to deprive others of them" (*Ethics*, 229).

Davis reveals the ways in which beauty helps suture dominant perspectives and perpetuate the distinct circuit of goods (the ideas, beliefs, and practices) that support possessive individualism. This disclosure allows the reader to understand how the subject may be, to use philosopher Mari Ruti's formulation, "immobilize[d] . . . into debilitating nodes of meaning."[58] In relation to the broader issue of rights, the economy of goods may potentially divest the subject of its freedom and transform it "into an

object of use for the oppressor (so that the subject becomes an instrument of the oppressor's sadistic jouissance)."[59] Despite assurances of a mythic originary equality, Lockean possessive individualism may deprivilege the subject by imagining its freedom solely on the basis of ownership. Consequently, the subject's rights depend entirely upon its status within a contested field of claims to goods and in its relation to *the* Good.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the economy of goods may operate via a "repetition compulsion" through which the subject continually tries and fails to embody the social significations and reach the ideals that are, ultimately, sustained by the Other's enigmatic desire.[60] As Ruti observes, one way out of such an oppressive structure is for the subject to commit an act through which it may "shatte[r] the cycle of repetition—of business as usual." Through such an (often suicidal) act, she argues, the subject effectively "mobilizes not only the death drive, but also this drive's 'will to create from zero.'"[61] Wolfe's suicide, which critics typically view as a morbid alternative to Deborah's joyful rehabilitation by the Quakers, represents no such emancipatory act. At first blush, the suicide seemingly dramatizes the degree to which Wolfe has been irredeemably corrupted by the dominant system that has abused him. While his death arouses our pathos, it does nothing to spur the social order's positive transformation. I would argue, however, that we should view Wolfe's suicide, more provocatively, as a *textual stain* that allows readers to envisage the subject's negative ontological condition.

In the story's final scenes, Davis implicitly links the creative-destructive cycles that attend Wolfe's production as an artist to his suicide via the korl woman's symbolic implications. In order to view the korl woman as only the artistic representation of Deborah's female form, one would have to overlook ample textual evidence that the sculpture also serves as Wolfe's symbolic double.[62] Davis' narrator

highlights Wolfe's feminine characterization early in the text when s/he emphasizes the puddler's "woman's face" and notes that "'Molly Wolfe' was his *sobriquet*." The narrator furthers this connection (from the opposite direction) by informing the reader that the korl statue has a "wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's." The association between Hugh Wolfe and his wolf-like counterpart becomes clearer still when Davis portrays the former's suicide as a final artistic act, accomplished with a "dull old bit of tin, not fit to cut korl with" ("Life," 435, 438, 448). Importantly, Wolfe's repetitive creative-destructive cycles, including, ultimately, his own self-mutilation and suicide, do not render some beautiful ideal, even if only through the failure to achieve it. Instead they point to a limit for and expression of the death drive's operation as "a will to create from zero, a will to begin again" (*Ethics*, 212). Wolfe's longing for beauty does not concern a specific object of desire. Rather, his "fierce thirst for beauty,—to know it, to create it; to *be*—something, he knows not what,—other than he is" ("Life," 435), evinces the subject's desire, as such.

During the moments surrounding Wolfe's suicide, moonlight washes over his jail cell, seeming to "wrap and fold into a deeper stillness the dead figure that never should move again." While the narrator invites the reader to imagine Wolfe's spirit "alone with God in judgment," the "black, nauseous stream of blood dripping slowly from the pallet to the floor" disturbs such sentimentality even as it contributes to the scene's deepening stillness. In the suicide's description, Davis skillfully builds tension between the "clear, pearly moonlight" bathing the room ("Life," 449), evoking Nathaniel Hawthorne's observations concerning moonlight's power to impart a "strangeness and remoteness" to a scene, and the gruesome corporeality of Wolfe's blood.[63] The moonlight's gathering, crystalline beauty both encompasses and resists incorporation of the appalling, particularized image. Likewise, the foreground

intrusion of death's ghastly intimacy unsettles the benignant fantasy of Wolfe's spiritual transition. Deborah, in her final encounter with Wolfe, seems to immediately recognize that the suicide's specter emanates from an entirely different order than the one that causally links poverty, crime, disease and death. The narrator observes, "that gray shadow,—yes, [Deborah] knew what that meant. . . . That meant death, distant, lingering: but this—Whatever it was the woman saw, or thought she saw, used as she was to crime and misery, seemed to make her sick with a new horror" ("Life," 446). While the presentation of Wolfe's suicide dramatizes his freedom's virtual foreclosure in the social, it simultaneously highlights freedom's paradoxes in ways that allows us to imagine a broader basis for rights. It is not the image of Wolfe's blood that stains the text; rather, the subject itself appears *as a stain* at the site of horror, sickness, and nausea induced by suicide's contradictions.

