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Diedrich Knickerbocker, Regular Bred Historian

Washington Irving has been a casualty of chronology. More precisely, he has been a casualty of a particular way of thinking about history: the notion that history progresses through chronological, linear time.[1] For if one of the stories of the literature of the United States is the story of dawning modernity, the best that can be said about Irving is that he represents an incipient phase in the process; his writings and his career are merely harbingers of better things to come, notably, the more mature works of Cooper and then (especially) Hawthorne and Melville. This, at any rate, long constituted the standard view, which described Irving's work not as "timeless, but temporal" and cast Irving himself as "a man of his time rather than for all time," belonging "to an outdated phase of culture," "too remote to engage twentieth-century sensibilities."[2]

In this view, Irving would seem to be a victim of the very historical processes his historian alter-ego Diedrich Knickerbocker attempts to forestall in Irving's first major work, *A History of New York* (1809). There, Knickerbocker takes on the task of rescuing the history of the Dutch settlement of New York from the "maw of oblivion."[3] If not for the toils of the patient and diligent historian, he insists, faithfully "transmit[ting] their renown to all succeeding time" (380), empires and nations, civilizations and cities, would perish, forgotten. Against the image of the reclusive chronicler poring in solitude over dusty volumes in search of dull facts and compiling his annals, Knickerbocker describes historians as "the public almoners of fame" (662), and likens them to the Creator—"the world—the world, is nothing without the historian!" (380)—or crusaders in the fight against the march of time, against the inevitability of superannuation. The early history of Dutch New York, he declares, would doubtless have been passed over by the forward rush of history had Knickerbocker himself not arrived and "snatched it from obscurity, in the very nick of time" (381). Thus, the

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bookish antiquarian metamorphoses into an heroic figure: "little I—the progenitor . . . with my book under my arm, and New York on my back, pressing forward like a gallant commander to honour and immortality" (381). But unlike Melville and Hawthorne, Irving has not had the benefit of a historian-champion, a role not even filled by his biographer Stanley T. Williams. For more than 70 years the standard authority (until the 2007 publication of Andrew Burstein's *The Original Knickerbocker*), Williams, always careful not to praise his subject, warned against measuring Irving "by the immemorial touchstones of the past, tested by which he is often trivial, or by the standards of to-day, by which he has been outmoded" (xiii). For Williams, Irving "emerges as a talented writer, hardly more" (xiii).

So if the world is nothing without the historian who gives it life, neither is a literary reputation, which is also constantly in danger of being passed over by time. Or to put this another way, literary figures are themselves always in danger of becoming outdated, of seeming anachronistic. Anachronism, in one of its senses, implies the kind of superannuation that Diedrich Knickerbocker combats: the tendency of things—nations, concepts, systems of belief, literary styles—to become "dated." As time proceeds steadily forward, or so the story goes, such things inevitably fall into disrepute, are superseded or forgotten altogether. The Ptolemaic conception of the universe, the literary form of epic poetry, and the eight-track tape are anachronistic in this sense: they are systems of belief, modes of representation, or technologies no longer in wide circulation. We know them only by their traces, only as relics. Still other creations, however, leave no trace at all; they are "lost in the maw of oblivion." Thomas Greene has called this process of supercession "pathetic anachronism" (223), which is ultimately "the destiny of all enduring human products, including texts, since all products come into being bearing the marks of their historical moment and then, if they last, are regarded as alien during a later moment because of these marks" (223).

Or, as in the case of Irving, because of the marks they do not bear. Until quite recently, American literary history was ambivalent with regard to Irving because the vocabulary often used to describe him derived from his successors: no one, for instance, would call Hawthorne post-Irvingian, but Irving has long been labeled pre-Romantic. The tendency, on the part of early and mid-twentieth-century critics, was to consider Irving only in relation to later writers around whom a more vibrant critical discussion

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developed, to see him only by looking through the American renaissance authors.[4] Within such a narrative of progress and succession, measured by the standards of later writers, Irving's reputation, almost by definition, did not stand a chance.

By contrast, thanks to the "historical turn" in literary studies over the past two decades, twenty-first-century readers of Irving have engaged in what might be called a kind of historicist corrective, one that approaches Irving not through the prism of the (later) American renaissance, but locates him in his own time and place. Indeed, historicism's contextualizing procedure has made possible fruitful revaluations of Irving's writings by grounding them within various early nineteenth-century discourses, most notably ideologies of U.S. imperialism and constructions of masculinity.[5] In these accounts, Irving emerges as an author both shaped by and helping to give shape to the ideological conflicts and cultural anxieties of the period in which his works were produced.

And yet, even situated within his own time, Irving remains, paradoxically, out of date. David Anthony, for instance, shows how Irving's work exhibits a form of early nineteenth-century "anxious masculinity" (116) brought about by market instability (in particular, the financial panic of 1819). Hence, *The Sketch-Book*, Anthony argues, reflects "a nostalgic longing for a period predating the modern period of commerce and credit," a period in which Irving himself was "decidedly out of place" (112). Similarly, in perhaps the finest of recent treatments of Irving, Michael Warner attributes Irving's archaism to his famous bachelorhood, which, Warner argues, disqualified him from the "reproductive narrative" that shaped his culture's historical-temporal consciousness. Indeed, for Warner, it is the "bachelor's fall from reproductive continuity," that "lies behind Irving's preoccupation with modes of historical time." Irving thus deploys an "antihistorical rhetoric of anachronism" in order to "remediate the discontinuities of post-patriarchal sexuality" (776). Or put more simply, "Irving idealized patriarchy just at the moment when it was clearly being displaced by modernity" (776–77). Thus, even for his most sensitive historicist readers, Irving remains a man behind the times, his face turned toward the past as all around him time presses steadily onward.[6]

The point, then, is that as much as recent historicist accounts provide us with new ways of reading Irving and can teach us a great deal about, among other things, early American conceptions of masculine selfhood and "re-

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productive ideology" (Warner 22), these accounts also reproduce, rather than overturn, the charge of outdatedness advanced by earlier generations of critics—a charge, I should note, that has been with Irving almost from the beginning of his career, when, in 1825, William Hazlitt famously called Irving's writings "literary anachronisms" (421). And they do so, I want to suggest, because despite the important differences in methodology between the (more recent) synchronic analyses offered by new historicism and the (older) diachronic analyses typical of more traditional modes of literary history, both approaches remain committed to a conception of history as sequential development. Thus, rather than providing a countermeasure to narratives of historical progress, the historicist insistence on contextualization actually reinscribes historical progression by other means. That is, to contextualize, to divide history into distinct moments (or periods) along a temporal continuum, each possessing its own unique character, is to continue to labor under the assumption that Irving "belongs" to a "then," distinct and remote from our "now."

By contrast, I argue that it is precisely this conception of history—the new historicist idea that texts or ideas "belong" to one period rather than another—that Irving's "rhetoric of anachronism," his metahistorical discourse, calls into question. And further, I argue that the new historicist insistence upon grounding texts in a predetermined temporal context actually precludes the possibility that they may speak to and within other (nonsynchronic) contexts. I mean to demonstrate otherwise. So in what follows, I shall be less interested in placing Irving *in* history than in exploring what Irving has to say *about* history. Indeed, as much as the "historical turn" in literary studies of the last 20 years has led literary scholars to productive considerations of the relations between literature and history—a more complex understanding of texts' embedment in their moments of production, a reconfiguration of the text/context relationship, a heightened awareness of the mutability of historical truth, and scrutiny of the relations between the "actual" past and modes of historical representation—far less attention has been given to the ways in which early American writers, Washington Irving perhaps foremost among them, were likewise attuned to these questions.

Yet much of Irving's best work, beginning with *A History of New York* (1809), was written in the guise of a mock-historian, Diedrich Knickerbocker, the creation through which Irving engaged in a thoroughgoing cri-

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tique of history-writing. On the one hand, Irving's Knickerbocker writings persistently work to undermine his own era's modes of writing history. On the other hand, these writings form an interrogation of the meaning of history, not easily reducible to a single determining context or ideology, that Irving sustained throughout the various works he attributed to his historian alter-ego. My analysis proceeds, first, with a consideration of the historiographical self-consciousness of *A History of New York* and turns, in the second half of the essay, to the temporal intricacy and epistemological skepticism of "Rip Van Winkle." Taken together, these works form a kind of practical illustration of the dismantling of history-writing in our own time which cannot be adequately accounted for by conventional historicist contextualization, by confining them to a particular moment in time, much less one that has been superseded by, or that is irretrievably distant and distinct from, the critical present. Paradoxically, then, Irving's archaism, his posture of obsolescence, amounts to an argument against the very idea of obsolescence. Far from being outmoded, Irving has never been more timely than right now.

