Introduction

The gentle and affable Washington Irving handed on to us by Thackeray and the nineteenth century is a partial distortion that needs correcting before we can appreciate Irving’s place in American literature. This book is, among other things, a corrective effort, although much of the time only implicitly so. In these opening pages, however, which are intended not as a systematic formulation of a thesis to be maintained but as a quick foreshadowing of the way the subject will be exhibited, I offer a summary view of Irving specifically aimed at weaknesses in the standard treatment of his work. My reliance for the time being is deliberately on a few peremptory strokes rather than on fullness of statement. I trust that more interest than annoyance will be aroused if I seem to proceed with certain assumptions that cannot be fully explored until later in the book.

The prevailing stereotype of Washington Irving stems ultimately from the overly enthusiastic reception originally given The Sketch Book (1819–20) in England, where readers were surprised to discover an American writing an easy, graceful prose. Certain elements in the book—its sentiment and the gentlemanliness of Geoffrey Crayon—were particularly stressed, and the memory of Goldsmith was invoked. An image of Irving as a writer emerged to which he himself in later years gradually surrendered—romantic escapist, lover of the picturesque, genial humorist. Most of his work after The Alhambra (1832) sustains

1 “Nil Nisi Bonum,” Roundabout Papers.
this image, and the final revision of his works (1848–50) stamps it more firmly on some of the earlier books.\(^2\)

His reputation remained fairly high as long as gentility was valued, but in the twentieth century it has often proved an embarrassment. At the same time modern scholarship has tended to reinforce basic misconceptions by allowing political labels to interfere with readings of Irving. The problem is especially acute in considering the early phase of his career. As the study of American literature apart from English literature became a respected discipline in the first half of this century, Irving’s interest in Europe and the European past was used as a way of distinguishing him from writers alleged to be more truly “American.” Vernon L. Parrington, for instance, saw him as basically antibourgeois and anti-industrialist. Parrington did recognize the provincial element in Irving’s early work and its close connection with the “frank evaluation of progress in terms of exploitation” in New York in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and he found a latent liberalism in the later Irving. But his general view was that Irving had “gently detached himself from contemporary America.”\(^3\) Subsequently another critic, Henry S. Canby, perhaps feeling that Irving might at least get

\(^2\) The revised edition was reprinted in numerous multivolume sets in the second half of the nineteenth century. They sold well and probably increased Irving’s popularity. See STW, I, 202. (For a list of abbreviations, see p. xiv.) The illustrations with which these sets, as well as individual works, were often copiously supplied reflected the mid-century sense of Irving and must have helped make reading him a conditioned response for many people. I have not seen many illustrations that do justice to his major works. A few, notably the caricatures by Felix Darley, manage to capture the grotesque comic qualities in Irving. But the process of softening and sentimentalizing, which began in the first half of the century (one finds it in some of Washington Allston’s illustrations for Knickerbocker’s History of New York), intensified with the issuance of the revised edition. Darley, who illustrated many of the volumes in a de luxe edition put out by Putnam beginning in 1848, had a deeply sentimental as well as a comic side. He and illustrators such as K. H. Schmolze, by ignoring the half-humorous tone in which Irving is apt to present extravagant action, made him out to be more melodramatic than he is. They even changed the costumes and appearances of characters in the interest of promoting an exceedingly refined and delicately romantic Irving. Stanley T. Williams and Mary Ellen Edge indicate illustrated editions of Irving’s works in A Bibliography of the Writings of Washington Irving: A Check List (New York, 1936).

credit for being a good conservative instead of being damned for not being liberal, completed his transformation into an elegant, stylish spokesman for Federalism, which Canby defined as "essentially an aristocratic ideal struggling to adapt itself to the conditions of a republic."\(^4\)

