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Rip Van Winkle’s Coat: Inheriting the American Republic

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> Civilization is the result of a long social process which takes place in the same spot, and is handed down from one generation to another, each one profiting by the experience of the last.
> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America.*

1 By the 1840s, Washington Irving, America's first internationally celebrated author, had gotten old in more ways than one. For a new crop of ambitious American writers, especially the so-called "Knickerbockers" who gathered around editor Lewis Gaylord Clark, it seemed that Irving's enormous popularity over decades had narrowed the cultural field to such a degree that mimicking his style was all that remained for anyone else to do. Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale*, still the definitive authority on feuds and frustrations among the literati of antebellum New York, names Irving among the three "Rhadamantine figures" (with James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant) who towered over this landscape, blocking the next generation from any meaningful success (Miller 1956: 24). In this way, says Miller, he lived to enjoy the worst kind of universal acclaim.

> Irving, when not in Spain, lived up the Hudson at 'Sunnyside,' an object of pilgrimage in a nation that lacked shrines. Visitors carried away what they thought were locks of his hair (he wore a wig). He belonged to the New York of the *Salmagundi Papers*; the difference between the city of 1810 and of 1840, even more of 1850, was immense. (Miller 1956: 25)

2 Dominating New York's literary scene, and yet not changing with the times, Irving makes himself a walking anachronism. His unchallenged supremacy seems to signal the foreclosure of a tradition that had barely begun to unfold. The first American author had become the last. It was with an eye toward reversing this foreclosure that Everett Duyckinck, Cornelius Mathews, and others coalesced into the Tetractys Club, later rechristened "Young America," and proclaimed the enduring novelty of the American artist and his world: "the fountains from which he draws inspiration are fresh and new. The sky above him is a new sky, the earth beneath him is a new earth, and the living influences and life-guiding institutions about him are new institutions and new influences. With him, custom hath lost its sway, and Time and Change are the champions against the field" (Matthews and Duyckinck 1965: 1). In this group's estimation, Irving, an "imitator of [Henry] Mackenzie" and other old-fashioned foreign models, had become a dead influence (Matthews and Duyckinck 1965: 85).

3 Much as admirers mistook fragments of a wig for genuine hair, so this image of Irving has distracted both his contemporaries and later interpreters from the man and his writings. However stubborn his reputation appeared to those who came up behind him, the original Knickerbocker understood very well that times had changed in ways he could not. By 1846, with negotiations for a new edition of his collected works progressing at a snail's pace, Irving candidly confessed to nephew Pierre that he was becoming "a sad laggard in literature," with little or no appetite to compose anything further (Irving 1978: 109). This feeling of superannuation during the winter of his career likely would neither have surprised nor particularly displeased the Irving of twenty-five years earlier, since *that* Irving had no patience for old writers overstaying their welcome. Indeed, several of the works that established Irving's reputation around the 1820s consider at length the problems that arise in a society when one generation

exerts too much influence over those that follow, and what such exertions reveal about the national ethos that tolerates them.

4 Drawing on the works of Washington Irving, especially sketches like "The Art of Book-Making" and "Rip Van Winkle," this article will consider how the concept of anachronism is deployed in American literature to expose infractions against the logic of generational succession that is supposed to grant each new wave of Americans their freedom from those that came before. When the ancient British writers in "The Art of Book-Making" notice young scribblers tearing wisdom from their books and literally wearing it as old-fashioned clothes, they rise from the grave to take back what is rightfully theirs by any means necessary. In contrast, the peace-loving Rip Van Winkle, returning from his twenty-year nap, is so aghast at seeing some lookalike (his son) wearing his old clothes that for a moment he seems liable to rip them off the younger man's back—but instead he finally settles into the role of storyteller and human curiosity, allowing the young to direct their own lives. Ultimately, I use anachronism to complicate how we regard nineteenth-century conceptions of historical change and generational influence.

5 In the West, the generation of Irving's parents witnessed a historic metamorphosis of the word 'generation' itself. It was during the late eighteenth century that generational thinking, which from at least classical antiquity signified only lineal descent through a single family, acquired the capability of drawing together large masses of people roughly equal in age. From Locke's meditations on patriarchy in the *First Treatise*, echoed by Paine in *Rights of Man*, Michael Warner dates the advent of this new generational thinking that reckons "not from a common ancestor … but from national demography in secular time" (Warner 2000: 779). Putting this transformation another way, Warner describes it as a movement from "patriarchy" toward a more sweeping "heterosexuality," the latter system enabling every man to throw off the yoke of ancestry, but also leaving every man utterly vulnerable to his own mortality. "Individuals," says Warner, "having ceased to be sons or fathers, now belong, by the abstracting magnetism of averages and nations, to a more grandly conceived succession, that of generations. Generational belonging is the essence of the modern. The dead are dead" (Warner 2000: 779). Young people may well rejoice at this historic shift, while the aged will more likely detect

the violent foreclosure of their powers to set the course of national destiny. The young Thomas Jefferson, mired in an improvident father-in-law’s debts, cheered heredity’s demise more loudly than most. Yet, in his seventies, Jefferson did not quit the field of politics, but meticulously directed the energies of various surrogate sons, as in a letter to Samuel Kercheval in which he proposes changing the Constitution every twenty years. “But I am now retired,” the elder statesman professes. “I resign myself, as a passenger, with confidence to those at present at the helm, and ask but for rest, peace and good will…” Jefferson’s resignation seems qualified at best.

