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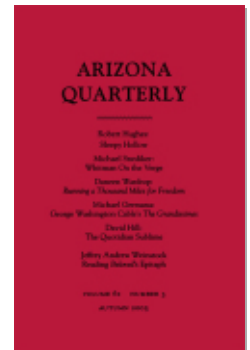
Sleepy Hollow: Fearful Pleasures and the Nightmare of History

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ROBERT HUGHES

Sleepy Hollow: Fearful Pleasures and the Nightmare of History

I. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS: IRVING'S LEGEND AND TRAUMATIC HISTORY

SOME OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED writings that recent decades have witnessed at the nexus of literature and history have been in the field of what has come to be called trauma theory.¹ One suspects that trauma theory has been especially fertile for literary studies at least in part because the telling of difficult histories gives rise to some of the most fundamental questions posed also by literature itself: questions about the nature of indirect reference, about the ethical stakes of putting events into language, and about the complex relations that may subsist between a spoken or written text and the world of history where social forces clash and real people live and die. The traumatized survivor—like, for example, the soldier who suffers nightmares and flashbacks after returning from the scene of battle, or like a community ravaged by the chaos and violence of civil war—is haunted by a terrible and profound problem of memory and narrative. How, for example, is one to *think* of—let alone *tell* of—an encounter with death, an event that by its very nature eludes human comprehension? How, for that matter, is one to account for the enigma of one's own survival in the face of death? As one influential critic has described the curious problem of history posed by traumatic events,

The history that a flashback tells—as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology equally suggest—is . . . a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition

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as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence.

For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*. (Caruth, Introduction 153)

Thus, on the one hand, it seems *impossible* to tell of such events that overwhelm any straightforward comprehension or narrative memory; yet on the other hand, to tell the tale, to bear witness, to testify to these events acquires for the traumatized subject a psychological and ethical *necessity*. To the question of how one is to reconcile this paradox of impossible discursive necessity, literature has seemed to promise an answer, as if literature perhaps had some privileged capacity for communicating the nightmares of history. And indeed, one might argue that a relationship between literary writing and traumatic history was intuited as early as Sigmund Freud who, in his well-known essay on "The Uncanny" (1919; SE 17:218–56), turned to the question of literature just as he was then also renewing his theoretical interest in trauma (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), following the explosion of "war neuroses" in World War I. Yet it seems plain, too, that direct testimonies of trauma—for example testimonies from Holocaust survivors—are not themselves events of "literature," at least not as we have ordinarily used the term in English Departments. How, then, are we to understand the relations among history, trauma and the properly literary? If we take Freud's hint and wish to consider the uncanny as the special province of trauma in literature, what are we to make of the indirection by which such fictional tales necessarily proceed—that they tell the truth, so to speak, by telling a lie? As the present essay will demonstrate, this shift from the traumatic register into the uncanny is precisely what allows the tale of a trauma to be told and heard and passed on again. Thus, a traumatic history—which of itself would be painful—is communicated instead as an uncanny tale that produces a strange variety of unsettling pleasure while still preserving a certain degree of traumatic force from the original historical event. The present essay will read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), the classic nightmare by Washington Irving

(1783–1859), to trace out, in this one story, the transformation of a traumatic history from the revolutionary war into a rather different sort of tale, a comic pastoral romance involving the disappearance of a schoolteacher.

Irving's legend revolves around Ichabod Crane, a New England schoolmaster with the comic figure of a scarecrow and an insatiable appetite for marvelous anecdotes, who arrives in the tiny Dutch hamlet of Sleepy Hollow, outside Tarry Town, New York, to establish a schoolhouse. Having accomplished this task with about as much success as one might hope for amid a rustic population suspicious alike of outsiders and booklearning, Ichabod's attention turns to beautiful Katrina Van Tassel, the neighborhood's most eligible young woman and its most promising young heiress. Ichabod woos her like a champion, steals the field from his rival, the local rowdy, Brom Bones, and seems on the verge of bringing his suit to fruition, when an evening's festive quilting at the Van Tassels' brings an unforeseen reversal and a fall from fortune. At the party, towards the end of the evening, a "knot of sager folks" sits repeating frightful tales to each other in drowsy undertones (*History* 1077). Among them, Brom Bones, Ichabod's rival, tells of his own race against the region's most powerful spirit, a headless horseman, whose nightly rides on the byways of Sleepy Hollow are the terror of the countryside. As Ichabod heads home that fateful autumn evening, the pedagogue is ridden down by a headless horseman, and is never seen or heard from again by the people of Sleepy Hollow. The reader is left, at the end of the tale proper, with the coy question: Was Ichabod the casualty of fantastic legend or of real, mundane love? Was the horseman on the road that night indeed the spectral horror of legend? Or was the rider instead the prankish Brom Bones, sporting with the pedagogue's simple credence in tales of the marvelous, and ridding himself at the same time of a rival to the hand of the peerless Katrina? Brom Bones, Headless Horseman, we ask—What's the difference between the two? Or are they indeed identical? Is it even possible—or fruitful—to consider such nocturnal fantasies under the light of day?

The tale itself does not allow the reader to resolve the mystery of Ichabod Crane's disappearance nor the identity of the monstrous horseman. Some readers may find it reasonable to conclude that the horseman was Brom Bones, who takes such a hearty good humor in the tale of his rival's disappearance. Such readers may further give their confidence

to an old farmer, who is one among a long chain of narrators of the tale and who proposes (without citing evidence) that Ichabod survived and eventually found political appointment after retreating from the scene of Katrina's (alleged) amorous refusal. But Irving was hardly averse to writing ghost tales,² and the problem of genre remains irreducible in his rendition of the legend. Indeed, the next in the chain of narrators, gives credence not to the reasonable old farmer but rather to the old country wives who are, he says, "the best judges of these matters," and who give a second reading, incompatible with the farmer's, maintaining that Ichabod was carried away by "supernatural means" (1086). One might look to Brom to settle the matter, but the boastful blade, uncharacteristically, says nothing at all on the matter of his rival's disappearance, making it impossible for the critical reader to determine whether the "knowing look" some observe on his face whenever the tale of Ichabod is told is indeed genuinely knowing, or else a consequence of the general neighborhood impulse to attribute anything like a prank to the rantipole hero (1069). Hence the two incompatible readings maintain an uneasy coexistence within the tale as Irving gives it to us. We shall see that the ambiguity assigned to the matter of *cause* in the tale (in the first instance, the difference between Brom Bones and the headless horseman) bears quite directly upon the peculiar relation between the uncanny quality of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and the question of historical trauma. We shall see, moreover, that this question of the identity of the horseman, which lies at the center of even the most naïve reading of the legend, functions as a surprising but necessary proxy to still more profound questions that enable the transmission of a traumatic history in Irving's unsettling fiction.

