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# RIP VAN WINKLE'S *ODYSSEY*

The wise Ulysses was more indebted to his sleeping than his waking moments for his most subtle achievements, and seldom undertook any great exploit without first soundly sleeping upon it…[1]

James Joyce was the first reader of Washington Irving's famous tale of Rip Van Winkle to have noticed that Rip is 'a lazy Odysseus', as Andrew Burstein has more recently described him.[2] Rip leaves home for twenty years, just as Odysseus did; however, unlike Odysseus, Rip spends this time not heroically fighting and adventuring but sleeping away his mature years. When he finally returns home, then, it is no surprise that the dog in front of his house 'has forgotten' him, unlike Odysseus' dog, who greets his master with a tail-wag of recognition. Irving creates in Rip Van Winkle an ironic and humorous embodiment of an Odysseus/Ulysses who, as quoted above, was 'more indebted to his sleeping than his waking moments for his most subtle achievements'.[3]

* In writing this article I have benefited from the advice and guidance of Robert S. Levine, a distinguished scholar of American literature, and of Lillian E. Doherty, one of the leading scholars on Homer's *Odyssey*; I am privileged to have both as colleagues at the University of Maryland.

[1] W. Irving, *A History of New York*, ed. M. L. Black and N. B. Black (Boston, MA, 1984), 64–5. *A History* underwent several revisions over the years. The passage quoted here first appeared in the 1812 edition but was not included in the original edition of 1809. The 1984 edition represents the text as it appeared in 1848; I will henceforth cite passages through its pagination, since it is more widely available now than the 1812 edition. Unless otherwise noted, I will only cite the text, however, as it was constituted in the 1812 edition, since it preceded the publication of *The Sketch Book* in 1819.

[2] James Joyce makes the connection in *Ulysses*, ed. H. W. Gabler et al. (New York, 1984), 624. As Leopold Bloom contemplates a sailor's impending journey back home, he catalogues a series of tales with similarly Odyssean themes: 'Quite a number of stories there were on that particular Alice Ben Bolt topic, Enoch Arden and Rip van Winkle…'. Burstein's characterization of Rip is found in *The Original Knickerbocker* (New York, 2007), 128.

[3] At the same time that Irving was writing *The Sketch Book* in England, his friend James K. Paulding, in his poem *The Backwoodsman*, was writing an alternative version of Rip's tale, one in which the 'nobler heroism' of America is embodied in the man *who quits all the dear domestic joys of life,/Home, harvest, happiness and honest wife* in order to tame the wilderness and rid it of savages. L. Le Fevre, 'Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle', *Yale Review* (1946), 66–76, argued that Rip represents one aspect of the American mind, the desire for ease, which is regularly in conflict with the other side, symbolized by folk figures such as Paul Bunyan, who 'represents the conscious ambition of Americans to do great deeds' (69). He noted that cultures often include in their folk traditions contrasting images of heroism of just this sort, giving as one example Achilles and Odysseus. Although Le Fevre does not make this point, it is fair to say that the figure of the backwoodsman is the American equivalent to Achilles, the hero as warrior (Timothy

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A mythic Rip is not in itself a surprise, for, as William Hedges describes it, Irving set out 'to equip the American landscape with a kind of mythology'.[4] Indeed, from a time very shortly after 'Rip Van Winkle' was published in 1819, critics scolded Irving for 'pilfering the materials of other men; working up old stories'.[5] The 'old' stories they had in mind, however, were German folk tales and especially the story of Peter Klaus, a goatherd who regularly pastured his flock in the mountains.[6] Irving himself admitted that he drew on the tale of Peter Klaus in creating Rip Van Winkle;[7] his transformation of Klaus into Rip, however, might not have taken the form that it did had not Irving read the German tale as a variation (and perhaps even a descendant) of the *Odyssey*. In the story of Rip's reunion with his dog, Irving provides an intriguing clue to the story's pedigree. Although both Klaus and Rip return to dogs that do not know them, Rip alone calls attention to this fact: "'My very dog", sighed Rip, "has forgotten me!'" (36).[8] Rip, in short, appreciates how different he is from Odysseus, whose dog *did* remember him, even in his changed appearance.

