

UNIT 1

WASHINGTON IRVING (1783-1859)

RIP VAN WINKLE & THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW

I. WASHINGTON IRVING (1783-1859): BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES AND LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

At this time, America was ready for a man of letters. This man of letters for whom the theater, the magazine, the novel, the more civilized society, and the new nationalism called so imperiously, was not to be, like Edwards or Emerson, timeless, but temporal, an inevitable creation and adroit(diestro) user of those cultural mechanisms and moods, it could not, in this adolescence of America's intellectual life, be otherwise.

Before he published *The Sketch Book*, at the age of thirty-six, Washington Irving had been a lawyer, a businessman, and a soldier. Although at heart a dreamer and a deliberate(premeditado) artist, he was fascinated by these new playthings(juguetes) of culture, and became a urbane participant in the clubs, coteries(tertulias), and literary and theatrical circles which formed a graceful backdrop(telón de fondo) to his own preeminence. His creative life prospered not in the study, but in the drawing room(salón), the theater, or the publishing houses.

Washington Irving was the first American classic. Even in his own time his sketches found their way into the schools and into the libraries besides the English masters, and he early demonstrated his mastery of the form and temper of the nineteenth century essay. Yet, contrary to the myth, he never imitated these essayists, even Scott, his own style is authentic, born of a temperament,

taste, and subtlety of mind which were peculiarly his own. His good sense and amiability undoubtedly enhanced his prestige, as Cooper's truculence (falta de tacto) diminished his, if he is now unread, this may be partly the reason. If we dismiss the romantic story of his life, that of the son of middle-class Scottish parents to eminence as a famous American, or if we set aside his brilliant workmanship (maestría) in prose, there still remains his extraordinary intuition concerning America's heritage of world legend, his fulfillment of his early determination to enrich his country with the color of romance and tradition.

By his twenty-sixth year he had composed light verse, essays and biographies, a little volume of dramatic criticism, a symposium of satiric pieces, and that energetic burlesque (\approx parodia), Diedrich Knickerbocker's *A History of New York* (1809), the first remarkable piece of comic literature. In these years Irving knew the blessings of a light heart which defied (opuso) his strain (temperamento) of latent melancholy. In these years occurred the great sorrow of his life, the tragic death of his fiancée, Matilda Hoffman; a period of doubt and uneasiness ensued, accentuated by the uncertainties of his future. During the War of 1812 he served as a staff (del Estado Mayor) colonel, and in 1815 he again sailed for Europe: he did not know that he was to remain abroad for seventeen years, or that he would return as 'Geoffrey Crayon', the famous author of *The Sketch Book* (1819-1820).

The depths of Irving's melancholy were not meant for repetition. As the climax of ten years of uncertainty and bereavement (privación), his sadness had nearly spent itself in "Westminster Abbey" and "Rip Van Winkle". In a sense he had spoken; never again was he to recapture the spiritual tension of these essays, even in the moonlight scenes in "St. Mark's Eve", in *Bracebridge Hall*, or in the reveries (ensueños) of *The Alhambra*.

Meanwhile Irving was exploring the vein which was to link his books with the more macabre studies by Poe and Hawthorne. Long before 1817, when he sat in Scott's library and watched the novelist take down from his shelves his copies of Fouqué, Grimm, Bürger, Tieck and Hoffman, he had shared the popular passion for what Scott called "the supernatural in fictitious composition". His approach to the tale of horror, despite his laborious study of the German masters, was characteristically light; he was fond of pointing his eerie(misteriosas) stories with a question or a whimsical(caprichosa) smile. (four sections of *Tales of a Traveler*, 1824)

After *Bracebridge Hall* (1822) and *Tales of a Traveler* (1824), and a winter in Dresden, he collaborated unsuccessfully in play writing in Paris with John Howard Payne. In 1826 he was on his way to Madrid to translate Navarrete's *History of Columbus*. The following three years saw him a scholar in the ancient libraries of Madrid, a dweller with Andalusian peasants in the courts of the Alhambra, and a friend of the German antiquarian Böhl de Faber, and of his daughter Fernán Caballero, the Spanish novelist of manners(costumbrista). The results of his experience in Spain were *The Life and Voyages of Columbus* (1828), *The Conquest of Granada* (1829), *The Companions of Columbus* (1831), and *The Alhambra* (1832).

