The Oracle of the “tiny finger snap of time”
The Oracle of the “tiny finger snap of time”:

*A Study of Novels with a Specific Time Culture*

Edited by
Pauline Winsome Beard

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
To Mick who is still my favorite enophile after all this time.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ........................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter One .................................................................................................................................... 1
Affective Temporality in Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*
Emily K. Blunt

Chapter Two ................................................................................................................................... 21
Cosmic Time and the Rhythm of Narrative
Marco Caracciolo

Chapter Three ................................................................................................................................. 35
Reversing Filth: Temporal Play and Violence in *Time’s Arrow*
AJ Burgin

Chapter Four .................................................................................................................................... 57
“The Past is a Thought in the Present”: Time and Morality in the Novels of Michael Köhlmeier
Raymond Burt

Chapter Five ..................................................................................................................................... 69
The Time We Keep Together: An Exploration of Felt Time in Contemporary Multicultural Women's Literature
Rachel Anya Kaufman

Chapter Six ....................................................................................................................................... 99
The Multiplicity and Mystery of Time in Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*
Pauline Winsome Beard

Contributors ..................................................................................................................................... 123

Index ............................................................................................................................................... 125
I have been fascinated with time ever since my mother was furiously cleaning the house to get ready for visitors and asked me “How goes the enemy?” I think I was about nine and asked “What enemy? We have enemies?” My mother gave a one-word explanation: “Time!” I have often felt since then we are always battling time; we never have enough of it. In undergraduate work I fell in love with the novel and found so many authors who used time so cleverly—not just modern but Lawrence Sterne, trying desperately to write the biography of Tristram Shandy, day by day;—Emily Brontë showing the history of the house Wuthering Heights at different times, in different generations. One memorable day a professor said, “So you’re interested in time? Here, read this!” handing over his large and battered copy of Lawrence Durrell’s The Alexandria Quartet. I became a time fanatic. Some years later my book A Riddling Thing: A Study of Time in Five Twentieth Century Novels was published. Many years later my interest in how time is handled or corralled in the novel was yet again sparked by Anthony Doerr’s All the Light We Cannot See. Doerr’s following remarks on time and memory inspired the title of this collection of essays:

For me the natural world is always telling big stories about humungous scales of time…I’m delighted I get to be here…lucky enough to experience these things for the tiny finger snap of time that we get to be here on Earth…Memory is this one attempt to not be erased by time. (italics mine)¹

The full title came about as the chapters analyzed novels with definite time cultures and gave hints as to the future of the use of time in the novel. As the book progressed it became clear that new and bold theories of time were emerging. Emily Bald’s chapter begins the collection in the Nineteenth Century with Life in the Iron Mills showing the inner time—the perceptual time which fluctuates with the vicissitudes of affective experience—and external, what has become known as clock time. This tied in well with Rachel Kaufmann’s chapter exploring felt time in contemporary women’s literature, introducing the intriguing notion of

mirror neurons for the act of reading. Equally intriguing is Marco Caracciolo’s chapter adding “cosmic time” to Ricoeur’s monumental and mortal time with the case studies of The Waves and The Tree of Life. Two chapters then explore the effects of WW11. AJ Burgin presents the disorienting technique of Martin Amis’ Time’s Arrow that shows time going backwards—even in the dialogue—to the war days, a temporal reversal which presages the oppression in 1990s England. Raymond Burt presents two novels of Michael Köhlmeier, one of contemporary Austria’s writers, spanning the decades since the end of WW11, with his chapter drawing the link between time and morality. Finally my chapter updates my exploration of Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler showing the multiplicity of time that the previous chapters have demonstrated so clearly.

Words such as affect, truth, haunting, memory, reality, identity, morality and mortality all resonate within these chapters as characters within the novels and their specific culture areas grapple with time, recall the past, and attempt to live in the present. The oracle aspect of the title comes into play because so many of the writers in this collection point towards possible new methods of dealing with time, reading methods, engaging with the novel writers of the future in new and interesting relationships. Perhaps in our own lives Time no longer will be the enemy but we accommodate it within our own experiences.

I would like to thank all the contributors whose remarkable hard work and dedication to the task impressed me. The writers who are still working on their dissertations and teaching and taking exams and applying for positions in academia…may all the time you need now be allowed you! Grateful thanks go to the library faculty at Pacific University, especially Isaac Gilman, Lynda Irons and Elaine Bortles. To my friend and colleague Lorely French, much gratitude for the recommendations of writers and her absolute attention to detail in reading texts, especially German. Finally to my husband whose patience and superb formatting skills brought this book to its completion. As to its success…only Time will tell.