Why does Irving turn Rip Van Winkle into a new and un-heroic Odysseus? I want to suggest that there are three frames (epic, personal, mythic) within which to appreciate Irving's adaptation. The tale of Rip Van Winkle, although it is usually read as a self-contained short story, in fact appears as the last of several stories in the first instalment of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* That collection constructs Crayon's journey from America to Europe as Odyssean, with tales of the dangers of the sea, of giants, and of faithful wives at home; 'Rip' is thus one sketch in a gallery of Odyssean scenes. *The Sketch Book*,

Flint, Daniel Boone's biographer, called him 'this Achilles of the West'); by contrast, Rip, who is averse to labour, is a 'cousin' to the Odysseus who never wanted to fight in the Trojan War. Odysseus, nonetheless, was famous for his bow, which he used upon his return to Ithaca to defeat the suitors for his wife's hand; Rip, on the other hand, wakes up after twenty years to find 'an old firelock lying by him, the barrel encrusted with rust' (W. Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, ed. Haskell Springer [Boston, MA, 1978], 35), a measure of his own diminished stature.

[4] W. Hedges, *Washington Irving. An American Study 1802–1832* (Baltimore, MD, 1865), 115.

[5] H. Pochmann, 'Irving's German Sources in *The Sketch Book*', *SPh* 27 (1930), 477–507, assembles the evidence and notes how widely Irving was criticized on this score. The quote is from a writer to the British periodical *Blackwood's* (XVII [1825], 65) and is cited in Pochmann (479).

[6] One day Klaus entered a cave and came upon knights who were bowling, drank some of their wine, and fell asleep for twenty years. Upon awakening, he returned to his village and found his house run-down; a dog there growled at him.

[7] In W. Irving, *Bracebridge Hall*, ed. H. F. Smith (Boston, MA, 1977), 247, in a sketch titled 'The Historian', Irving answers the charges of 'plagiarism' and asserts that he 'had considered popular traditions of the kind as fair foundations for authors of fiction to build upon'.

[8] All references are cited from Irving (n. 3), and are indicated within the text.

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moreover, was written while Irving was living in England, feeling 'shipwrecked' and far from home. I will argue that at such a moment Irving found an apt role model in the one Greek hero who turned his misfortune into profit by telling his own story. Finally, Irving wrote 'Rip' as America was passing from neo-classicism to romanticism. His sympathies were with myth as romance and fantasy, not with myth as history and ideology. The *Odyssey* provided a template for a wandering poet in a fantastic world who could imagine a mythic America.

## I. The epic frame

> I am of this mind with Homer, that as the snaile that crept out of her shel was turned eftsoones into a Toad, and thereby was forced to make a stoole to sit on; so the traveller that stragleth from his owne country is in a short time transformed into so monstrous a shape that he is faine to alter his mansion with his manners and to live where he can, not where he would.[9]

Irving introduces the 'author' of his *Sketch Book* by making him of one 'mind' with Homer. Although fond of epic similes comparing humans to animals, Homer never said anything about toads; John Lyly was notorious for similes such as this one based on unnatural natural history.[10] Nonetheless, the theme of the simile is certainly Homeric and specifically Odyssean: the traveller's need to adapt in order to survive in an alien world. It foreshadows, moreover, an Odyssean theme in Rip: the confrontation of small and great that results in the victory of the little guy and his transformation into a great man himself, just as the 'snaile' became a 'Toad'.

The narrator whom we meet as *The Sketch Book* begins is thus cast in the role of Homer's travelling hero: 'Wand'ring from clime to clime, [he] observant stray'd, Their manners noted, and their states survey'd' (Hom. *Od.* 1.5–6).[11] Indeed, Irving has Crayon use very similar words of himself: 'I have wandered through different countries and witnessed

[9] Irving derives this epigraph from John Lyly's *Euphues and His England*, originally published in 1580; the passage can be found in R. W. Bond, *The Complete Works of John Lyly* (Oxford, 1902), ii.25.