Irving became one of nineteenth-century America's most widely read authors by both participating in and lampooning the project of creating a national past—sometimes simultaneously. His body of work includes "serious" histories (notably, biographies of George Washington and Christopher Columbus) and fictional sketches—among them "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—that are themselves deeply concerned with matters historiographical. Yet *A History of New York* has rarely been taken seriously in discussions of early national history writing for reasons probably best summed up by William Hedges: "The book may contain a great deal of fact," Hedges wrote, "but to call it history is simply to abuse the word."[7] However, the line separating fiction and history that underpins Hedges's assessment is surely less stark in the wake of the work of Hayden White and other poststructuralist challenges to the practice of history writing. Among literary scholars, at least, I suspect there is somewhat less concern today about considering Irving's provocative admixture of historical fact and fiction a species of history (see esp. White).

At the time of its publication *A History of New York* was the best (in fact, the only) account of the early Dutch reign of New York that had yet been published and could thus—and was intended to—take its place among the

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state histories of writers like Jeremy Belknap and Benjamin Trumbull. The book was even dedicated to the New York Historical Society "as a humble and unworthy Testimony of the profound veneration and exalted esteem of the Society's Sincere Well wisher and Devoted Servant," a wry jab at the Society's "real" historians who, by the time of the bicentennial of Hendrick Hudson's founding, had been unable to produce anything approaching a comprehensive history of colonial New York (see Black 80–81, and Williams and McDowell).

One of the functions of *A History of New York* was to deflate the high moral import of nationalist historiography.[8] Or as he put it in the "Author's Apology" included in the 1848 revised edition of the *Knickerbocker History*, Irving wanted "[t]o burlesque the pedantic lore displayed in certain American works" (CW 3).[9] The satire and burlesque that Irving deployed under the guise of his fictional mock-historian captured the tensions, contradictions, and irregularities of a genre undergoing change. If nothing else, Knickerbocker's mock history provides a useful index to the transitional state of early national historiography. The book appeared between two important eras of historical writing in America, coming after the great New England colonial historians, yet preceding the Romantic historians by two decades or more. In his study of Revolutionary histories, *The Politics of History*, Arthur H. Shaffer notes that there was a "hiatus, chronological as well as political or ideological" between the colonial historians and the generation of historians born in the three decades before the revolution (8).[10] *A History of New York* registers these changes in an especially perceptive way. Irving's pseudo-history provides a running self-referential commentary on its own historicity—and by extension on early national historiography. Scholars have long attributed Knickerbocker's self-reflexivity to Irving's adaptation of the narrative methods of Sterne, Swift, Cervantes, and Rabelais.[11] Yet by placing Diedrich Knickerbocker in relation to previous *fictional* narrators, critics of the *History* have tended to ignore the extent to which Irving modeled him on a tradition of *historical* narrators.

For instance, structurally *A History of New York* moves from older to newer styles of historical narration, adopting the conventions of classical and colonial histories in the early parts of the book and gradually becoming embroiled in more contemporary forms of historical discourse. Book 1 pokes fun at early colonial chronicles, like Samuel Purchas's 20-volume *Purchas His Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World in Sea*

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Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others (1625)—on which Irving doubtless modeled his own pedantic chapter headings. Similarly, the pedantry of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, for example, especially his penchant for citing the classical historians, is a likely model for Knickerbocker's comic displays of erudition. Conceptually, too, *A History of New York* adopts conventions used by Mather (and many others), like arranging his history as a series of books organized according to the reigns of successive governors. And perhaps most notably, the "philosophical speculations" that comprise Book 1 have a model in another American work that Irving likely knew: Thomas Prince's influential *Chronological History of New England in the Form of Annals* (1730). Like Knickerbocker, Prince dwells at some length on the difficulties of his researches and begins his annals with a long introduction that runs from an account of the Creation up to the beginning of the British empire.

Although the principal targets of ridicule in Book 1 are colonial historians, from the beginning Knickerbocker is a recognizably republican historian. His narrative is rife with the favored platitudes of early national history writing. As George Calcott has noted, "probably the most frequent historical cliché of the period was 'to rescue from oblivion'" (113), which are the very first words of Knickerbocker's history: "To rescue from oblivion the memory of former incidents, and to render a just tribute of renown to the many great and wonderful transactions of our Dutch progenitors, Diedrich Knickerbocker, native of the great city of New York, produces this historical essay" (377)—variations of which are repeated throughout the text (381, 437, 452). A second cliché in the early American historian's lexicon were claims of "authenticity," honesty and accuracy" (see Calcott 121–50 and Shaffer 34).

For his part, Knickerbocker insists ad nauseum on his own "faithful veracity" (379), his adherence to the "most approved and fashionable plan of modern historians" (449), his "duty as a faithful historian" (451, 476), and his "unimpeached character for veracity" (581), and claims that his is a "faithful and veritable history" (642), the "most authentic, minute and satisfactory of all histories" (595). If truthfulness and accuracy were the "chief merits" of any authentic historian, such veracity was to be achieved principally through scrupulous research and displays of erudition, which postrevolutionary readers expected. In fact, documentation was a particular obsession among early nationals. David Van Tassel has called the years

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following the War for Independence "documania," as citizens rushed to gather and preserve the materials of history, from government documents and correspondence to families' genealogical records and oral accounts of colonial life (see Van Tassel 103–10).

Such researches were further promoted—and their findings disseminated—by the formation of state historical societies, beginning with Belknap's founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791. Connecticut and New York followed in 1799 and 1804, respectively, and by 1860 there were over a hundred such organizations, some in territories that had not yet even been admitted as states.[12] Appropriately, then, Knickerbocker, like other historians of the time—Trumbull, for instance, remarks that "[t]he labor of collecting the materials for the history and compilement, has been almost incredible" (xvii)—takes pains to describe his work as an "arduous undertaking, which has been the whole business of a long and solitary life" (377), in which he set about "carefully winnowing away the chaff of hypothesis and the tares of fable" (379), relying on materials "carefully collected, collated and arranged" so as to produce "a history which may serve as a foundation, on which a host of worthies shall hereafter raise a noble superstructure" (381). His pages are "abounding with sound wisdom and profound erudition" (387)—so much so that, early on, he must offer his readers

> fair warning, that I am about to plunge for a chapter or two, into as complete a labyrinth as ever historian was perplexed withal; therefore I advise them to take fast hold of my skirts, and keep close at my heels, venturing neither to the right hand nor to the left, least they get bemired in a slough of unintelligible learning, or have their brains knocked out by some of those hard Greek names which will be flying about in all directions. (391)

Once Knickerbocker turns to his subject proper, his satire is directed almost entirely at his contemporaries. A great deal of critical attention has been given, for example, to explicating Irving's political satire: his treatment of early republican factiousness, of "mobocracy," and, especially, of Thomas Jefferson, the certain model for the ineffectual governor William the Testy, whose reign is described in Book 4.[13] Less apparent, however, is Irving's historiographical satire. Products of the Enlightenment, early national historians were "anxious to disassociate their function from that

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of mere chroniclers," like Purchas and Prince (Shaffer 37), and to "[leave] behind the traditional providential interpretations of history" that characterized the work of ecclesiastical historians like Mather (Cohen 15). The principal feature distinguishing early national histories from their colonial predecessors was their nationalistic tenor.[14] As one writer explained the task of the national historian in 1806,

> [Independence] may indeed be considered a moral and political phenomenon, the real existence of which, after ages would find it difficult to believe, or to account for, if it were not authenticated by indubitable evidence, accompanied with correspondent illustration. To put the event upon the solid footing of undeniable historical truth, to develope the means, and to perpetuate the memory of those by whom it was effected, is the duty of the chronicler of the present day, and is the purpose of the present attempt. (Carpenter 21)

Nationalist histories thus performed several essential functions. Not only did they help to create a sense of a shared past among the newly republicanized former colonists, to lionize various military heroes as representative Americans, and to build a national literature, they also served more immediate political ends, like rallying support for ratification of the Constitution. And given the rancorous political environment of the early republic, historians were not unaware of this dilemma; they understood that the historian was "at the mercy" of "furious partisans" for whom "the statement of . . . facts will seem impertinent and the displaying of . . . truths appear offensive." Nevertheless, "the duty of the historian, or the chronicler, remains the same . . . [F]rom purity, strict justice, and impartiality, he must not knowingly swerve, to please or oblige either party; he must be careful to omit no incident of moment; and he must deliver his sentiments with frankness, boldness, and impartiality" (Carpenter 3).

