



**REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICA IN WASHINGTON IRVING,
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE AND HERMAN MELVILLE**

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Innocence, freedom, pride, self-trust progress, paradise, optimism: these and many more of the kind are ideas connected to and defining America. These are the ideas for which the Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic in search for the Garden of Eden that had been lost by Adam and Even. The discovery of new territories reinforced the belief that Paradise was not lost forever and led to the growing belief that it can be won, once again, that innocence is an ideal to be reached and the corrupted world has a new chance of renewal and regeneration. These are some of the ideas that stood at the basis of the creation of the fictional construct that will later be called America, a world that was mentally forged even before its discovery and colonization whose inhabitants tried to preserve the dream.

Since medieval times, there was the conviction that the Garden of Eden did not disappear; it only became inaccessible. Thus, even if the earthly paradise is forbidden to man, there is still the possibility of recovering/discovering wonderful happy places of fabulous wealth, parts of the lost Eden (Delumeau, 37). In other words, medieval geography, allows the existence of such spaces that are, in medieval imagination, the earthly Paradises. Little by little, going towards the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance, the age of great discoveries, America became the concrete embodiment of this paradisaical space. Actually, the geographic discoveries from the 14th up to the 17th centuries, have been prompted, beside the desire to lay their hands on tremendous riches, by the unshaken belief that they were trying to find the earthly paradise (Delumeau, 98). So, even before its actual discovery and colonization, American has been a fictional construct, a utopic land that drew hopes of the inhabitants of the old and fallen world. Mircea Eliade, for instance, locates in this search for the Paradise, some sort of desire to return to the origins, recovering a primordial situation and begin history once more (Eliade, *Nostalgia*, 143).

The paradise is a fictional construct as well, a Biblical text, and such a text stands at the basis of the discovery of America. The first colonists, for instance, described America in biblical terms convinced that they repeat those mythical adventures. John Smith, during a voyage along the coast of New England in 1614 compares America to the Garden of Eden, whereas George Alsop sees Maryland as «heaven on earth” and its trees, fruits and flowers are hieroglyphs describing our adamic state (Eliade, *Nostalgia*, 149). Georgia, in fact, is said to be the future Eden, being situated on the same terrestrial parallel as Palestine, and the examples may continue. John Winthrop in his famous metaphor of America as “the city upon the hill” draws inspiration again from the Bible, from *the Gospels according to Matthew*, and his famous sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity*, a document that draws the lines of desirable behavior in the new continent is delivered before reaching American shores. Thus, the Bible, as a text, becomes the very first frame of reference for the creation of America. And, just like the Bible, America is also a text

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that is continuously prolonged, transformed, amended into other texts from official documents like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, to literary texts, all of each try to make the dream of innocence, freedom, or happiness possible. Some of these texts that “write America” are, *Rip van Winkle* by Washington Irving, *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and, in some ways, Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Sctivener*.

Hawthorne’s short story *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* appears to be quite similar to Wahington Irving’s *Rip van Winkle* in the sense that the protagonists of both stories experience important events not only for their personal history but for the collective history as well in a very odd manner – as a game, a masquerade or a sleep. Both texts are also preceded by an account of the larger historical context and thus warning the reader that the text is more than a simple account of an individual history.

Rip van Winkle is presented not as fiction, but as a legend found by the narrator among the papers of one named Dietrich Knickerbocker who was not a writer, but a historian. The text has a presentation a final note signed D.K., and a Postscript introduced as “traveling notes from a memorandum book of Mr. Knickerbocker. All these elements are, in fact, arguments to the authenticity of the facts presented in the text, but they are constantly undermined by the narrator’s comic attitude.

In the introduction, the reader finds out some details about the identity of the writer of the text : Dietrich Knickerbocker. His research is of a very curious type combining history and legend and being centered on the area of New York, “ere an older province rich in legendary lore so invaluable to true history”. There is never clear, in this introductory note, whether we should take the writer very seriously or not, since this ambiguity between legend and history is preserved in the rest of the presentation. Thus, such appreciations as “scrupulous accuracy” and “unquestionable authority” are continuously undermined by other assertions as “his time might have been much better employed in weightier labors” and “his follies and errors are remembered more in sorrow than in anger.” Moreover, the entire presentation is more personal than scientific with a touch of gossip rather than true historical (thoroughly documented) fact. The ending of the introductory passage supports the previous tone and reveals the idea that the narrator intends to mix history and legend in a very comic and personal way:

“But however his memory may be appreciated by critics, it is still held dear among many folk whose good opinion is well worth having; particularly by certain biscuit bakers, who have gone so far as to imprint his likeness on their New Year cakes, and have thus given him a chance for immortality almost equal to the being stamped on a Waterloo medal or a Queen Anne’s farthing.”