6 In contrast, Irving *never* rooted for the triumph of youth over heredity, not even while young himself. Though he remained a lifelong bachelor, he will only portray reproduction as a generous act; “he says nothing of the ways the patriarch lives for himself: neither of the gratifications of authority, nor of the narcissism of reproduction, nor of the dream of self-perpetuation, nor the public status of the *pere de famille*” (Warner 2000: 774). That Irving “idealized patriarchy just at the moment when it was clearly being displaced by modernity” is part of what makes him, and each of his narrators, a living throwback operating in an old style. The most modern experiment that Irving can attempt from this position is “Rip Van Winkle,” which “narrates at every point the incoherence and sacrifice in Rip’s drift through the life course by which reproduction makes his place in the world intelligible,” before finally, inevitably, settling Rip into the familiar role of “patriarch” (Warner 2000: 785). In this reading, the tale seems an ineffectual criticism of a social order that Irving could not help but regard with jealous desire.

7 I suggest that what Irving actually saw while composing his *Sketch-Book* was not the displacement of traditional patriarchy, but its modernization. Because the dead are indeed dead, he reasons, their living descendants have time and space enough to define themselves and even their past as they see fit, a process that may well involve claiming only select parts of whatever inheritance prior generations have left behind. Every man is a child of the past, and every child has authority to make his own way. In this brave new world of averages and national ethos, young men can at last derive benefit from their ancestry without suffocating under its accumulated mass. Crucially for Irving, in making the choice to depart from their fathers’ example,

sons do not cease to be sons; rather, they become modern—which is really to say American—sons.

8 Irving defines this concept of American heredity against the British model. This is not to say that he rejects all things British—at least not all of the time. In a sketch from *Bracebridge Hall* titled "Forest Trees," Crayon, flanked by the "great avenues of stately oaks" that decorate Squire Bracebridge's estate, interprets them as symbols of a beneficent heredity that extends finite human life in both directions: "It is one of the effects of hereditary rank, when it falls thus happily, that it multiplies the duties, and, as it were, extends the existence of the possessor. He does not feel himself a mere individual link in creation. He carries back his existence in proud recollection, and he extends it forward in honorable anticipation" (Irving 1991: 74). These reflections are consistent with the strong savor of Anglophilia that runs through this volume. But what about when hereditary rank does not fall thus happily? According to the somewhat earlier *Sketch-Book*, England, for all its charms, is a place where the dead often tyrannize the living. Crayon's sense of unease on first reaching the Old World—"I stepped upon the land of my forefathers—but felt that I was a stranger in the land"—never fully leaves him, even as his knowledge of English society and its customs grows (Irving 1983: 751). What this oft-quoted sentence belies, and what later sketches like "London Antiques" and "John Bull" plainly show, is that England makes Crayon uncomfortable precisely *because* it is the land of his forefathers, a place where the dead and dying hold dominion. Time and again Crayon's rambles are interrupted by old men—some real, others imagined—whom his narrative casts as the genies, arch-mages, or other powerful beings not to be crossed by a young American tourist. This confederacy of "gray headed old men" from the past seem to guard England's treasures against the grasp of youth (Irving 1983: 965). Through such encounters Crayon gradually learns that Britons live too much for the past, while the past prolongs its own life, unnaturally, through them.

9 For an extended example, let us turn to a *Sketch-Book* entry that, contrary to Warner's assessment of Irving, says much about the potential selfishness of patriarchy. I refer to a brief anecdote entitled "The Art of Book Making." Crayon, in search of diverting subject matter, finds himself in a reading room of the British Museum: "a spacious chamber, surrounded with great cases of venerable books.

Above the cases, and just under the cornice, were arranged a great number of black-looking portraits of ancient authors" (Irving 1983: 808). Also present are a throng of "pale, studious personages" engaged in some mysterious work that involves pouring over ancient tomes, taking copious notes, and occasionally signalling to their "familiars" for even more such materials (Irving 1983: 809). These men are not "magi," as the American tourist first assumes, but authors engaged in the composition of books. Watching them at their work, which seems to consist almost exclusively of lifting passages from old sources, Crayon drops into a series of meditations about the nature of literary influence. "Nature" is a word used advisedly here, since the process of influence is best understood, it seems, by comparison with processes of vegetative growth and decay.

> Thus it is in the clearing of our American woodlands; where we burn down a forest of stately pines, a progeny of dwarf oaks start up in the place; and we never see the prostrate trunk of a tree mouldering into soil, but it gives birth to a whole tribe of fungi.
> Let us not then, lament over the decay and oblivion into which ancient writers descend; they do but submit to the great law of Nature, which declares that all sublunary shapes of matter shall be limited in their duration, but which decrees, also, that their element shall never perish. Generation after generation, both in animal and vegetable life, passes away, but the vital principle is transmitted to posterity, and the species continue to flourish. Thus, also, do authors beget authors, and having produced a numerous progeny, in a good old age they sleep with their fathers, that is to say, with the authors who preceded them—and from whom they had stolen. (Irving 1983: 811)

10 In some ways these are quintessentially Romantic reflections on nature's relationship to human society. Crayon could be mistaken for the speaker of William Cullen Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis," who predicts that his sublunary listener will "go / To mix for ever with the elements," but also that that person will enjoy the company of his most admirable precursors: "Thou shalt lie down / With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings, / The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good, / Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past, / All in one mighty sepulchre" (1884: 24, 25). Bryant's poem observes necessity, and even great beauty, in the limited duration of organic life, making possible as it does the flourishing of later generations who feed on its

constituent matter. In this formulation, death's rewards are reaped equally by the dead and those who survive them. Irving, for his part, applies this woodland analogy to the specific domain of cultural production, and thus imagines a natural order in literary production where "authors beget authors" and old, forgotten texts contribute their basic elements to new ones.