[10] Bond (n. 9), ii.494, notes that Homer could not have been Lyly's source for the fate of snails since 'in reality these curious facts in natural history seem to have escaped Homer'. Although Lyly drew on a variety of sources for his similes and proverbs, no source has yet been identified for this one.

[11] I will use Alexander Pope's translation of *The Odyssey of Homer* (London, 1806), since it was the most popular one available at the time Irving wrote *The Sketch Book*. Irving never

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many of the shifting scenes of life' (9). Crayon's visit to Europe is thus conceived as an odyssey of sorts, with sketches of the author's adventures sent back to America as enchanting tales.

Irving's invocation of the *Odyssey* at the beginning of *The Sketch Book* is immediately given specific point in the persona he develops for Geoffrey Crayon; he is to be the Odysseus who confronts as a 'nobody' the 'very famous' Polyphemus.[12] Crayon writes that 'I was always fond of visiting new scenes and observing strange characters and manners' (8), in words that echo those of the Odysseus who wants to meet the Cyclopes:

> I call'd my fellows, and these words addrest:
> 'My dear associates, here indulge your rest:
> While, with my single ship, advent'rous I
> Go forth, the manners of yon men to try;
> Whether a race unjust, of barb'rous might,
> Rude, and unconscious of a stranger's right,
> Or such who harbour pity in their breast,
> Revere the gods, and succour the distressed?' (*Od.* 9.199–206)

Crayon, like Odysseus, is curious to learn the 'manners of yon men' and the Europeans whom Crayon is about to meet are giants like the Cyclopes:

> I was anxious to see the great men of Europe, for I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson.... I will visit this land of wonders, thought I, and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated. (9)

Crayon's description of the Europeans and their superiority has to most readers sounded slyly ironic: he may be culturally insecure as an American in 'this land of wonders', but like Thomas Jefferson he certainly rejects the arguments of philosophers such as Buffon who characterize Americans as 'degenerate'.[13]

studied Greek and so his knowledge of Homer would have been through a translation such as Pope's.

[12] When the Cyclops asks Odysseus his name, Odysseus replies with a pun, 'My name is Nobody' (Hom. *Od.* 9.366). The Cyclops' name, Polyphemus (*Od.* 9.407), means 'much spoken of' or 'very famous'.

[13] Among the 'philosophers' to whom Crayon alludes was Georges Buffon, who, in his book *Histoire naturelle génerale et particulièrè* (Paris, 1769), argued 'that nature is less active, less energetic on one side of the globe than she is on the other', to use Thomas Jefferson's translation

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In both his metaphor and his tone, Crayon recalls the Odysseus who prepares to confront his 'giant', Polyphemus. Odysseus uses this same metaphor of the mountain to convey Polyphemus' towering superiority over him:

> A form enormous! Far unlike the race
> Of human birth, in stature, or in face;
> As some lone mountain's monstrous growth he stood,
> Crown'd with rough thickets, and a nodding wood. (Hom. *Od.* 9.221–4)

Odysseus, of course, is narrating this tale after the fact, knowing that in the end he will defeat the giant and make a name for himself in the process; he does not believe in Polyphemus' inherent superiority any more than Crayon does in that of the European giants he is about to meet. Odysseus exalts his antagonist only to make his own victory seem all the more impressive. Thus Irving's choice of the Odysseus who confronts Polyphemus as his model for Crayon's encounters with European 'giants' highlights the irony and the anxiety with which Irving, as an American writer, took up his pen again after several years to resume his career in the land of Milton and Shakespeare.

In every sense, Crayon is a 'bookish' hero. Not only does he compare his adventures to a 'volume' and derive their contents from the books he has read; he also becomes an Odysseus who does much of his wandering in libraries and whose Cyclopes are literary giants, as the sketch 'Roscoe' illustrates. The first place that Crayon takes us after his arrival in England is to a library named the Athenaeum in Liverpool, and there he introduces us to one of the European 'giants' he had been expecting to meet, a famous writer called William Roscoe, a man who 'lives with antiquity and posterity' (18). Roscoe had once lived in a 'mansion…built in the Grecian style', but he had subsequently fallen on hard times and had lost his home and the beloved library he kept there.