---

2 Pauline Winsome Beard, adapted from A Riddling Thing (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group), 1996.
CHAPTER ONE

THE ART OF HABIT:
TEMPORAL CONFLICT IN DAVIS’S IRON MILLS

EMILY K. BALD

Industrial technologies, labor, and transportation systems of the nineteenth century ushered in social and institutional paradigm shifts through which the clock became the unquestioned gauge for temporal experience. Yet contrary to much of the historical and literary scholarship that has outlined these transformations, the reconceptualization of time during this period cannot be simplified as an abrupt shift from natural to mechanical time, an almanac swapped for a factory clock. As Jane Thrailkill has observed, the latter half of the century also witnessed the birth of multidisciplinary studies of the body, from neurology to pragmatist philosophy.¹ These new forms of disciplinary knowledge generated manifold ways of fathoming temporal and affective experience, rendering time a source of perplexity that was nevertheless being reified and wielded as a source of political and social control. Edward Sugden recently identified a “temporal turn” in the study of nineteenth-century American literature, a critical movement that has asked that scholars attend more carefully to the tensions among various temporal modalities that we see reflected by texts of this period.² This turn has helped illuminate the ways in which disparate experiences across class, race, and gender lines have produced distinct and often irreconcilable ways of gauging and inhabiting time. This chapter thus begins with the premise that a crucial context for literary experimentation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century involves the navigation of

incongruous temporal realities amid what Michael O’Malley has called the period’s “crisis in the authority of time.”

Of particular importance to this study is the way clock time in the mid-century became a source of oppressive power for mill overseers seeking to discipline workers and eke out maximal labor. E. P. Thompson’s well-known work on factory time documents the transition from “task orientation,” in which “the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task— and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and ‘passing the time of day,’”

4 to “time discipline,” marked “by the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings,” and the like, all of which systematically compelled workers to internalize the bedrock of industrial capitalism: time is money.5 Yet this transition was by no means seamless; as O’Malley explains, factory owners began manipulating factory bells “to wring an extra half hour’s work out of employees who had no reliable way of measuring time themselves,” and employees thus “began feeling the lack of a reliable standard of time.”6 Factory owners’ access to and control of time enabled them to delineate new industrial habits for the working class, characterized by the synchronization of workers’ bodies to abstract, mechanized, and manipulable timekeeping devices.

It is in the context of such bewildering transformations that we must situate Rebecca Harding Davis’s first novella, Life in the Iron Mills (1861), which uses narrative time “as a cultural practice,” to borrow Amy Kaplan’s phrasing, in order to “actively create and criticize the meanings, representations, and ideologies” rooted in and emerging from socioeconomically divided temporal systems in the mid-nineteenth century.7 This chapter examines two illuminating dynamics of Davis’s engagement with time: her visceral representation of the psychobiological repercussions of an emergent industrial habitus regulated by increasingly

5 Ibid., 90.
6 O’Malley, Keeping Watch, 39, emphasis mine.
7 My framing of “habit” and “habitus” will align more with conceptualizations by William James, John Dewey, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty than those by Marcel Mauss or Pierre Bourdieu. These concepts will be elaborated upon more extensively shortly.
precise mechanical time, and her micro-narratives of unfolding attunement to that habitus and the affectively charged possibilities that accompany such attunement. While Davis’s opening pages reveal the psychological and physiological effects of workers’ habituation to factory time, she intermittently highlights the potentialities sensed by inhabiting temporal modalities that re-orient one to abstract, reified, socially oppressive temporal habits. As Jonathan Flatley asserts, when narratives disorient us from our assumptions about spatiotemporal relationships, “we may see that the logic of the world we live in is not compulsory. Things might work differently.”9 As we will see, Davis’s proto-realist narrative explores the potentially revelatory experience of unfolding attunement to one’s temporal habits—and what such habits enable or impede—while nevertheless reckoning with the grave importance of temporal synchronicity to physiological and psychological wellbeing.

Bridging Time and Affect Studies: James to Droit-Volet

Central to my methodology are the under-examined intersections among temporality and studies of affective experience and embodiment. To trace the connections among these discourses, I begin with William James, who laid much of the groundwork for this conversation. James’s distinction between “sensation” and “perception” anticipates very recent discussions of the relationship between affect and emotion: while both, he argues, are cognitive, sensations are “the immediate results upon consciousness of nerve-currents as they enter the brain, and before they have awakened any suggestions or associations with past experience,” whereas perception is “the higher consciousness about things,” whereby “[i]deas about the object mingle with the awareness of its mere sensible presence” and we begin to “name it, class it, compare it,” and so on.10 While James typically held that experiences of pure sensation—experience unmediated by “any suggestions or associations with past experience”11—are not possible in adult life, Gerald E. Myers has noted that James occasionally points to exceptions: extraordinary experiences in which rational explanations falter and sensations provide “remedies,”12 which will indeed be relevant to

11 Ibid., 12.
Hugh Wolfe’s experience in Davis’s novella. Rather than draw a crisp line between sensation and perception, as dualistic philosophers had done, James lays out a much blurrier “continuum.”13 “Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor activities,” he argues, “sometimes with the perceptions, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought.”14 James’s continuum resonates with Sianne Ngai’s similar framing of the nebulous boundaries between affect and emotions. She advocates a “switch from formal to modal difference” among affects, emotions and moods because it allows for “an analysis of the transitions from one pole to the other,” or “the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects,” processes which we will see unfold in the midst of Hugh Wolfe’s crisis.15 James’s conceptualization of a continuum between immediate bodily sensations and perceptual processes moreover highlights how affective experiences unfold in and through time, and while this in and of itself doesn’t suggest an explicit connection between temporal and emotional experience, it has laid the foundation for more recent neurobiological research into the relationship between how one feels and how one perceives and inhabits time.