In the end, the narrator says that the tale can be suspected to have originated in a “little German superstition”, but this was not so, and the note appended by Mr. Knickerbocker shows that it is an absolute fact:

*“The story of Rip Van Winkle may seem incredible to many, but nevertheless I give it my full belief, for I know the vicinity of our old Dutch settlements to have been very subject to marvelous events and appearances. Indeed, I have heard many stranger stories than this, in the villages along the Hudson; all of which were too well authenticated to admit of a doubt. I have even talked with Rip Van Winkle myself, who, when last I saw him, was a very venerable old man, and so perfectly rational and consistent on every other point, that I think no conscientious person could refuse to take this into the bargain; **nay, I have seen a certificate on the subject taken before a country justice and signed with a cross, in the justice’s own handwriting** (underlining mine). The story, therefore, is beyond the possibility of a doubt. D. K.”*

The text as such is in keeping with this introductory passage, mixing the importance of one of the greatest events in the history of America – the American War of Independence – and the extraordinary and strange life of a simple man named Rip van Winkle. The historical event that serves as background for the life of Rip is present in his life as a change of portraits at the town inn between his majesty George the Third and George Washington that brings about a change in the behavior of the people he used to know. The foreground of the story is occupied by Rip's strange experience in the woods, his encounter with some odd-looking personages playing at ninepins, his drinking and his long (20 years) sleep. Upon his return he realizes that he has slept for an unnaturally long period of time in which many changes have taken place and from a hen-pecked husband as he appears at the beginning of the tale, he becomes the town legend.

Rip van Winkle's story is not only a tale told by Rip himself and then retold by a historian but also a document written and signed by a country justice, a legal document having the authority of law. Fantasy, lie, hallucination? Maybe, but it is printed matter, historical writing and legal document at the same time having the authority to become part of the local history.

Rip's odd experience in the woods becomes thus a rewriting of the American War of Independence. Actually, as far as the readers' of the tale are concerned, this is the only account of the War that they have. The writer establishes thus an ambiguity between a true (historical) account of a true (historical) event that is usually mentioned in history books (as it is the case here, with the historical writings of Mr. Knickerbocker) and, as far as modern history is concerned, in legal documents (our case here, as well) and the importance of the myths centered around what Mircea Eliade would call Great Founding Events, and we could say that the American War of Independence can be such an event in the American history. The postscript of the tale mentions some Indian traditions of the place considering the Kaatsberg or Catskill Mountains an "abode of spirits".

The question that may arise at this point is why would a writer choose as a starting point for his fiction a historical event? The answer may be found in the very birth of the America, founded on medieval utopia or dream of Paradise transformed then in the Puritans' "renovated earth" and framed by another text: the Bible. America is as much history as it is fiction and Rip van Winkle, beyond his comic appearance, can be seen as the American explorer individualistic in his adventure, dissatisfied by his present condition, whose only alternative to "escape" is to "stroll away" into the virgin untouched American wilderness. There is another text, previous to Irving's story that describes, in just a few words, Rip's dreams: it is the Declaration of Independence with its famous

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (34)

This is, actually, the brief story of Rip van Winkle: unhappy and bound to a termagant wife (symbolic of the English rule over the American colonies). He goes away into the woods and upon his return he realizes that these unalienable rights mentioned in the Declaration have become a reality for him as well. In other words, just as the Jews' Exodus becomes a frame for the Puritans' crossing of the Atlantic or Matthew's "city upon the hill" becomes a founding image of America and the colonists in John Winthrop's vision so Jefferson's Declaration of Independence becomes the frame of Rip van Winkle's experience in the woods. Jefferson's text contains the ideal, Rip's life is the ideal accomplished of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness fulfilled as a result of America's newly-won independence.

But Rip's experience can be described as more fantastic than factual/historical. There is nothing real about the way in which he lives through the War, he only *dreams* about it

after having drunk a *magic beverage* and so we can consider that his experience is more transhistorical than factual. This type of attitude can be seen as the individual's protection against what Mircea Eliade calls "the terror of history". In other words, the tale would be a rewriting of the Declaration of Independence from the individual perspective. But, why then, does Rip become a local hero instead of a strange man with an odd story? And why is there a need for a legal document to assert the validity of his experience? It means that, in some strange way, Rip becomes some sort of prototype for the other members of the community who have experienced the American War of Independence in a more traumatic way. Yet, why then, would the community prefer to identify with Rip rather than impose on him their own version of the War (there is nowhere, in the text, an account of the War as it was)?