Knickerbocker registers this sentiment repeatedly. For instance, the central conflict in Knickerbocker's narrative, between the encroaching Yankees from Connecticut and the phlegmatic Dutch burghers, is mirrored in Knickerbocker's own struggles against both rival historians and his readers. "I have had more vexations," he writes, "in those parts of my history which treat of the transactions on the eastern border, than in any other, in consequence of the troops of historians who have infested these quarters, and have shewn the honest [Dutch colonists] no mercy." Chief

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among these is "Mr. Trumbull," who "arrogantly declares that 'the Dutch were always mere intruders'" (502–3). In fact, Trumbull's account in his *History of Connecticut* of the clashes between the Yankees and the Dutch is a favorite target of Knickerbocker. He can barely contain his indignation—it "makes my gorge to rise while I write" (580)—when telling of the alleged plot, during the reign of Peter Stuyvesant, forged by the Dutch and the Indians to unite in attacking the Yankees. At such a "wanton, wicked and unparalleled attack, upon one of the most gallant and irreproachable heroes of modern times" (581), Knickerbocker is whipped into a paroxysm of protest and outrage:

> Oh reader it was false!—I swear to thee it was false—if the undeviating and unimpeached character for veracity, which I have hitherto borne throughout this work, has its due weight with thee, thou wilt not give thy faith to this tale of slander; for I pledge my honour and my immortal fame to thee, that the gallant Peter Stuyvesant, was . . . innocent of this foul conspiracy . . . Beshrew those caitiff scouts, that conspired to sully his honest name by such an imputation. (581)

As if battling against rival Yankee historians were not enough, Knickerbocker must also contend with a horde of "testy" readers, whom he knows are also likely to be furiously partisan. Of all the "perils and mishaps that surround your hardy historian," he notes, the one he has "no hopes of escaping" is "offend[ing] the morbid sensibilities of certain . . . unreasonable descendants" of the Yankees by "detailing the many misdeeds" of their ancestors. However, his duty as a faithful historian requires that he deliver the unvarnished truth: "[H]ow in heaven's name, can I help it, if your great grandfathers behaved in a scurvy manner to my great grandfathers?" (552). And here again, Knickerbocker reminds his readers of the historian's power to redress past wrongs: "I have as great a mind as ever I had for my dinner, to cut a whole host of your ancestors to mince meat, in my very next page." But his duty as a historian requires that he forbear: "I trust when you perceive how completely I have them all in my power, and how, with one flourish of my pen I could make every mother's son of ye grandfatherless, you will not be able enough to applaud my candour and magnanimity.—To resume, then, with my accustomed calmness and impartiality, the course of my history" (553).

The obvious irony, of course, is that Knickerbocker is anything but im-

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partial; he is an abuser of his power, as a historian, to bestow honor and immortality—as were many early national historians. Knickerbocker even goes so far, at the end of his history, to cast the Dutch colonists as the real progenitors of the Revolution. In the *History's* penultimate chapter, "on the decline and fall of empires," Knickerbocker explains the "subtle chain of events," beginning with the Dutch battles with the Swedes over Fort Casimer, that have led to "the present convulsions of the globe" (721). Often cited, it is one of the *History's* richest historiographical passages:

> By the treacherous surprisal of Fort Casimer, then, did the crafty Swedes enjoy a transient triumph; but drew upon their heads the vengeance of Peter Stuyvesant, who wrested New Sweden from their hands—By the conquest of New Sweden Peter Stuyvesant aroused the claims of Lord Baltimore, who appealed to the cabinet of Great Britain, who subdued the whole province of New Netherlands—By this great atchievement the whole extent of North America from Nova Scotia to the Floridas, was rendered one entire dependency upon the British crown—but mark the consequence—The hitherto scattered colonies being thus consolidated, and having no rival colonies to check or keep them in awe, waxed great and powerful, and finally becoming too strong for the mother country, were enabled to shake off its bonds, and by a glorious revolution became an independent empire—But the chain of effects stopped not here: the successful revolution in America produced the sanguinary revolution in France, which produced the puissant Bonaparte who produced the French Despotism, which has thrown the whole world in confusion! (722)

Here, in a parody of historical causation, Irving's gentle satire against his historian contemporaries burgeons into a theoretical consideration of history's ways of knowing.[15] The ridiculousness—and yet strangely, the utter plausibility—of the notion that the blundering attempts of the Dutch at warfare should be responsible for "the present convolutions of the globe" is meant to illustrate that determining causes is an arbitrary procedure.[16] That is, Knickerbocker's procedure suggests that causes and consequences proceed not naturally, but by assertion, according to the historian's ability to construct a plausibly interconnected series of events—a narrative.

Indeed, it is in this emphasis on the role of narrative representation in history writing where Irving seems to exceed the "context"—early national

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historiography—that I have thus far described. Earlier, in Book 1, for instance, Knickerbocker provides an even more vivid demonstration of the point. Before a single Dutch settler arrives in his narrative, Knickerbocker first, in successive chapters, "ventures a Description of the World, from the best authorities"; attempts to explain the creation of the world; establishes the discovery of America; explains the peopling of America; and finally, establishes the right of the first colonists to possession of the land—all of which he deems necessary to his history. Or as he puts it prefatory to the second chapter:

> [I]ndeed these points [how the world was created] are absolutely essential to be cleared up, in as much as if this world had not been formed, it is more probable, nay I may venture to assume it as a maxim or postulate at least, that this renowned island on which is situated the city of New York, would never have had an existence. The regular course of my history therefore, requires that I should proceed to notice the cosmogony or formation of this our globe. (391)

In pointing out the absurdity of historical cause and effect relations—since, apprehended only retrospectively, causes merely beget prior causes—Irving via Knickerbocker verges upon the kind of historical relativism typically associated with the postmodern moment, but that, as Brook Thomas has shown, was also a concern for American historians of the Progressive Era. As Thomas notes, Charles Beard, for one, was led to embrace relativism because of doubts about the possibility of writing causal history. "A search for the causes of America's entry into [World War I]," Beard wrote in 1936, for instance, "leads into the causes of the war, into all the history that lies beyond 1914, and into the very nature of the universe of which the history is a part; that is, unless we arbitrarily decide to cut the web and begin at some place that pleases us" (qtd. in Thomas 92). Knickerbocker, it would seem, provides a perfect illustration of such a causal history, beginning it just as Beard feared a history that fully accounts for interconnectedness would need to begin: with the "very nature of the universe of which the history is a part." By the same token, Knickerbocker's tracing of French Despotism to the Dutch defeat at Fort Casimer reveals his insistence upon first causes as little more than a matter of locating a pleasing point of origin—since it invests the battle for Fort Casimer with epochal importance—to explain contemporary events.

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The point here is not to attribute to Irving some remarkable powers of prescience. Nineteenth-century writers were far more (theoretically) reflective about historiographical practice than has often been recognized. For instance, Irving was not alone in recognizing the contingency and indeterminacy of efforts to discern causes. Charles Brockden Brown began his "Annals of Europe and America" (1806) by remarking that

> [p]olitical transactions are connected together in so long and various a chain that a relater of contemporary events is frequently obliged to carry his narration somewhat backward, in order to make himself intelligible. He generally finds himself placed in the midst of things, and quickly perceives that he cannot go forward with a firm and easy step, without previously returning to some commencing point. An active imagination is apt to carry us very far backward on these occasions; for in truth, the chain of successive and dependent causes is endless; and he may be said to be imperfectly acquainted with the last link, who has not attentively scrutinized the very first in the series, however remote it may be.

Perhaps writers of fiction, like Brown and Irving, were more sensitive to the processes of invention by which causes are deduced or constructed—more sensitive to the fictive quality of historical causation. Whatever the case, Irving and Brown were clearly attuned to the representational conundrums that confront the historian and attuned in ways that resonate with the kinds of poststructuralist challenges to historiography with which many current (literary) historians continue to grapple.[17]

For instance, unwilling to settle on one theory of the earth's formation over another—all of which Knickerbocker dismisses as "the smoke and vapours" of "heated imagination" (397)—he settles instead on unassailable present facts. After presenting numerous competing theories for the creation of the earth, for example, Knickerbocker concludes only that "the globe really *was created*" (398). Similarly, he demonstrates in excruciating detail how historians have established "to the satisfaction of all the world" that the New World "*has been discovered*" (403). And most pointedly, he ultimately determines that the earliest settlers of America took possession of the land by virtue of what he calls "THE RIGHT BY EXTERMINATION" or "THE RIGHT BY GUNPOWDER" (419). Other critics, notably Christopher Looby and William Hedges, have noted how in moments like

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these Knickerbocker illustrates the retrospective quality of historical narrative.[18] For Looby, these examples show how "Knickerbocker reasoned from present facts to necessary preconditions" and demonstrate Irving's "recognition that historical necessity was an illusion of retrospection" (96–97). And Hedges notes that Irving learned from Lord Bolingbroke that "the past is to a certain extent a function of the interests of the present" ("Bolingbroke" 326).