11 But Irving's version of this analogy also complicates Bryant's. Moving from the natural world to that of humankind, Crayon accomplishes a fascinating maneuver not found in "Thanatopsis." "[T]he vital principle *is transmitted* to posterity": here the use of passive voice leaves ambiguous who does the transmitting. The older generation, from whom these principles pass to the younger, seems a likely candidate, as does the "Nature" that presides over such transmission. But it is neither of these, a fact not disclosed until the final line: "they sleep with their fathers, that is to say, with the authors who preceded them—and from whom *they had stolen*." Suddenly we learn that agency belongs to each rising generation, but only while it rises. If theft serves in this analogy as the mechanism of hereditary transmission, then it is "posterity," not age, that makes it work. The implications of this last-minute reversal are immense. Since youth performs the work of stealing essential principles from an old generation and taking them into itself, it is also youth, in choosing what to steal, that decides which parts, and how much, of the older generation qualify as "essential" in the first place. According to this model, authors themselves do not become immortal. On the contrary, it is their mortality that enables their works to undergo a kind of "metempsychosis," changing shape in the hands of later practitioners. Put another way, it is not the passing generation that magnanimously bequeaths its principles to youth, but rather youth that takes as much or as little as it sees fit, in the process striking a balance between continuity and change.

12 At least, that is what should happen. What materializes in this sketch about English book manufacture, however, is unlike anything found in nature. Crayon, still watching the authors at their questionable business, falls victim to his own "unlucky habit of napping at improper times and places" (Irving 1983: 811). In a dream, he observes an allegorical version of the same scene, where every page stolen from an ancient work becomes an article of clothing that its possessor immediately assumes. Crayon describes, for example, how "a portly, rosy,

well-fed parson … soon contrived to slip on the voluminous mantle of one of the old fathers, and having purloined the gray beard of another, endeavored to look exceedingly wise." Before Irving's narrator can describe any more garish outfits, these bibliographic revels are brought to a screeching halt.

> In the height of this literary masquerade, a cry suddenly resounded from every side, of "Thieves! thieves!" I looked, and lo! the portraits about the walls became animated! The old authors thrust out, first a head, then a shoulder, from the canvas, looked down curiously for an instant upon the motley throng, and then descended, with fury in their eyes, to claim their rifled property. The scene of scampering and hubbub that ensued baffles all description. The unhappy culprits endeavored in vain to escape with their plunder. On one side might be seen half a dozen old monks, stripping a modern professor; on another, there was sad devastation carried into the ranks of modern dramatic writers. Beaumont and Fletcher, side by side, raged round the field like Castor and Pollux, and sturdy Ben Jonson enacted more wonders than when a volunteer with the army in Flanders. As to the dapper little compiler of farragos mentioned some time since, he had arrayed himself in as many patches and colors as harlequin, and there was as fierce a contention of claimants about him, as about the dead body of Patroclus. (Irving 1983: 813)

13 Crayon's dream turns to something like Stephen Dedalus' nightmare of history. As this excerpt suggests, the lowly book manufacturers are powerless to repel their resurrected assailants. The massacre still raging, Crayon laughs himself awake, attracts the notice of a librarian, and is expelled from the premises for not having a library card. "In a word, I stood convicted of being an arrant poacher, and was glad to make a precipitate retreat, lest I should have a whole pack of authors let loose upon me" (Irving 1983: 814). Crayon leaves unclear to which "pack of authors," the real ones or the imagined, he refers with this parting joke.

14 Aside from its comic value, what is the point of this strange sketch? A satire of British literary culture, it uses rampaging Renaissance dramatists and medieval monks to portray the vicelike grip in which nineteenth-century England is held by its own illustrious past. In answer to the stereotype that Americans, with their lack of castles and long history, are incapable of producing art without borrowing from

the British, Irving shows us the English borrowing maniacally from themselves, and in the process extending the lifespan of generations that should be allowed to die.[1] Theft, with its power transmit vital principles from one generation to the next, may be a natural part of literary influence, but it can be carried to unnatural extremes. The key, apparently, is moderation. Of those writers gathered in the British Museum during Crayon's dreamy visit, a few handle its treasures with impressive moderation, taking only "a gem or so" to ornament themselves, or else taking nothing at all, but standing clear of the fray and "contemplate[ing] the costumes of the old writers, merely to imbibe their principles of taste" (Irving 1983: 812). These visitors, apparently, do not suffer the wrath of Jonson and his deceased peers. (One assumes that Crayon, too, belongs in this category—that his fleeting references to the *Iliad* fall within Irving's threshold of tasteful use.) The vast majority, however, borrow far too much and with too great abandon, making their own writings a mere patchwork of the past. It is their behaviour that wakes the dead. At one level, then, Irving's sketch serves as a thought experiment where these writers instantly suffer the consequences of their thoughtless rapacity.

15 The 'moral' of this sketch, then, is that authors need not, and should not, become mere reproductions of their ancestors. We can better appreciate the thrust of this critique by attending to certain recent developments in influence studies. Michaela Bronstein, in *Out of Context* and elsewhere, has argued for a version of intertextual influence that looks beyond "the hegemony of the past over the present," to the ways that comparatively recent artists condition our sense of those who came before (Bronstein 2018: 1). This leads to a fundamental inversion of how we generally understand connections like the one between novelists Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Joseph Conrad, as Bronstein contends that "Ngũgĩ's significance does not lie in his relationship to Conrad, but Conrad's significance lies in his relationship to Ngũgĩ, and to all who read and react to his work decades and continents away from its moment of production" (Bronstein 2014: 411-37). Irving's point in "Book Making" is essentially a precursor of this critical insight. It is within the power of every rising generation of writers to decide how much their ancestors may impose themselves on the present moment. British writers, like those depicted in this sketch, sentence themselves to live under the past's hegemonic rule

by grasping for the property of their forbears. As a result, and in an almost vampiric transference of life force, dead authors become "animated," while at least one of their supposedly living descendants degenerates to the point of resembling a "dead body."