When Crayon imagines the scene of the auction at which that library had been sold, he presents it as another confrontation between small and gigantic:

> Did such a scene admit of ludicrous associations, we might imagine something whimsical in this strange irruption into the regions of learning. Pigmies rummaging the

in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston, MA, 1829), 44. Jefferson was eager to refute Buffon's arguments.

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armoury of a giant, and contending for the possession of weapons which they could not wield. (19)

Irving is much preoccupied in *The Sketch Book* with this theme of raiding libraries; at some level he sees himself as a Pigmy 'rummaging the armoury [that is, library] of a giant' as he writes his collection, an American plundering the storehouse of European literature and 'contending for the possession of weapons which [he] could not wield'. Several of the sketches deal with this theme: 'The Art of Bookmaking', 'The Mutability of Literature', and 'Stratford-On-Avon'.

Europe was full of literary giants, but the one who most influenced Irving was Sir Walter Scott, whom Irving visited for several days in 1817. Scott modelled for Irving a professional life of writing, as Joy S. Kasson has noted.[14] Scott also encouraged Irving to draw on folk traditions in his writing and to learn German, which ultimately led Irving to read the story of Peter Klaus.

## II. The personal frame

I dreamt that I was once more in my native home [–] everything around me looked as in my happier days. The mother that had so fondly cherished my childhood was hanging over me with looks of fondness – I awoke – in a strange land – poor [–] sick – solitary – desolate.[15]

The dream that Irving here records in notes written when *The Sketch Book* was taking shape highlights the personal dimensions of his interest in Odysseus; for Irving was himself a dreamer thinking fondly of his home far away during the period when he wrote the first of his sketches. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky has argued that Irving 'was continually preoccupied with the idea of home' during these years – years that he spent in England, 'desolate' because of financial difficulties in his family's business.[16] What finally broke his sense of exile and grief was the act of writing *The Sketch Book* and in particular the story of Rip Van Winkle, a story in which he returned home in his imagination.

[14] J. S. Kasson, *Artistic Voyagers: Europe and the American Imagination in the Works of Irving, Allston, Cole, Cooper, and Hawthorne* (Westport, CT, 1982), 13–15.

[15] W. Irving, *Notebook* from 1818, in *Journals and Notebooks. Volume II, 1807–1822*, ed. W. A. Reichart and L. Schlissel (Boston, MA, 1981), 268.

[16] J. Rubin-Dorksy, *Adrift in the Old World. The Psychological Pilgrimage of Washington Irving* (Chicago, IL, 1988), 27.

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Personally and professionally adrift, Irving set off for Europe in 1815 with the ultimate intention of travelling to Greece. His plans, however, were altered by the financial misfortunes of his family's business in England: 'I sit like a shipwrecked mariner & look out upon the tranquil bosom of that deep in which my hopes have been overwhelmed.'[17] Homer writes in a similar manner of Odysseus, shipwrecked on Calypso's island. The goddess offers him immortality but Odysseus longs only for home. He sits on the shore each day and looks out to sea, longing for his *nostos*, his 'return':

> Him pensive on the lonely beach she found,
> With streaming eyes in briny torrents drown'd,
> And inly pining for his native shore…
> On rock and shores consum'd the tedious day;
> There sat all desolate, and sigh'd alone,
> With echoing sorrows made the mountains groan,
> And roll'd his eyes o'er all the restless main…
>
> (Hom. *Od.* 5.193–5, 200–4)

'[T]emptest [*sic*] tossed and weather beaten', unsure of when he will return, Irving finds himself thinking, like Odysseus, about home far away.[18]

'Rip Van Winkle' is, in part, Irving's fantasy of what it might be like to be an Odysseus who returns home with tales of his adventures and thereby becomes a hero. Rip's tale is just the sort of fantasy that Irving would entertain, since the 'degenerate' proves his worth through the stories he has to tell about his twenty-year 'adventure'. Crayon's 'degenerate' American was in part Irving himself, anxious to prove his worth. Irving's own words about the genesis of 'Rip' confirm that he saw himself in his hero; he is said to have sat for days 'facing empty sheets of paper' until the night when he wrote 'Rip' in a rush of

[17] Irving (n. 15), 174.