Or to put it another way, in such moments Irving highlights the importance of linguistic representation in history writing, or as Looby puts it, Knickerbocker narrates his history as if "what happens—what happened—was an effect of his writing" (91), "collapsing the time of his writing and the time of the historical event" so that "past historical events [are presented as] the direct objects of present-tense verbs" (93). Thus, for example, Knickerbocker can claim that he "make[s] it a rule, not to examine the annals of the times whereof I treat, further than exactly a page in advance of my own work" (643). And although he "cannot save the life of my favourite hero," he can "now and then make him bestow on his enemy a sturdy back stroke" or "drive his antagonist clear round the field" (643–44). Historical events are caused, then, not by explaining their connection to prior events; they are caused by the historian's narrative constructions. Yet Looby does not pursue the point. Instead, he cites these instances of Knickerbocker's "performative retrodiction" (92) as examples supporting his more general claim that the American nation was created as an effect of linguistic utterance. In this, he is in basic agreement with Martin Roth, who has argued that Knickerbocker effects "a new beginning" for America through an act of "artistic creation" (172).

But, I have been suggesting, it is just such acts of (historical re-) creation in the service of nationalism that *A History of New York* seeks to undermine by exposing nationalist history's pretensions to truth.[19] The conclusions Knickerbocker draws from his intellectual exertions comically disrupt any claims they might make to having advanced human knowledge or understanding. So Irving's reflections upon "the relations between writing and event" (Looby 91) suggest that historical "explanations" are, at best, radically contingent—the only possible certainty regarding the earth's formation is the fact of its formation—and, at worst, utter fancies of the imagination. Relying upon tautology, rather than causation, as his preferred mode of historical explanation, Knickerbocker conceives of his-

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tory as unmotivated by any pre-existing shape or design. Hence, competing theories, alternative narratives, are presented by Knickerbocker, not as a gradual progress toward the truth—for "all have the same title to belief" (398)—but as so many fictions, each of which has a claim to truth not on the basis of its correspondence to reality, but according to the authority that underwrites it. These Knickerbocker often takes care to mention, such as when he notes that the former "Catholic opinion" that the earth "is an immense flat pancake" was "sanctioned by a formidable *bull*, dispatched from the Vatican by a most holy and infallible pontiff" (385). Or similarly, the "fact" of European possession of the New World "was considered as fully admitted and established" by historians in large part because "no Indian writers arose on the other side" (413). The accidents of power and transmission, not the objective uncovering of actuality nor even "reasoning from present facts to necessary preconditions," establish the "truth" about the past.

Knickerbocker's emphasis on authority as the real arbiter of historical explanation brings into relief his methodological self-consciousness. Following his explanation of the formation of the globe, Knickerbocker insists that, "like an experienced historian," he confines himself only "to such points as are absolutely essential to [his] subject," constructing it as an architect builds a theater: "beginning with the foundation, then the body, then the roof, and at last perching our snug little island like the little cupola on the top." Pleased with his metaphor, Knickerbocker sustains it in order to "illustrate the correctness of [his] plan":

> Had not the foundation, the body, and the roof of the theatre first been built, the cupola could not have had existence as a cupola—it might have been a centry-box—or a watchman's box—or it might have been placed in the rear of the Manager's house and have formed—a temple;—but it could never have been considered a cupola. As therefore the building of the theatre was necessary to the existence of the cupola, as a cupola—so the formation of the globe and its internal construction, were first necessary to the existence of this island, as an island—and thus the necessity and importance of this part of my history, which in a manner is no part of my history; is logically proved. (399)

This illustration speaks once again to the problem of interconnectedness as it relates to causation. It also brings into focus the related question of

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context, that most fundamental of principles to recent forms of literary historicism. Since new historicists typically avoid diachronic analysis, they are less concerned with explaining change or continuity over time; so what provides for—or allows—their connections between literary texts and the social world is a governing context. In Louis Montrose's formulation, the new historicism "reorients the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history, the synchronic text of a cultural system" (17). Where diachronic histories consider events and historical periods as following one another in a logical and determinable chain, as causes and effects that occur over time, synchronic histories, as Montrose suggests, treat a single historical period as a "system" of interrelated concerns, concepts, ideas, and texts. The synchronism of new historicists is evident in their readings of particular texts, which they view not as separate from and commenting upon their historical moment—but as both constituted by and constitutive of their time. In other words, new historicists substitute context for cause as a mode of historical explanation. Hence "the signifier 'context,'" as Christopher Lane puts it in a recent critique, "promises interpretive leverage and revelation" (451).[20]

And indeed, highlighting the explanatory power of historical context is the satirical point of Knickerbocker's cupola simile, which undermines the notion of meaning as a function of context, comically asserting instead that context does not help to *explain* historical phenomena, but *determines* historical phenomena. That is, it is only after having identified the foundation as a foundation, the roof as a roof and so forth—or more precisely, it is only after having constructed these constituent parts—that the cupola can then take on meaning as a cupola: its existence is a function of its context. Independent of that context, it could well be any number of other things—a centry-box, a watchman's box, a temple. But the thrust of this critique is not positivist; it does not suggest that historical phenomena possess meaning independent of context. Rather, the point is that neither can context itself be taken as predetermined. It, too, is dependent, to pick up on Irving's metaphor, upon acts of construction. The key element in Knickerbocker's architectural metaphor—"As therefore the building of the theatre was necessary to the existence of the cupola, as a cupola"—is not the cupola, but the *building of the theater*, the context. The historian might well build something else, a bridge, a church, a house, in which case cupola would be stripped of its meaning, or at least take on some other meaning.

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It might be objected at this point that Irving's deployment of satire to critique the historiographical pieties of his contemporaries and, beyond that, to unsettle historical truth-claims generally, might well be self-defeating. After all, it is sometimes hard to know what, if anything, lies behind or beneath the book's relentless irony, to know whether it tends toward a useful critical awareness or merely toward a skepticism so complete as to border on cynicism. But the claim I am making for the *History* is not that the text denies truth in history-writing; it is only that that truth is always constructed, rather than discovered. Hence, the irony of having Knickerbocker describe himself as a "regular bred historian" (404) has less to do with the obvious fact that his manner of presentation is so *ir*regular than it does with the way in which Knickerbocker's method turns out to be closer to the "regular" practice of history writing; closer, at least, to the ways in which late twentieth-century theorists of history have taught many of us to regard it: as a practice largely determined by what Hayden White has called "the content of the form." This Knickerbocker understands. As he says in one of his many moments of narrative self-consciousness: "[M]y work shall, in a manner, echo the nature of the subject, in the same manner as the sound of poetry has been found by certain shrewd critics, to echo the sense—this being an improvement in history, which I claim the merit of having invented" (404).

Nor do I mean to suggest a lack of theoretical awareness on the part of new historicists with regard to the role of linguistic representation in every act of historical (re)creation. Yet historicist methodology does, in practice, often assume (perhaps necessarily) a self-evident context, an assumption made possible by an understanding of historicity as bound by chronological time. In historicist literary scholarship, as Christopher Lane argues, "the date has become a fetish," in which "critics use a literary work's publication to initiate—and sometimes to authorize—a set of lateral cultural comparisons, based on events that might have influenced the writer in question. The difficulty of verifying influence—centrally important to traditional historians—proves secondary, for new historicists, to what the comparison enables" (452–53). Along similar lines, Wai-Chee Dimock argues that "numerical chronology" derives from Newtonian science, which converts what may simply be analytically useful—a system of numerical designations, assigning numbers to years, days, hours—into an "absolute mathematical truth, eternally binding." Adherents of Newton in this sense,

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historicist critics fix texts "into a brief duration, a numbered slice of time, as if that slice were an air-tight container" (916).

Above all, it is this way of understanding the temporality of history that Irving, especially in his Knickerbocker writings, resists; indeed, it is the very numerical determinism that makes it possible to think of Irving as being behind the times (his own as well as ours) in the first place. So however much energy Irving devoted in *A History of New York* to a critique of his historian contemporaries, his more interesting ruminations on history involve raising still more penetrating questions about *epistemology*, or how we arrive at historical knowledge, and *temporality*, or how we experience historical time. In the remainder of this essay, I want to suggest that these are the central concerns of Irving's most famous tale, "Rip Van Winkle," which is at once a parody of the very possibility of absolute historical knowledge and a brilliant confounding of our devotion to chronological, linear time.