2. SLEEPY HOLLOW AND THE NIGHTMARE OF HISTORY

The opening paragraphs of the tale announce a familiar, romantic yearning to escape from the cares of history, but amid Irving's charming language of pastoral romance, we can already begin to get a sense for the bewitching fabric of his tale in the way it threads a troubled life and a weary hint of death into a wished-for retreat into dream:

If ever I should wish for a retreat, whither I might steal from the world and its distractions, and dream quietly away the rem-

nant of a troubled life, I know of none more promising than this little valley.

. . . . A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere. Some say that the place was bewitched . . . and the night mare, with her whole nine fold, seems to make [Sleepy Hollow] the favourite scene of her gambols. (1058–59)

The oddity of the last sentence in particular is striking and opens for us the key question of Irving's legend: to what degree will the dreamy tale cancel out history and to what degree preserve it? On the one hand, the language issues a certain invitation to smile at the fanciful image of a mare and her fillies prancing playfully about an idyllic field; on the other hand, Sleepy Hollow has just been explicitly staged as the scene of a nightmare. Irving, again and again, dresses up his nightmares in the more becoming apparel of the pastoral or the comedic. Such generic transvestitism is surely one of the contributing factors to the ambiguities of the tale (and the reading of its ending). I would propose that what we have in "Sleepy Hollow" is a horrific *nightmare* that expresses itself essentially in masquerading as a pastoral *daydream*: neither just the one, nor the other, but rather some sort of complex interrelation between the two that allows both for the surprising appearance of a certain history, as we shall presently see, as well as for the captivating charm of the literary.

Directly following the "night mare" sentence, the specifically historical nature of the Sleepy Hollow dream starts to seep through the seams as we discover little eruptions of history into the seeming timelessness of the legend's enchanting Märchen guise. Irving writes:

The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region, and seems to be commander in chief of all the powers of the air, is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, in some nameless battle during the revolutionary war, and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk, hurrying along in the gloom of night, as if on the wings of the wind. His haunts are not confined to the valley, but extend at times to the adjacent roads,

and especially to the vicinity of a church at no great distance. Indeed, certain of the most authentic historians of those parts . . . allege, that the body of the trooper having been buried in the church yard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of its head, and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes passes along the hollow, is owing to his being belated . . . (1059–60)

The passage is richly nuanced, but the unstable status of the historical allegations attracts immediate notice. The headless horseman “is said by some” (but perhaps not by others) to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, and “certain of the most authentic historians” (though perhaps not all of them) “allege” without cited proof that “the ghost rides forth to the scene of the battle in nightly quest of its head.” Readers of Irving will be familiar, from *A History of New York* and elsewhere, with this Knickerbockerly fussiness concerning the authenticity of historians, but the play in evidence here goes beyond mere fussiness.³ Irving isn’t just being coy about the reality or non-reality of ghosts in this narrative world. He is suggesting that the truth of the ghost of Sleepy Hollow rests properly not in the decisive judgments that one might wish to render, but instead in some more complex discursive place, in the sayings and in the allegations of those who live there. This isn’t quite the same as taking a historicist or relativist stance on the truth of the ghost as “true for them,” nor yet is it to dismiss the question as a fool’s game of undecidability or indeterminacy. Rather, it is to assert that the question of history in Irving’s legend finds its force as a matter of speaking, of telling or transmitting a tale. In this respect, the persistent return to the instability of historical truth in the passage above echoes the authorial and narrative paradoxes this essay has already seen—when, for example, a historian of New York writes a collection of tales whose narrator remarks on the lack of American history, or when a tale of alleged dreamy forgetfulness is “found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker,” the narrator of *A History of New York*, who makes such an ado there about the need to “rescue from oblivion the memory of former incidents” (377). History remains a crucial and unresolved problem, but it is as a problem that it transmits its force in Irving’s legend.

Even leaving aside the instability of the allegations themselves, this essential ambiguity speaks likewise in the details adhering to the

trooper. This headless horseman arrives not as some anonymous goblin imported unchanged from the Germanic folk tales of the local tradition. It is known, for instance, that he was a man, a Hessian mercenary, in the service of the British in the recent War of American Independence. It is known, moreover, that the Hessian's head was completely blown off by a cannon ball—"carried away," in Irving's infinitely suggestive phrase. And yet, what was the trooper's name? In which battle did he lose his head? More tellingly, who was there to witness the traumatic kiss? Where do the details of the legend originate? The tale reports that the Hessian lost his head "in some nameless battle." What does this mean? Why "nameless"? Any headless, foreign soldier buried in the churchyard of Sleepy Hollow presumably met his fate in the immediate neighborhood and wasn't just carried there from far away—can it be that the locals have given no name to the battle that took place in their own backyard? The nightmare image of the headless horseman would seem to present, to the people of Sleepy Hollow and to the reader of Irving's legend, the trace of an event that in some sense has failed to find its proper place in the symbolic world of Sleepy Hollow.