Irving's politics are a matter to be discussed in detail in Chapter II, but I shall anticipate here to the extent of insisting that to read the early Irving as "erudite, polished, suave"\(^5\) is to let both the man and the work slip beyond one's grasp. A supercilious English reviewer of 1811, who wished that the comic periodical *Salmagundi* (1807–8), the joint work of Irving, his brother William, and James K. Paulding, were more like the *Spectator*, was hardly a fair judge of the magazine's ultimate worth. But the fact that this writer was offended by the "want of good style" in *Salmagundi*, that was, he said, "unfortunately obvious," ought to warn us against measuring Irving by stock notions of Federalist propriety. The reviewer complained of "many . . . vulgarisms, or at best provincialisms" in the American work, of the "poverty" of a typical pun, and of classical allusions that "would shock the ears of a north-country-schoolboy." He also found "hyperbolical ridicule" sometimes carried to such an extreme as to frustrate the intentions of the magazine.\(^6\)

The first post-Revolutionary generation of American writers, it has been said, "often considered itself 'lost' and traced its plight to a society whose values were too confused and crude to sustain a mature literary art."\(^7\) While Irving was not always self-conscious about the problem, he was hardly exempt from it. Born into an immigrant family that was rapidly moving up the social scale through business, law, medicine, and journalism, he found nowhere in his youth a set of beliefs or attitudes to which he could wholeheartedly commit himself. There is much in him which suggests a sense of the world as ungraspable. His

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 86.
\(^7\) Benjamin T. Spencer, *The Quest for Nationality* (Syracuse, 1957), p. 68.
work raises questions as to the applicability in the United States of artistic criteria established in the Old World and of the relation of literature to business and politics. His cultural uneasiness distorts his youthful writings into curious shapes. The elegant past to which those writings refer is, at least for Irving, less a reality than a fiction, a vestige of the periodical essay convention. It is true that he already had access to fashionable New York society, particularly through the family of Josiah Ogden Hoffman, the Federalist judge with whom he began to study law in 1802. But his experience as the son of a New York hardware dealer hardly squared with the cultivated past assumed by the periodical tradition. And even if his fashionable contacts gave him glimpses of what the distinguished society that had graced colonial New York had been like, how was he, as a writer born after 1776, to define his attitude toward a culture so firmly rooted in the usages of the English upper classes? For most Americans the Revolution had at least partially invalidated the appeal to an aristocratic tradition, even in manners and taste.

Furthermore, while Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, may have overstated the case, he was probably essentially correct in saying that the "general attachment to learning" in New York was "less vigorous" than in Boston, since "commerce" had "originally taken a more entire possession of the minds of its inhabitants." The "prepossession" with wealth seemed to Dwight a "blast upon all improvement of the mind: for it persuades every one in whom it exists, that such improvement is insignificant, and useless." The bourgeois state of mind was hardly conducive to the kind of Federalism often ascribed to Irving. Yet something not far removed from that state of mind is reflected in his writing from *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle* (1802–3) through *Knickerbocker’s History of New York* (1809). He cannot be sure that he has an identity beyond that of being one in a scrambling democratic throng. The legacy of 1776, the Revolutionary resentment of traditional authority, finds an outlet in the irreverence and irresponsibility of his early literary productions, even if they take no real comfort in freedom. The old bachelors

of these works are emasculated father figures. In the midst of a longing for tradition, for images of authority, there is idol-smashing.

Irving's suavity, to whatever degree it existed, was not acquired effortlessly. The journals and letters of his youth suggest a high-spirited and not altogether self-controlled young man, bouncy and brash, yet sensitive and easily hurt, even while fearful of seeming to take himself too seriously. Youthful rough edges show through the surface of his maturity. One glimpses them in the few portraits which refrain from smoothing, slenderizing, and paling his features, curling and glossing his hair to a rich darkness, and personifying him as romantic youth. One suspects, on the strength of depictions by Vogel von Vogelstein and C. R. Leslie,\(^9\) that he had the congenial, well-fed good looks conventionally associated with the average middle-class American. The face was round, the nose a trifle long and broad; the eyes perhaps came close to looking calculating.