Irving also dealt with both of these issues in *A History of New York,* albeit to a lesser extent. As we have already seen, in his opening chapters Knickerbocker found himself so awash in competing theories and philosophical speculations that he accords all of them the "same title to belief," and can locate no stable ground—aside from claims of authority—from which to adjudicate among them. We have also seen briefly how, as Looby describes it, Knickerbocker collapses "the time of his writing and the time of the historical event." Or we might recall Charles Brockden Brown's terms and say that in writing his history Knickerbocker often "finds himself placed in the midst of things." This is literally the case, for instance, near the end of the book when the New Netherlanders prepare for war with the Swedes. Prior to narrating the battle, Knickerbocker asks "one small favour" of his readers:

> which is, that when I have set both armies by the ears in the next chapter, and am hurrying about, like the very devil, in the midst—they will just stand a little on one side, out of harms way—and on no account attempt to interrupt me by a single question or remonstrance. As the whole spirit, hurry and sublimity of the battle will depend on my exertions, the moment I should stop to speak, the whole business would stand still—wherefore I shall not be able to say a word to my readers, throughout the whole of the next chapter, but I promise them in the one

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> after, I'll listen to all they have to say, and answer any questions they may ask. (647)

This moment is just one of many, as we have seen, where Irving reminds us of what new historicists have taught us to call "the textuality of history"—the idea that our access to the "actual" past is always mediated by language and the shaping hand of the historian.

But of even greater interest to me here is this moment's representation of temporality. Knickerbocker bends time out of shape. That is, having first positioned the past as the historian's—and by extension, the reader's—present (is this not always history's aim?), Knickerbocker arrives at the scene of battle and proceeds to project a future. As they wait for the battle to commence, he writes, "[H]istorians filled their ink horns—the poets went without their dinners . . . antiquity scowled sulkily out of its grave, to see itself outdone—while even posterity stood mute, gazing in gaping extacy of retrospection, on the eventful field!" (648). Here, Irving built on a term that is itself perhaps the English language's most temporally ambiguous: "now," the very term with which the passage begins. "Now" registers time at its most slippery; it is a term that is never immediate with itself, since the very instant it is meant to capture has passed by the time it has been uttered (or read). At the same time, "now" also has a built-in temporal mechanism that allows it to catch up with itself; that is, it signifies, paradoxically, "then," both the past and the future—as in the phrases, "now you've done it" and "now I will describe." Exploiting now's peculiar semantic temporality, Irving constructs what might be called a posthistoricist moment: the figure of posterity, at the present time, looking forward to looking back.

"Rip Van Winkle," a story of historical dis-location, is an elaboration on this theme. The tale hinges on its complex structure of temporality, which is thick with layers of past and present and in which time passes irregularly, alternately slowing and accelerating.[21] Strangely, the story is rarely considered in the context of Irving's other Knickerbocker writings.[22] This may be because the narrative voice in "Rip" lacks the comic absurdity of that found in the *History*. Yet the tale also repeats, in compressed form, the earlier work's historiographic preoccupations with the accuracy of historical research, with the role of authority in historical explanation, and with the constructedness of narrative representation. Despite these affinities, the

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rich critical commentary on the story more often tends to dwell on thematic issues such as cultural alienation, revolutionary political change, and the conflict between the practical and the ideal. Or in other treatments, Rip is seen as a mythic figure, the quintessential American and precursor to later American literary heroes like Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn. More recently, historically minded critics have produced new interpretations of "Rip Van Winkle"—ostensibly returning the tale to its historical context to argue that Irving intended it as a gentle critique of post-Revolutionary America and that he used the figure of Rip as a reminder to the new nation of the importance of maintaining ties to its colonial heritage, of retaining a sense of its history.[23]

But Irving cleverly complicates this reading by questioning what it means to have a sense of history at all, what it means to be historical. Indeed, "Rip Van Winkle" actually parodies the very possibility of definite historical knowledge. Yet this fact is easily overlooked when we consider only the tale proper, interpreting it as "fable," and do not attend to the explanatory notes that frame it.[24] Those notes are an integral part of the story and a crucial narrative strategy on the part of Irving. In the prefatory note to "Rip Van Winkle," Geoffrey Crayon (the "author" of *The Sketch Book*, in which the story was originally published) re-introduces the reader to Diedrich Knickerbocker, among whose papers the tale of Rip was found. Knickerbocker, we are reminded, was a historian of the Dutch settlements. However, "his historical researches . . . did not lie so much among books, as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favourite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more, their wives, rich in that legendary lore so invaluable to true history" (767).

The pun on the word "lie" in Crayon's note hints at the ironic attempt Crayon makes to convince the reader of the subsequent tale's historical accuracy. The "chief merit" of Knickerbocker's history, Crayon tells us in the same note, "is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has since been completely established; and it is now admitted into all historical collections as a book of unquestionable authority" (767). And again, in a note that follows the tale, Crayon appends the note Knickerbocker had originally included with the tale, in which, based upon his knowledge of similar "marvellous events and appearances" in the Dutch settlements, he gives Rip's tale his "full belief." Knickerbocker reveals further that he has even verified the story with Rip

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himself and "seen a certificate on the subject taken before a country justice and signed with a cross in the justice's own hand writing. The story therefore is beyond the possibility of doubt" (784).

In this way, Irving offers a parody of historical scholarship in its fetishization of the source, the process of making distinctions between the levels of reliability of historical documentation. We have already seen early nationals' concern for accurate scholarship and documentation. But just as valuable to early nineteenth-century historians as state records and the papers of public figures were oral histories and other firsthand accounts, which historical societies often recorded (Calcott 125). Likewise, while Knickerbocker "gleaned" "many legends, letters and other documents," he also "gathered a host of well authenticated traditions from divers excellent old ladies" (*AHNY* 378). This latter form of research lends Knickerbocker authority, because, as Geoffrey Crayon implies, in "true history," the veracity of written texts is suspect; the historian's best source is someone with firsthand experience, like Rip himself. But Irving cleverly undermines any such authority by showing that Rip, ostensibly the "primary source," lacks credibility: "[Rip] used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived at Mr. Doolittle's Hotel. He was observed at first to vary on some points, every time he told it, which was doubtless owing to his having so recently awaked. It at last settled down precisely to the tale I have related and not a man woman or child in the neighborhood but knew it by heart" (783–84).

Once again, we might say that Irving "deconstructs" historical truth by questioning the very foundation upon which truth-telling in history rests: this time, the distinction between primary and secondary sources. And he does so in two ways: first, he cleverly depicts Rip as an unreliable witness. The legal metaphor here is especially apt, not only because of Irving's early training for a career in the law but because its rules and strictures for arriving at "truth" served as a model for early nineteenth-century historical practice.[25] As one reviewer asserted, the historian's role was to act as a judge, compelled to "examine the strength of the evidence and the character of the witness. The rules of our courts of jurisprudence are generally applicable here" (Calcott 126). And indeed, it is the authority of the law that, for Knickerbocker, makes Rip's tale "beyond the possibility of doubt.' That is, it is (legally) admissible into the historical record only after "a certificate" signed by "a country justice" underwrites its truthfulness.

We might pursue this legal metaphor still further. In his essay "The

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Practice of Historical Investigation," Mark Cousins makes a similar claim, arguing that "historical scholarship bears more than a fleeting resemblance to . . . jurisprudential" reasoning. Like Irving, Cousins questions the presuppositions which determine reliable historical practice:

> A primary source is preferred over a secondary source because—why? Because it is close to—what? A complex of relations is opened up by this question. A primary source is closer to what it refers to than a secondary source. This word 'closer' has two connotations. It is closer to the truth and it is closer to the event. Truth is the adequate representation of the event. The event is the object which may be referred to in truth. A primary source is then the more reliable witness to the event. The event is most reliably represented by a witness, by testimony which can be trusted. Secondary sources are tainted, less reliable; they cannot be treated as convincing testimony; they lack reliability . . . They cannot establish truth. (131)

In Cousins's poststructuralist account, the law establishes the "truth" or the "reality" of a past event only "in a specialised sense." It requires a truth about the past that is subject to the rules of evidence, to particular strictures of admissibility and appeal; thus, it *determines* a representation of the past that is "relevant to the law," or "definable by law." The truth of the past is not the past as it "really" happened—for surely the plenitude of a past event, all that can be said or known about it, is never exhausted by forensic investigation—rather, it is a "strictly legal truth," truth only as the law defines it for itself. Or we might apply Knickerbocker's language here and say that without first building a legal foundation and constructing an evidentiary edifice, a truth could not have existence as a truth. The particular version of the past arrived at through historical investigation is similarly subject to rules and restrictions, to a determining epistemological context—accepted distinctions between primary and secondary sources, reliability and unreliability, documentation and hearsay; hence, historical truths are likewise disciplinarily contingent. In "Rip Van Winkle," Irving undermines these distinctions and disrupts this procedure by casting doubt on even the most rigorously investigated of historical events, that linchpin of historical legitimacy, the primary source.