16 With its emphasis on teeming bodies and "hubbub … that baffles all description," the battle scene in "Book Making" also registers a vaguely Malthusian form of claustrophobia. If countless dead ancestors are reanimated by over-quotation, there will soon be far too many to sustain. Irving expresses this thought much more pointedly in a sketch titled "The Mutability of Literature," where Crayon warns his reader about the geometric proliferation of reading material in recent times:

> A few centuries since five or six hundred manuscripts constituted a great library; but what would you say to libraries, such as actually exist, containing three or four hundred thousand volumes; legions of authors at the same time busy; and the press going on with fearfully increasing activity, to double and quadruple the number? Unless some unforeseen mortality should break out among the progeny of the muse, now that she has become so prolific, I tremble for posterity. (Irving 1983: 861)

17 In an adaptation of Malthus' most famous argument, the cultural field requires positive checks to prevent its population of books from too far outstripping the supply of contemporary readers. Books consume people, it turns out, and with every passing generation the former seem more likely to starve and the latter to be irrevocably depleted. If "some unforeseen mortality" capable of addressing this problem can be found anywhere, the *Sketch-Book* does not expect that it will be found in England. With republican condescension, Crayon implies that England would not be such an "old, highly finished, and over-populous" nation if its people conducted themselves with more restraint and less absorbed attention to history (Irving 1983: 787). The more a society gropes after its own past, the more surely that society will be trampled or eaten alive by it.

18 But it is not only dead authors who threaten the living. Irving makes a larger point in the expanded 1848 edition of the work that established his reputation, *A History of New York*. In Book 7, pseudo-historian

Diedrich Knickerbocker describes the “complicated distress” suffered by Dutch settlers while trying simultaneously to subdue “internal faction and commotion” and repel an English invasion force. The English commanders, sensing an opportunity to “foment the fears and tensions of the populace,” issue a proclamation that demands surrender while making various attractive promises to the Dutch. Among these is a guarantee of uninterrupted heredity: “That every man should be allowed quietly to inherit his father's hat, coat, shoe-buckles, pipe, and every other personal appendage; and that no man should be obliged to conform to any improvements, inventions, or any other modern innovations; but, on the contrary, should be permitted to build his house, follow his trade, manage his farm, rear his hogs, and educate his children, precisely as his ancestors had done before him from time immemorial” (Irving 1848: 433-4). The Dutch, finding this arrangement desirable, become alienated from their strong-willed governor, Peter Stuyvesant, and thus render themselves and their settlement of New Amsterdam vulnerable to takeover. Knickerbocker regards the promise of inheritance untroubled by innovation as nothing more than a “crafty and conciliatory” device, part of those “insidious means” whereby the British secured power in North America (Irving 1848: 434). Implicit in this brief anecdote is the lesson that few things weaken any society more than a total capitulation to its ancestors.

19 With the *Sketch-Book*, Irving would save young America from this fate. His most forceful effort is found in the essay “English Writers on America,” a polemic that evaluates the two countries’ strained relationship in filial terms. Throughout this entry, England appears as an aged parent in the throes of natural decline, while America becomes its sprightly child with a glorious future in store.[2] But America must not be a child of England as England itself knows the word, assuming its likeness in every last detail. The end result of such mindless mimicry would be a kind of “mental vassalage” that “prevent[s] the growth of proper national pride” (Irving 1983: 791). Given the choice between stunting its growth and a total estrangement from the parent country, Crayon would reluctantly choose the latter. “But,” he adds, “it is hard to give up the kindred tie! and there are feelings dearer than interest—closer to the heart than pride—that will still make us cast back a look of regret as we wander farther and farther from the paternal roof, and lament the waywardness of the parent that would

repel the affections of the child" (Irving 1983: 791). Though America, Crayon is quick to point out, can always console itself with being "the rising and the gaining party" in every encounter with England, losing all contact with that venerable country would be a bitter way for the republic to reach its maturity (Irving 1983: 792).

20 Ultimately, Crayon chooses not to "give up the kindred tie," but instead transform it for a new era and national outlook. The image of America as a youth drifting regretfully from "the paternal roof" is replaced, in the essay's final paragraph, with a mature young nation free to revisit its childhood home whenever it chooses to do so.

21 We are a young people, necessarily an imitative one, and must take our examples and models, in a great degree, from the existing nations of Europe. There is no country more worthy of our study than England. The spirit of her constitution is most analogous to ours. The manners of her people—their intellectual activity—their freedom of opinion—their habits of thinking on those subjects which concern the dearest interests and most sacred charities of private life, are all congenial to the American character; and, in fact, are all intrinsically excellent: for it is in the moral feeling of the people that the deep foundations of British prosperity are laid; and however the superstructure may be timeworn, or overrun by abuses, there must be something solid in the basis, admirable in the materials, and stable in the structure of an edifice that so long has towered unshaken amidst the tempests of the world.

> Let it be the pride of our writers, therefore, discarding all feelings of irritation, and disdaining to retaliate the illiberality of British authors, to speak of the English nation without prejudice, and with determined candor. While they rebuke the indiscriminating bigotry with which some of with which some of our countrymen admire and imitate every thing English, merely because it is English, let them frankly point out what is really worthy of approbation. We may thus place England before us as a perpetual volume of reference, wherein are recorded sound deductions from ages of experience; and while we avoid the errors and absurdities which may have crept into the page, we may draw thence golden maxims of practical wisdom, wherewith to strengthen and to embellish our national character. (Irving 1983: 793-4)

22 With this passionate exhortation, Irving infuses reproduction and heredity with modern generational thinking—or, in Warner's language, he uses heterosexuality to alter the terms of patriarchy. Young America, as Old England's rightful son and heir, must not succumb to "indiscriminating" extremes of devotion or rebellion. Instead, like the precious few men of taste in the British Museum, Americans will collectively scan the "volume of reference" that is English culture with utmost discrimination and taste. Some of the material that it finds there will be upheld as so many "golden maxims," while the rest—an accumulation of "errors and absurdities"—will be cast into oblivion. Crucially, America alone may decide what is what. Young nations on the rise, like young people, should find political and cultural agency in the knowledge that their parents are mortal.