Indeed, in the past decade, the dynamics of affective and emotional experience have become increasingly important to multi-disciplinary studies of temporal experience. Marc Wittman has observed an “emotive turn” in the field of time perception,16 a turn which has begun to lead neurophysiologists and cognitive psychologists back to some of James’s earlier theories of time. James’s application of Robert Kelly’s “specious present,”17 for instance, anticipates “internal-clock” models of interval timing, which have provided the foundation for much of the work on time perception in the past decade. Sylvie Droit-Volet and Warren H. Meck outline the internal-clock mechanism as a kind of pacemaker: the number of pulses stored in the pacemaker’s accumulator determines how one

13 Thrailkill, Affecting Fictions, 44.
17 James describes the specious present as “a sort of saddle-back of time with a certain length of its own, on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time.” Psychology, 280.
experiences temporal duration. In a more recent study, Droit-Volet and Sandrine Gil link perceptual time to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as emotional experiences and social rhythms, respectively, compelling us to recognize that shifts in subjective time do not stem from defective internal clocks, “but rather from the excellent ability of the internal clock to adapt to events in one’s environment.” Indeed, what we see intuitively emerging in realism beginning with Davis is precisely Droit-Volet’s and Gil’s point: there are many different ‘realities’ of temporal experience, and “[o]ur subjective temporal distortions directly reflect the way our brain and body adapt to these multiple time scales.” What recent studies in time perception thus emphasize is the remarkable sensitivity of our internal clocks to changes within and without the body, which positions time as a crucial facet to our subjective experience and social interactions.

The critical function of our internal clocks also arguably relates temporal experience to the formation of habits and habitus. Many thinkers since Descartes have disparaged habit as a function of the ‘lower,’ mechanical body, distinguishing it, as Bourdieu has done, from cultural habitus. In contrast, James, Dewey, and Merleau-Ponty frame habituation as a crucial, dynamic, and empowering way in which we engage with and know the world through the body. Whereas breathing, digesting and the like are involuntary physiological functions, Dewey explains, habits are acquired, involving “skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials.” They are also inevitably social and cultural, formed through an individual’s interaction with his or her social environment. Dewey repeatedly describes habit as an art, yet he also acknowledges a crucial distinction “between routine, unintelligent habit, 18 Sylvie Droit-Volet and Warren H. Meck, “How Emotions Colour Our Perception of Time.” Trends in Cognitive Sciences 11, no. 12 (2007): 505.
20 Ibid.
21 For a more detailed account of theoretical conversations surrounding habit, see Nick Crossley, “Habit and Habitus,” Body and Society 19 (2&3): 136-161. Like Crossley, I use “habit” and “habitus” in similar ways to refer to James’s, Dewey’s, and Merleau-Ponty’s sociological understanding of habit formation and social customs.
and intelligent habit or art. This distinction will be key to understanding Davis’s complex negotiation of distinct socioeconomic habits. As James asserts:

Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow. . . . It keeps different social strata from mixing.

For James, habituation to even the most painful, grueling circumstances is an absolute necessity, for life in such conditions would otherwise be unbearable. James’s characterization of the sociological function of habit as a “conservative agent”—one that potentially “keeps different social strata from mixing”—is particularly interesting in the context of industrial time structures such as night shifts. Thompson notably invokes the sociocultural influence of habit in articulating his central question about time discipline: if industrialization involved “a severe restructuring of working habits,” to what extent does this transform “the inward notation of time?”

He indeed concludes that as a result of industrial time systems enforced by the division and supervision of labor, factory bells, clocks, and the like, “new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was imposed.” I will likewise frame industrial time systems—and their attendant impacts upon workers’ bodily rhythms as well as social and emotional life—as a phenomenon through which socially constructed but naturalized conceptualizations of time create and maintain distinct, class-based habitus. This work helps illuminate certain ways in which collective, habituated relationships to time have developed among the working class in response to emergent industrial systems in the mid-nineteenth century; however, we will see in the novella, as Dewey argues, that “a degree of social mixing is inevitable,” and in such moments “differences in collective habits will come to the fore, often leading to conflict.”

\[
\begin{align*}
23 & \text{ Ibid., 45.} \\
24 & \text{ Psychology, 143.} \\
25 & \text{ Thompson, “Time,” 57.} \\
26 & \text{ Ibid., 90.} \\
27 & \text{ Crossley, 154.}
\end{align*}
\]
time—can lead to a new kind of attention to one’s habits and habitus, potentially signaling one’s inclusion in or disenfranchisement from socioeconomically divided institutions or social spheres.