[18] W. Irving, *Letters. I. 1802–1803*, ed. R. M. Aderman et al. (Boston, MA, 1978), 449–50. Odysseus' own attitude toward 'wandering' acknowledged its emotional costs; Homer may have presented his travels as an exploration in the line I quoted earlier, but in the very next line he highlights the sufferings they caused: 'He suffered many griefs in his heart upon the sea' (Hom. *Od.* 1.4). Odysseus himself asserts that 'nothing is worse for mortals than wandering' (*Od.* 15.345). As Silvia Montiglio demonstrates in *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago, IL, 2005), 3, 'wandering' was for the Greeks an ambivalent condition: 'At every turn, a wanderer will be praised for his superior knowledge or blamed for his idle talking, invoked as an authority or rejected as a liar and cheat.' Odysseus was the prime exemplification of this ambivalence, one which will be on display as well in the character of Rip: 'Rip's story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night. The neighbours stared when they heard it; some were seen to wink at each other and put their tongues in their cheeks…' (39).

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inspiration: 'He said it had all come back to him; Sleepy Hollow had awakened him from his long dull, desponding slumber; and then he read the first chapters of "Rip Van Winkle".'[19] The Rip who awakens from his slumber and returns to tell his tale is the author as hero. Irving, too, is 'the wise Ulysses…more indebted to his sleeping than his waking moments for his most subtle achievements'.

Although presented as a projection into the past, 'Rip Van Winkle' is really a projection into the future and an analogue to *The Sketch Book* itself, which Irving sent back to America 'to reinstate myself in the world's thoughts – to raise myself from the degradation into which I had fallen'.[20] Irving's own odyssey predisposed him to choose the *Odyssey* as his template and, as a result, to envision 'Rip Van Winkle' as a version of the *Odyssey*. 'Rip' is thus a *mise en abyme* of *The Sketch Book* itself.

## III. The mythical frame

From that point an ebbing of his greatness and a wandering amidst the mythic and incredible was manifested. [Longinus], *Subl.* 9.13

The ancient literary critic Longinus argued that Homer's genius declined after he composed the *Iliad*, a dynamic work filled with images of real life; writing the *Odyssey* in old age, Homer 'wandered' into the realm of fantastic myths much like the hero of his story. In antiquity a journey to distant places became the rationale and vehicle for mythologizing; in making the *Odyssey* the paradigm for his *Sketch Book*, Irving was working in the same tradition. We could say of Irving what Longinus said of Homer: his wandering in a world of 'poetical associations' enabled him to fulfil his wish to give America its own mythology in the story of Rip Van Winkle.

The story of 'Rip Van Winkle' 'was found among the papers of the late Dietrich Knickerbocker' (28), who had 'written' Irving's earlier *History of New York*. Set in America, the tale is part of the 'legendary lore so invaluable to true history' (28) and is thus presented as

[19] See S. T. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving* (New York, 1935), i.169. The story is recounted in 'The Birthplace of Rip Van Winkle', *Packard's Monthly* (November 1869), 333.

[20] Irving (n. 18), 743. See also Rubin-Dorsky (n. 16), 115: 'Ultimately, Irving hoped that the nation would expand its idea of "usefulness" and accept him – just as the village finally welcomed Rip – as chronicler.'