Within his sally(≈ aventura) to the frontier literature, Irving wrote *A Tour on the Prairie* (1835), a drawing room(salón) version of, to Irving justice, a rough experience, in which he forded(vadear) streams on horseback and dined uncomplainingly(con resignación) on skunk(mofeta). Yet in the waving trees of the forest he saw the Gothic arches of the Europe for which he was still homesick, and as he rode with Ellsworth through the blackjack, he reminisced on his creation of *The Sketch Book*.

Like many of his contemporaries, he regarded the creation of literature as merely a gentleman's avocation. Living on at the 'Sunnyside'(barrio de Nueva York), except when he was the popular Minister at the court of Isabella II (1842-1846), he became an arbiter of American letters, a benevolent despot of American writers, a symbol of American thin literary culture. Uncomprehending, he beheld the rise of the great New Englanders and uttered pontifical platitudes on Poe's tales and *The Scarlet Letter*. His work was long since done; the age in which men read eagerly of the romantic wanderer in Europe already belonged to the past. Yet in the pathos of his decline we must not forget the adoration of Poe and Hawthorne; through Washington Irving, writing as art had been born in America.

Even if he translated into his essays and letters, all the historic events occurring within his long life, Irving lacked a sustained (prolongada) wisdom concerning movements of thought behind these historical events. From the unrest (agitación) in England and the democratic upsurge in America he acquired only a sentimental Toryism. On the meaning of democracy, of sectionalism, of the frontier he offers only pretty paragraphs communicating his personal distaste. He was simply a lover of old ways, of the romantic past. Likewise, on more spiritual problems Irving was properly silent. His personal religious history includes his childhood with Deacon Irving, a Scotch Covenanter (puritano), his rapid progress toward skepticism and indifference, and finally, in the latter years at Tarrytown, his identification with the Episcopal Church, the story reflects his natural remoteness from religious introspection. His notions of current trends of thoughts had their origin not in an analytical mind such as Melville's, nor even in a passionate partisanship (partidismo) such as in Cooper's, but in an indolent (perezoso) temperament and an incurably conservative taste.

In retrospect, Washington Irving's golden career as a man of letters seems the result of a happy convergence of circumstances: the rapidly growing social and literary life of Manhattan; European fashions of writing; his own alert, plastic mind.

More and more in retrospect, Irving emerges as both the beneficiary and the victim of the adolescent American culture of the first three decades of the nineteenth century. In this period he formed standards of literary taste from which, for good and ill, he never afterward deviated. To the pre-Victorian drama, to the periodicals, to contemporary idols (Byron, Scott), to literary clubs, to growing libraries and still unexhausted private collections of manuscripts, and to lax copyright laws he was heavily in debt. Although he was occasionally capable, as in the libraries of Spain, of almost monastic devotion to learning, yet constructive thought, such as that of the Concord group, was alien to him. His satire, his short stories, his personal essays, were the easy products of his travel, his life in society, his endless casual jottings in his notebooks. Tirelessly he collected these literary morceaux (temas); skillfully he amplified them into story or essay; and tactfully he introduced them into the most appropriate cultural medium -the periodical, the annual, or the timely book. He was a superlative literary adventurer. Yet from such habits of mind, evident to readers of his self-revealing correspondence with Murray (publisher) concerning the Columbus, developed a second Irving, the man of affairs, the successful American, the substantial citizen of New York (mentioned as candidate for the mayoralty), the grandee of Sunnyside, the Minister to Spain. From the days of Aaron Burr, Irving had hated the sweaty nightcaps of the mob; his Tory soul shrank (se arrugó) before Jacksonian democracy. These two careers were intimately joined. The America of the forties loved to canonize its literary men, such as a Bryant or an Irving -and so

destroy them as poets or essayists. Literary fame might mean public eminence and, turn about, public distinction might enhance literary reputation.

Yet another Irving -there were really three- commanded the homage of younger American writers who resisted more effectually than he the corrupting influences in America's callow(*inexperta, novata*) culture. If Hawthorne and Poe beheld in their inspirer a journeyman or political meddler(*intruso, trepa*), they never said so; in Irving's *Sketch Book* and even in his trifles they perceived the penetrating observer, and his aspirations and his craftsmanship as an artist. This Irving they revered(*reverenciaban*). For this nobler Irving, no self-imposed discipline for the sake of the image or sentence was, as the notebooks prove, too arduous. Ceaselessly he rewrote: indefatigably he revised; his was, in his best moments, the happy, blessed labor of the true artist.