The sociological importance of habit offers fruitful ways to navigate the bridge from subjective to intersubjective time. Endeavoring to better understand the importance of time to social life, phenomenological psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs distinguishes between what he calls “implicit” and “explicit” temporality: “time as pre-reflectively [or habitually] lived vs. consciously experienced,” respectively.28 Explicit temporality is a consequence of what he calls “desynchronization”—a falling out of sync with social, habitual rhythms—which leads to “a retardation or acceleration of inner time in relation to external or social processes.”29 As Fuchs explains, the explicit experience of time arises when “a disturbance or negation, whether this be shock, surprise, pain, shame or loss . . . breaks through the habitual.”30 Time itself thereby becomes an object of attention, often in disorienting and cumbersome ways. Fuchs posits that because the experience of desynchronization leads to an acute awareness of time itself along with a potentially oppressive sense of one’s embodiment, it is arguably the cause rather than the effect of melancholic depression. This proposed relationship between isolating temporal experiences and melancholic depression highlights the profound importance of intersubjective time and synchronicity to emotional and psychobiological wellbeing, and Fuchs’s work will help shed light on Davis’s critical attention to the precarious possibilities of disrupted temporal habits in her portrayal of Wolfe’s ultimately chronic desynchronization and melancholic decline.

In sum, this cross-disciplinary, cross-historical conversation between studies of time and affect contends that our temporal experience engages body and mind, is habituated as well as adaptive, and is crucial to our healthy participation in the social world. This framework for examining the embodied and affective dynamics of time perception undergirds the larger social consequences of Davis’s aesthetic experimentation, which stresses the influence that class division has upon temporal habits, as well as the concomitant exhilaration and terror that accompany disruptions to those habits. Research into the neurobiological and psychological functions of our internal clocks will help frame reflective shifts in time perception as key moments in Davis’s novella—moments which expose

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 79, original emphasis.
the bodily rhythms, affective orientations, and ideas that institutions such as factory labor attempt to regulate or repress.

**Conflicting Rhythms in the Mills**

In the opening pages of *Life in the Iron Mills*, readers are given an eerie glimpse into a world bereft of circadian rhythms, a “scene of hopeless discomfort” in which workers can only be thankful that their sleep-deprived “waking stupor” “smother[s] pain and hunger.” When Deborah, pale and physically deformed from years of 12-hour days at the spools, journeys to the mills to bring dinner for her cousin Hugh Wolfe, the narrator attempts to illustrate the dire biological and psychological repercussions of factory labor, and of night shifts in particular. Using metonymic language of “hands” and “watches,” the narrator critiques the systemic ways in which workers are dehumanized and subordinated to mechanical, disembodied temporalities:

> The hands of each mill are divided into watches that relieve each other as regularly as the sentinels of an army. By night and day the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of metal boil and surge. Only for a day in the week, in half-courtesy to public censure, the fires are partially veiled; but as soon as the clock strikes midnight, the great furnaces break forth with renewed fury, the clamor begins with fresh, breathless vigor, the engines sob and shriek like ‘gods in pain.’ (19)

Clock-governed factory time—explicitly likened here to the metronomic precision of military discipline—indiscriminately subordinates “unsleeping,” “breathless” machines and the bodies of workers alike to its rhythm. The hellish world painted in this passage is thus strangely rationalized and metered by a system of time that is indifferent to circadian or homoeostatic rhythms. Governed by machines, the workers in the world represented here are reduced to lives of “incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses”—lives therefore punctuated exclusively by the unappeasable pangs of hunger and exhaustion (15). Yet the narrator goes on to distinguish the personified river, which “knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,” from the mill worker whose prospects are merely “[t]o be stowed away, after his grimy work is done, in a hole in the muddy graveyard” (13). From the

31 Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* (NY: The Feminist Press, 1985), 12, all other references are made to this edition and enclosed parenthetically within the text.
start, the narrator thus portrays a world confined to what Max Weber describes as the modern capitalist economy: an “immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live.” ³² In this apparently unalterable world, “Labour must . . . be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling.” ³³ Weber’s account suggests that the spatiotemporal confines of this world—the ceaselessly repetitive rhythms of the watches, the smoke hanging heavily upon the streets and obscuring the horizon, and the like—delimit the affective possibilities of the working-class habitus: there is no hope without an awareness of alternative possibilities or possible change.

The wearying pace of the novella’s opening pages can be read as a visceral representation of workers’ temporal habitus and its affective tones. As we are introduced to the world of the mills, we see smoke “roll[ing] sullenly in slow folds,” a “long train of mules, dragging masses of pig-iron,” a river that “drags itself sluggishly along . . . slavishly bearing its burden day after day”—all of which is likened to “the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills” (12). The environment painted in these first few pages—like the narrative itself—is weighed down by the sense of temporal protraction that Fuchs connects to acute attention to time itself and a consequently oppressive sense of one’s embodiment. The struggling syntax, superfluous commas, and repetition throughout the opening pages seem to work to encumber and frustrate the reader’s progress. Through this embodied pacing, Davis aestheticizes the disjuncture between reified clock time and the vicissitudes of experiential time and embodiment, characterized here by the mill workers’ painful awareness of time’s heavy, sluggish passing.