Unfortunately—or was it fortunate?—he was never educated systematically. His family may have looked upon his first trip to Europe (1804–6) as a substitute for Columbia College, where two of his brothers had studied, but he had not been prepared intellectually to take full advantage of the opportunity. Though an avid reader, he taught himself by fits and starts, often reading good and bad works indiscriminately and seldom arriving at comprehensive views.\(^{10}\) Socially he had fewer handicaps. Had business or the law, at which he worked off and on for more than a dozen years, involved only entertaining clients, he might have made a fortune. Even the frivolity of tea-table gossip accorded with his temperament, at least if it meant a release from office routine. Later, in moments of middle-aged pontification, he regretted the time he had wasted in “idle society” and grumbled, “Young people enter into society in America at an age that they

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\(^{10}\) Thus Reichart (pp. 20–22) pictures him between 1817 and 1819 laboriously teaching himself German as a result of Scott’s suggestion and his own belated realization that he ought to know the new German literature, and then, having decided to do *The Sketch Book*, struggling through German texts in search of “bits of lore that might furnish bone and sinew for a tale.”
are cooped up in schools in Europe." But this was only half the story. He never absented himself from fashionable society for very long and took a quiet satisfaction in the familiarity with prominent and cultivated people which his eventual success brought him. Yet there were always recurrent guilt feelings and the fear of wasting time.

Just as one detects in Irving’s later prose certain traces of crudeness or nervous laughter, so one sees him in Europe after 1815 still awkward and uneasy at times, fearful, as one of his biographers suggests, of being embarrassed by the “exuberance” of fellow Americans, though getting along capitally for the most part on an American good-naturedness. Many observers found him pleasant, genial, but at the same time quiet. John Neal put it rather rudely: “very amiable—no appearance of especial refinement—nothing remarkable—nothing uncommon about him:—precisely such a man . . . as people would continually overlook, pass by without notice, or forget, after dining with him.”

Irving’s restless peregrination abroad between 1815 and 1832, his inability to become deeply involved in any phase of European life—these outward forms of an inner unsettledness, qualify the genteel view of him as America’s first cultural attaché to Europe. His continual references to himself as an idler, drifter, and dreamer are more than perfunctory. The boisterous flippancy of his early works should not blind us to his personal vulnerability. His youthful cocksureness in print only partially masks the hesitancy that eventually came out in the character of the bachelor, Geoffrey Crayon.

The bachelor is a dominant image in Irving; he embodies, like those other recurring figures the antiquarian and the traveler, a degree of alienation from the reality which common sense takes

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12 Edward Wagenknecht,Washington Irving: Moderation Displayed (New York, 1962), p. 89. Wagenknecht has a good discussion of the various impressions Irving made on observers (pp. 88–90). An abnormal fear of speaking in public was one of his social handicaps.
13 “American Writers, No. IV,”Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, XVII (January, 1825), 60. Neal also noted “a sort of uneasy, anxious, catching respiration of the voice, when talking zealously.”
for granted. Most of his pseudonyms, early and late, including the fictitious “editors” of *Salmagundi*, Diedrich Knickerbocker, Crayon, and the narrator of *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829), derive from his earliest mask, Jonathan Old-style, even though in some cases the type is modified almost beyond recognition. They are, at least in part, extensions of the stock character of the old bachelor in the eighteenth-century periodical essay, who began by representing social irresponsibility and eccentricity in need of correction or regularization (for example, Will Honeycomb in the *Spectator*), but who in the course of the eighteenth century had gradually turned into a ridiculous or pathetic figure. The ineffectual character of a bachelor in the mid-century *Connoisseur*, for instance, simply invited practical jokes, and they were played on him, not until he really changed, but until he promised to marry in return for gentler treatment. Another, in Mackenzie’s *Mirror* (1779–90), on the other hand, was finally given enough sympathy for his one great disappointment in love to justify his retirement. And in the *Looker-On* (1792) the realization emerged that one might not be adequately equipped to serve society as a husband: Simon Olivebranch came, he said, from a family whose members shriveled up and assumed the appearance of old age at twenty-five.

*Salmagundi* made periodical bachelorhood unashamedly Quixotic. The pseudonymous editors, Launcelot Langstaff,

14 See *Spectator*, No. 530. Sir Roger de Coverley’s bachelorhood is not a matter of choice but of the failure of the widow he loves to recognize her obligations as a woman and take a gentleman’s suit seriously (*Spectator*, Nos. 113, 118). Hyme­næus, a man of healthy instincts in the *Rambler* (Nos. 113, 115, 119, 167), has to be encouraged to keep his good humor until the right woman comes along. Instead of falling into melancholy or into romantic love in his frustration at failing to find what he is looking for, he is allowed to continue to exercise his discretion until he discovers an old maid with good common sense like his own and marries her. Some of Irving’s bachelors are also descendants of the archetypal Spectator himself. The diffidence and disinterestedness of such a character may verge on antisocial withdrawal, even though he is authorized to abstain from marriage, presumably because he fulfills an obligation to society in trying to improve it. In America the “Old Bachelor” in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* (1775–76), partly the creation of Francis Hopkinson, is an interesting combination of the Honeycomb and the Mr. Spectator types of bachelor.