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a postscript to *A History of New York* rather than as an episode in Crayon's European adventures. Knickerbocker, however, had been a reluctant historian; he claimed Herodotus as his model but longed instead for 'the privileges of Dan Homer or Dan Vergil to enliven my narration, with giants and Lystrigonians'.[21] Given his focus on 'giants and Lystrigonians', Knickerbocker clearly would like to write an *Odyssey*. He did manage to present the story of the founding of New York as a new version of Virgil's *Aeneid* and to portray the attack on Fort Christina as Iliadic ('Fort Christina, which like another Troy, had stood a siege of a full *ten* hours' [239]).[22] His *Odyssey*, however, found its form only when he wrote 'Rip Van Winkle'. Indeed, it is Knickerbocker who suggested that Odysseus' heroism manifested itself when he was asleep.

In his prospectus at the beginning of *The History*, Knickerbocker draws a contrast between the historian and the poet in their reactions to the decline of once great cities:

> [T]he poet may wander among their mouldering arches and broken columns, and indulge the visionary flights of his fancy – but alas! Alas! the modern historian whose pen, like my own, is doomed to confine itself to dull matter of fact, seeks in vain among their oblivious remains, for some memorial that may tell the instructive tale of their glory and their ruin. (18)

In *A History*, Knickerbocker's romantic ambitions are usually frustrated, turning him into a satirist who shows how epic myth does not fit America's history. The poet whom Knickerbocker envies in the passage above is someone more like Geoffrey Crayon, able to 'wander' among 'mouldering' ruins of the past and to 'indulge…his fancy'.[23] It is that Knickerbocker who tells the tale of 'Rip Van Winkle' and who fits harmoniously within the Odyssean scheme that Crayon constructs for his narrative.

We meet this 'poetic' Knickerbocker in *A History* during Peter Stuyvesant's voyage on the Hudson. Near the site where Rip Van

[21] My citations of the 1809 edition are drawn from W. Irving, *History, Tales and Sketches*, ed. J. W. Tuttleton (New York, 1983); this passage is from 427–8.

[22] See J. Walsh, 'Washington Irving's Comic Aeneas and the Apotheosis of Santa Claus', *CML* 26.2 (2006), 22–49.

[23] Knickerbocker's description of the poet closely matches Crayon's 'account of himself' in *The Sketch Book*: '…every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement…to loiter about the ruined castle – to meditate on the fallen tower…' (9).

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Winkle will later live (as Martin Roth observes[24]), Knickerbocker describes a scene from the golden age: 'But when the fairy hour of twilight spread its magic mists around, then did the face of nature assume a thousand fugitive charms'.[25] Soon, however, he stops and rebukes himself for his 'wandering', 'historic wayfaring', and 'dwelling' on 'fairy scenes' recollected from youth and endowed with 'the charms of a thousand legendary tales'. Such 'idling' does not befit a historian and his 'weary task' (216). Here myth is used not to mock but to enchant; it is a fantasy by which to escape from history and to return to a beginning in time, to childhood. The code words for this poetic vocation – wandering, idling – highlight how myth takes us off the track of 'relentless Time' (216) and thus away from history. Because the *Odyssey* was the story of return, narrated out of chronological sequence and after the fact, it was time's and history's antithesis, a vehicle for retreat rather than advance, the venue for 'wandering'.

Irving was writing *The Sketch Book* during the years when America was passing from eighteenth-century neo-classicism toward nineteenth-century romanticism. He turned to the *Odyssey*, I suggest, because he was looking to myth not for political models (as the Founders had) but for poetic ones.[26] The *Odyssey* serves as an allegory not for the birth of the nation but for the birth of myth and of the mythic storyteller as hero. In Lillian Doherty's words, 'a distinctive feature of the *Odyssey* is the highly self-reflexive way in which it thematizes the art of storytelling, and especially the art of the bard, the epic storyteller'.[27] On two occasions in the *Odyssey*, the hero is compared to a poet and, as Silvia Montiglio has noted, Homer emphasizes that status by allotting the narration of four books to Odysseus, books that immediately follow the performance of Demodocus, the professional

[24] M. Roth, *Comedy in America. The Lost World of Washington Irving* (Port Washington, NY, 1976), 128.