II. WASHINGTON IRVING'S *RIP VAN WINKLE* (1819-20)

The decade beginning with the publication of Diedrich Knickerbocker's learned indiscretion (*A History of New York*, 1809) and ending with the appearance of Geoffrey Crayon's *The Sketch Book* changed Irving from a callow(*inexperto*) youngster to a man; he was still amiable, still shrewd, but he was now meditative, a participant in human suffering. To us through the twentieth century, all the virtues of *The Sketch Book* seem pallid; we can endure but not applaud the unevenness of the thirty-two pieces, the sickly(*macabro*) pathos of such an essay as "The Pride of the Village", the naïve records of Irving's travel in England, the appropriation of the familiar legends. This last weakness in particular has attained an unpleasant emphasis

in the scholar's discovery that even "Rip Van Winkle" is dependent on a literal translation from a tale in Otmar's *Volksagen* ("Peter Klaus"), and that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" has origins in Bürger's "Der wilde Jäger" and one of Rubezahl tales.

Yet beneath Irving's insipidities(soserías) burned one strong response to life, his sadness or romantic melancholy in the presence of the law of change. The underlying idea in all Irving's best essays is that of flux(cambio), the brevity of life, the transiency of Man.

Perhaps the gossamer(sutil) loveliness(gracia) of these sketches suffers under precise interpretations. Their symbolism is probably unconscious, involuntary; the essay's indefinitiveness of emotion may be felt as we read, but not explained. In "Rip Van Winkle" this connotative meaning is the secret of its hold upon our imaginations; in it are all the implications of the grim but romantic theme of *tempus edax rerum* (\approx "el tiempo acaba con todo"). In retrospect or in prospect, Rip's free youth, prolonged sleep, fanciful (caprichosos) dreams, and disillusioning return are all ours. The fragile piece deserves study for its debt to German literature, to American legend, to Thomas the Rhymer, to Walter Scott, and to Irving's own boyhood; for its arresting adaptation in the theater, in song, or in Spanish or Russian translation, for its revolution of a great stylist. But its soul lies in the symbolic distillation of a universal mood. All of Irving's literary manipulation of his reading, his wandering life, and his melancholy were concentrated in a passion which made him compose the tale during a single night, pouring into it all that he had ever felt concerning man's ceaseless enemy, 'time': the German romance of Otmar, stories heard from the lips of Dutch friends, memories of the shadowy Catskills and of the Blue Hudson. However outworn(manido) by

familiarity, jest(frivolidad), and parody, "Rip Van Winkle" still belongs to the indestructible literature of all peoples.

Even when he talked through the mouth of Diedrich Knickerbocker Irving was accused of plagiarism. "Rip Van Winkle's story was shameless theft. From Irving's passages and those from the old German tale of "Peter Klaus", taken one after the other, there emerges such a blatant imitation that most of Rip's unfortunate adventures seem almost a direct translation. But if on studying Irving's books we only limit ourselves to this detective job, we run the risk of missing greatly the true intention of the author, who once stated: "Of all things I do, I wish I could write in a way that my work might be recommended for something different than the mere interest of the story; for something hard to concretise, something to which, if you allow me to say, I would call a 'classical value'; that is to say, dependent on style..., which gives the work the chance of lasting beyond the fad or the fashion of the day".

There has been not just the style, however, that has maintained "Rip Van Winkle" alive in print, on the screen, in the mind and in the hearts of his fellow countryman. Rip has become their "muse of memory". Hart Crane once said that Rip was his "guardian angel in a journey into the past", and still today he remains his conscience, a conscience which, at the same time accuses them and amuses them. Irving did not limit himself to giving naturalization papers in his country to some old legends, as old as any other which could have seduced the human mind in some other time - Epimenid's or Endymion's; the Sleeping Beauty's or the seven sleeping of... Epheso's - but he also introduced many familiar elements of people's common knowledge such as the thunder of gods, the birds of bad omens, the magic filter, the dog as the best companion of man, or dwarfs' ghostly spirits; and transported to the Catskills mountains the Vahalla of Norwegian mythology and the Brocken

of Austrian legends, places where Rip continues adapting the posture of the American man-boy (Huck Finn and Anse Bundren) who never really grows up; the New World innocent who longs to return to the paradise before the Fall, free from any effort and all responsibility; to retire as Franklin did, at forty-years-old and devote himself to flying kites. To be as he has been called, "a child playing with children", "a boy with a dog".