15 *Mirror*, Nos. 1, 19; *Connoisseur*, No. 19; *Looker-On*, Nos. 1, 12, 15. See also Colonel Caustic in *Lounger*, No. 4.
Anthony Evergreen, and Will Wizard, claimed to be “true knights,” who, though they loved “noble dames and beauteous damsels,” wanted little more from them than the “smile of beauty.” They had acquired the necessary supply of whims, “without which” they considered “a man to be mere beef without mustard” (*SAL*, p. 125).\(^\text{16}\) And they were given a library that “would bear a comparison, in point of usefulness and eccentricity, with the motley collection of the renowned hero of La Mancha” (pp. 399–400). Their bachelorhood was on the whole a neurotic shrinking back from overly close contact with the world at large.

Yet as the story of “The Little Man in Black” shows, the “editors” had a fearful awareness of what happens to the eccentric who moves too far away from ordinary social contexts. Beginning as a humorous view of a scholar far gone in whimsy, the tale approaches terror when the people of his village reject him in superstitious fear. *Salmagundi*’s antiquarian, an obvious variation of Goldsmith’s “man in black,” a disappointed bachelor in the *Citizen of the World*,\(^\text{17}\) is distinguished by being the most withdrawn of all the eccentrics in *Salmagundi*: “He sought no intimacy . . . nor ever talked; except sometimes to himself in an outlandish tongue. He commonly carried a large book, covered with sheep-skin, under his arm; appeared always to be lost in meditation . . .” (p. 353). In the end he proves to have human sentiments, but his life has already been ruined. And the books that have destroyed him are the same set still to be found in the library at Cockloft Hall, the gathering place of Langstaff and his colleagues. Here is neither pure pathos nor comedy, but something for which *Salmagundi*’s term “gothic risibility”\(^\text{18}\) seems appropriate, as it does for Diedrich Knickerbocker; quite literally another little man in black, unaccommodated with a real present, Knickerbocker gives expression to his desire to live with

\(^{16}\) For an explanation of page references included in the text, see the Preface.

\(^{17}\) Letters XXVI and XXVII.

\(^{18}\) The phrase describes Will Wizard, who in the latter part of *Salmagundi* takes to deciphering “old, rusty, musty, and dusty” manuscripts and books. *SAL*, pp. 341–43.
the past by keeping his room “always covered with scraps of paper and old mouldy books” (K, p. 2).

Irving’s imagery of estrangement, no matter how laughable initially, undoubtedly embodies motives which he felt within himself, even if he only half-understood them. The quest for literary identity, which is the story of his career, often mirrors a quest for personal identity. Irving eventually became a wistful and more or less resigned bachelor; his courtship of Matilda Hoffman and her languishing illness and death in 1809 provided him with a legend of true love and loss—all that was needed, according to some of the eighteenth-century periodicals, to make a staunch bachelor. Irving could play the part well, as when in 1820 he wrote Paulding, confessing that he had hoped that his friends would also remain unmarried, so that with him they could “form a knot of queer, rum old bachelors, at some future day to meet at the corner of Wall Street or walk the sunny side of Broadway and kill time together.”