So what we have in Irving's legend is a tale that asserts and then all too swiftly buries its own history. Indeed, when years later Irving wrote a nostalgic reminiscence of the Sleepy Hollow neighborhood, he described the hollow as if it were an eddy of timeless Dutch pastoral life, undisturbed by the mainstream of modern historical movement and unsusceptible to its influence, until the steamboats of the nineteenth century brought New York City so much closer.⁴ The strangeness is not that Sleepy Hollow may have been such an eddy of circular time, or at any rate that Irving presented it in such a way, but that the tale itself specifies that its most famous figure, the disruptive headless Hessian, comes from some other time, decades before the steam-engine arrived on the Hudson, and yet clearly not a part of the mythical Dutch idyll. Where, one must wonder, does the historical trauma of the revolutionary war figure into the seeming ahistoricity of the old Dutch hollow?

But while direct historical references in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" may be scant, they are not altogether absent, and there is, in fact, one scene quite devoted to the very particular history of the Sleepy Hollow community during the war. At the pivotal moment in Ichabod's fortunes—that is, towards the end of Van Tassel's party, after Ichabod's

brilliant dancing with Katrina and immediately before conversations turn to the recent hauntings of the headless horseman—a knot of the sager folks are smoking and repeating in drowsy tones long tales of their experiences in the American War of Independence:

This neighborhood, at the time of which I am speaking, was one of those highly favoured places which abound with chronicle and great men. The British and American line had run near it during the war; it had, therefore, been the scene of marauding, and had been infested with refugees, cow boys, and all kinds of border chivalry.⁵ Just sufficient time had elapsed to enable each story teller to dress up his tale with a little becoming fiction, and in the indistinctness of his recollection, to make himself the hero of every exploit. (1077)

The unflagging charm of the narrative voice again almost invites a smile from the reader, this time at the heroism that survivors will use to dress their testimonies of war, without which dress the testimonies would be read more nakedly as tales of survival, of death fortuitously missed rather than heroically conquered. For example, of the two brief tales we are given, the first is of a Dutchman who survives the explosion of the cannon he is manning against a British frigate; the second tale is of an older gentleman who, though struck by a musket-ball, had been saved by its deflection off the hilt of his sword; and both tales are dressed in the rhythmic beauty of Irving's most dapper literary prose. Following these tales of survival, the Sleepy Hollow people begin to dole out dismal, ghostly tales of funeral trains and of mournful wailings heard about the tree where the unfortunate Major André was captured during the war. However, the chief part of the stories turn, we are told, upon the patrols of the favorite spectre of Sleepy Hollow, an insistent headless Hessian, far less fortunate than the surviving cannoneer or the older gentleman. Before the revel breaks up, the New England pedagogue shares his own tales, conned from Cotton Mather's *History of New England Witchcraft*.

We notice several important things about this instance of storytelling within "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." First, we see that the tales told by the Sleepy Hollow folk move from the historical events of the war to the ghostly afterlife of those events, a metonymy which underscores the association between the strictly historical (however dressed

up) and the legendary supernatural of the neighborhood ghosts. If we understand that the ghostly tales of the restless dead (for which this region has a special appetite) enjoy some organic relationship with the community's experience of the war, that the tales of ghosts and apparitions follow from anecdotes of the war not just happenstantially but logically, we begin to suspect that these formally conventional ghost tales work as a sort of proxy for some other, more violent tale that remains to be properly told in its own terms. "But all these [stories of wartime chivalry]," we read, "were nothing to the tales of ghosts and apparitions that succeeded" (1078). It's an odd relationship: the heroically dressed anecdotes of escaping violent death give rise to ghost tales, tales which then retrospectively make "nothing" of the very stories which occasioned their own telling. This essay will argue that it is not an absolute negation that the latter tales effect, but rather a palpable, problematic "nothing" that carries an insistent weight even after these grounding historical anecdotes are submerged beneath the flashier and somewhat more conventional tales of the ghostly hauntings around Major André's tree and of the nightmarish returns of the headless Hessian.

The late night story telling at the Van Tassels' also serves to remind us that *Sleepy Hollow* is in fact a real place and had a very particular history during the revolution. As the longer passage cited above hints to us, the village had been right on the front lines of the war, between the British command center, down the Hudson River in New York City, and Benedict Arnold's American stronghold, up the Hudson River at West Point. The revolutionary history of the hollow, it turns out, was an anguished one of bitter civil war, controlled and protected by neither the British nor the American armies, but rather placed uneasily as the neutral ground between the two. Historian Robert E. Cray, drawing from firsthand accounts recorded by local residents, describes the radical disruption of *Sleepy Hollow* and the Westchester County countryside during the war—where, he says,

irregular bands of loyalist Cowboys and patriotic Skinners, operating beyond the reach of military discipline, waged guerrilla warfare. Indiscriminate plundering was commonplace. Revenge spurred countless reprisals as people settled scores. Residents reeled from sorties by British and American units, probing for enemy weaknesses, faced repeated demands for

supplies, torched farms, and stripped fields. Political loyalties often succumbed to the harsh reality of survival. Friends and neighbors fought each other, switched sides, turned neutral, or fled the county. Who was a patriot? Who was a loyalist? Simple questions about allegiances dissolved into a fog of ambiguity in the Neutral Ground. (376)

Henry Steiner, the modern day historian of the Village of Sleepy Hollow, reports that British-allied Hessian troops would range through the neighborhood, looting and foraging, raiding cattle, and taking prisoners from the resident Dutch Whigs. He also says that among the local tales of the war that survive (though not one that Irving reports) is the tale of Polly Buckhout, shot dead by a Hessian, who mistook her for a man because she was wearing a man's hat. The history of this nightmare-ridden community has, then, been marked by battles nameless and otherwise, by marauding, famine, and "infestations" of refugees, by the confusion of identities and allegiances surrounding the treason of Benedict Arnold and the "unfortunate Major André" (as he is invariably called by Irving and by others), the British officer who arranged for Arnold's treason and had the misfortune to be caught behind lines, himself wearing the wrong set of clothes.⁶ The movement of the line was fluid, however, and the residents of Sleepy Hollow had every reason to ask (as the unfortunate Major André might have asked) where they were. Donald Pease comes close to the matter when he writes that Major André was, for the people of Sleepy Hollow anyway, a figure of divided loyalties (16–17).⁷ Probably it would be more appropriate to say—as was quite literally true of its geography—that Sleepy Hollow didn't know what side it was on. More precisely, then, Major John André serves as a figure suggesting the troubling ambiguity of identity in the context of the fluid front lines of a colonial rebellion against the motherland. A man calling himself John Anderson and dressed like a local civilian, turns out to be a British intelligence officer and is hanged for wearing the wrong clothes; the American Major General, who ought to have been in charge of the affair, escapes to the British as a turncoat. Mather's accounts of the witch trials of 1692, which Ichabod relates that night at the Van Tassels', share certain structural similarities: here, too, the secret identities of those with whom one might identify turn out to be distressingly ambiguous legal affairs and liable to end, to no one's lasting satisfaction,

at the end of a rope.

