Washington Irving
Hedges, William L.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Hedges, William L.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70843

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2427434
IRVING'S next work was supposed to have been his German sketchbook. With Crayon beginning to feel pinched for English subjects, Irving, a half-convert—in the standard view—to the new faith of romanticism, had dutifully gone to Germany in 1822 to replenish his muse at a pure source. Instead of settling down to the systematic study of language and literature or the collection of legends and folktales, however, he had been undone by a variety of distractions, particularly in Dresden, where he found a group of new companions, the stimulation of opera and theater, and a social life which involved him to some extent with the royal family of Saxony as well as with such German intellectuals and artists as Ludwig Tieck and Carl Maria von Weber. At the same time he seems to have fallen in love again, at the age of 40, with a young English girl named Emily Foster. It was perhaps the deepening of this attachment and of his anxiety about the outcome of it that had more than anything else to do with his inability to write the book people expected. Emily proved unable to return his love, and Irving retreated forlornly to Paris. There he composed most of Tales of a Traveller.

When it finally appeared in 1824, it had nothing to do with the "German localities, manners, characters" that he had been

turning over in his mind even after leaving Germany. Nor was it a sketchbook. British and American readers were greatly disappointed. For many the book had nothing distinctive about it; the fiction seemed little, if at all, better than the standard light reading then being dispensed by the popular press. Critics who had felt all along that there was no great originality in Geoffrey Crayon now reveled in I-told-you-so’s. Not only did many of the tales have a familiar ring, but Irving’s relaxed and half-humorous manner on the whole tended to detract from the kind of excitement and sensation that popular fiction was supposed to generate.

Today Irving’s backing off from Germany in his fiction has become a mark of his comparative unromanticalness. True, he may have read widely first and last in Schiller, Goethe, Jean Paul, Tieck, and lesser German romantics, and undoubtedly the “Märchen world” had “laid powerfully hold” of his “imagination.” But (so the argument runs) his work finally lacks “the wild extravagance” of Hoffmann; or, “one cannot feel that Irving” in his lighter fantasies is “sincerely romantic.”

But to look for German romanticism in *Tales of a Traveller* is simply to court disappointment and to be distracted by what the book is not from seeing what it is. Misreadings of this sort have been common, though the controlling preconception has not always been the same. It was the failure of Irving to live up to the image of Geoffrey Crayon that outraged some of his contemporaries. John Neal, for instance, charged him with a betrayal of trust, with attempting “to smuggle impurity” into the English home through certain “equivocal” remarks “that no

---

3 Letter to Peter Irving, 4 September 1823, PMI, II, 166. German influences can be detected here and there, but the German background to the *Tales* is trifling compared to the English, Italian, and American backgrounds. There is little that is Germanic about the texture of the book. For a detailed discussion of sources see Reichart, chap. vi; Pochmann, “Irving’s German Tour and Its Influence on His Tales,” *PMLA*, XLV (December, 1930), 1150-87; STW, II, 286-96.

4 For discussions of the contemporary reaction to the *Tales*, see STW, II, 294–95; Reichart, pp. 157–64.

woman could bear to read . . . aloud.” Complaints about the risqué humor of the Tales were common. The trouble, Neal said, was not that such humor in itself was absolutely objectionable; after all, Salmagundi and Knickerbocker had from time to time reveled in “droll indecencies.” But critics had touted Geoffrey Crayon “as an immaculate creature for this profligate age.—He knew this. He knew that any book with his name to it, would be permitted by fathers, husbands, brothers, to pass without examination: that it would be read aloud in family circles, all over our country.”

In view of the general disapproval expressed for the Tales, it is curious that Irving’s most quoted remarks about the nature of fiction occur in a letter to Henry Brevoort in which he defends the book, well aware that it had “met with some handling from the press.” The letter is generally cited as evidence of a certain artistic self-consciousness in Irving and of his willingness to experiment with a new and still vaguely defined form. Earlier, when he was only planning Tales of a Traveller, he had written of feeling a need to steer clear of “Scott’s manner,” to “strike out some way of my own, suited to my own way of thinking and writing”; he had been determined to avoid falling “into the commonplace of the day,” exemplified in the “legendary and romantic tales now littering from the press both in England and Germany.” And he had hoped to find his way through “style,” rather than mere “narrative,” which he believed to be “evanescent.” Now, in the wake of the bad reviews, he said in writing to Brevoort, “I fancy much of what I value myself upon in writing, escapes the observation of the great mass of my readers: who are intent more upon the story than the way in