In a reading of the film Double Indemnity in Ugly Feelings, Ngai discusses a tactic she describes as “narrative expansion or stretch,” which is achieved when “‘discourse time’ becomes considerably longer than ‘story time.’” She characterizes this as an “anticathartic device” that exacerbates the sense of impotency or thwarted agency responsible for the kinds of ugly feelings (i.e. irritation or anxiety) that she treats in her book.³⁴ Davis seems to be producing such anticathartic effects through her narrative pacing, a tactic for which she offers no apology. Just as readers might feel inclined to carp about the dragging rhythm of the opening few pages, the narrator warns that the upcoming narrative will offer no

³³ Ibid., 62.
reprieve: “You may think it a tiresome story enough,” she derides, “as foggy as the day, sharpened by no sudden flashes of pain or pleasure.—I know: only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost” (13). Through the narrator’s disclaimer, Davis is quite barefaced in explaining that her goal is not to entertain or amuse her readers but to expose them to a particular socioeconomic reality and habitus with its own attendant temporal and affective limitations and possibilities. “Stop a moment,” the narrator then demands, explaining, “I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed of your clean clothes, and come right down here with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you” (13-14). If readers have been feeling impatient with the slow pacing of the first two pages, the narrator’s command that they “[s]top” and “hide [their] disgust” suggests that discomfort and frustration are a necessary part of Davis’s realist aesthetic, and of the cultural work she aims to do. As Richard A. Hood argues, the way in which the narrative frame is “coterminous with the reader’s world” but spatially removed from it “tends to emphasize the enormous epistemological distance between the reader and Hugh.” 35 It is the sense of conflicting realities achieved through this framing—the reader’s sudden awareness that he or she inhabits time differently, albeit simultaneously in history, than others—that helps highlight the “epistemological distance” between the 1860s middle-class reader’s habitus and Wolfe’s. As this narrative makes increasingly clear, social divides create disparate temporal realities that lie immeasurably outside of clock time.

The import of these socioeconomic divisions is aestheticized and rendered most viscerally in the form of Wolfe’s korl woman. In his “off-hours from the furnace,” we are told, Wolfe “had a habit” of sculpting figures from korl, the industrial waste from the processing of pig metal. The narrator goes on to describe this habit as “a curious fancy in the man, almost a passion,” which occupied “[t]he few hours for rest” he had each day “until his watch came again”—the temporal refuse analogous to the material refuse he used for his craft (24). This passage expresses the exacerbated distinction between labor and leisure time that Thompson argues arises with the emergence of industrial time discipline. More importantly, however, it distinguishes artful habit from mechanical habit in

The Art of Habit: Temporal Conflict in Davis’s *Iron Mills*

a way that is notably similar to Dewey’s aforementioned conceptualization. What Dewey disparages as oppressively mechanical routinization seems to characterize the labor demanded of the working class by the tireless machinery of the industrial factory system. Dewey warns of circumstances in which those in power encourage the kinds of routinization that become unintelligent and mechanical, for this “enables them to do the thinking and planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution.” As we have seen, this is made possible in large part by the increasingly oppressive function of time discipline in industrial labor, which subordinates workers’ bodies to the mechanical rhythms and vile conditions that essentially necessitate what was described earlier as these workers’ “waking stupor.” However, Wolfe’s “habit” of sculpting korl figures constitutes something more mindful; it offers him the means to communicate a “groping . . . mad desire, a great blind intellect stumbling through wrong” (25). The identification of a “blind intellect” intimates Wolfe’s keen sense of injustice despite his unawareness of any clear alternative way of life. Habit here is thus “both motor and perceptual,” to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s language, residing somewhere “between explicit perception and actual movement, in the basic function which sets boundaries to our field of vision and our field of action.” Wolfe’s “off-hours” offer a temporal modality in which he has managed to cultivate a habitual mode through which to attend to and aestheticize the injustice of class oppression—an illuminating, albeit dangerous, form of resistance to the benumbed hopelessness and obedience made possible by the “tyranny of the clock.”

The chasm between socioeconomic worlds is soon rendered more palpable by the korl woman’s befuddled reception by the middle-class visitors of the mill, who—like Davis’s readers themselves—are intruding upon an alien spatiotemporal world. The korl woman is, in Doctor May’s estimation, “the very type of her class”: a female form, “muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing” expressed through “the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (32). The korl woman’s unglamorous embodiment of psychobiological breakdown and abjection—qualities of the life to which workers have been habituated—illustrates the extreme risks posed for those subordinated to alienating temporal habitats such as night shifts, which as we have seen disrupt workers’ circadian and

---

social rhythms. Upon first seeing the korl woman, “Mitchell started back,” we are told, “half-frightened” by his encounter with the face of a figure in the dark, for the figure “touched him strangely,” which is to suggest he finds the figure and her expression inarticulate or undefinable (32). Doctor May, on the other hand, attempts to rationalize and scientize the sheer viscerality of this figure—“Where did the fellow learn that sweep of the muscles in the arm and hand?” he asks in hyperbolized, clinical fashion—but ultimately, he “cannot catch the meaning” (32). Wolfe’s explanation, “She be hungry,” does not satisfy May because he can only understand hunger as a pure biological drive, rather than a collective and affectively charged experience of explicit time and the concomitantly oppressive sense of embodiment linked to the alienating desynchronization of those toiling in the mills. Whereas we discussed earlier James’s characterization of habit as a stabilizing sociological force that makes it possible for people to endure grueling lives of dreadful labor, thus preserving social hierarchies, Wolfe’s discourse with these middle-class men brings about the kind of conflict Dewey identified in inevitable confrontations between clashing habitus.