We can now see that the crucial question of Ichabod's disappearance concerns itself not just with the banalities of love and the pleasures of the imaginative tale, but also with the urgent question of historical trauma and survival—the question, so to speak, of the survival of one's own death. Or, to put it more pointedly: the hanged Major André or the hanged witches—how are they different from me? What accounts for the difference between the fortunate and the unfortunate, when to outward appearances they are identical? When so many die from exploded cannon or from musket balls less erring, how is it that I survived to tell the tale, leaving the scene of the event apparently uninjured? We earlier posed the key question of the legend in terms that now assume a more unsettling, less playful aspect. We asked then *Brom Bones, Headless Horseman, What's the difference between the two?* When we consider Brom Bones as, precisely, a member of the Sleepy Hollow community—someone like me, and the headless horseman, that fragmented body, as, precisely, an image of surprising and enigmatic death, the question of Brom Bones and the headless horseman appears as an essential proxy to what one is tempted to call the *real* question of the legend and the literary tale: the surviving me, the violently, inexplicably, unexpectedly dead, *What's the difference?!* This, the terrible question of surviving one's own death, is of course the traumatic question par excellence. And how does it get posed in Irving's tale? The only way it can, given the spectral paradox of the question itself: by shifting into a different mode and masquerading as a different, more innocent question. It is important to note, however, that the traumatic historical enigma underlying the tale is not altogether lost, but rather persists, as we have just seen, between the very threads of Irving's complex tale, lending its texture to the warp and woof of his tapestry.

We get a sense, then, for the powerful motivation of these tales, one that is very much a matter of history: there is something so incomprehensible, so unaccountable about the historical event of survival in the face of overwhelming death, that one simply must, psychologically and ethically, take that unaccountability and, impossibly, *turn it to account*, in recounting the tale and bearing witness to the terms of insistent death and impossible survival. That's why the locals must tell their tales of Major André's capture and of explosive deaths unexpect-

edly survived. That's why Ichabod tells the witchcraft tales of his native New England. That's why, above all, the survivors of Sleepy Hollow tell insistent tales of an unfortunate Hessian trooper. And if, like the spy, the traitor, or the witch, these frightful tales appear dressed up in a little becoming fiction, or in the vital, rhythmic charms of Irving's prose, so that they appear to be something more comfortingly familiar, the critic might justifiably suppose that the uncanny imposture only restages the essential, traumatic confusion of identity between the living and the dead.

We might pause here to pose yet again the problem of the event in Sleepy Hollow. Hitherto, this essay has concerned itself with the historical event suggested in the figure of the headless horseman that the tale claims as "the dominant spirit . . . that haunts this enchanted region" (1059)—namely with the traumatic experience of the Sleepy Hollow community on the front lines of the war. In seeming contrast with the dressed-up tales of the survivors and the doleful tale of the wrongly dressed Major André, tales of the apparitions of the headless horseman would seem to present us with the real thing, the naked horror, so to speak, of the event of the war that still haunts the people of Sleepy Hollow. Nevertheless, given the persistent dual nature of Irving's tale, if we want to suggest that the tale of the headless horseman is *the* legend of Sleepy Hollow, we must also recognize that the legend is itself a doubled affair, *both* nightmare and daydream. It is not, after all, just the tale of the trooper that comes down to us—indeed two hundred years later, the details of the rider's battlefield demise are mostly eclipsed by the alleged predations of his ghost one dark and dismal autumn night, some years later. The reader might more precisely say that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," in all its richness, is the placing of another story into association with the story of the Hessian. It is, simultaneously with the tale of the headless horseman, the tale of the luckless Crane that the old wives (and the old farmer) now circulate. The event, then, appears to have a two-fold nature: a traumatic, originary event in the war, and a secondary event, more contemporary, and perhaps less violent (if the claims of the old farmer are to be believed over those of the old wives).

Indeed, the New England pedagogue and the Hessian trooper occasion tales of remarkably similar types. This becomes clear when we begin to ask those same critical questions of Ichabod's fatal ride as we did of the Hessian's. For example, the tale circulated between various

of the narrators (“given, almost in the precise words in which I heard it related,” [1087]) gives some very particular allegations of Ichabod’s last ride: the sounds heard nigh about Major André’s tree, the misshapen apparition of the silent horseman, the panicked flight of an unskillful rider on an ornery steed, the gaining of the far side of the bridge, and Ichabod’s final look back:

now Ichabod cast a look behind to see if his pursuer should vanish, according to rule, in a flash of fire and brimstone. Just then, he saw the goblin rising in his stirrups, and in the very act of hurling his head at him. Ichabod endeavored to dodge the horrible missile, but it was too late. It encountered his cranium with a tremendous crash—he was tumbled headlong into the dust, and Gunpowder [Ichabod’s mount], the black steed, and the goblin rider, passed by like a whirlwind.—

The next morning . . . was found the hat of the unfortunate Ichabod, and close beside it a shattered pumpkin. (1085)