[25] I quote this passage from Irving (n. 21), 624; in subsequent editions Irving dropped the word 'fairy' before 'hour of twilight'.

[26] As J. P. McWilliams, *The American Epic. Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (Cambridge, 1989), 22, has shown, Americans, trained as neo-classicists, had long aspired to create an epic poem about their nation's birth, but 'Americans of the early Republic grew up despising the contents of the epic poems they revered'. The savagery of Achilles, the trickery of Odysseus, and the imperialism of Aeneas were each distasteful to a republican and Christian New World. For the ways in which the Classics shaped American attitudes at the time of America's founding, see C. J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics* (Cambridge, MA, 1994) and C. Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism. Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910* (Baltimore, MD, 2002).

[27] L. Doherty, *Siren Songs. Gender Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1995), 16–17.

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bard. Moreover, the association of poets with wandering makes particular sense in the Greek scheme. The function of the poet is to spread the fame of heroes; therefore, 'because he moves from place to place, the itinerant poet is like poetry itself'.[28]

Irving's personas, Knickerbocker and Crayon, are romantic poets who long 'to escape…from the commonplace realities of the present… and lose [themselves] among the shadowy grandeurs of the past' (9). Their credo is precisely that of the later American romantics such as Hawthorne; Crayon (like his creator Irving) and Hawthorne both leave America, which Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* characterizes as 'a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity…nor anything but a common-place prosperity', for a Europe with 'the charms of storied and poetical associations' (Crayon) and an Italy that offered 'a sort of poetic and fairy precinct' (Hawthorne).[29] Their descriptions of romance are echoed in what Longinus said long ago about the *Odyssey*: its power, in the words of Charles Segal, 'to transport us to places that fascinate'.[30]

Irving chooses the *Odyssey* as his template for 'Rip Van Winkle' in part because Odysseus was the West's first romantic hero, a man who ventures forth into a strange and fantastic world and then tells in his own words what he saw and felt there.[31] The *Odyssey* does not simply take us back in time but also outside the known world to places that are literally utopian, 'no places' that are also 'good places': the island of Calypso or the land of the Phaeacians. As James Romm has noted, 'at the furthest remove from the *oikoumene* [the inhabited world] [the *Odyssey*] is assumed to become utterly fabulous'.[32] If Irving's ideal is a world of fantasy, then the *Odyssey* provides an itinerary for 'wandering' there. That is why Rip's story, although set in America, fits into the template of Crayon's Odyssean adventures in Europe: Knickerbocker is a bard, describing a place far away and a time long ago, whom Crayon 'encounters' in the midst of his adventures.

[28] Montiglio (n. 18), 96–8.

[29] N. Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun. Or, The Romance of Monte Beni* (New York, 1990), 3.

[30] C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 3.

[31] Indeed, the *Odyssey* has regularly been cited as one of the sources for the ancient novel or romance; that genre but not those labels existed in antiquity. See N. Holzberg, 'The Genre: Novels Proper and the Fringe' and C. Ruiz-Montero, 'The Rise of the Greek Novel', in G. Schmeling (ed.), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden, 1996), 11–28 and 29–86. Chariton's *Callirhoe*, Petronius' *Satyricon*, and Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* are all ancient novels modelled on the *Odyssey*.

[32] J. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought. Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 187.

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## IV. The mythic Rip Van Winkle

Rip is potentially, a truly mythic figure. He is even more: *ur*-mythic.[33]

If *The Sketch Book* is the story of a wandering hero's adventures, Rip Van Winkle is the Odyssean adventure in particular to which Crayon alludes in his 'Author's Account': the confrontation between Odysseus as 'nobody' and the 'very famous' Polyphemus. Rip in his Odyssean persona is a comic illustration of American 'degeneracy': he is ordinary, unaccomplished, and has children who looked 'as if they belonged to nobody' (31).