A second, and related, strategy he employs to cast doubt on the reliability of his "sources" is the presentation of Rip's story through a labyrinth

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of voices and narrators, subtly complicating our apparent direct access to the source. That is, what might be called the "tale proper"—Rip's family life, his sojourn into the mountains, and his return—is filtered not only through Rip's own many variations, but has then been transcribed by Diedrich Knickerbocker and subsequently, finally, presented in Geoffrey Crayon's miscellany. Irving employs this device in almost all of the Knickerbocker tales. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," for instance, is a story "found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker" (1058). There, we learn that the tale was given "*almost* in the precise words" in which Knickerbocker first heard it "related at a Corporation of the ancient city of the Manhattoes" (1087; emphasis mine). On this occasion, as Knickerbocker relates the story of his own first hearing of the story, one of the audience members expresses doubt as to the veracity of the tale. To this the story-teller, of whom we know only that he was "a pleasant, shabby, gentlemanly old fellow . . . with a sadly humorous face," rejoins, "Faith, sir, as to that matter, I don't believe one-half of it myself" (1088). This ambiguous remark—which "half" does the speaker not believe, the ghost story? the plausible explanation of it?—is intended to cast doubt on Knickerbocker's entire historical enterprise. This is because his sources, like Rip, are almost always themselves crafty story-tellers, shapers of narratives.

Similarly, "Dolph Heyliger" is also a third-hand account. In the note that frames that story, we are told that Dolph's tale was related to him by "a pleasant gossiping man whose whole life was spent in hearing and telling the news of the province" (303). For his part, Knickerbocker—ever the dutiful historian—claims to have "endeavored to give it as nearly as possible in his words," although Knickerbocker has grown old and his "memory is not over good. [He] cannot therefore vouch for the language, but [he is] always scrupulous as to facts" (303). Irving employs yet another variation of the device in "The Money Diggers" section of *Tales of a Traveller* (also found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker), where stories are passed along a chain of narrators and thus beget more stories. So while Knickerbocker "made diligent research after the truth" (648) of the legends he has recorded, those that follow are the only ones that "had any thing like an air of authenticity" (649). What follows, however, does not seem particularly authentic; nor is it a historian's disinterested third-person account. Instead, we find a series of voices and interrelated stories: a "Cape Cod whaler" narrates "The Devil and Tom Walker," followed by

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"Woolfert Webber, or Golden Dreams," told by "one of the most authentic narrators in the province" (668)—a portion of which is related in indirect discourse by yet another narrator—which gives way without resolution to yet another story, "The Adventure of the Black Fisherman"—and so on. The accumulation of these third- and fourth-hand accounts—all framed as the researches of Diedrich Knickerbocker—cast the historical enterprise not as a scientific search for reliable, or even verifiable, material evidence but as an unruly (and perhaps unreliable) discursive practice, an elaborate game of telephone, in which a simple phrase is radically transformed as it is passed on in whispers from one ear to the next.

Yet simply to suggest that "Rip Van Winkle," like these other tales, undermines historical truth-claims and raises questions about the historian's access to the past is not to do justice to the tale. Working in tandem with his disquisition on the mutability of historical knowledge is the *experience* of history the tale offers to its readers, by placing us in precisely the same position in which Rip finds himself upon his return to the village after a 20-years nap. Or to put this another way, Rip's need to settle upon an orienting present after being removed from chronological time for two decades is duplicated in the reader's experience of the story itself; and it is out of this experience—the way the story acts upon the reader's sense of temporality—that the "meaning" of Irving's tale emerges.

Rip has what amounts to the same experience twice, though in opposite temporal directions. Irving carefully constructs a parallel structure between Rip's experience in the mountain—when he steps into the past—and his experience upon returning to the village—when he leaps into (what is for him) the future, as himself a figure from the past. The marks of this structure are found in the story's details. Rip's sojourn into the mountains, rather than an escape from a particular place into a magical realm outside of history, is actually a journey deeper into history, into an estranging past. The mysterious personages he encounters bear the signs less of fancy and imagination, than of a bygone era. For example, upon meeting the stranger toiling up the mountain with a keg of liquor, Rip recognizes his clothing as being of the "antique Dutch fashion, a cloth jerkin strapped round the waist, several pair of breeches, the outer one of ample volume decorated with rows of buttons down the sides and bunches at the knees" (774). As Rip silently assists the stranger, he begins to perceive something "strange and incomprehensible about the unknown that inspired awe and checked

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familiarity" (775). The mysterious figures Rip encounters in the mountains are similarly "dressed in a quaint outlandish fashion" and "all had beards of various shapes and colours" (775). Initially, he only watches the grave game of nine-pins, but, "by degrees Rip's awe and apprehension subsided" (776) and he eventually becomes comfortable enough to partake of the spirits. Following repeated trips to the flagon, Rip falls into a deep sleep.

Awaking from his slumber Rip returns to the village only to find it utterly changed: his home, the village inn, the portrait of King George, bear little resemblance to Rip's memory of them. Faced yet again with the "unknown," he feels the same sense of bewilderment he felt during his first estranging experience, the language of which is repeated precisely: "all this was strange and incomprehensible" (779). And again, like the personages in the mountains, the townspeople's dress is "of a different fashion from that with which he was accustomed." Rip himself is now the antiquarian figure, and he carries the marks of his estrangement in the form of his "rusty fowling piece," his "uncouth dress," (779) and in his most characteristic—and memorable—feature, his foot-long beard. Thus Rip's "return" to the village is not a return at all. Rather, it is a repetition; or it is a return only in the sense that he returns to his earlier bewildering experience. In both cases, Rip is, in Robert Ferguson's phrase, a kind of "anachronistic vagrant" ("Generational Divide" 541)—a figure from an era other than that in which he finds himself. He enters the future as strangely and (to him) disconcertingly as he entered the past upon meeting the crew of Hendrick Hudson. Rip, in effect, has no place in history. But crucially, this is not the same as saying that Rip stands outside of history; instead, he is momentarily lost within it. His loss of identity occurs because he can find no present which corresponds to his sense of his own. Yet just as he did previously, after an initial feeling of trepidation and confusion, Rip acclimates himself to his post-Revolutionary surroundings gradually "assum[ing] his old walks and habits." He is ultimately able to perform as successfully in one time and place as another. Situating and resituating Rip in historical time, the story represents Rip's dilemma as a problem of historicity (precisely the sorts of questions, I might add, that literary scholars ask about texts): to which historical period does Rip "belong"?

The repetitiveness of Rip's experience also bears on the feature of Irving's tale that seems to interest critics most: what Looby calls "the allegorization of historical process as semiotic substitution" (95). Specifically,

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Looby is referring to the "signs" with which Rip is confronted upon his return to the village: the portrait of King George has been replaced with George Washington, his scepter replaced with a sword, his red coat with "blue and buff," and the tree in front of the inn has been replaced by a flag pole. Looby remarks that these substitutions, while different, also constitute a "repetition: the new face of George Washington was the same old face of George III" (95). Indeed, the interplay of the new and the old upon Rip's return is densely textured: Rip finds that his old home is new, while the villagers find that the new person among them is from "the old times." And, privy to both of these bewildering experiences, the reader must also grapple with historical confusion. After all, while the new face above the inn strikes Rip as old and vaguely familiar; to the story's readers, the new president, George Washington, is symbolically rendered as old George III. That is, while the replacement of one George for another is simply a joke at the expense of Rip, who confuses them, the reader, instantaneously, is able to sort out the mistake, distinguishing the monarch from the republican leader; the former belongs to the past, the latter to the present. But the very act of prying the Georges apart and returning them to their proper slots in historical chronology entails recognition of their similarities: the widespread fear among early nationals that Washington would re-institute monarchy, the possibility that, for all the revolutionary rhetoric, not much had changed in the lives of most Americans. Thus, George the president and George the king, life after and life before, the present and the past, are asymmetrically aligned: they are at once different and the same.

The reader of "Rip Van Winkle" thus proves integral to the tale. In fact, the manner in which the tale plays with the reader's sense of historical time is its most important feature. Not surprisingly, it turns upon the gap or elision produced by Rip's 20-year nap. Rip, unlike the reader, does not experience time logically or chronologically. From his point of view time moves not along the trajectory past–present–future, but along the axis present–past–future–present. In the second half of the tale, Irving renders the disorientation of Rip's unusual temporal experience through an intricate narrative discourse in which the third-person narration is increasingly restricted to Rip's "sorely perplexed" (778) point of view. After his nap, Rip's experience is frequently presented in free indirect discourse, such as when Rip wakes up in the mountains to find his dog gone and his rifle rusted. "What was to be done?" the narrator asks, as if inside the mind of Rip. "The

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morning was passing away and Rip felt famished for want of his breakfast. He grieved to give up his dog and gun; he dreaded to meet his wife; but it would not do to starve among the mountains" (777). Similarly, upon entering the village, the narration mimics Rip's confusion, as well as his attempt to find his bearings in a place at once familiar and unfamiliar: "Strange names were over the doors—strange faces at the windows—everything was strange. His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched. Surely this was his native village which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains—there ran the silver Hudson at a distance—there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been—" (778).