As with the events around the death of the Hessian trooper, one must ask (given the disappearance of the pedagogue and the speechless silence of the headless ghost), *who* was there to witness these events we hear of in such particularity? who again saw the fatal kiss? who heard the crash of Ichabod’s cranium? who was there to witness his final fall, headlong (and maybe a head short) into the dust? On the evidence, the tale of Ichabod’s ride would seem to have been spun out of an empty hat found by the brookside, and a shattered pumpkin nearby. But the details of the language are suggestive as to how the tale of Ichabod’s mysterious departure comes to be threaded together with that of the Hessian: the empty hat, the coincidence of the name “Crane” with the word “cranium” and the associations of that word with the head(lessness) of the headhunting horseman. The violated pumpkin would seem the condensation of all this, suggesting heads, their displacement, and their momentary substitution by head-shaped missiles, by cannonball or by cheerful orange gourd. The name of the horse (Gunpowder), citing Ichabod’s final expectation of fire and sulphur, the use of “the unfortunate” in application to Ichabod, when Major André has all along—and without fail (1078, 1081)—claimed that dubious honorific. Such details suggest that whatever the historical truth of Ichabod’s unaccountable

departure, the tale draws its power from the weaving together of the two tales, from a narrative association between the uncanny tale of Ichabod and the traumatic tales of death and survival in the war—the tale of the Hessian, obviously, but also a more general experience of the war. Surely the frightful urgency, borrowed from the *earlier* event in the telling of the *later* event, is one reason why the reader, like at least one of the narrators, is likely to favor the old country wives who insist on the connection between the two, over the denial of history and the more mundane tale of love proposed by the old farmer.

3. FEARFUL PLEASURES: FROM TRAUMA TO THE UNCANNY

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” then, presents the critic with a remarkably intractable problem of history. We have seen that the legend is staged in a strong relation to history. This fact derives from the location of Sleepy Hollow on the front lines of the War of Independence, and evinces itself generally in the propensity of its inhabitants for hallucinatory visions and nightmares—voices, (martial?) music, fireworks and flares shooting across the valley, the “angry echoes” that follow upon the report of a pleasure-shooter’s gun (1059, 1058). We have also seen this strange history manifested more specifically both in the community’s association of explicit tales of the war with tales of the supernatural, as well as in the details alleged of “the dominant spirit,” the headless Hessian, said to haunt this enchanted region. Moreover, we have seen that the locals, the old country wives and the old farmer, have threaded this originary tale of battlefield trauma together with the secondary, perhaps more benign, tale of Ichabod’s last ride, as *the* legend of Sleepy Hollow, weaving in with these, other ambiguities of their history: the unfortunate Major André, the witch trials in New England, the exploded cannon and deflected bullets of personal war-time anecdote. Irving’s tale has thus proved itself to be irreducibly ambivalent. The tale is not just, on the one hand, about beauty, or day-dreamy oblivion, or romantic rivalry, but neither is it just about history, or insistent nightmare, or traumatic horror. Rather, we can see that the terrible beauty and captivating charm of the tale owe their possessive power over Sleepy Hollow imaginations to the uneasy coexistence and ambiguous confusion of all these terms. Elements that ought to have had identities as distinct as life and death have been brought into some fateful convergence and the difference between the two fallen under

question. The strangeness of this legend—its enigmatic yet undeniable relation to the historical trauma of war—seems to place itself beyond critical reach. For what, one must still ask, is the critic to do in the face of an insistent history that seems to lack any directly specified referent? The most fundamental critical questions of any event—who saw it? what did they see? how do they know the details they claim?—are missing here both in the case of the Hessian's last battle, as in the case of Ichabod's last ride in *Sleepy Hollow*. One might say that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" asserts, therefore, not so much an historical *event*, as a traumatic, historical *gap* that the tale and its narrators must fail to render in conscious, critical terms. And this gap, this hole within the Hollow, seems to define nearly every circumstance of the legend: the missing elaboration of the war, the missing Ichabod, the missing head of the Hessian, the missing witnesses, the missing comforts of normal self-identity—indeed the missing answers to so many critical questions.

This isn't quite a gap like the absolute (and comparatively untroubled) one of Rip Van Winkle's twenty year slumber, to cite the other well known tale from Crayon's *Sketch Book*, in which the henpecked idler sleeps dreamlessly, timelessly, through the American War of Independence (and the unmourned decease of his termagant wife). Rather, the essential historical gap in *Sleepy Hollow* is one of comprehension, as if an insistent question mark had installed itself in the very soul of the little valley to trouble the sleep of its survivors and nightly stalk its byways in the figure of a monstrous, black Hessian, who embodies the gap both spatially in his very headlessness as well as temporally in his rushing belatedness. Something irreducibly enigmatic befell the *Sleepy Hollow* community in its survival of the war, something which eludes the hard facts of remembering and forgetting, but which expresses itself through the rhythms of these tales: first that of the unfortunate Hessian and then again that of Ichabod's romance and final ride. The tales of the survivors, which as this essay has shown are associated with the tale of the headless horseman (and precede the telling of that tale at the Van Tassels' fête), share an analogous status. They are essentially about an event, a death, that *didn't* happen, a musket ball that, by the most improbable happenstance, failed to arrive at its proper destination, a cannon explosion that, quite inexplicably, killed no one. Perhaps, one is tempted to speculate, the people of *Sleepy Hollow* repeat

the tale of the headless horseman because in that figure, all at once, one is given the narrative comfort of an actual event (a head “carried away” by a cannonball), the visible embodiment of a gap (headlessness), an acknowledgment that the event *didn't really happen to them* per se, and a sort of explanation for why, in the aftermath of the war, the community continues to suffer the nightly effects of an event, a death, that didn't fully happen to them. The peculiar status of this historical event as a real *gap* that resists symbolization and narrativizing—and as something that nevertheless insists in the dreamy imagination of the community and struggles to find a certain expression in its speech—suggests why the tale of a community's war-trauma had to be told in part through a ghostly Märchen proxy-tale.

Yet the tale suggests, as we shall see, that they also tell the story because it is enjoyable to do so. Certainly, the tale is an enjoyable one to read as rendered in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, and for almost two hundred years readers have found themselves carried away by its fearful pleasures. But as critics, the theoretical dimensions of a pleasure that seems to situate itself in relation to trauma remains among our most pressing problems, since trauma would seem to locate itself as essentially beyond the domain of pleasure and incommensurable with it. In other words, having established the *historical trauma* that functions as the real kernel of the tale's persistent power, what is one to make of the fact that in the present case, the *tale* produces precisely *pleasure*?