Irving’s love for the shy Matilda, who was only fourteen or fifteen when he began to pay her serious attention and only seventeen when she died, was obviously highly idealized. “Never did I meet,” he wrote years later, “with more intuitive rectitude of mind, more native delicacy, more exquisite propriety in thought word & action than in this young creature. . . . I felt at times rebuked by her superior delicacy & purity and as if I am [sic] a coarse unworthy being in comparison.” Yet underneath his Pierrot-like need to idolize her innocence, there may have lurked latent hostilities. His semi official engagement meant that he was to try in earnest to make himself a lawyer. This was his understanding with his fiancée’s father, Josiah Ogden Hoffman, the legal mentor under whom he had trained for several years. Irving, who had already passed the bar examination, later vividly described the conflict which was now thrust upon him:

I set to work with zeal to study anew, and I considered myself bound in honour not to make further advances with [Matilda] until I should feel satisfied with my proficiency in the Law—It was all in

19 PMI, I, 457.
20 “Manuscript Fragment,” in STW, II, 256.
vain. I had an insuperable repugnance to the study—my mind would not take hold of it; or rather by long despondency had become for the time incapable of dry application. I was in a wretched state of doubt and self distrust. I tried to finish the work [Knickerbocker] which I was secretly writing, hoping it would give me reputation and gain me some public appointment.\textsuperscript{21}

Matilda’s death, no matter how deeply it grieved him, at least freed him from certain frustrating entanglements. Small wonder that in \textit{Knickerbocker} lawyers come to be associated with the denial of freedom. Satirical attacks on lawyers and the law had been a part of the humorous tradition within which Irving was accustomed to working, but the vehemence of the abuse in \textit{Knickerbocker} suggests a dissatisfaction with the career to which his engagement to Matilda had committed him. Law is seen, for instance, to work hand in hand with religion, cloaking robbery and murder with pretentious rhetoric; according to the anachronistic Knickerbocker, Spanish missionaries who forced the Indians to give up “a little pitiful tract of this dirty sublunary planet in exchange for a glorious inheritance in the kingdom of Heaven” had “Blackstone, and all the learned expounders of the law” to sustain them (pp. 61–62). By the time of the first revision of the book in 1812, Irving’s feelings on the subject had apparently intensified. The “noble independence” in men, he then wrote,

revolts at this intolerable tyranny of law, and the perpetual interference of officious morality, which are ever besetting his path with finger-posts and directions to “keep to the right, as the law directs;” and like a spirited urchin, he turns directly contrary, and gallops through mud and mire, over hedges and ditches, merely to show that he is a lad of spirit, and out of his leading-strings.\textsuperscript{22}

It has been suggested recently that what Irving took to be his love for Matilda served only as a mask for a stronger but not fully avowed emotion, a filial or fraternal affection for her stepmother, Maria Fenno Hoffman, a woman not very much older

\textsuperscript{21} Ib. II, 257.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{A History of New York . . . by Diedrich Knickerbocker} (New York, 1812), I, 119. The 1809 edition contains a conscience-stricken assertion that what is said about lawyers does not apply to the many worthy members of the profession in New York City (\textit{K}, p. 215). But it is so exaggerated as to appear in part ironic.
than himself. His real motive in wooing Matilda, according to this view, was his unconscious desire, now that he was growing too old to be nurtured by his own family, to establish himself in the security of a foster family, with Judge and Mrs. Hoffman as substitute father and mother.\textsuperscript{23}

One may not want to accept this theory, but it is difficult to deny that bachelorhood was a role for which Irving was fitted by personality and temperament, although he worked himself into it only with considerable stress and recurrent misgivings. Certainly the sheltering which he received from the females in his own family as a child and young man, his guaranteed refuge against paternal severity, was hardly calculated to make a grown man of him in a hurry. Until well along in adult life he showed little taste for assuming the kind of responsibilities that marriage would have entailed; in his later works the frequent pattern of the impulsive son driven to rebellion against a stern father indicates a preoccupation with the problem of assuming manhood.

The Matilda figure lives on in his fiction primarily as an ideal, while at the same time the mothers of youthful sons are also often glorified. Simplification, however, will not serve in these matters. Irving may generally have “desexualized women and delibidinized love and passion,”\textsuperscript{24} but we must still account for a certain bawdy strain in his work. An interplay of desire, fear, and guilt, as we shall see, characterizes his treatment of love, sexuality, and marriage. It is not a coincidence that he kept returning to themes and images of sterility and fertility. Certain ominously wizened figures in his later fiction suggest that he was not unmindful that he ran the risk of losing himself, like Knickerbocker and the man in black, in antiquarian futility.\textsuperscript{25}

