FEW critics today would claim that what is commonly called American realism merely puts on display the realities of American social life. A generation of scholars has illustrated that understanding realism in all of its complexity as “a cultural practice within capitalism” requires an interrogation into how particular works theorize the task of representation itself.¹ As Amy Kaplan writes, “Realism cannot be understood only in relation to the world it represents; it is also a debate, within the novel form, with competing modes of representation.”² But if we understand literary realism as a self-conscious representational practice (or rather, a range of practices) that speaks to the competing representational forms available in the popular marketplace, how do we reconcile this account of realist fiction with my project’s view of romance as a similarly dialogic narrative form? After all, though different in important ways, a work such as *The House of the Seven Gables* shares with both William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (among countless other realist novels) a suspicion regarding the modern technologies and journalistic practices that were transforming the nineteenth-century public realm into a spectacle manufactured for mass consumption. In these brief concluding paragraphs, I want to argue that the prevailing critical distinction between mid-nineteenth-century “romantic” fiction and late nineteenth-century “realist” fiction begins to fall apart when we approach the romance as a representational practice emergent out of the same economic, technological, and social conditions that shaped the rise of the institution of literary realism. Indeed, when we approach the romance as a way of witnessing modernization, the emergence of realism looks very much like the triumph of the romantic conception of reality.
In April of 1861, only months after the appearance of Hawthorne’s last novel, the *Atlantic Monthly* published Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills,” a text often described as the first major work of American realism. Though Davis’s story was published only a few years after the heyday of American romanticism, it is typically understood as belonging to an entirely different era. Appearing only days before the start of the Civil War, “Iron Mills” provides an easy turning point for the long-standing narrative of nineteenth-century literary history in which “romance” is displaced by the postbellum “realism” of Twain, Howells, Chesnutt, Crane, and others. And yet, like Hawthorne and Melville, Davis foregrounds, even flaunts the distance between the journalistic stories that circulate in the popular marketplace and the kind of reality that can less easily be contained by storytelling. In fact, what is most striking about “Life in the Iron Mills,” more striking even than the harshness of its titular setting, is the narrator’s repeated insistence on the impossibility of her narrative task. The story begins with the difficulty of seeing, with the cloudiness both of the day itself and of the linguistic distance that lies between narrator and reader: “A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me. I open the window, and, looking out, can scarcely see through the rain the grocer’s shop opposite, where a crowd of drunken Irishmen are puffing Lynchburg tobacco in their pipes” (11). Confronting us immediately with a present-tense description of the world outside her room, Davis’s narrator foregrounds the gap between narrator and subject, between reader and text, and between the social classes that define the audience and subject.

As she introduces her story to the reader, she further relies upon the cloudiness of the day to prevent her audience from composing too hastily in their minds a picture of what they expect to see: “Can you see how foggy the day is? As I stand here, idly tapping the window-pane, and looking out through the rain at the dirty back-yard and the coal-boats below, fragments of an old story float up before me,—a story of this old house into which I happened to come to-day. You may think it a tiresome story enough, 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). By placing her narrator on the same side of the window as the reader, Davis begins her story with two levels of narrative representation: the narrator sitting in an old house, which the reader is assumed to see vividly, and the reality that lies outside her window, which the narrator tells us is “as foggy
as the day,” and which is kept at a distance by our presumed preference for
the “sudden flashes of pain or pleasure” of a more entertaining mode of
storytelling. In the act of depicting her narrator “idly tapping on the win-
dow-pane,” Davis draws our attention to the fictional lens through which
we see reality. Telling us, “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), Davis’s narrator simultaneously announces her desire to unveil
a long-buried social reality and confesses that the story we are about to
read is authentic precisely because it acknowledges the real as a category
produced by the act of representation.

Like Hawthorne and Melville, Davis defines her text’s own type of
authenticity against competing accounts available in the mass market-
place, including both sentimental fiction and journalism. Among the
visitors who enter the mills with Kirby (one of the mill owners) and
Doctor May is “a sharp peering little Yankee . . . a reporter for one of the
city-papers, getting up a series of reviews of the leading manufactories”
(27–28). By introducing the reporter briefly into the mills, Davis dra-
matizes the newspaper writer’s exposure to the political machinations that
keep Kirby’s mill running smoothly: in the brief time the reporter appears,
he is solely concerned with economic facts (“‘Pig-metal,’—mumbled the
reporter,—‘um!—coal facilities,—um!—hands employed, twelve hun-
dred,—bitumen,—um! all right, I believe, Mr. Clarke;—sinking-fund,—
what did you say your sinking-fund was?’” [28]), as the other men discuss
how Kirby “brought seven hundred votes to the polls for his candidate last
November” (28). Davis’s critique of the newspaper’s complicity in the
company’s manipulations is perhaps obvious, but more significant is the
way in which she carefully defines her own transparent agenda by oppos-
ing it to the submerged political and economic objectives of newspaper
reporting.