For present purposes, let us follow Ichabod Crane, who is especially suggestive of the pleasures of the literary, since before he himself became the subject of the tale, Sleepy Hollow's man of letters was distinguished by the ferocity of his “appetite” for marvelous tales. We read, for instance, that

His appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary; and both had been increased by his residence in this spell bound region. No tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow. It was often his delight, after his school was dismissed of an afternoon, to stretch himself on the rich bed of clover . . . and there con over old Mather's direful tales, until the gathering dusk of evening made the printed page a mere mist before his eyes. Then, as he wended his way, by swamp and stream and awful woodland, to

the farm house . . . every sound of nature, at that witching hour, fluttered his excited imagination (1063–64)

Irving will write two years later of the taste for the supernatural tale in terms of instinct,⁸ but here already, in Ichabod's monstrous appetite (for tales as for food), we get a sense for something at work unreasonably in excess of mere need and beyond ordinary satisfactions. On one level, to say that the direful delights of such tales operate in excess of reason and beyond need seems like a banality, for these are surely hallmarks of the literary most broadly, but it is worth remarking that the particular pleasures of tale-telling in *Sleepy Hollow* (translatable to the printed word, as we see above) likewise exceed any ordinary, comparatively subdued, pleasures of literature. Ichabod's extreme voracity, like his figure ("the genius of famine descending upon the earth" [1061]), suggests a link to death here and a driving hunger infinitely in excess of any possible object. Ichabod may spend his late afternoons reclining on a sensuous bed of clover, indulging his appetites with old Mather, leaving him only misty-eyed in the gathering dusk, but the effect is hardly one of the serenity of love fulfilled, nor even of the excitements of a typical bedtime amour. Rather, we see that these very powerful excitements transform his nighttime world into a place of fluttering terrors.

This intimacy of pleasure and terror astonishes people far too little. To be carried away by a word, as Ichabod is by the Mather he so loves, to lose one's head, so to speak, amid the rhythms and charms of the dismal tales of history and legend, is plainly to give oneself over to a fearful death, if only one in imaginary anticipation. And yet this imaginary death, we find, is again and again contextualized amid familiar, homely comforts. The classic *Sleepy Hollow* venue would seem to be a cozy fireside hearth on a winter's evening:

Another of his sources of fearful pleasures was, to pass long winter evenings with the old Dutch wives, as they sat spinning by the fire, with a row of apples roasting and sputtering along the hearth, and listen to their marvelous tales of ghosts and goblins, and haunted fields and haunted brooks, haunted bridges and haunted houses, and particularly of the headless horseman, or the galloping Hessian of the Hollow, as they

sometimes called him. He would delight them equally by his anecdotes of witchcraft . . . (1064)

Indeed together with the haunting repetitions the critic might have expected from the traumatized community, with the sputtering, stuttering, breathless panting of the alliterations, we begin, too, to witness a certain poetic transformation, an essential degree of mollification in the manifestation of the strictly traumatic:

But if there was a pleasure in all this, while snugly cuddling in the chimney corner of a chamber that was all of a ruddy glow from the crackling wood fire, and where, of course, no spectre dared to show its face, it was dearly purchased by the terrors of his subsequent walk homewards. What fearful shapes and shadows beset his path, amidst the dim and ghastly glare of a snowy night!—With what wistful look did he eye every trembling ray of light streaming across the waste fields from some distant window!—How often was he appalled by some shrub covered with snow, which like a sheeted spectre beset his very path!—How often did he shrink with curdling awe at the sound of his own steps . . . and dread to look over his shoulder, lest he should behold some uncouth being tramping close behind him!—and how often was he thrown into complete dismay by some rushing blast, howling among the trees, in the idea that it was the galloping Hessian on one of his nightly scourings.

All these, however, were mere terrors of the night, phantasms of the mind, that walk in darkness . . . (1065)

No doubt poor Ichabod suffers terrifying expectations on his night return through the snow. But we see here a shift in the status of the terror. This terror, unlike anything properly traumatic, enjoys an economic exchangeability with pleasure: a certain measure of pleasure in the tales enjoyed by the homely hearth is “purchased by” a certain measure of terror on Ichabod’s subsequent walk homewards.

The shift in the position of the strictly traumatic—away from the pure and present directness of the nightmare image—is signaled too by the curious schema of the language here. If we had earlier described trauma as a sort of irreducibly insistent question mark installed in the soul of the valley (What’s the difference between the surviving me

and the exploded dead?), in the above paragraph we find something insistent and repetitive, and with the *form* of a question (“What fearful shapes and shadows . . . With what wistful look . . . How often was he appalled . . . How often did he shrink with curdling awe . . . how often was he thrown into complete dismay . . .”), but slightly *trans-formed* into something more exclamatory. It is as if the gap of trauma has been effectively *elided* by this rhetorical scheme, even while this scheme succeeds in *marking* that gap—by preserving both its repetitive insistence and as well as a trace of its question form—and in *transferring* some of its power into a different kind of excitement, a fearful, but *non-traumatic*, pleasure. We recognize this pleasure specifically as “the uncanny,” something Freud described as that which is distinct from—but “reminds us of”—the traumatic repetitions beyond pleasure (SE 17: 238; “Unheimliche” 251). Curiously, Freud’s German word here, *mahnen*, isn’t the more common word *erinnern*, meaning *to remind*. *Mahnen* means to remind or to warn, but it also carries a suggestion of economic exchange, like a reminder of payment due. The uncanny legend, then, would in this sense issue a “reminder” to the listener or reader of the debt to be paid in words, in story-telling, and owed to a trauma originating in the War of Independence.