According to Kant, suicide "makes us shudder" because it embodies not only the abuse of but also the contradiction inherent to human freedom (*Lectures*, 124). Kant observes that "freedom in accordance with a will which is not necessitated to action" is the "inherent value of the world." However, because man is not bound to the "subjectively necessitating principle" that regulates the natural world, he requires an objective moral law's implementation. Such self-legislation offers assurance that humans might not use their free will to perform unspeakably evil acts that "turn nature inside out in order to satisfy" their desires (*Lectures*, 122, 123). If not self-governed by some objective rule that serves the "essential end of humanity," Kant declares, "there could be no certainty that man might not use his powers to destroy himself, his fellows, and the whole of nature." In his description of human freedom, Kant imagines a negative (or real, in the Lacanian sense) foundation for the law. The subject, in its founding gesture, freely imposes the law reflexively as a constitutive act of negation. Therefore,

the law's implementation constitutes the *negation of a negation*. Suicide, from this perspective, poses a special problem because such an act, which uses freedom to "annul itself and abrogate itself," puts freedom in "collision with itself" (*Lectures*, 122, 123). As such, it serves as a disturbing metonymy for freedom's inherently negative condition of possibility: the subject, in effect, chooses its own existence just as it chooses its own law.

We might further suggest that the Kantian prohibition against suicide points to the traumatic generative principle from which human freedom and the notion of inalienable rights emerge. As Copjec observes, a generative principle marks the split between the "positive relations" that constitute a society and its "being" (*RMD*, 9). Wolfe's suicide, I suggest, inscribes the death drive's function as the source of the subject's freedom in precisely this way. Neither emancipatory political act nor socially determined outcome, Wolfe's strangely beautiful death stains the text with the intimation of an *unspeakable* freedom for which natural law and the economy of goods cannot account.

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Lang argues that the narrator's inability to access the workers' interiority in "Life" reflects a "problem of literary representation and its adequacy," namely the failure to make visible the workers' concrete desires and demands. She maintains that in "fail[ing] to redeem its working-class protagonist," "Life" insists that "the effects of class cannot be dismissed as obscuring a deeper 'humanity' in the millworker."[64] I have argued that this apparent representational failure offers unique possibilities for imagining how inalienable rights might be conceived apart from—even in opposition to—bourgeois self-making ideology. As Doctor May's speech suggests, the self-making ideal is premised on the belief in a deeper humanity; however, this belief serves only to mystify social inequities

by moralizing social outcomes and blaming victims for their own deprivileged status. Within possessive individualism's limiting framework, the rhetoric of inalienable rights potentially serves to obfuscate class hierarchies and perpetuate oppressive norms.

I have sought to demonstrate that when aligned with the narrator's moral imperative to *look deeper*, the liminality of Davis' narrative—its contradictions, blind spots, and omissions—functions as a veil that preserves the subject by excluding it from and thereby prohibiting its foreclosure within the economy of goods. By acknowledging Wolfe's economic oppression while mocking his delusional belief in "fancied rights" ("Life," 444), Davis' narrator compels the reader to consider whether the concept of rights has any meaning beyond the very exploitative social structures that keep workers like Wolfe living in wage slavery. "Life" enacts a parabolic or curved reading, one that repetitively encircles an unknowable subject who is not simply unseen but constitutively *indeterminate*. Davis thereby marks an internal limit to knowledge. In so doing, she hypothesizes a miraculous subject whose freedom eludes what Mark Seltzer calls industrialization's "body-machine complex."[65] When the reader actually does glimpse the subject, it appears not as a fully visible, occupiable subject position, but as a disfiguring surplus. An uncanny stain in the text, the subject mirrors both the korl woman's strangeness and the repetitious acts of creativity and destruction that characterize Wolfe's process as an artist. Davis' narrative challenges beauty's hegemonic function as the guarantor of upper-class ideals and reimagines it as a symbol for the ontologically negative, inviolable source of the subject's freedom.

"Life in the Iron-Mills" revitalizes the notion of inalienable rights by supposing a subject whose very existence is irreducible to the conception of selfhood enshrined in possessive individualism. In the process, Davis'

narrative unexpectedly anticipates Arendt's twentieth-century speculation regarding how "the right to have rights" might "be guaranteed by humanity itself,"[66] not by sentimentalizing humanity's underlying sameness, but by associating human freedom with radical doubt. As Copjec observes, "it is only because I doubt that I am . . . a democratic citizen" (*RMD*, 161). The subject's desire is inarticulable and exceeds the knowledge of any given social context or historical milieu. The enunciation of its rights, therefore, constitutes an immortal challenge to the established order, an echoing insistence on the "rights of the soul" ("Life," 440).

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I am grateful to Trisha M. Brady and Jap-Nanak Makkar for their generous and insightful feedback during the writing of this essay.