The Potentiality of Desynchronization

In the events that follow, Davis illuminates the precarious possibilities of what Fuchs framed earlier as a disturbance that ruptures the habitual, making lived time explicit. In the midst of Wolfe’s awkward encounter with the middle class, he ultimately learns that, in the simplest terms, money is what distinguishes him from a man like Mitchell; money constitutes the means to another set of possibilities and spatiotemporal realities (37-8). The narrator deems what follows “the crisis of [Wolfe’s] life” before pleading for readers’ empathy (26). Indeed, Lauren Berlant describes crisis as a “heightening interpretive genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life.”

Do you remember rare moments when a sudden light flashed over yourself, your world, God? when you stood on a mountain-peak, seeing your life as it might have been, as it is? one quick instant, when custom lost its force and every-day usage? when your friend, wife, brother, stood in a new light? . . . So it came before him, his life, that night. The slow tides of pain.

---

The Art of Habit: Temporal Conflict in Davis’s Iron Mills

This passage describes an illuminating departure from an everyday inhabitation of time. Wolfe’s habitual desynchronization—his oppressive attunement to the repetitive, grueling temporality of his life and the unrelenting pain of his body—constitutes the “ongoing condition,” in Berlant’s terms, that comes to a head and is affectively “intensified” by this crisis. The shock of Wolfe’s insight unfolds in the span of a “quick instant,” amid which he comes to recognize custom as just one of many possibilities: “reality,” in this passage, is glimpsed by suddenly recognizing the reified customs that delimit one’s sense of the possible. This is moreover an experience that intensifies Wolfe’s acute attention to his own oppressive embodiment, compelling him to rip the clothes straight from his body: he thus sheds his ‘habit’ in a literal sense here—recognizing perhaps the narrator’s earlier assertion that he “was by habit only a coarse, vulgar laborer”—and is momentarily freed to reexamine his life, and, indeed, the habitual rhythms and affective orientations of his class, from multiple perceptual vantage points.

In such moments, Davis signals the potentiality of particular temporal experiences of disrupted habit to illuminate forms of resistance and sensations of alternative possibilities to naturalized industrial labor systems and forms of class oppression. Note, for instance, the way narrative time protracts as Wolfe wrestles with the money Deb has stolen for him, sifting through several available perspectives:

He did not deceive himself. Theft! That was it. At first the word sickened him; then he grappled with it. Sitting there on a broken cart-wheel, the fading day, the noisy groups, the church-bells’ tolling passed before him like a panorama, while the sharp struggle went on within. The money! He took it out and looked at it. If he gave it back, what then? . . . Then he saw himself as he might be, strong, helpful, kindly. The night crept on, as this one image slowly evolved itself from the crowd of other thoughts and stood triumphant. He looked at it. As he might be! (45)

Again, the rare and sudden process whereby custom loses its “force and every-day usage” is precisely what we see amid Wolfe’s struggle. A carefully positioned semicolon links Wolfe’s initial shock to his reflective
“grappling” process, intimating what James characterized earlier as the transition or threshold between sensation and perception, or what Ngai described as the moments when emotions “denature into affects.” “Denature” is an apt verb in this case, as we see the naturalized logic of the law dismantled into various, conflicting rationalizing discourses. While the mere word—theft—initially compels Wolfe’s socialized disgust, he gradually comes to perceive theft from different vantage points with distinct logics: he considers, for instance, that “God made this money”—that God “never made the difference between poor and rich,” thus coming to consider the social and legal censure of theft as just one reality (47). “What wonder,” the narrator insists, “if it blinded him to delirium,—the madness that underlies all revolution, all progress, and all fall?” (46). This experience culminates in a shift in Wolfe’s affective orientation from one dominated by a perpetually thwarted, bedimmed hope to one charged with a more open-ended sense of prospect, intuited through what the narrator continually articulates as his “artist-eye”: “If he took the money?” Wolfe repeatedly asks himself, as he envisions himself “as he might be” (46; my emphasis). Wolfe’s experience notably unfolds in a seemingly distended modality of perceptual, embodied time—a night that “crept on” as his vision of life as he might be “slowly evolved itself from the crowd of other thoughts and stood triumphant” (46). In the midst of this protracted crisis, a new conditionality is born in which “reality” becomes more unstable and more dynamic, charged with vague but nevertheless thrilling affective possibilities. The habitual social rhythms around Wolfe—the sun’s passage, the din of passers-by, the clock-time signified by the clangor of church-bells—take on a certain unreality; passing “like a panorama,” these ordinary activities recede into a kind of two-dimensional, static background, Wolfe’s attention directed instead toward “the sharp struggle . . . within.” In this time of crisis, Wolfe’s internal clock time seems to slow with his unfolding self-awareness in the midst of the disparate temporal modalities around him. While “[p]eople going by to church saw only a sickly mill-boy watching them quietly at the alley’s mouth,” Davis has engendered a narrative form which illuminates the possibilities sensed through Wolfe’s disjunction from the habitual temporalities of the social world (45). Davis’s narrator is sure to explain, “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” (46). Through such narrative framing, Davis finds a way to destabilize reified social constructs and gesture toward alternative possibilities while nevertheless acknowledging social “custom” as one of many formidable social realities that must be negotiated.
The Danger of Desynchronization