This transformation of the tale into the uncanny also makes possible a certain generalization that extends the range of that kernel of historical trauma into the unconscious of the broader social field, beyond any historical restriction to an actual witness of the original, traumatic event (or non-event) that we suppose first set the dream in motion. Irving suggests as much by describing the power of the tale as a sort of contagion communicated along unconscious lines:

It is remarkable, that the visionary propensity I have mentioned is not confined to the native inhabitants of the valley, but is unconsciously imbibed by every one who resides there for a time. However wide awake they may have been before they entered that sleepy region, they are sure, in a little time, to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative—to dream dreams, and see apparitions. (1060)

So while the uncanny may always “remind us of” a trauma, the fact that it must do so unconsciously in “dreams and fancies” (1078), the

fact that this reminiscence is one beyond the reach of conscious, critical appropriation, beyond the reach of daylight, one might say—all this likewise makes possible the fact of the tale's generalizable power, to the degree that we may expect to see this dreamy-nightmarish "contagion" carried even through the printed word (1078), as we saw in Ichabod's fascination with the histories of Mather, and as we dare propose in the case of Irving's still loved tale.

The uncanny, reminiscent as it is of obscure trauma, suggests a class of tale with a specially unsettling power, as if invisibly woven into the expected excitement and familiar fright we bargained for, there were some troubling, enigmatic, *other* element, something that seems to address us very particularly from some other scene unavailable to our direct observation. The uncanny is not to be equated, therefore, with the thrills and satisfactions of the "merely" scary. The communicability of the odd horror, the ability of its fearful pleasures to survive through different tellings and retellings, the virulence of the tale—such aesthetic qualities, invisible and fleeting, are difficult to account for with any critical rigor, but we might propose, following Irving, that some quality of the telling, some contagion communicated at the level of the unconscious, is able to carry over some part of the weight of the original trauma, even if that originary event remains disguised or unrecognized by both the teller and the recipient.

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" testifies to this excessive significance of the uncanny in part by staging the tale as an essentially shared one. The communal provenance of the legend of Sleepy Hollow is made most explicit in the secondary event of Ichabod's disappearance, but the way this arises is suggestive too of the way the community claims or affirms its own identity as witness to a common trauma embodied in the spectral figure of the Hessian:

The mysterious event caused much speculation at the Church on the following Sunday. Knots of gazers and gossips were collected in the church yard, at the bridge, and at the spot where the hat and pumpkin had been found. The stories of Brouwer, of Bones, and a whole budget of others, were called to mind; and when they had diligently considered them all, and compared them with the symptoms of the present case, they shook

their heads, and came to the conclusion, that Ichabod had been carried off by the galloping Hessian. (1086)

The question of Ichabod's disappearance knots together these gazers and gossips in a community effort to situate this new mystery within the existing narrative field, to narrativize the symptoms of the present case under the authority of the galloping Hessian. Hence the people of Sleepy Hollow seek to locate the event amid existing stories that the circumstances call to mind: the story of old Brouwer, for instance, a tale the reader will recollect from the Van Tassels', involving "a most heretical disbeliever" who met the horseman and was dunked in the brook with a clap of thunder for his lack of faith in the dominant spirit of Sleepy Hollow (1079). The events that Sunday certify the continuing symbolic life of the headless Hessian, and we are not therefore surprised to find that the tale of the missing Ichabod, now bound together with the tale of the ghostly horseman, becomes "a favourite story often told about the neighborhood round the winter evening fire" (1087)—hearth fires where once the pedagogue snuggled so cozily.

Irving further signals the extraordinary virulence of the tale and broadens the field of its enigmatic inheritance by presenting the legend through fully four narrative frames:

[1819 Prospectus, 1120; 1819 Advertisement, 1121]

W.I. (1848 Preface, 742)

Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (The Sketch Book of, 731)

Diedrich Knickerbocker ("Found among the Papers of the late," 1058)

POSTSCRIPT story teller (1087)

Old farmer; old country wives; authentic historians
(1086)

The author of the Prospectus, Advertisement, and (later) the Preface, has an identity distinct from Geoffrey Crayon, the putative author of the collection, who indicates that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was found among the papers of the "late" Diedrich Knickerbocker, who himself claims to have heard it repeated in Manhattan, from a storyteller who claims to have gotten it from an old farmer of Sleepy Hollow,

where the tale appears to be in common currency among the old wives at least. In this lengthy chain of narration, "Sleepy Hollow" would appear to be, quite eminently, a tale to pass on—not just a tale to enjoy, but a tale to transmit, a tale that demands to be told by those who have heard it, and not just among the native inhabitants of the valley. Long after Irving has gone to sleep with his fathers beneath the green valleys of the Hudson, the fearful pleasures of this tale are still so vital that the event of Sleepy Hollow—regardless of the actual status of its historical referent, whether real or merely on the level of dream—might still be said to circulate through the American social body as the "possession of every American mind," to cite Van Wyck Brooks slightly askew in the ambiguity of a double genitive (244). We are indeed possessed. Possessed of a marvelous tale, certainly—but also possessed by the trace of a historical trauma captured and communicated and calling for further iteration in Irving's uncanny legend.

4. POSTSCRIPT: THE MORAL OF THE STORY AND WHAT IT GOES TO PROVE

So, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, which opens with a denial of an American history, concludes with the strange and paradoxical history communicated—unconsciously—through the dreamy contagion of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." We remain, in the end, as much in the dark as ever about the specific nature of the trauma of this community in its survival of the war. Whatever it was, it remains an enigma that resists the daylight of critical consciousness and must be finally incomprehensible except as a forceful, empirical fact witnessed in the telling of the tale—perhaps, I propose, the affective force of some originary traumatic incomprehension. Similarly the question of the ending, *Brom Bones, Headless Horseman, What's the difference between the two?* remains with us open and unanswered, though not without uncanny pleasures of its own.

The POSTSCRIPT that immediately follows the tale proper seems to have anticipated the critical quandary engendered by such a compelling, yet irreducibly enigmatic tale. The scene is Manhattan, and a storyteller has just relayed the tale of Ichabod and the horseman of Sleepy Hollow. One cautious old gentleman, a familiar type in Irving's frames, demands of the storyteller "what was the moral of the story, and what it went to prove" (1087).⁹ For reasons untold, the cautious old gentleman

has been unable to convert the unsettling and fearful pleasures of the tale into laughter, as the other burghers have succeeded in doing. It's as if he has sensed the open question of the tale, and identified it at the level of truth and ethics, but in demanding comprehension and satisfaction at the level of *information*, the cautious old gentleman displays his misapprehension of the *type* of question the tale has posed, as well as his blank immunity to the special power of the literary to communicate a truth beyond cognition, a communication all the more forceful for its essential deferral and indirection. "He was one of your wary men, who never laugh but upon good grounds—when they have reason and the law on their side" (1087). The cautious old gentleman has missed not only the pleasures of beauty and of a tale well told; he has also sought to deny another variety of truth following another law, one we have seen located at the level of affect: the unsettling and incomprehensible trauma preserved and communicated through the uncanny tale.