Dissolving the border between the third-person narration and the perspective of Rip, the narration in these instances attempts to place the reader inside Rip's bewildering experience. This bewilderment is compounded—or mirrored—by other moments where even direct quoted speech takes on the character of indirect discourse, such as when the orator passing out handbills "bustled up to [Rip], and drawing him partly aside, enquired 'on which side he voted?'" As Rip looks at the man in "vacant stupidity," another "pulled him by the arm and rising on tiptoe, enquired in his ear 'whether he was Federal or Democrat?'" (779). Here, in an inversion of free indirect speech, the characters query Rip as if in the voice of the narrator, asking him about present matters (in the second instance) in the past tense. Insisting that Rip reveal "whether he *was* Federal or Democrat," the speaker appears to adopt the after-the-fact, past-tense perspective of the story's narrator—even as the narrative perspective does just the opposite by adopting Rip's point of view in order to capture with some immediacy his present dilemma. This curious exercise in point of view culminates in a final exchange—which, not coincidentally, occurs just before Rip's crisis is resolved. Having reached a moment of utter mystification upon seeing "a precise counterpart of himself" (his son), Rip asks a young woman (his daughter) about his wife:

> Rip had but one question more to ask, but he put it with a faltering voice—
>
> "Where's your mother?"—
>
> Oh she too had died but a short time since—she broke a blood vessel in a fit of passion at a New England pedlar.—

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It is difficult to tell here just where dialogue ends and narration resumes. To whom are we to attribute this reply to Rip's query? If it is Judith Gardenier who speaks, did Irving simply forget to add quotation marks? Is this a mistake? Or do the dashes that demarcate the exchange imply quoted speech? If, on the other hand, we are to attribute the reply to the narrator, how are we to account for the unexpected exclamatory "Oh"?

Syntax suggests one potential answer: it would make little sense for Judith to speak of the recent death of her mother in the past perfect tense. But it would make sense for the narrator to do so. It makes sense, too, in light of the present argument; for the effect of this curious moment is to register alternative temporalities, to capture the relative quality of time in the story. That is, while on the one hand, Judith's response simply conveys to Rip that her mother has recently died ("but a short time since"), on the other hand, the verb tense ("she *had* died") serves as a subtle reminder that what is a recent event to the characters in the story is an even more distant event for the narrator and the reader—and, I would add, for Rip himself. For despite the fact that in the tale, the news of his wife's death is new for Rip, in the *telling* of the tale her death took place long ago, a fact that makes the beginning of the denouement, with its odd passive construction, that immediately follows both appropriate and multiply ironic: "Rip's story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night" (782). The story is "soon told" both in the sense that is told *in* a short time, quickly, and in the sense that it is told *after* a short time, as the implied action that immediately follows the exchange with his daughter. The irony, of course, is that by that time, the story has *already* been told—and retold: it is what we have just read—first by Rip to the villagers, then by Rip to Diedrich Knickerbocker, and then by Diedrich Knickerbocker (via Geoffrey Crayon), who tells it to us, we learn in the tale's last paragraph, "precisely" as Rip related to him (784).

In other words, "Rip Van Winkle" ends with the telling of a story we already know. In fact, what follows "Rip's story was soon told . . ." amounts to little more than tidying up: corroborating evidence to explain Rip's experience supplied, fittingly enough, by "a descendant of [a] historian"; Rip returning to his family and locating his "former cronies" (783); and, most important, the explanation of the War for Independence that took place while Rip slept. And yet, just like Rip's telling of his own story, the sorting out of events that takes place in the tale's concluding paragraphs has also

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already occurred. Like the death of his wife, the Revolution may well be news to Rip, but it most certainly is not for Irving's readers. Which is precisely the point: it is the inevitable process of restoring order, of reconstituting events, that the elaborate narrative discourse I have been describing is designed to counterbalance.

Or to put this another way, "Rip Van Winkle" exploits the reader's need to experience time "naturally," as a chronological sequence, and the act of reconstruction that serves this need. That is, the transaction that occurs as we read "Rip Van Winkle" is the replacement of Rip's experience of time with our own extratextual experience: our role is to fill in the gaps, to recognize and supply the history that Rip himself misses. For an imaginary reader with no knowledge of the American Revolution, for a reader as closely implicated in Rip's experience of time as the narrator—and hence unable to restore the logic of linear time, the proper context, to the tale—"Rip Van Winkle" would, literally, make no sense. By the time Rip has his moment of crisis ("every thing's changed, and I am changed, and I can't tell what's my name or who I am!"), we as readers have restored temporal order. In doing so, we are thus implicitly aligned with the newly republicanized villagers who have experienced the passage of time that Rip has not.

But, it turns out, Rip's moment of crisis is also the pivotal moment of crisis for the reader, for it is that instant in which two distinct conceptions of time coexist in the reader's mind: Rip's anachronistic experience as provided by the tale and our own "natural" one. Although we have been "with" Rip—we have followed his movements, witnessed his strange experience—temporally we have been with the villagers. And so we are faced momentarily with a kind of epistemological crisis: do we arrive at the "truth" (of Rip's experience, of the "meaning" of the story—and metaphorically, of history) based on our knowledge of events outside the text (i.e., the history of the American Revolution, the linear movement of time, the fact that we already know how things turned out) or is the truth what we have "witnessed" in our sojourn with Rip into the mountains and his belated return home? The particular historical-temporal experience that reading "Rip Van Winkle" provides is this moment when we are confronted with competing temporalities. We become, paradoxically, unreliable witnesses of our own (reading) experience.[26]

In this way, "Rip Van Winkle" turns out to be a kind of "temporally uncanny"[27] gloss on historicist methodology. That is to say, in the history of

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American literary history, current historicist practice performs a function that is strikingly similar to what I have described as the reader's role in Irving's tale: it is likewise committed to the restoration of temporal order, to returning texts to their proper slots in historical chronology. Marjorie Garber has dubbed this commitment "'historical correctness," "the suggestion, either implicit or implicit on the part of literary scholars, that history grounds and tells the truth about literature" (180). The trouble with historical correctness, the cost of enforcing the temporal parameters within which texts can make meaning is that it can prevent us from recognizing the surprising immediacy, or what I have called the timeliness, of the texts of the past. As literary scholars continue to come to grips with this and other limitations of the historicist devotion to context, the particular constraints that conventional conceptions of historical time can impose upon texts, we might do well to bear in mind not only that such problems are not altogether new—as Irving's Knickerbocker writings demonstrate—but also that the alternative to current versions of historicism need not be a return to discredited forms of ahistorical criticism. To the contrary, along with Irving, we might reverse the claim implicit in historical correctness and look to literature to help tell the truth about history, allowing it to unsettle our certainty about—and to provide us with a more flexible sense of—what it means to be historical at all.

NOTES

1. See Berkhofer, who argues that "temporal succession is fundamental to the ordering of" historian's data: "What makes chronology work in historical practice is the assumption of the order or sequence of time that measures both succession and duration. Thus a historic event embraces a specific span of time while simultaneously being before, during, or after other events at the same or different times. Historic time is both singular for the moment of dating and continuous for measuring duration. The irreversibility of historic time allows assumptions about causality, contingency, irrelevance and anachronism" (109–10).
2. These quotations are drawn from, respectively, Spiller (temporal), 242; Springer (of his time), 239; and Gilmore (outdated, remote), 661. Gilmore registers some ambivalence toward this prevailing view, remarking that Irving was "nonetheless an innovator who established American writing on a new footing as a viable profession" (661).
3. Irving, *History, Tales, and Sketches* 380. This and all subsequent page references

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refer to the Library of America reprint (1983), which follows the original edition of 1809. Irving published revised editions of the *History* at several points during his career. For extended commentary on its publication history and Irving's revisions, see Michael L. Black and Nancy Black. Most critics agree that Irving's later revisions robbed the original of its potency.