23 Taken together, the *Sketch-Book*'s satiric sketches and essays reject at every level the sort of old-fashioned heredity whereby the ancient dominate the young for all time. Such crimes against nature, Crayon indicates, do not happen in America, a society that learns from the natural world how to manage the relationship between the living and the dying. Unlike the English stronghold of Bracebridge Hall, where "[i]t is with great difficulty that the squire can ever be brought to have any tree cut down on his estate," America for Irving is a place "where we burn down a forest of stately pines" without hesitation, so that young saplings may have room and food enough to flourish (Irving 1991: 71). It is, more generally, a place where old things are not suffered to become overdeveloped and brooding, but instead are swiftly relegated, in all but their most fundamental elements, to the past. By following these principles of constant growth and decay, American society, so unlike the musty estates and museums of her aged parent country, achieves an unselfish heredity that keeps the nation evergreen.

24 How exactly does Irving's young nation avoid the generational disorder of over-finished, overpopulous England? By the time Crayon gestures in his "Book Making" episode to the ways of life and death in "our American woodlands," his *Sketch-Book* has already given us "Rip Van Winkle," a romance set explicitly in that space. The tale, as otherworldly as Crayon's dreams in the British Museum, is Irving's ur-example of how heredity—not just among artists, but all people—is

managed in a modern republic where every generation must have its share of time.

25 The first information communicated about Rip, apart from his being "a simple good natured fellow," concerns heredity: "He was a descendent of the Van Winkles who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant" (Irving 1983: 770). In other, less flattering words, paraphrased from A *History of New York*, Rip can trace his ancestry back to those Dutch settlers whom the British manipulated by portraying ancestry itself as a closed and utterly repetitive system. This outlook dominates the world of Irving's story. Although Rip's "patrimonial estate ha[s] dwindled away under his management acre by acre," he still appears destined for immortality, thanks to his having been productive in one crucial aspect of life (Irving 1983: 771). "His son Rip," we are told, "an urchin begotten in his own likeness, promised to inherit the habits, with the old clothes, of his father" (Irving 1983: 771). Here habits and old clothes, already related by a punning association, become a package deal, two parts of the same inheritance passing from father to son. This is consistent with other entries in the *Sketch-Book* that speak of inheritance, none of them distinguishing much between personality traits and physical property. The younger Rip Van Winkle will have all of it, Irving's narrator complacently explains, thereby perpetuating his father's exact likeness. As Dutch descendants living in a British colony, Rip and his son are connected by the same ancient form of heredity that Irving lampoons in "Book Making," whereby each generation does well to inherit as closely as possible the traits of the generation that preceded.

26 Of course, it is debatable whether some traits, like an "insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor," are worth inheriting (Irving 1983: 770). Dame Van Winkle's complaints, to which the tale does not grant us direct access, serve as the first intimations of this point. We are told that whenever her influence becomes unbearable, Rip is apt to "stroll away into the woods" with his dog, Wolf, and there to lose himself in admiration of the "rich woodland" (Irving 1983: 773). In this mountainous natural space, "the boundaries between the living and the dead, the material and the immaterial, the real and the fictional, the present and the past are porous." Here Irving's American tale introduces the fantastical inciting incident that will begin to show old-fashioned heredity in its more oppressive aspect.

> As he was about to descend, he heard a voice from a distance hallooing: 'Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!' He looked around, but could see nothing but a crow winging its solitary flight across the mountain. He thought his fancy must have deceived him, and turned again to descend, when he heard the same cry ring through the still evening air, 'Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!'—at the same time Wolf bristled up his back, and giving a low growl, skulked to his master's side, looking fearfully down into the glen. (Irving 1983: 774)

27 What comes after this inauspicious greeting is essentially "The Art of Book Making" in colonial form. Following an odd, square-shaped stranger into a nearby amphitheater, Rip stumbles into the company of certain "odd-looking personages playing at ninepins." These men at first are almost a different species, one of them possessing "small piggish eyes" and another's face seeming "to consist entirely of nose." The group becomes identifiable only by their resemblance to "the figures in an old Flemish painting in the parlor of Dominie Van Schaick, the village parson, and which had been brought over from Holland at the time of the settlement" (Irving 1983: 775). In essence, then, Rip interacts with dead men who have sprung from a painting into animate life, just as the British book manufacturers do. Also like those men, Rip succumbs to the influence of past generations. "By degrees," explains the narrator, "Rip's awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage which he found had much of the flavor of excellent Hollands. He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often, that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep" (Irving 1983: 776). The same logic that we saw in "Book Making" implicitly repeats itself in this scene: if Rip had maintained a tasteful distance from his ancestors, or if, having approached them, he had sampled their wares (liquor, not literature) more discriminately, he would not have been overwhelmed. As it is, he passes prematurely into a burlesque of the fate that Crayon prescribes to all men: "in a good old age they sleep with their fathers." Rip's fathers reward his familiarity by rendering him unconscious and costing him twenty years of waking life.

28 Now we arrive at the infamous Great Divide in Irving's tale, the "enormous lapses of time" that so confuse a suddenly aged Rip (Irving 1983: 781). By declining to narrate the revolutionary events that occur between Rip's falling asleep and his waking, Irving thrusts entirely upon his reader the task of evaluating how, if at all, the early republic actually differs from its colonial precursor. If this chasm of time in the middle of "Rip Van Winkle" seems like a thing to be admired passively, as Rip admires "a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs," in fact we have other options (Irving 1983: 774). Fifteen years after the story was first published, Alexis de Tocqueville, in the first volume of *Democracy in America* (1835), would supply narration that fills much the story's immense gap, at least where its attention to inheritance is concerned. In Chapter 3, Tocqueville explains why the "germ of aristocracy" never flourished in those regions of the New World where it was even planted, including New York. Some colonial figures, he admits, "acquired a power over the rest which might truly have been called aristocratic, if it had been capable of transmission from father to son" (Tocqueville 2007: 45). By this he means that a patriarch passing his entire property to a single male heir would have enabled quasi-aristocratic families to exert perpetual control over future generations in much the same way as wealthy Europeans had long done. This becomes impossible, according to Tocqueville, because of laws that dictate a radically new social condition in America.