The tension between a literary communication and a developed theoretical understanding was in fact a long-standing interest of Irving's. Already in *A History of New York*, his Diedrich Knickerbocker was satirizing the perverse refusal of a fickle and wayward world to conform to the most ingenious truths of philosophy and theoretical understanding (389; also 397–98, 405, 409–10). But in this *POSTSCRIPT*, in the cautious old gentleman's direct and reasonable demand for the moral of the story and (as we shall see) in the curiously playful response of the storyteller who insists upon deference, Irving dramatized more starkly the gap between the two modes:

The story teller, who was just putting a glass of wine to his lips, as a refreshment after his toils, paused for a moment, looked at his inquirer with an air of infinite deference, and lowering the glass slowly to the table, observed that the story was intended most logically to prove,

"That there is no situation in life but has its advantages and pleasures, provided we will but take a joke as we find it:

"That, therefore, he that runs races with goblin troopers, is likely to have rough riding of it:

"Ergo, for a country schoolmaster to be refused the hand of a Dutch heiress, is a certain step to high preferment in the state."

The cautious old gentleman knit his brows tenfold closer after this explanation, being sorely puzzled by the ratiocination of the syllogism . . . , still he thought the story a little on the extravagant—there were one or two points on which he had his doubts.

“Faith, sir,” replied the story teller, “as to that matter, I don’t believe one half of it myself.” (1087–88)

In response to the demand, the storyteller might have responded directly, from *within* the field of the theoretical, either by saying, more or less reasonably, that literature can “prove” nothing at all, or else by saying, for example, that the preceding tale most logically proves that certain tales may carry over some other meaning from outside of the rule of cognitive, conscious truth; the moral of the story concerns the ethical obligation to pay, in words and narrative, the debt owed to trauma originating in the War of Independence. But instead, he refuses the older gentleman’s demand for direct communication and for a rationalization of the literary to the theoretical. The storyteller may give his reply in the syllogistic *form* of the purest theory, but he so playfully undermines this form’s presupposition of simple cause and effect, that he finally reasserts the literary by insisting on the essentially extravagant, unsettling, and indirect counter-logic working in the tale.

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NOTES

1. The critical literature on history and trauma is now vast. In its conceptualization of the strange historicity of trauma, however, the present essay is specifically indebted to two foundational texts, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920; SE 18: 3–64) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1938; SE 23: 3–137) and to the important critical work represented by Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*. Also useful were Erikson’s article on community trauma and Lifton’s remarks on trauma by proxy (Caruth, “Interview”). Fresco’s fascinating article on the intergenerational transmission of trauma in families of Holocaust survivors was especially useful in thinking about how trauma may come to be shared among a community and not remain simply the possession of an individual.

2. Indeed, in 1824, “The Adventure of the German Student” (from Crayon’s *Tales of Traveller*) would feature another headless (and now plainly supernatural) ghost situated provocatively between love and history. See Washington Irving, *Bracebridge Hall* 418–24.

3. See “To the Public” in *A History of New York*, 377–81. See also the preface to

the Dolph Heyliger stories in *Bracebridge Hall*, 300–3 and the early remarks in “The Money Diggers” section of *Tales of a Traveller*, 647–55.

4. This 1839 reminiscence from *The Knickerbocker Magazine* was published as simply “Sleepy Hollow,” and is not to be confused with the 1820 tale, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

5. “Cowboys” were bands of highwaymen and freebooters who roamed the Neutral Ground between the British-controlled New York City and the American-held West Point. They claimed loyalist sympathies and confiscated the property of patriots who fell into their hands. Highwaymen with patriot sympathies were called “Skinners.” See Cray’s very informative article on cowboys and skinners and on especially John Paulding, Isaac Van Wart, and David Williams, the three men who stopped the disguised Major André on the road near Sleepy Hollow, evidently with the idea of robbing him.

6. Major John André was the staff officer in charge of intelligence for the British Commander-in-Chief, General Clinton. André had opened negotiations with the disgruntled American Major General, Benedict Arnold, and in September 1780 was behind American lines, completing negotiations for Arnold’s treason, when his sloop was forced back down the Hudson, stranding him behind the lines. André attempted to reach British lines by land, but was caught by an irregular patrol near Tarrytown, out of uniform, under a false name, and carrying papers relevant to Arnold’s treason. Arnold received the news and quickly escaped to New York City. André’s gallantry during his trial and appeal (to be reclassified, despite his disguise and his conveyance of classified documents, from spy to prisoner of war) earned him broad sympathy (1081). Nevertheless, he was found guilty and was hanged as a spy, some miles down river from Sleepy Hollow and on the opposite shore, at Tappan. Had the unfortunate major but remained in British uniform, he would have survived and instead been interned as a prisoner of war.

7. Pease’s very brief discussion of the tale (15–17) misattributes characteristics to several figures. Thus, he claims that André himself held divided loyalties, whereas in fact André was very faithfully serving the British crown while arranging for Arnold’s treason. He misidentifies Major André’s tree as the tree where André was hanged, whereas André was merely caught near the named tree in Sleepy Hollow. Pease and I are certainly in agreement, however, with his essential point—namely, that the tale is a way for the locals to come to terms with the difficult history of divided loyalties.

8. Says Irving in *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), “It seems, in fact, to be a part of our nature, like instinct in animals, acting independently of our reason” (103).

9. A similar gentleman who asks all the wrong questions of pleasurable tales is found in the “Strange Stories” part that opens the 1824 *Tales of a Traveller* (392, 394, 406, 409, 424, 438).

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