While disruptions to habit can be revelatory, the novella does not underestimate the terror and disorientation of such crises, and of what Fuchs has described as intense desynchronization from social rhythms. Having glimpsed the possibility of life as a man “free to work, to live, to love,” Wolfe can no longer see his current life—nor, indeed, his own body—without a newborn disgust (47). Upon realizing that it was his watch at the mill, he “shake[s] off the thought with unspeakable loathing,” turning his attention instead toward his potential future with “a new eagerness . . . a new disgust, a new sense of sudden triumph, and, under all, a new, vague dread, unknown before, smothered down, kept under, but still there” (48). What we sense from this vertiginous catalogue of seemingly contradictory affects is that Wolfe’s disjunction from the rhythms and feelings to which he has become habituated is a precarious experience: while it opens him up to other realities—momentarily enabling him to imagine a life “as he might be”—it simultaneously drives him further toward the psychobiological decay and abjection we see so viscerally embodied by the korl woman. Rita Felski has noted that while overdependence upon habit can lead to a “complacent acceptance of the way things are,” thus maintaining “conservative ends,” she also follows in James’s and Dewey’s tracks by pointing to the underappreciated importance of habit to everyday life. “To be suddenly deprived of the rhythm of one’s personal routines,” she argues, “can be a source of profound disorientation and distress.” This helps explain the dizzying shifts in Wolfe’s continuum of experience throughout the course of the night. He has seen beyond what Weber described earlier as the “immense cosmos” of the laboring class, but has no habitual recourse or means through which to realize his potential existence beyond that cosmos. He has thus reached a state of desynchronization from habitual time in which prior “orientations, roles and attachments have become anachronistic,” in Fuchs’s terms, but the crucial steps forward are “dammed back.” As Fuchs moreover posits, “new homoeostasis is not to be attained without a break or ‘time-out’, a phase of disorientation and dying of the past.”

After exploring the vague possibilities sensed by inhabiting such distended moments of desynchronization and disrupted habit, the narrator

[41] Ibid.
abruptly reveals the collapse of all possibility as the dawn ushers in a new, more perilous form of desynchronization. We learn that Wolfe has been tried and sentenced to 19 years in prison. “You wish me to make a tragic story out of it?” the narrator taunts; “Why, in the police-reports of the morning paper you can find a dozen such tragedies,” thus ironically trivializing her previously drawn out tragedy by re-contextualizing it within an archive of other identical stories found in the daily newspaper (50). Middle class readers are therefore confronted with their own potentially detached perspectives on the lives of the other half, embodied most unsettlingly by Doctor May’s callous account of Wolfe’s sentence. While leisurely perusing the paper, he remarks to his wife, “Here he is; just listen:—‘Circuit Court, Judge Day. Hugh Wolfe, operative in Kirby & John’s London Mills. Charge, grand larceny. Sentence, nineteen years hard labor in penitentiary’” (50). After a quick, conclusive appraisal from Dr. May—“Scoundrel! Serves him right!”—we are told, “His wife said something about the ingratitude of that kind of people, and then they began to talk of something else” (50). The truncated, rushed, bullet-like emulation of such reports in the morning paper—juxtaposed with the previous account of Wolfe’s crisis—rings conspicuously shallow, crude, disembodied, and dehumanized. Perhaps nowhere do we feel a more palpable rift between temporal habitus than we do here between the flitting, flippant world of “the news” and Wolfe’s impending 19 years of “hard labor,” which can be hardly more oppressive and monotonous than all his “countless cankering days” and “countless nights” at the mill (25).