Before Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain, before Henry James, Sinclair Lewis or William Faulkner, Irving created, perhaps inadvertently, the symbolic effigy of the mythic North American, offering, as Philip Young has noted, "the almost perfect image of the world as most of the world consider us: sympathetic people --to a point and in some occasions--, but essentially immature, egocentric, free-and-easy and, above all -- and perhaps dangerously -- candorous", *i.e.* frank and simple. And with yet more success, Rip represents a prototype of the North American man as others see him from abroad, or from some dazzled sectors of the same USA: a perfect incarnation of the boy who has grown too much and is in the most absolute ignorance with regard to own wife and the world of completely adult men; condemned to be perpetually "one of these boys": a Lazarus who has come back from death as if he pretended to inform his fellow countrymen and who does not escape from being a comical type, in spite of a life spent in the deepest and most unreal dream. His sons are like him, and his grandsons are as many other Rips. Irving was not capable, consciously by himself, of such a tortuous intention but his critics have discovered in him this kind of machination.

III. WASHINGTON IRVING'S *THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW* (FROM *THE SKETCH BOOK*, 1819-20)

When in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" he adapted some parts of the story from Bürger's "Der wilde Jäger", and perhaps also from Robert Burns' "Tam O'Shanter", Irving noted that the story was nothing but "something fortuitous, inspired by some stories and scenes proceeding from Tarrytown" and its plot "just a sort of bond which could connect descriptions of atmospheres, customs and ways of life". However, as the creator of Brom Bones and Ichabod Crane, tangled up in their famous contest, he has been proclaimed as "the first important North American author to introduce into the literary repertoire the burlesque mythology and popular traditions of pure North American essence which, at the beginning of the 19th century, had been abundantly proliferated through oral transmission", showing that "the rowdy people of the upper region of the Hudson Valley were frontiersmen of the same nature of the Ohio river navigators or the Missouri trappers and fur hunters".

The Dutchmen in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are, in fact, quite different from the stupid, indolent, pipe smoking citizens, sat down in the staircases, which Irving presented us in his first writings. Brom is a frontier braggart, hefty and boastful, "a Catskill Mike Fink, a troublemaker followed by his corresponding gang from Kinderhook". He is the tough mountain man from the forest, who plays hard tricks on beginners and for the first time, according to Daniel G. Hoffman, plays a role in USA literature, constituting a theme which "from there on has been profusely repeated in David Crockett, in Mark Twain, in thousands of news-stand novels and popular magazines; a theme in which the country bumpkin ends up emerging victorious against the

urban fiddler". Ichabod, a jack-of-all-trades: school teacher, professor of singing, farmer and, finally, fortune lawyer, is perfectly portrayed as Irving's Connecticut Yankee, a funnier and less spectacular ancestor of Mark Twain's mechanic, as well as a more optimistic testimony to the destiny of the common man in Melville's Israel Potter. Ichabod is a meddling devotee, singer of hymns, son of New England, superstitious and simple, but clever and ambitious, with his head full of illusions about quick enrichment that he would obtain by marrying the "lusty Katrina" and leaving with her in pursuit of the frontier treasures, "toward Kentucky, Tennessee or God knows where". This anaemic Ichabod is, however, the father of many national heroes, full of a wild confidence, inexpert and crazy but triumphant.

Among Irving's stories worth remembering, most of them celebrate the victory of the practical man and assign defeat to the dreamer, as if the stories were sarcastic fables of a masochistic and corrective nature indirectly referring to Irving's own career. Men like Brom, who condescend to superstition or challenge it, knowing that all fantasies, after all, are false, always come off well. When one grows up, fantasies must be substituted by common sense; the ghost stories, as well as prodigious adventures and the romantic sentiments are child's play or Peter Pan's chimeras. Irving, no doubt, must have accompanied the final note with an ironic wink addressed to his readers saying that, the most incompetent of visionaries, such as Ichabod Crane, ended up well when, after abandoning his daydreaming vices, he devotes himself to the practice of law.