> The English laws concerning the transmission of property were abolished in almost all the States at the time of the Revolution. The law of entail was so modified as not to interrupt the free circulation of property. The first generation having passed away, estates began to be parcelled out, and the change became more and more rapid with the progress of time. At this moment, after a lapse of a little more than sixty years, the aspect of society is totally altered; the families of the great landed proprietors are almost all commingled with the general mass. In the State of New York, which formerly contained many of these, there are but two who still keep their heads above the stream, and they must shortly disappear. The sons of these opulent citizens are become merchants, lawyers, or physicians. Most of them have lapsed into obscurity. The last trace of hereditary ranks and distinctions is destroyed—the law of partition has reduced all to one level. (Tocqueville 2007: 45)

29 Elsewhere, Tocqueville puts the same idea more evocatively: partible inheritance is a force that acts upon the American patriarch's property, breaking it into smaller and more numerous pieces with every generation, "until by its incessant activity the bulwarks of the influence of wealth are ground down to the fine and shifting sand which is the basis of democracy" (Tocqueville 2007: 44). This grinding of bulwarks that would otherwise overshadow the future seems not unlike the necessary burning of overgrown pine trees in Crayon's American woodland. Both images find ancestry being robbed of its traditional power to perpetuate its own likeness endlessly through time. "What is called family pride," Tocqueville remarks, bringing his European experience to bear upon the subject, "is often founded upon an illusion of self-love. A man wishes to perpetuate and immortalize himself, as it were, in his great-grandchildren" (Tocqueville 2007: 45). In America, the law ceases to enable that desire for self-immortalization, making every child accountable to himself before all others. In its place rises a system whereby "sons" must choose a profession and create themselves in whatever image they prefer. More recent theorists have added to the letter of Tocqueville's theory while affirming its spirit. "Partible inheritance itself," according to Warner, "takes on greater significance itself given natural rights theory, the historical time of modernity, the social imaginary of democratic legitimacy, and the decline of kinship systems generally"—all of which factors conspire to produce a republic where people's reach can no longer exceed the span of their mortal years (Warner 2000: 781).

30 Irving's tale dramatizes this historic transformation by showing us a post-revolutionary America where heredity holds nowhere near the sway that it did during colonial times. Though Rip is no aristocrat, his existence before the twenty-year nap unfolds in the sleepy certainty of an immortal likeness passing whole and unbroken, again and again, from old age to youth: his son "promised to inherit" everything that he was. Handing on such an inheritance should give Rip power over his progeny. Returning from the woods, and seemingly from the dead, to his native village, the old man notices his adult son in the street, and reacts not with satisfaction, but with unbridled confusion.

> Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself as he went up the mountain; apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own

> identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name? (Irving 1983: 781)

31 At this moment, Irving’s story seems just about to erupt in an American reenactment of the “Book Making” sketch’s bizarre generational brawl. Like the parson in the British Museum, Rip’s son has put on a dead ancestor’s beard and become that man’s copy. Looking at him, the elder Rip is confronted by the same crisis as Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and the monks: “I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else, got into my shoes…” (Irving 1983: 781). His passive nature notwithstanding, the elder Rip might be seconds from reacting as those reanimated Britons do, with a cry of “Thief! Thief!” and an assault upon the younger generation.

32 This is not, of course, what happens. That it cannot happen is a distinctive feature of the nascent republicanism that Irving would represent as America’s foremost improvement upon the ways of its parent country. Ancestors can no longer dominate the present moment with their property, material or otherwise. Everywhere the town’s altered topography shows signs of this change, none of them more evocative than an actual sign. As Rip returns to his altered town, we learn that one trace of the recent past looks the same, and yet altogether different: “He recognized on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe, but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, ‘GENERAL WASHINGTON.’” This altered portrait is one of the story’s most rigorously interpreted symbols. Terence Martin treats this rather slapdash George Washington as a “new father image” around which Rip seems incapable to orienting himself (Martin 1959: 142). Steven Blakemore reads the sign as articulating “that radical change … is merely superficial and that (sub)versive repetition is really the story’s secret theme” (Blakemore 2000: 194). For Lloyd Pratt, the portrait “articulates the character of a modernity in which incommensurable temporalities fail to resolve into a single arrow of time” (Pratt 2010: 27).

33 To develop a new reading of this enigmatic symbol, I propose that we compare Washington’s portrait with those that hang in the “Book-Making” sketch’s British Museum. The differences between them could not be starker. We have seen young British authors ransacking the work of their forbears to wear as clothing. This insult prompts Ben Jonson and other dead men to “thrust out first a head, then a shoulder, from the canvas,” before leaping fully into the present moment and dominating their lowly imitators. In America, the young do not scramble to put on their ancestors’ garments; on the contrary, they make older generations wear whatever *they* choose, in this case dressing King George in a “coat blue and bluff” and a “cocked hat” so that he may pass for their current favorite idol. Far from submitting to the hegemony of the past, then, Irving’s young Americans have discovered power to assert their own influence over the past, covering it in whatever garb they consider appropriate at the present time. Furthermore, by collapsing the king and the general into one figure, Americans control the population of their influences, not allowing themselves to be outnumbered and overrun by their forebears. The is not the British Museum, where portraits are everywhere, their subjects ready to ambush covetous onlookers at any moment. Seen in this light, the inn’s altered sign becomes an answer to Crayon’s half-joking call for a “unforeseen mortality” capable of keeping history in check.