“The great charm of English scenery . . . ,” Irving wrote in \textit{The Sketch Book}, “is the moral feeling that seems to pervade it.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 23.
\textsuperscript{25} Heiman sees Knickerbocker as partly Irving’s father, partly Irving himself (pp. 14-16).
It is associated in the mind with ideas of order, of quiet, of sober well-established principles, of hoary usage and reverend custom. Every thing seems to be the growth of ages of regular and peaceful existence” (p. 87). Such pronouncements ring slightly false. The effort to find “ideas of order,” to smooth things over, is never quite convincing when it comes from one who as a young man lampooned the law and took positive delight in demolishing smugness and exposing the fatuous feeling for order that underlies a cliché. One is still tempted to regret, with the elder Richard H. Dana, that in The Sketch Book Irving abandoned the unrestrained Knickerbocker style, with its “words and phrases, which were strong, distinct and definite, for a genteel sort of language.”

The pompous and sentimental tendencies, however, represent only one side of the man; the youthful flair for self-ridicule kept intruding.

What he apparently faced after Knickerbocker was the prospect of turning into the family errand boy unless he found a regular way of making his living. In 1811 and 1812 he was acting from time to time as the Irving’s representative in Washington, a job that gave him opportunity to dance attendance at Dolly Madison’s levées. For two years he did literary hack-work as editor of the Analectic Magazine, published in Philadelphia, and he volunteered for a brief tour of military duty during the War of 1812. He was not able to devote himself extensively to his own writing again until 1817, when the idea of The Sketch Book began to form in his mind. Meanwhile, in 1815, for want of anything better to do, he drifted to Liverpool, England, and before long was working overtime to help his brother Peter salvage one of the Irving enterprises. They failed, Peter fell ill, and The Sketch Book seems to have been an almost desperate effort to overcome the depression, mental and financial, which followed.

Some of the loathing that he expressed for business probably ought to be charged to an exuberant prose style. “By all the martyrs of Grubstreet,” he once wrote while working in his

26 Unsigned review of The Sketch Book, North American Review, IX (September, 1819), 348.
brothers' store, "I'd sooner live in a garret . . . than follow so sordid, dusty, soul killing way of life; though certain it would make me as rich as . . . John Jacob Astor himself." Yet to some it appears that by 1835 he was in effect working for Astor, writing a history of the great merchant's early fur-trading ventures in the Pacific Northwest. Irving never stopped being partially commercial; he never as a writer raised himself to a devoted singleness of artistic purpose. And he came to look back on the composition of The Sketch Book as an almost heroic achievement, undertaken to raise the family name above the humiliation of financial failure.

Nevertheless, there is some sense of dedication in his reference to himself in 1819 as "a poor devil of an author" and in his statement of purpose to his brother William: "I certainly think that no hope of gain . . . would tempt me again into the cares and sordid concerns of traffic . . . . I look forward to a life of loneliness and of parsimonious and almost painful economy." When The Sketch Book appeared, he was thirty-six years old. He had been trying for the ten years since Knickerbocker to find a career for himself. The Sketch Book was a gamble for literary success taken by a man who felt that in the ordinary concerns of this world he had been something of a failure.

27 Letter to Henry Brevoort, 15 May 1811, Letters of Henry Brevoort to Washington Irving, ed. George S. Hellman (New York, 1916), II, 185-86. The large correspondence between Irving and Brevoort is full of indictments of business, the morals of businessmen and lawyers, and the manners and taste of commercial families; neither, however, could altogether escape involvement in, and nearly constant anxiety over, the cycles of boom and panic. By 1843, after a series of financial losses to "our cheating . . . corporations," Brevoort decided that the country was "degenerate & corrupt to the very core." Brevoort to Irving, II, 132-33.

28 Astor suggested Irving's doing Astoria (1836) and supplied him with the basic historical materials for it, but, argues Wagenknecht (p. 84), Irving was scrupulous about not taking money from Astor. Whether Irving served Astor as apologist in the book remains debatable.

29 He was capable of urging a business career on others as an honorable calling with the same energy with which he shunned it himself; see for instance, letter to P. P. Irving, 7 December 1824, PMI, II, 218-22. Once he began writing for a living, he quite frankly aimed to please the public, and was willing within limits, to alter his style or mood to suit their taste. See "L'Envoy" in SB; WIHB, II, 106; PMI, I, 430-31.