As she asserts her own privileged understanding of reality, Davis also
invites her audience to reject the reading practices of the mass consumer.
The reporter’s departure from the mills is followed closely by a fascinat-
ing scene in which, with Hugh Wolfe working nearby, Kirby “drew out
a newspaper from his pocket and read aloud some article, which they
discussed eagerly” (30). Coming on the heels of the reporter’s superficial
engagement with the workings of the mill, the newspaper here emerges as
an important rhetorical device. As a political tool set up in opposition to
journalism, Davis’s narrative overturns the idea of newspaper writing as
a vehicle for portraying working-class life. To the visitors discussing the
newspaper article, Wolfe “listened more and more like a dumb, hopeless
animal, with a duller, more stolid look creeping over his face, glancing
now and then at Mitchell, marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul” (30). By subtly linking the newspaper with this “mirror” that embodies all that Wolfe is not, Davis places journalism entirely outside the realm of the lower-class laborer and reveals its inability or unwillingness to acknowledge its own complicity in the plight of this class.

In a move that further distances newspaper reading from the reality of Wolfe’s plight, we learn of his arrest, conviction, and sentencing in the strictly factual language of journalism. Before giving us these facts, though, Davis taunts her reader: “What followed was mere drifting circumstance,—a quicker walking over the path,—that was all. Do you want to hear the end of it? You wish me to make a tragic story out of it? Why, in the police-reports of the morning paper you can find a dozen such tragedies: hints of shipwrecks unlike any that ever befell on the high seas; hints that here a power was lost to heaven,—that there a soul went down where no tide can ebb or flow. Commonplace enough the hints are,—jocose sometimes, done up in rhyme” (50). In other words, she connects the narrative closure her audience presumably demands with the market-oriented writing of popular journalism. Though she does indeed “make a tragic story out of it,” her constant acknowledgment of the artifice of storytelling shapes a narrative idiom—we might call it a realist idiom—that continually highlights the distance between the stories that circulate in the marketplace and the reality that exists beyond its reach.

Our narrator takes us from the above passage immediately to a conversation between Doctor May and his wife at the breakfast table: while the realist author is defined in “Iron Mills” by her mastery over the fictions of mass culture, the implied realist reader is defined against the popular appetite for sentimentalism and narrative closure. May reads aloud a brief newspaper account of Wolfe’s arrest and sentencing, a story that wrongly depicts Wolfe as responsible for stealing the money. The doctor moves quickly from defining Wolfe by the details of the article (“Here he is; just listen,” he tells his wife) to moralizing upon the crime about which he knows nothing (“Scoundrel! Serves him right!”) (50). Seated inside their own home, the Mays inhabit a fictive, middle-class space outside the mills, a position importantly analogous to the fictive library in which Davis’s narrator sits writing her story. But if all these figures are conspicuously removed from the reality that sits on the other side of the window, only in the narrator’s library is reality understood as the ever-shifting commodity of mass information culture.

Davis’s story epitomizes realist fiction’s desire to “juggle competing visions of social reality . . . [and] encompass conflicting forms and narra-
tives which shape that reality.” But such a project should not only be read as a forward-looking introduction to late nineteenth-century fiction, for her preoccupation with the implications of a popular appetite for storytelling in the earliest days of modern journalism—Davis in fact sets her story in the first years of the penny press era—also brings us back to Hawthorne’s early literary experiments, by which the young romantic author invoked the commercial nature of journalism to articulate a more foundational understanding of reality. If the literary interrogation of the relationship between language and the category of the real was, for Hawthorne, also a way of defining himself in the literary marketplace, the depiction of reality in “Iron Mills” similarly defines the literary as that which exists at arm’s length from the commercialism of popular journalism and sentimental fiction. And it is for this reason that “Iron Mills” serves as such a valuable bridge between my discussion of romantic fiction and the problem of reality in late nineteenth-century realism—not simply because Davis’s story problematizes the task of representing reality but because this narrative agenda is so clearly aligned with the question of identity inside and outside of the text. If the rhetorical space of the library in which our narrator sits in “Iron Mills” acknowledges that we must first go through the realm of (a certain kind of) fiction to get to the “secret” reality of life in the mills, it is no doubt significant that this architecture looks a great deal like the room the story’s nineteenth-century reader might be sitting in, perusing the latest issue of the Atlantic Monthly and looking out with Davis over the murky reality outside. To put this another way, the text’s portrayal of a mass-produced, mass-consumed reality is the very means by which Davis communicates a particular kind of identity (for herself, her fiction, and the magazine in which “Iron Mills” appeared) against journalism and popular fiction—against, that is, mass culture.

Of course, it is not only in works of realism that we encounter arguments about the nature of reality, and so it was not only in late nineteenth-century America that such a project afforded authors an imagined autonomy from the masses. Unlike the realist writer, Hawthorne and Melville often rejected the goal of depicting the world as it is. But this rejection was a way of speaking to mass culture—a way of recasting reality as that which cannot be genuinely represented, and a way of locating those who consume mere copies in a rhetorical world of lies. By the time Davis published “Life in the Iron Mills” in the Atlantic Monthly, of course, American periodical culture had begun carving out the kinds of cultural hierarchies that were not fully available to Hawthorne (and the editors of the New-England Magazine) in the earliest days of the penny press revolution. Each of these writers, I have argued, participated in antebellum
debates about the problem of reality in a mass-mediated age while simultaneously asserting a romantic distance from the concerns and priorities of contemporary civic life. This mode of romantic self-invention would lose its cachet precisely because late nineteenth-century literary culture professionalized the role of the arbiter of reality, and thus what was a marker of autonomy became a preoccupation of authorship and readership on a mass scale. That is, the romancer’s view of reality would become, over the final decades of the nineteenth century, a defining assumption of the age of realism.