One answer could be found in A. van Gennep's study on the formation of legends. In his attempt to explain how and why legends are born, van Gennep mentions Franz Boas' opinion that there is a psychological reason that stands at the basis of the formation of legends and he sees it as the desire to have magical and social power (181). Then, van Gennep quotes Freud's view on the human psyche's need and tendency to represent the world according to its needs and desires. Thus, this tendency is freely expressed each time our mind, conditioned by exterior circumstances, is troubled in its logical connection to reality (181). The mind adapts to and protects itself from exterior pressures and represents the world differently especially when the reality is terrifying. This actually leads us to the above-mentioned "terror of history" and the individual's protection in front of the dissatisfying and even terrifying historical events (Eliade, *Mitul*, 127). In the particular case of Washington Irving's tale, Rip's variant is a more pleasant account of the War than the actual historical event and instead of discarding it as the story of a madman, it becomes (legal) part of the local legend.

A similar story is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* with a similar introductory passage presenting glimpses of colonial history and a solitary individual who experiences a terrifying event in a similar way to Rip, by falling asleep at a certain moment and waking up when it is all over.

The introduction of the text acquaints the reader with the range of colonial governors appointed by the kings of Great Britain, and what happened to them in those times with "few intervals of peaceful sway". These details will serve as frame for Robin's adventures in town. The ending of the paragraph is crucial for the way in which history is to be understood:

"These remarks may serve as a preface to the following adventures which chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years ago. The reader, in order to avoid a long and dry detail of colonial affairs, is requested to dispense with an account of the train of circumstances that had caused much temporary inflammation of the popular mind."

Thus, the introductory passage seems to prepare the reader for a presentation of that "temporary inflammation of the popular mind", and the account of the governors seems to allude to a glimpse of public history. The text, however, appears to contradict the introduction for we are left with the strange nocturnal adventure of a common young man.

Hawthorne's protagonist is similar to Irving's in his refusal to participate in the historical event or "the temporary inflammation of the popular mind" and eventually falls asleep. In the case of Robin, that historical event is not a game of ninepins but a carnival in which his kinsman, Major Molineux, the one whom he had been looking for all over the town all along the night appears as a tarred and feathered figure. It is not clear what the historical event behind the vague term as "inflammation of the popular mind" is, whether it is the American War of Independence or just a popular riot in colonial times, but the focus

here is on how a young man experiences this event. He is an outsider coming for the first time in the city, young and simple, though he considers himself shrewd, with no knowledge or experience on the ways of the city and trying to find his kinsman Major Molineux who promised to help him advance into the world.

His night experience into the city is a terrifying one as he encounters aggressive individuals, is drawn into temptation, gets lost in a labyrinth of streets and is chased away by mocking peals of laughter while in the meantime he gets drowsier and drowsier and eventually falls asleep. Upon his awake, he finds himself caught in a sort of town carnival in which his own kinsman is crowned King of Misrule. It is for the first time in his town experience that the collective laughter is not directed towards him and it is for the first time that he joins in the general laughter:

“The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when, all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street; every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin’s shout was the loudest there.”

Unlike Rip who dreams through the War of Independence, Robin becomes part of the historical event. The similarity between the two comes from the fact that neither Rip nor Robin is aware of the historical reality. For Robin what he sees is not a revolution but a carnival, it is not a popular riot but a popular feast, it is not suffering but therapeutic laughter.

The carnival allows any type of rule-breaking, any type of criticism of the official authority without punishment. Its character is sociability, exteriority and marginality. Its chaos and laughter have as their purpose to renew and obsolete world (Caillois, 135). So, the carnival becomes the place where the traditional orders can be turned on their heads and the authority and respectability of insiders challenged and potentially renewed by those who live beyond the acceptable bounds. The carnival, on the other hand, destroys the apparent cohesion and coherence of the world, mocking it by introducing its own structure. It is an endless contest between order and disorder, between perfection and limitation because, beside the threat to destroy, there is also the promise to renew communities and the conventions on which communities depend.

In the case of Robin, the story begins with him as constantly marginalized threatened by people with authority to be punished and striving to find its way towards the center – his kinsman Major Molineux. At the end, he becomes the center of the public riot (his laughter is the loudest of all) and his kinsman is marginalized and mocked at.

The problem at this point involves the connection between this text and the writing of American history, given the ambiguity of the historical reference and the subjective individual perspective. It is a tale that can be seen as an individual story of initiation, the collective side functioning as a mere frame. The story can indeed be seen as an individual’s progress into the ways of the world if it hadn’t been for the introduction that warns the reader of the fact that Robin’s story may be typical for a wider range of people. Just like Rip, Robin is in many ways indicative for the American type of character: young, innocent, “shrewd”, leaving his home for the sake of advancement into the world; he alludes to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and the latter’s first entry into the city described in Part 2.