NOTES

1. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-made Men: Including Grant, Greeley, Wilson, Brown, Sumner, Colfax, Beecher, Sherman, Sheridan, Farragut, Garrison, Stanton, Andrew, Buckingham, Phillips, Chase, Lincoln, Howard, etc*. (Hartford: Worthington, Dustin; Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing; Chicago: M.A. Parker, 1872), 1:vii; hereafter parenthetically cited as *LD*.
2. Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills," *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1861, 431; hereafter cited parenthetically as "Life."
3. Many critics demonstrate that "Life" oversimplifies the disparate circumstances and experiences of actual nineteenth-century iron workers. See for example Jean Pfaelzer, "Rebecca Harding Davis: Domesticity, Social Order, and the Industrial Novel," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4, no. 3 (1981): 234–44; William L. Watson, "'These mill-hands are gettin' onbearable': The Logic of Class Formation in *Life in the Iron Mills* by Rebecca Harding Davis," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 26 no. 1–2 (Spring-Summer 1998): 116–36; and Raymond A. Mazurek, "Rebecca Harding Davis, Tillie Olsen, and Working-Class Representation," *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 436–58.
4. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1995), 124; hereafter cited parenthetically as *RMD*.
5. Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: MIT P, 1986), 258.
6. Lefort, *Political Forms*, 258.
7. Tillie Olsen, *Silences: Classic Essays on the Art of Creating* (New York: Feminist P, 2003), 49.
8. See for example, Eric Schocket, "'Discovering Some New Race': Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills' and the Literary Emergence of Working-Class Whiteness," *PMLA* 115, no. 1

(Jan. 2000): 49–59; Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 69–98; and Mazurek, "Working-Class Representation," 436–58.

9. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 184.
10. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 276. Arendt famously observes that the very notion of inalienable human rights usually reflects one's status as the citizen of a state. The idea of human rights, she suggests, has not logically preceded citizens' rights but has been its conceptual offspring. See Arendt, 279.
11. Matt. 7:5 (KJV).
12. Janice Milner Lasseter, "The Censored and Uncensored Literary Lives of Life in the Iron-Mills," *Legacy* 20, no. 1–2 (2003): 183; hereafter cited parenthetically as "Censored."
13. As C. B. MacPherson observes, "it is only when we enter the modern world of the full capitalist market society, in the seventeenth century, that the idea of common property drops virtually out of sight. From then on, 'common property' has come to seem a contradiction in terms." MacPherson, *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1978), 10.
14. C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), 3.
15. MacPherson, *Property*, 2.
16. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Thomas P. Peardon (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 22.
17. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 17.
18. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 8.
19. William Paul Simmons, *Human Rights Law and the Marginalized Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 97.
20. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 48.
21. John Locke, *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, ed. Robert Horowitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 227.

22. See Joe B. Fulton, "Sounding the 'Muddy Depth of Soul-History': Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Influence on Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills,'" *South Atlantic Review* 68, no. 4, (Autumn 2003): 38–61.
23. Jean Pfaelzer similarly observes that Wolfe's "fantasy of economic transcendence" takes the suggestive form of a "highly eroticized image of nature as a female sanctuary." Pfaelzer, *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1996), 49, 48.
24. Karl Marx, "Capital: Volume One," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 444. For Marxian readings of "Life in the Iron-Mills," see for example Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 129–45; Pfaelzer, *Parlor Radical*; Agata Preis-Smith, "Gender, Revolution, and the Political Unconscious in Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*," working paper, John F. Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikastudien 118, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland, 1999, 1–20; Lang, *The Syntax of Class*, 69–98; and Sofía Martinicorena Zaratiegui, "The Ideology of Self-making and the White Working Class in Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*," *REDEN* 2, no. 1 (2020): 59–68.
25. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 18.
26. Karl Marx explains that in order for members of the ruling class to protect their personal power and advantageous "conditions of life," they must "maintain that they hold good for all." Marx, "The German Ideology," *Karl Marx*, 184.
27. Sofía Martinicorena Zaratiegui relates the self-making ideology in "Life" to the nineteenth-century's "ideal of white disembodied masculinity." Martinicorena Zaratiegui, "The Ideology of Self-making," 64.
28. Charles C. B. Seymour, *Self-made Men* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858), 67, 109, 497, 77.
29. Étienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham UP, 2017), 80.