It is clear why both Crayon and Knickerbocker the poet, Irving's alter egos, would have found this story appealing. For Rip possesses a 'roving passion' and 'idle humour' much like theirs. Rip 'longed…to escape…from the commonplace realities of the present' (for Rip, his household chores) and instead to mingle with 'the great men of the earth' (9). For Rip, these are the men who sit on the porch of the local inn, 'a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers and other idle personages of the village' (31). Among them can be found 'Derrick Van Bummel the schoolmaster, a dapper, learned little man, who was not to be daunted by the most gigantic word in the dictionary' (32). Not surprisingly, given Crayon's ironic framework, Rip's great men are not very different from Rip himself, actually 'little' and 'idle', and not very different from the bookish Crayon, since their giants are found in dictionaries.

Rip also meets great men in the hills, where he encounters 'the great Hendrick Hudson' and his crew, who constitute, as Marcel Heiman has suggested, a parallel with the gigantic race that Crayon expects to meet in Europe.[34] Rip's adventure, however, is a fantasy that inverts the 'reality' of European superiority and, through the Odyssean model, underlines the irony of Crayon's professed sense of awe. Crayon's Europeans were to be as 'superior' to Americans as the Alps were to a 'highland of the Hudson'. Yet Rip's tale begins with a description of these same mountains, the Kaatskills, as a 'dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family…swelling up to noble height and lording it over the surrounding country'. When Rip enters these

[33] P. Young, 'Fallen From Time: The Mythic Rip Van Winkle', *Kenyon Review* 22.4 (1960), 551.

[34] M. Heiman, 'Rip Van Winkle: A Psychoanalytic Note on the Story and its Author', *American Imago* 16 (1959), 36.

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lofty mountains, he does not meet 'giants' but instead a 'short, square built old fellow'. William Hedges has argued that '[Hudson's men] are small and comical…because they are in a sense mock-heroic images of Rip himself; they represent his unconscious recognition of his lack of stature'.[35] I suggest that they are instead a fantasy of American superiority over Europeans, for Rip is the taller one and he returns from the encounter to become the 'hero' of the tale.

'Rip' was not just Irving's personal fantasy of literary success but also America's. The quote from Milton that heads 'English Writers on America', the sketch that immediately follows 'Rip', is revealing in that regard: 'Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks' (43). Milton's words, and the sketch that they introduce, serve as a commentary on 'Rip', underlining Rip's awakening as a storyteller after his long sleep. America is now itself an Odyssean hero, 'an infant giant' and a 'gigantic foe' (45–6).

'Rip Van Winkle' is not mythic simply because it is based on a German folk tale or on archetypal traditions about long sleepers.[36] It is not even mythic merely because it recalls the story of Odysseus. It is mythic because, like the instalment of *The Sketch Book* in which it appears, it takes the *Odyssey* as the paradigm for creating myth: wandering into far-off places where your experiences seem to others to be fantastic and enchanting. Writing in America, Irving had earlier been unable to create a myth of this sort. Only when he was wandering in England could he become the Homer he had earlier longed to be, sending *The Sketch Book* back home as his tales from beyond. Although we can read 'Rip Van Winkle' as a story all alone, we cannot really understand why Irving created his 'lazy Odysseus' out of Peter Klaus and tales of enchanted sleepers unless we see 'Rip' as a story inspired by Irving's own Odyssean adventures and framed by a wandering poet's Odyssean persona. As a historian back at home, Washington

[35] Hedges (n. 4), 138.

[36] There is a long and broad tradition of men who fall asleep for a long time and then return to a changed world. K. W. Cameron ('The Long-sleep-and-changed-world Motif in "Rip Van Winkle"', *Emerson Society Quarterly* 19–21 [1960], 35–6) and Young (n. 33) each catalogue the main examples, some of which go back to the classical world. At some point, however, this tradition must have crossed paths with the *Odyssey*; for Klaus's twenty-year absence and dog back at home seem indebted to Homer (these details are not in any of the other tales of long sleepers). This blending of the *Odyssey* with other tales of sleepers makes perfect sense, however, when we remember that Odysseus himself returned home asleep and awoke to a changed world (see Hom. *Od.* 13.187 f.).

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Irving could only mock a mythic America; as a poet abroad, he could imagine one.

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