30 Letter to Brevoort, 9 September 1819, WIHB, II, 117.

31 23 December 1817, PMI, I, 393.
Beyond a certain point, authorship in the United States in the early nineteenth century constituted something of a repudiation of the middle-class values of practicality and industry. To be sure, there was among the business community of New York a certain tolerance for, and benevolent interest in, culture, and the Irvings were willing to encourage their youngest son’s literary effusions and even to assist him to make something of his talent. Still, it seems clear that they did not plan to support him in gentlemanly leisure indefinitely. Irving probably exaggerated, but not greatly, when, before he won fame with *The Sketch Book*, he wrote: “Unqualified for business, in a nation where every one is busy; devoted to literature, where literary leisure is confounded with idleness; the man of letters is almost an insulated being, with few to understand, less [sic] to value, and scarcely any to encourage his pursuits.”

The romantic extreme toward which this dilemma helped drive several major American writers was a more or less defiant isolation. Irving had more luck to begin with than Poe, Thoreau, Melville, or Emily Dickinson. The humor that he fell heir to in the Knickerbocker period was based on assumptions so vaguely defined that, up to a certain point, it could be used to criticize with impunity the very class that patronized it. In the next stage of his career, however, he attempted to balance appeals to a popular audience against a desire to sustain artistic integrity or at least stylistic excellence, a feat which he failed to accomplish more than once (and not always because he truckled to his audience). Only later (after 1832) did he achieve relative composure by his willingness to capitalize on his reputation and to repeat tested formulas.

In the meantime, doubts about the legitimacy of the writer’s calling were hardly to be allayed by an awareness of the difficulty of creating techniques appropriate to the newness of American experience. Ultimately, the problem was how to perceive significant form in the experience itself. In the absence of the kind

-- Review of *The Works of Robert Treat Paine*, AN, I, 252. Spencer (p. 68) speaks of the “salient fact in post-revolutionary America” that “the man of letters was neither honored nor respected by the majority of his compatriots.”
of social hierarchy assumed as the norm by English literature, the “important questions,” as one scholar puts it, “of where authority was and whence it came were not yet fully answered.” The author thus “confronted experience in bulk, experience badly in need of synthesis—social, economic, and political, as well as artistic.”

The synthesis was not to come until the period now known as the American Renaissance, beginning in the 1830’s. The transition to this period must be a central concern in any detailed examination of Irving’s career, and that transition was toward a full-fledged romantic subjectivism. Emerson was to make his own mark and that of American literature as well when in 1836, at the beginning of *Nature*, he dared reduce his universe to a naked self confronting in all the rest of creation simply a negative, “NOT ME.”

Scholars have carefully observed Irving’s gradual appropriation of romantic devices and absorption of romantic influences. We know that he sometimes utilized sentimental plots with gothic trappings, that meeting Walter Scott in 1817 intensified his interest in folklore, that reading Mrs. Radcliffe years earlier had alerted him to Italian bandits. The net effect of the work done so far, however, is to give the impression of a romantic façade slapped section by section onto a fundamentally neoclassical frame. Actually, his early orientation toward the eighteenth century was of a wholly unsettled kind, and the romantic awarenesses that he gradually developed came in large part as the natural consequence of the tensions, personal, intellectual, and literary, in which he was immersed.

He finally lifted himself out of the negativism of his early phase by what we can now see as the comparatively simple and probably inevitable expedient of parlaying his own uncertainty into something positive. This was a romantic strategy, and it enabled him to develop as a writer. But it did not mean that his waverings had ceased or that the tensions had essentially changed. He remained diffident about insisting on his own individuality or exploiting himself except in a somewhat self-

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deprecatory way. In the United States both experience and the
democratic dogma tended to jar one free from the customary
identities of class and creed, but individual identity did not come
automatically. Self-reliance was a conditioned, not a natural,
reflex. Both an asset and a disability, Irving’s original penchant
for whimsy, his feeling for the “farce of life” (SAL, p. 18), was
something he never fully lived down.