---

6 “American Writers, No. IV,” Blackwood’s XVII, 67. The review in the United States Literary Gazette (I [15 November 1824], 229) also feared lest the book offend the “private eye of the young and innocent.” The Eclectic Review noted that Irving was now less careful than in his two previous works “to avoid any thing bordering on either coarseness or profaneness” and wondered whether he now “thinks worse of the public” or was himself “worsened by his travels.” The reviewer was even upset by Irving’s levity in dealing with “Tom Walker’s master.” XXIV (July, 1825), p. 74.

7 11 December 1824, WIHB, II, 184.

8 Letter to Peter Irving, 4 September 1823, PMI, II, 166.
which it is told.” His chief concerns, he insisted, were “the play of thought, and sentiment, and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly yet expressively delineated; . . . the half-concealed vein of humour that is often playing through the whole.”

* Tales of a Traveller * is the work of a short-story writer who had not quite discovered his form, even though he had already, partly by chance, written two or three stories that are destined to survive. An instinct for the form seems almost miraculously in control in “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” and “The Stout Gentleman,” where in each case the story is essentially the extension or development of a single episode or moment in which character is decisively exposed. But there was very little precedent for such economy in prose fiction. For all practical purposes the short story did not yet exist because, although pieces more or less corresponding to our sense of the term had been written, there was no clear conception of the genre. Consciously Irving was attempting to write, not short stories, but a series of relatively short narratives that could somehow be combined into a book. He thought of himself as a bookman, not as a magazine hack. A few years later it was to the advantage of Hawthorne and Poe to be forced to begin by publishing pieces individually in periodicals. They moved more easily toward a realization of the short story as a self-contained fictional form. Yet their early aspiration was also to publish booklength collections of short items tied together by one device or another.

That Poe professed to admire the *Tales*\(^9\) may come as a surprise, because on the whole he saw in Irving simply that darling of the 1840’s, the sentimental essayist, and he considered

---

\(^9\) He admitted that the book had been composed hastily but said, “. . . I am convinced that a great part of it was written in a free and happier vein than almost any of my other writings.” *WTHB*, II, 185-86.

\(^10\) See “Tale-Writing,” *Complete Works* (1902), XIII, 153-54. Poe speaks of the “graceful and impressive narratives” in the *Tales*, though he finds the stories individually not so neat and compact or climactic as he would have liked. Longfellow and Robert Louis Stevenson were also supporters of the *Tales* (see *STW*, II, 295-96).
him "much overrated." But of course his concern for what Irving, in the famous letter to Brevoort, called the "nicety of execution"—the proper telling of the tale—went even farther than Irving's. What is perhaps more important is what the two writers had in common: it was a necessary strategy for them to attempt to clarify their intentions in the story or tale by exposing the false assumptions underlying what Poe called the puerile "*intensities*" or "*bizarries*" of popular fiction. On the one hand for instance, *Bracebridge Hall* in its interpolated tales had veered toward mystery and gothic excitement; on the other, Irving had made the Hall itself an anti-gothic mansion, equipped with "neither trapdoor, nor sliding-panel, nor donjon-keep." In "Dolph Heyliger" he deliberately passed up a "fine opportunity for weaving in strange adventures among these wild mountains . . . and, after involving my hero in a variety of perils and difficulties, rescuing him . . . by some miraculous contrivance" (*B*, pp. 18, 427). Similarly, although Poe repeatedly burlesqued the magazine thrillers of his day, some of his finer stories fulfill the formula for romantic fiction which he gave facetiously in "How to Write a Blackwood Article": "... get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before"; "should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure to make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet."