Just as in the case of Rip, Robin’s mind replaces the frightening reality with alleviating laughter and avoids the traumatic experience of the historic event by fictionalizing it into carnivalesque ambiguity.

Herman Melville introduces a different type of protagonist in his *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, but in many ways, the meaning of the text comes closer to the meaning of the previously-analyzed tales. With no introduction to the historical context as in the cases

mentioned above, this text has its own intriguing opening that makes us include it among those text that “write” America, by making Bartleby, a simple, marginal individual a prototype of a specific kind of experience. Thus, the text opens as follows:

“I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written – I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I please, could relate divers stories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages I the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature.”

Why would the life of a mere law-copyist be interesting enough for one to write a biography, what kind of materials one would need to do that and why is it such an irreparable loss to literature? In order to answer these questions it is helpful to look at the subtitle: *A Story of Wall-Street*. Thus, the life of a simple individual, transformed into a text becomes representative for one American experience, the development of New York, of the financial core of America – Wall Street – with its trauma-provoking and depersonalizing character. Bartleby seems strange, or at least this is what the respectable narrator tells us, but his oddities are not stranger than those of the other copyists in the office.

Bartleby’s obstinate refusal to get involved in anything and his obsessive “I’d prefer not to” can hardly be decoded. He may be just a machine broken under social pressures or he consciously refuses to take active part in creating this depersonalizing system any longer, in other words he refuses to be part of the traumatic historical mechanism. The point is that the narrator’s existence, previously tranquil and well-settled, is shaken by the intrusion of this strange copyists and he ends his biographical account with: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”

As a conclusion, what is common to these three protagonists is their refusal to participate in the historical event. In the case of Rip, the whole American Revolution is experience as an unnaturally long sleep disturbed only by the sound of the game of ninepins played by some strange characters he encounters in the woods. Robin becomes part of a popular riot that he experiences as a masquerade and Bartleby prefers inaction to any type of participation whatsoever. As seen before, this is the way individuals avoid “terror of history,” preferring to fictionalize the historical experience rather than live it as real.

In many ways, the refusal of history may be seen, in the case of America, as a refusal to give up a state of innocence, in other words the ideal for which the first colonists have undertaken the adventure across the Atlantic and the idea around which they created their America. The acceptance of history or time means “growing up” and also be willing to bear the burden of the past. In these short stories there is no actual historical event but only a fictionalized happening, a story or a dream, briefly a text that allows any type of experiences with time, and especially the view of time not as linear and destructive, but as circular and regenerating.

Rip van Winkle, for instance, experiences the American War of Independence as a 20 years sleep and when he comes back, he reassumes his position in town. There is actually a very interesting play upon the idea of age when he sees his son, the exact image of himself when he left his home and starts doubting his identity: “I’m not myself – I’m somebody else – that’s me yonder – no – that’s somebody else, got into my shoes”. Thus,

there is a curious transfer by superposing the image of the young Rip with the image of old Rip and thus abolishing the idea of age altogether. Later on, by continuously retelling his story, Rip persists in his refusal of the passage of time and the existence of history by returning upon the same fantastic account.

Similarly, Robin gets, for a short while, involved in the destructive wheel of history and the imagery in *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* almost obsessively alludes to the passage of time. At the end of his experience the first question asked by his companion is “Well, Robin, are you dreaming?” and so he immediately fictionalizes the protagonist’s night experience and thus eliminates the feeling of failure and defeat. Robin, the “shrewd” young man who got off the ferry a night before, faces the new morning with his “cheek somewhat pale, and his eye not quite so lively as in the earlier part of the evening.” He wants to go back to the ferry and go home, but his companion turns the situation upside down by saying: “Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.”. The word “shrewd” places Robin as if by magic, in a situation/state of mind similar to that a night before – innocent and confident, looking towards a future of advancement into the world. Time is renewed and innocence restored.

Bartleby has a different attitude. His refusal to participate into the historical process is materialized into a refusal of time. His “I’d prefer not to” places Bartleby in a some sort of unhistorical dimension. If there is not possibility to turn back time in order to renew it, then, at least, there will be no more advancement, no more trauma.

All these protagonists are not simple individuals living, in their own way, historical events together with personal failures. They are symbolic of the way in which the collective mind refuses the “terror of history” preferring to adhere to the initial ideals that stood at the basis of the creation of America.

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Résumé

Cet article décrit quelques unes des représentations de l’Amérique telle quelle est envisagée par des auteurs célèbres comme Irving, Hawthorne et Melville.

Rezumat

Lucrarea propune unele imagini ale Americii, așa cum apar acestea în creația literară a unor autori celebri, respectiv, Irving, Hawthorne și Melville.

Abstract

The paper focuses on different features of America, as detectable in the literary creations of famous writers as Irving, Hawthorne and Melville.