When Knickerbocker talks, and not Geoffrey Crayon, the technique of caricature skilfully drawn is used with a more firm hand; readers will not easily forget Ichabod Crane riding astride in his bony ass: "He rode in short stirrups, which brought his knees nearly up to the pommel of the saddle, his sharp elbows stuck out like grasshoppers legs"; he carried his whip

perpendicular in his hand, like a sceptre, and as the horse jogged on, the motion of his arms was not unlike the flapping of a pair of wings". Very few times would even Dickens leave a more intense after taste such as Irving's when he describes "the ample delights of a genuine Dutch country table laid out for tea" [las innumerables delicias de una auténtica mesa holandesa dispuesta para el té con los] with "the doughty dough-nut, the tender buttery puff pastries, and the twisted crumbly cruller, an abundance of pies of meat and poultry"(961)[fanfarrones buñuelos, los tiernos hojaldres mantecosos y las desmenuzables, retorcidas hojuelas] con su abundancia de tartas, de carnes y de aves, así como de and "delectable dishes of preserved plums, and peaches, and pears, and quinces..., all mingled higgledy"(961)[regalados platos de ciruelas, melocotones, peras y membrillos confitados..., todo mezclado y revuelto].

Neither Hawthorne, nor Balzac or Frank Harris, in their best descriptions, could have painted with such perfection the spacious country house of Mynheer Van Tassel over which "a great elm tree spread its broad branches..., at the foot of which bubbled up a spring of the softest and sweetest water, in a little kind of well, formed of a barrel, and then stole sparkling away through the grass, to a neighbouring brook, that babbled along among elders and dwarf willows"(954)[un olmo corpulento tendía sus anchas ramas..., al pie del cual borboteaba una fuente del agua más fina y sabrosa, que se recogía en un pequeño barril para escabullirse con un cercano arroyo que pasaba bullendo entre los alisos y los sauces enanos]. Bajo los aleros poco elevados se veían "flails, harness, various utensils of husbandry, and nets for fishing in the neighbouring river"(954)[trillos, arneses, varios útiles de labranza y redes de pesca para pescar en el cercano río]. En el interior de la casa "rows of

resplendent pewter, ranged on a long dresser"[lucían hileras de reluciente peltre, bien ordenadas sobre un largo aparador].

"In one corner stood a huge bag of wool ready to be spun; in another a quantity of linsey-woolsey just from the loom; ears of Indian corn, and strings of dried apples and peaches, hung in gay festoons along the walls, mingled with the gaud of red peppers; and a door left ajar, gave him a peep into the best parlour, where the claw-footed chairs, and dark mahogany tables, shone like mirrors; and irons, with their accompanying shovel and tongs, glistened from their covert of asparagus tops; mock oranges and conch shells decorated the mantelpiece; strings of various coloured birds eggs were suspended above it; a great ostrich egg was hung from the centre of the room, and a corner cupboard, knowingly left open, displayed immense treasures of old silver and well-mended china"(955)[En un rincón había un gran saco de lana dispuesta para ser hilada y algunas piezas de estameña acabadas de salir de los telares. A lo largo de las paredes, las mazorcas de maíz colgaban en alegres festones, junto con ristras de manzanas y melocotones secos, que alternaban con llamativas guirnaldas de pimientos colorados; y una puerta entornada le dejaba ver el mejor salón, donde las sillas de patas en forma de garra y la mesa de oscura caoba relucían como espejos, y las planchas, con su correspondiente acompañamiento de pala y tenazas, brillaban a través de las hojas de esparraguera; naranjas artificiales, conchas y caracolas decoraban la repisa de la chimenea, sobre la que se hallaban suspendidas sartas de huevos de pájaro de diversos colores, mientras que un enorme huevo de avestruz colgaba del centro del techo y una rinconera, abierta convenientemente, dejaba ver inmensos tesoros de plata antigua y de porcelana remendada con todo cuidado].

If we could not count on Rip Van Winkel, or Ichabod Crane and Diedrich Knickerbocker to tell us their stories, *The Sketch Book* would continue in being a friendly and entertaining collection, but with nothing of the extraordinary. The sketches of Christmas, its detailed observations of country customs, and descriptions of Westminster Abbey, Stratford-on-Avon and the Boar's Head Tavern contain sketches(viñetas), finely colored and nuanced, of a diversity of people and memorable, venerable places. "The Art of Bookmaking" is a good humored joke about the way in which Irving drank from the past writers. Their reflections about the "The Mutability of Literature", are an expression in attractive form of some sad certainties, such as the one that says that the production of books will never end, or from considerations of those reticent authors devoid of glory whose destiny is to remain unknown. In his weak censorship of the "English Writers on America", Irving approaches dangerously close to the expression of opinions capable of offence.