34 The same principle of capping past and passing generations’ influence over the present also applies more locally in “Rip Van Winkle.” The story takes still another important turn when Peter Vanderdonk, the town’s oldest living citizen, who shares his name with an esteemed historian from generations past, is seen “slowly advancing up the road.” This aged figure provides a kind of *senex ex machina* that restores order to the town.

> He recollected Rip at once, and corroborated his story in the most satisfactory manner. He assured the company that it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor, the historian, that the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings. That it was affirmed that the great Hendrick Hudson, the first discoverer of the river and country, kept a kind of vigil there every twenty years, with his crew of the Half-moon; being permitted in this way to revisit the scenes of his enterprise, and keep a guardian eye upon the river and

> the great city called by his name. That his father had once seen them in their old Dutch dresses playing at ninepins in the hollow of the mountain; and that he himself had heard, one summer afternoon, the sound of their balls, like distant peals of thunder. (Irving 1983: 782-3)

35 Notice Vanderdonk's use of the phrase "handed down" in describing how knowledge about the Kaatskills has been transmitted across time. This is precisely the view of inheritance that, according to my argument, no longer predominates in America, a place where the young steal whatever they care to steal and no more. But Vanderdonk's choice of words has already been undermined by another detail: he enters the story only after "it [is] determined" by people younger than himself that his advice should be taken. According to this formulation, the older man's knowledge is not really handed down by him so much as it is taken up, like the metaphorical volume of reference in "English Writers on America," by his youthful successors. Once the question of Rip's seeming resurrection is settled, says Irving's narrator, the townspeople "returned to the more important concerns of the election," leaving both Peter and Rip in their wake. Peter, his useful information dispensed disappears from the tale altogether, having shared no directly reported dialogue with Rip. It is as though "Rip Van Winkle" will not tolerate too many old men standing in its foreground at one time.

36 Nature will not tolerate it either. The mystery of Rip's long absence resolved, it seems, to everyone's satisfaction, his daughter, Judith Gardenier, steps forward and takes charge of the old man. "'I am your father!' cried he—'Young Rip Van Winkle once—old Rip Van Winkle now!—does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle!'" (Irving 1983: 782). The logical endpoint of this progression is 'dead Rip Van Winkle.'[3] In what remains of his tale, Irving leads us part of the way toward that eventuality.

> Having nothing to do at home, and being arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity, he took his place once more on the bench, at the inn door, and was reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times "before the war." It was some time before he could get into the regular track of gossip, or could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his torpor. How that there had been a revolution-

> ary war—that the country had thrown off the yoke of old England—and that, instead of being a subject to his Majesty George the Third, he was now a free citizen of the United States. (Irving 1983: 783)

37 Talk of a "happy age" reminds us that in Rip's world, with all of its supernatural elements, aging still has an inalienable role to play. As Carolyn Dinshaw has pointed out, the fact that Rip ages, both during and after his twenty-year sleep, represents a significant departure from earlier tales of temporal asynchrony. The protagonist of "The Monk and the Dove," whom the Northern Homily Cycle depicts returning from the dead; the Seven Sleepers of Christian and Islamic legend, who conceal themselves in a cave to escape religious persecution and emerge three centuries later; Walter Map's King Herla, the twelfth-century British monarch who returns home after inhabiting the Otherworld for three hundred years—these characters are no older coming back to normal life than they were departing it (Dinshaw 2012: 134-5). In contrast, Irving emphasizes from the moment of Rip's awakening (after a much shorter period) that time has inflicted its wear upon himself and his surroundings. "He looked round for his gun," says the narrator, "but in place of the clean well-oiled fowling-piece, he found an old firelock lying by him, the barrel encrusted with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm eaten" (Irving 1983: 776). Another, more conspicuous clue presents itself while Rip is among the townspeople: "They all stared at him with equal marks of surprise, and whenever they cast eyes upon him, invariably stroked their chins. The constant recurrence of this gesture, induced Rip, involuntarily, to do, the same, when, to his astonishment, he found his beard had grown a foot long!" (Irving 1983: 778). Rip's wildly overgrown facial hair provides the most in-your-face reminder possible that he is fast approaching the proper time to be cut down.

38 Why should the character not live forever? For reasons set down by Thomas Paine: "Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the age and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow" (Paine 2011: 74). Even more surely than death frees Rip from "the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle," it will eventually free later generations from any tyranny that Rip, Peter Vanderdonk, or their contem-

poraries might impose upon them (Irving 1983: 783). The tale that began with a promise of old-fashioned heredity—a son merely becoming his father—concludes with quite a different promise: that of modern American self-fashioning, embodied not by Rip Van Winkle's son, also called Rip Van Winkle (himself another relic of colonial existence), but by Rip's grandson, Rip Gardenier, who does not bear Rip's surname and does not necessarily take after him in any way. This young Rip, if he were real, would belong to what historian Joyce Appleby calls the "first American generation," for whom "[t]he very idea of generations resonated with new meaning … As families exerted less influence on the lives of those born after Independence, the young people looked more to their peers for models of behavior. The attachment to one's age group weakened traditional loyalties, but it held out the promise of creating a fresh political will" (Appleby 2000: 3).[4] From a colony where less than total inheritance is a failing of the younger generation, we have moved to a republic where a partial and quite selective inheritance is one's birthright. Seen in this light, the American Revolution is a break not merely from the British Empire, but from the tyranny of history itself. It has long been argued that Irving regards progress as a comforting illusion that obscures the cyclical forces of history (McGann 2012: 354). If even the possibility of authentic progress is found anywhere in his work, it flows from the discrimination and taste that young people exercise in departing from their ancestors' influence and making the world again.