As the novella nears its close, the narrator paints Wolfe’s continued, exacerbated disjunction from his habituation to social time as a clarifying but ultimately perilous state. Wolfe gazes out his cell window and sees the market in preternaturally keen detail—noting his immediate sensations of the “golden melons,” the light that “flickered on the pheasant’s breast” and “the purplish blood dripping over the brown feathers”—at which point there comes “the sudden picture of what might have been, and now” (55). Wolfe’s earlier vision of life “[a]s he might be” has undergone a noteworthy syntactical change: having become “what might have been,” the conditionality of future-oriented hope is transformed into past conditionality—into regret. The ultimate result of this chronic sense of desynchronization, as Fuchs has posited, is melancholia, as “explicit time establishes a merciless rule; its passing by is noticed painfully, and the future of lived time seems closed forever. At the same time, the body falls out of the implicit mode and is ‘corporealised’ . . . turned into a heavy,
material object that puts up resistance to all remaining impulses.” As he
moreover argues, the lost past for the depressive “can be expressed in a
continuing perfect tense instead of the preterite”: as we clearly see for
Wolfe, “the future subjunctive withdraws into the past and becomes past
subjunctive, an empty possibility.” Yet as Dana Seitler observes, “[t]he
affective and grammatical mood of Hugh’s desire,” in both tenses, “is
subjunctive,” which she reads as “the mood used to express various states
of unreality,” or intimations of the possible. In his state of distended
perceptual time and its “affective and grammatical mood” of possibility,
Wolfe is able to observe a dog in the street and question, “Why, the very
vilest cur, yelping there in the gutter, had not lived his life”—a life of
relentless drudgery and pain—but rather “had been free to act out
whatever thought God had put into his brain” (55). Again, Davis suggests
that slipping out of synchronicity with social rhythms can reorient one to
social constructs (such as factory shifts) that would perhaps otherwise
remain implicit and unquestioned. However, Wolfe’s attunement to such
nascent but yet unrealizable alternative possibilities ultimately leads him to
conclude, “It was all wrong; but let it be!” (56). It is only at this moment,
“[w]hen Wolfe trades in the subjunctive mode for the simple present
tense,” Seitler asserts, that he “ceases to live because living in the text is
equated with one’s ability to inhabit the possible.” Unable to conceive of
any possible recourse through which to act upon his sense of injustice,
Wolfe “bare[s] his arms” and takes his life (59).

Wolfe’s suicide ushers in perhaps the most generically perplexing
aspect of the novella, as the narrative’s reformist ambitions are suddenly
confronted with a kind of literary dead-end. Rather than indulge us in
Wolfe’s last words, the narrator reveals only that the dying man looked
into the moonlight “as one that said, ‘How long, O Lord? how long?’” (60,
emphasis mine). This narratorial ambiguity perhaps serves to reposition
this rhetorical question as one posed by the novella itself, transcending the
specificities of Wolfe’s life to the realm of systemic social reform. Davis’s
subsequent, unexpected recourse to sentimental, Christian hope in the final
pages has baffled literary critics over the years; however Emily Dolan has
suggested that it is precisely through Davis’s intentionally “troubled
conclusions” that she enables “the narrative tensions to remain unresolved,”

42 Fuchs, “Implicit and Explicit Temporality,” Philosophy, Psychiatry, &
Psychology 12, no. 3 (2005): 196.
44 Dana Seitler, “Strange Beauty: The Politics of Ungenre in Rebecca Harding
thereby problematizing “sentimental conclusions and ushering in literary realism.”46 In a similar vein, Seitler deems Life in the Iron Mills an “aspirational narrative,” a narrative that is “dissatisfied with available conventions of expression and representation.”47 Davis’s generically liminal narrative thus metaphorically embodies Fuchs’s sense of explicit time at the level of literary form: occupying an aesthetic “period of awaiting or aspiration,” the novella is determined to reach like the groping korl woman toward literary and sociocultural possibilities that have yet to take clear shape.48

By examining Davis’s attention to and expressions of temporal perception, we therefore begin to see how modalities of embodied time and affective experience destabilize the notion of a historically or culturally shared present tense. Davis’s insistent efforts to attune the reader to the divisive functions of time across socioeconomic habitus throughout this narrative reveal a nascent literary mode that produces and makes palpable what Hood described above as the “epistemological distance” sensed amid confrontations between disparate realities. Social divides create distinct forms of habituation to time that cannot be unified by the calendar, clock, factory bell, or morning newspaper, a representational as well as a political problem which arguably becomes key to later realist aesthetics in the 1880s and 90s. By tracing the relationship between Wolfe’s unfolding awareness of his disrupted temporal habit and his inhabitation of the subjective realm of possibility, Davis moreover establishes temporal disjuncture as an opportunity to see social constructs as constructs, and to thereby imagine alternatives to even the most naturalized and reified of institutions. Wolfe’s melancholic alienation from his working-class habitus enables new forms of perception, productively destabilizing reified, oppressive social systems. Indeed, as Flatley argues, “The melancholic state of mind, then, even as it dwells on ruins and loss, is at the same time liberated to imagine how the world might be transformed, how things might be entirely different from the way they are.”49 However, Fuchs has also helped us understand that such alienation from social time is a tremendously precarious experience. Wolfe’s intermittent inklings of the possible (or the not yet) therefore come at a cost: in the depths of such chronic, melancholic depression, Fuchs explains, one “drops out of shared time,” inhabiting “an ‘anachronistic’,

49 Flatley, Affective Mapping, 37.
slow-moving time of his own.” Indeed, this is precisely what we sense as Wolfe bleeds to death in his prison cell, his gaze fixed upon the moon as it works its way, “inch by inch, slowly,” across the sky.

Bibliography