30. Schocket, "'Discovering Some New Race,'" 51; Simmons, *Human Rights Law*, 10.
31. William Dow argues that this drama is meant to "stres[s] the part played by the emotions in the reading process," inviting "us not so much to think about and judge as to feel into or become—to realize a complex experience given in language." Dow, *Narrating Class in American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 50. Pfaelzer claims that Davis is trying to "find an aesthetic language to express the ineffable nature of industrial reality" (*Parlor Radical*, 24). My point, by contrast, is that the ineffable in "Life" marks what is *prohibited* and thus objectively indeterminate.
32. Tillie Olsen notes that "Beyond" was one of Davis' original choices for the story's title. Olsen, "A Biographical Interpretation," afterword to *Life in the Iron Mills*, by Rebecca Harding Davis (New York: Feminist P, 1972), 86.
33. Sharon M. Harris, "Rebecca Harding Davis: From Romanticism to Realism," *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 18.
34. Michael D. West, "Romantic Irony in the Short Fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis," *American Literary Realism* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 236.
35. Lang, *The Syntax of Class*, 84.
36. Lang, *The Syntax of Class*, 85.
37. Andrew J. Scheiber, "An Unknown Infrastructure: Gender, Production, and Aesthetic Exchange in Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills,'" *Legacy* 11, no. 2 (1994): 114.
38. The subject I have in mind corresponds to Copjec's theorization of the modern subject and, in particular, her discussion of the way in which the Lacanian real is inscribed as *impossible* within the symbolic order. See Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 121.
39. Pfaelzer argues that Deborah is "suffering from unrequited love" for Wolfe, making her a "doppelganger" of the presumed to be female narrator, whom Pfaelzer describes as "a romantic voyeur and romantic casualty." Pfaelzer, *Parlor Radical*, 37, 39. Robin L. Cadwallader has offered an insightful critique of this view, arguing that Deb's characterization aims at something more profound than unrequited

romantic love. See Cadwallader, *"For Love's Sake": Literature as an Appeal for Kindness or the Benevolent Work of Three Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers* (PhD diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 52–53. My use of the term *desire*, within a psychoanalytic framework, refers specifically to the Lacanian subject. Through the reader's missed encounters with Deb and the other workers, we, in essence, identify with the *desire to desire*.

40. Sheila Hassell Hughes, "Between Bodies of Knowledge There is a Great Gulf Fixed: A Liberationist Reading of Class and Gender in *Life in the Iron Mills*," *American Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (March 1997): 122.
41. Matt. 13:13 (KJV).
42. Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 16.
43. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene McLuskey, Fraser McLuskey, and James M. Robinson (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1995), 71.
44. Hassell Hughes refers to the invocation of an audience's participatory response to a parable as a "parabolic knot" between the reader and the text in liberation praxis. Hassell Hughes, "Between Bodies of Knowledge," 123. By contrast, my use of the term *parabolic* refers to Davis' aesthetics of repetition and negation.
45. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 71.
46. Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973: Encore, the Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 94.
47. Étienne Balibar, "Subjection and Subjectivation," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 11.
48. Scheiber, "Unknown Infrastructure," 107, 110.
49. Harris, "Romanticism to Realism," 9.
50. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 216; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Ethics*.

51. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 229.
52. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 76, 229.
53. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), 122; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Lectures*.
54. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 73.
55. Even while acknowledging that Wolfe's sculptures are generally perceived as "strangely beautiful," the narrator ironically observes that the korl woman has "not one line of beauty or grace in it" ("Life," 435, 438). This discrepancy, which May's awed assessment does not reflect, corresponds to the narrator's attempt during the mill scene to differentiate between Wolfe's abject, animalistic status and the wealthy men's Apollonian beauty, whose bodies represent an aesthetic ideal. This inconsistency reappears at the story's conclusion, when we learn that the narrator keeps the korl woman veiled in her/his library. In contrast to the "homely fragments" on the narrator's desk, the korl figure ambiguously appears as a "rough, ungainly thing," which, nevertheless, exhibits "touches, grand sweeps of outline, that show a master's hand" (451, 450).
56. Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2017), 11, 146n6.
57. Copjec argues that such a view mistakenly posits a "subject . . . assumed to be already virtually there in the social and . . . [who has] come into being by actually wanting what social laws want it to want." Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 41.
58. Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* (New York: Fordham UP, 2012), 80.
59. Ruti, *Singularity of Being*, 80.
60. Ruti, *Singularity of Being*, 80.
61. Ruti, *Singularity of Being*, 81.
62. See for example Scheiber, "An Unknown Infrastructure," 101–17 and Carol DeGrasse, "'Blocks of this Korl': Substance as Feminist Symbol in 'Life in the Iron-Mills,'" *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 49, 7 (2020): 736–47. In contrast to these views, I agree with Cadwallader's contention that, despite the fact that Deborah's name is also Wolfe, exclusively viewing the korl

woman as Deb's artistic representation is problematically limiting. See Cadwallader, *"For Love's Sake,"* 50.

63. Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter *and Other Writings: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Leland S. Person (New York: Norton, 2005), 29.
64. Lang, *The Syntax of Class*, 73, 85.
65. Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 125.
66. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 298.