39 All of which necessary generational succession would be helped greatly if Rip Van Winkle would only adhere to Geoffrey Crayon's law of the American woodland, follow the example of "all sublunary shapes," and die (Irving 1983: 811). By the end of the story, however, he is still very much alive. Even Diedrich Knickerbocker's postscript cannot confirm Rip's death: "I have even talked with Rip Van Winkle myself, who, when last I saw him, was a very venerable old man, and so perfectly rational and consistent on every other point, that I think no conscientious person could refuse to take this into the bargain…" (Irving 1983: 784). That Rip has become "*very* venerable" suggests that he continues along an inexorable course of degeneration that leads to the grave—but how much longer will that course run? This faint tension Irving leaves permanently unresolved at the close of his foundational romance.

40 The *Sketch-Book* frames death as the driving force of American life. In a democratic republic, dead generations are as unreal as "distant thunder," their will, edited by the free hand of youth, surviving in heavily abridged form, if at all (Irving 1983: 783). Where earthly immortality cannot exist, mortality becomes everything. Irving, in letting the old man for whom he has obvious affection continue living to the end of the story and beyond, admits that aging Americans have no certain refuge except in the span of their own mortal lives, no recourse except in continuing to live. Whatever inheritance fathers would prefer to hand on at their death, the next generation is a different story.

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[1] Following the publication of "Rip Van Winkle," Irving would be accused of "pilfering" from German folklore, specifically the legend of Peter Klaus.

[2] William Hazlitt, in *The Spirit of the Age*, derides Irving for his portrayal of England as a nation whose past is its only present and whose future does not exist: "Instead of tracing the changes that have taken place in society since Addison or Fielding wrote, he transcribes their account in a different hand-writing, and thus keeps us stationary, at least in our most attractive and praise-worthy qualities of simplicity, honesty, hospitality, modesty, and good-nature. This is a very flattering mode of turning fiction into history, or history into fiction; and we should scarcely know ourselves again in the

softened and altered likeness, but that it bears the date of 1820, and issues from the press in Albemarle-street."

3 Here I disagree slightly with the classic feminist reading of Judith Fetterley, in which Rip "moves from the boyhood of youth to the boyhood of an old age *that promises to go on forever*.".

4 Basing her argument on a range of historical records from that fifty-four-year span, Appleby regards this generation as unique, more liberated from the strictures of influence and heredity than either their forebears or their descendants. From the literature of the period, however, it is clear that Americans writers saw their break from England as inaugurating a tradition of such "will" that would continue through all subsequent American generations, until the end of time.

English

Inheritance—of goods, reputation, and even physical traits—is a matter of paramount importance to Americans throughout the decades following Revolution. Paine and Jefferson, in propounding their vision of a new republic detached from Old World tyranny, continually assert every generation's right to take only what it desires from prior generations, the better to reshape themselves and their nation as they see fit. In this world of generational self-fashioning, an older generation cannot be suffered to direct its successors from beyond the grave, or to refuse the task of provisioning those successors with material and intellectual wealth. Drawing on the works of Washington Irving, especially sketches like "The Art of Book-Making" and "Rip Van Winkle," my paper will consider how the concept of anachronism is deployed in American literature to expose infractions against the logic of generational succession that is supposed to grant each new wave of Americans their freedom from those that came before. When the ancient British writers in "The Art of Book- Making" notice young scribblers tearing wisdom from their books and literally wearing it as old- fashioned clothes, they rise from the grave to take back what is rightfully theirs by any means necessary. In contrast, the peace-loving Rip, returning from his twenty-year nap, is so aghast at seeing some lookalike (his son) wearing his old clothes that for a moment he seems liable to rip them off the younger man's back—but instead he finally settles into the role of storyteller and human curiosity, allowing the young to direct their own lives. Ultimately, this article uses anachronism to complicate how we regard nineteenth-century conceptions of historical change and generational influence.

Français

Hériter - de biens, d’une réputation et même de traits physiques - est une question de la plus haute importance pour les Américains tout au long des décennies qui suivent la Révolution. Thomas Paine et Thomas Jefferson, en proposant leur vision d'une nouvelle république détachée de la tyrannie de l'Ancien Monde, ne cessent d'affirmer le droit de chaque génération à ne prendre que ce qu'elle désire des générations précédentes, afin de se remodeler et de remodeler la nation comme elle l'entend. Dans ce monde d'autodétermination générationnelle, on ne peut tolérer qu'une génération plus âgée dirige ses descendants d'outre-tombe, ni qu'elle refuse la tâche de fournir à ces descendants des richesses matérielles et intellectuelles. En m'appuyant sur les œuvres de Washington Irving, en particulier des nouvelles comme "The Art of Book-Making" et "Rip Van Winkle", mon article examinera comment le concept d'anachronisme est déployé dans la littérature américaine pour exposer les infractions à la logique de la succession générationnelle qui est censée accorder à chaque nouvelle vague d'Américains leur liberté par rapport à ceux qui les ont précédés. Lorsque les anciens auteurs britanniques de "The Art of Book- Making" remarquent que de jeunes scribouillards arrachent la sagesse de leurs livres et la portent littéralement comme des vêtements démodés, ils sortent de leur tombe pour reprendre ce qui leur revient de droit par tous les moyens nécessaires. À l'inverse, le pacifique Rip, qui revient de sa sieste de vingt ans, est tellement horrifié de voir un sosie (son fils) porter ses vieux vêtements qu'il semble un moment prêt à les arracher du dos du jeune homme, mais il finit par se contenter du rôle de conteur et de curiosité humaine, permettant aux jeunes de diriger leur propre vie. En fin de compte, cet article utilise l'anachronisme pour compliquer la façon dont nous considérons les conceptions du dix-neuvième siècle sur le changement historique et l'influence générationnelle.

Mots-clés

littérature américaine, Irving (Washington), temporalité, anachronisme, nationalisme, influence

Keywords

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