4. Martin Roth, for instance, begins his study of Irving, *Comedy and America*, by claiming that "Irving's bequest to the major writers of nineteenth-century American literature is deeper and more meaningful than it is generally supposed to be" (ix). Hence, the "subject of Irving's relationship to that richer literature would obviously provide my anticipated audience with a book more pertinent to the announced interests of American literary study" (ix). Such deference to the later masters is evident, too, in Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky's study *Adrift in the Old World*. Irving, Rubin-Dorsky claims, "was not an 'original' writer in the way we might apply the term" (xiv) to later writers. Yet at times he did "ventur[e] into the underside of the American psyche before Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville would stake it out as their particular terrain" (xviii). Even the very best of Irving's critics, William Hedges, cites approvingly Harry Levin's suggestion that "there are tinges of shadow in the allegedly lighthearted Irving that ultimately relate him to the darker aspects of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville" and asserts that the "transition to [the American Renaissance] must be a central concern in any detailed examination of Irving's career" (*An American Study* 15). The question of Irving's relation to the American Renaissance authors is also implicit in the title of and the essays collected in *The Old and New World Romanticism of Washington Irving*, edited by Brodwin. See, for instance, Hedges's introduction, where he refers to Irving as a "half-way figure" (4).
5. Indeed, over the past decade, in particular, there has been a flurry of interest in Irving, mostly devoted to "contextualizing" (Traister 112) his works. For compelling treatments of Irving in relation to U.S. imperialism and manifest destiny, see especially McLamore and LeMenager. Irving has also attracted considerable interest among queer theorists and critics interested in conceptions of masculine selfhood. See, in addition to Warner and Anthony, Traister and Greven.
6. See also Traister, who argues that bachelorhood in the early republic was, in part, a discourse of nostalgia for lost freedom.
7. Despite this assessment, Hedges's studies remain the most extensive explorations of Irving's "attitudes toward historiography" ("Bolingbroke" 318). See especially "Knickerbocker, Bolingbroke, and the Fiction of History" and *Washington Irving: An American Study*. In addition, in his introduction to *The Old and New World Romanticism of Washington Irving,* Hedges says, "I think we have not yet learned how to respond to Irving's mock-history because we have been trying too hard to grasp what it means" (8). Implicit in my argument is that, strangely, it may have taken the poststructuralist challenges to history in the wake of the historical turn to teach us how to respond to Irving's historiographical critique. See

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also Gilmore, who asserts that in *A History of New York*, "laughter and confusion deflate history's authority as the realm of truth" (661). And Daigrepont notes, briefly, Irving's rejection of history as a "coherent process" (48).

8. See Gilmore, 664–67, who views this fact as Irving's "conservative challenge to the emerging liberal consensus (666).
9. Precisely which works of "pedantic lore" Irving had in mind to burlesque remains largely a matter of conjecture, though his documented sources provide several clues. For a discussion of those sources, and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historians Irving parodies, see Williams and McDowell, to whom much of the following account is indebted. See also Burstein, who locates the "genesis" of the work in a response to Samuel L. Mitchill's 1807 *Picture of New York* (70).
10. Fittingly, Shaffer invokes "Rip Van Winkle" to describe the effects of this hiatus on history writing in the U.S. "Having reawakened," Shaffer writes, "in a changed world after a sleep of more than twenty years, American historical writing changed profoundly. The Revolution shattered the colonial frame of reference and created a new perspective; it transformed a colonial into a national psychology" (8).
11. The most extended discussion of Irving's adaptation of such satires and burlesques is found in Roth. See also Williams and McDowell; and Hedges, *An American Study*.
12. Calcott 35–45. Shaffer adds that "the United States led the world in the development of archival techniques and the establishment of repositories" of historical materials (33).
13. See for instance, Michael Black and Nancy Black; Michael L. Black; Bowden; Ferguson, *Law and Letters*; and Burstein.
14. Civic and political leaders in the colonies had long recognized the importance of an educated populace and saw instruction in history as integral to the project of creating good republican citizens. As George Calcott has noted, Benjamin Franklin as early as 1749 was insisting in his "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania" [sic] that for children, "History be made a constant Part of their Reading" (56). In 1779, Thomas Jefferson's Diffusion of Knowledge Bill made Virginia the first state to require the instruction of American history in its public schools. But emphasis on instruction in history became even more imperative in the years after the War for Independence as a crucial means of inculcating the citizenry on the republican principles informing the Revolutionary cause. Jefferson, along with such prominent Americans as Benjamin Rush, David Ramsay, and John Adams, insisted strongly on the need for versions of the history of the Revolution from the American point of view. These calls were answered not just by accounts of the Revolution, like David Ramsay's *The History of the American Revolution* (1789) and Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805), but by filiopietistic biographies of heroes of the war, like Mason Locke Weems's notorious *Life of Washington* (1800) and William Wirt's biography, *Patrick Henry* (1817)

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15. Irving's "Author's Apology" prefatory to the 1848 edition portrays the original work as merely "a temporary jeu d'esprit" (CW 3), the production of a "young and inexperienced writer" who made "presumptuous trespasses into the sacred, though neglected, region of history" and was met with "deserved rebuke from men of soberer minds" (CW 4). He now wishes his readers will receive it with "good-humored indulgence" and that it will be "thumbed and chuckled over by the family fireside" (CW 5).
16. The chain of causes—or what Irving here calls the "chain of effects"—was also a familiar trope among early American historians.Beginning, in effect, with Independence, nationalist historians, as Cohen argues, "impose[d] on events a single-minded linearity that attempts to account for its end-point" (97). David Ramsay, for example, claimed that the battle won by the Americans at Bennington, Vermont, "was the first in a grand chain of causes, which finally drew down ruin on the whole royal army." Similarly, Mercy Otis Warren, echoing Knickerbocker's insistence on the "necessity" of demonstrating the formation of the globe, argued that historians' "circumstantial detail of lesser events, when antecedent to the convulsions of empire, and national revolution, are not only excusable, but necessary"(qtd. in Cohen, 97). Warren might just as well be referring to the Dutch action at Fort Casimer as to the events at Lexington. After all, using the "chain-of-causes metaphor," Cohen points out, "the historian could portray virtually any event, no matter how trivial, as the first link in a long series of consequences" (98).
17. In fact, Brown proves at least as surprisingly "postmodern" as Irving. New historicists might be interested, for instance, to read Brown's essay "On Anecdotes," where he argues compellingly for the use of the seemingly trivial, the insignificant, and the out-of-the-way in the writing of histories. "History itself," Brown insists, "derives some of its most agreeable instructions from a skillful introduction of anecdotes. We should not now dwell with anxiety on a dull chronicle of the reigns of monarchs; a parish register might prove more interesting" (37). Similarly, readers of Hayden White might take interest in Brown's essay "Historical Characters are False Representations of Nature" (1806), in which he argues that "The historian is a sculptor, who, though he displays a correct semblance of nature, is not less solicitous of displaying the miracles of his art" (113). For more detailed treatment of Brown's theories of history, see Kamrath.
18. Looby, for instance, has argued convincingly that in the *History* "the necessary metalepsis of historiographical reconstruction was brilliantly parodied" (90).
19. Robert Ferguson argues that the *History* "is the first American book to question the civic vision of the founding fathers" (30). Michael Gilmore also takes note of Irving's attempt to mock puffed-up patriotic histories, asserting that the *History* set about "toppling history from its cultural preeminence" (665). But ultimately, Gilmore is in agreement with Roth that he did so in order to "clear the way for American Romanticism" by "free[ing] the imagination to invent its own version of the world" (665). By contrast, I am suggesting that we need not look at Irving

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through the later Romanticist frame. Rather, Irving demonstrates that all histories invent their own versions of the world; history and imaginative freedom are in no way at odds.

20. For other recent critiques of new historicist assumptions about time and context in addition to Lane, see Dimock; Garber; Castronovo; and Insko. Garber, for instance, argues that "New Historicism tried to avoid or complicate causality; it preferred terms like resonance, circulation, poetics, and social energy. But through its very avoidances this strategy whetted the appetite for causation. To put it another way, New Historicism began by reading history as a text, but it created, despite its best efforts, a desire for history as a ground. In the wake of postmodernism and the general questioning of foundations, a longing to find causality—the priority of history, history as explanation—seems to have come back to literary study even more strongly than before" (178).
21. The temporal dimension of "Rip Van Winkle," is frequently noted, but has received comparatively little extended treatment. The most extended consideration of the theme of time in "Rip Van Winkle" are Young; Shear; and Warner. Yet each of them, in different ways, suggests that in the story Rip seeks to somehow escape time and history.
22. For a recent notable exception, see Blakemore.
23. See, for instance, Pearce; Daigrepont; and Pease.
24. Readings of "Rip Van Winkle" have long neglected its complex, layered framing device. Notable exceptions are Anderson; Blakemore; Warner; and Ferguson, "Generational Divide".
25. Burstein suggests that Irving's discussion of Indian and European rights to the land in Book 1 of the *History* "may be the only indication in any of his writings that [Irving] was a lawyer" (74). I am suggesting that "Rip Van Winkle" may well be another such indication.
26. The final irony of "Rip Van Winkle" is that Rip, the unreliable narrator, ultimately becomes the village historian. At the end of the story he "took his place once more 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" (40).
27. The phrase is adapted from Castronovo (190).

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