The keynote of *Tales of a Traveller* is the recognition of a certain fraudulent quality in fiction. Crayon will not let his readers forget that he is only telling them stories: "... I am an old traveller. I have read somewhat, heard and seen more, and dreamt more than all. My brain is filled therefore, with all kinds of odds and ends . . . and I am always at a loss to know how much to believe of my own stories" (p. ix). The implication is that stories are not actualities; one needn't pretend that they really happened or be duped into taking them

---

12 *WIB*, II, 186.
13 "How to Write a Blackwood Article."
the wrong way. Part I consists of “Strange Stories” for which the same “nervous gentleman” whom Crayon encountered at Bracebridge Hall is made responsible, and it is the spirit of “The Stout Gentleman” that presides over the beginning of the Tales, a spirit perhaps best epitomized in the final sentences of the original story: “The skirts of a brown coat parted behind, and gave me a full view of the broad disk of a pair of drab breeches . . . and that was all I ever saw of the stout gentleman!” (B, p. 86). The story as such, the point, the sensational disclosure gets away. What is left is simply storytelling, the “way” the story is told. “The Stout Gentleman” is, as one reviewer pointed out, a spoof on the “writers of the Radcliffe school” and, as Irving himself made clear, on readers who expect something in the vein of the “Wandering Jew,” the “Man with the Iron Mask,” or the “Invisible Girl” (B, p. 73). Burlesque, then, is the mode in which the new book, the Tales, starts.

At “The Hunting Dinner,” which is the setting for all the stories in Part I, the “nervous” narrator observes “a thin, hatchet-faced gentleman, with projecting eyes like a lobster,” “one of those incessant questioners, who have a craving, unhealthy appetite in conversation.” He is “never . . . satisfied with the whole of a story,” and, instead of joining in the laughter at a joke, he puts it “to the question” (TT, p. 20). An “Irish captain of dragoons,” inspecting family portraits in the “ancient rook-haunted” country house (p. 17) where the dinner guests are stranded for the night because of inclement weather, says that he wouldn’t be surprised to “find the ghost of one of those long-waisted ladies” in his bed, whereupon the hatchet-faced man quizzes, “Do you believe in ghosts, then?” (p. 20) Tales of a Traveller repeatedly mocks such literal-minded re-

14 According to his nephew, Irving, on once hearing it said that his “most comical pieces have always a serious end in view,” quipped that “the moral of the Stout Gentleman” had finally been “detected.” PMI, II, 57. In the Tales Crayon’s attitude toward his “simple” reader becomes that of a horse-doctor toward a sick animal. He is willing that the patient, while “listening with open mouth to a ghost or a love story . . . have a bolus of sound morality popped down his throat, and be never the wiser for the fraud.” TT, p. ix.

sponses to wit and imagination. Several narrators deliberately tell stories to baffle readers like the hatchet-faced man. One reviewer, upset by these tactics, complained that the tales were generally wanting in those satisfactory conclusions for which we pant so ardentely, when our curiosity has been put to the rack, and our sympathies worked to a considerable fermentation. They often break off suddenly, like those broken skeins of incident, of which our dreams are composed.\(^{16}\)

But, as we shall see, this is to miss the point.

The frame narratives of Parts I, III, and IV of the *Tales* provide contexts for storytelling which seem ready-made for the thrill-seeker: an old mansion on a stormy night; an isolated inn in a bandit-infested region in Italy; the shore of Long Island Sound, purportedly the haunt of Captain Kidd. But Irving produces the ghost, the sensation, the intensity only on his own terms. In “The Adventure of My Uncle,” the first story in Part I, a ghost actually appears, but when the suspense has been screwed tight, the protagonist abruptly turns his back, draws the bedclothes about his head, and falls asleep. In the morning, when he identifies the ghost as that of a great lady whose portrait hangs in the gallery below, his host begins a story which seems likely to account for the ghost, only to excuse himself from continuing after having aroused curiosity—family pride will not permit him to go into sordid details.

“The Adventure of My Uncle” thus proves merely a trap for the hatchet-faced man, who at the end exclaims, “Well, . . .

\(^{16}\) _Eclectic Review_, XXIV, 65–66. _Blackwood’s_ said of the ghost stories in the *Tales*, “The tone in which Mr. Irving does them up, is quite wrong. A ghost story ought to be a ghost story. Something like seriousness is absolutely necessary . . . and the sort of half-witty vein, the little dancing quirks, &c. &c. with which these are set forth, entirely destroy the whole matter.” “Letters of Timothy Tickler, Esq., No. XVIII,” _Blackwood’s_, XVI (September, 1824), 295. The _Blackwood’s_ review was devastating. Obviously disappointed at not finding a German sketchbook, the reviewer saw everything but the American section of the *Tales* as shopworn and artificial. Making no effort to respond to Irving’s particular manner of treating familiar materials, he simply dismissed him as unable to find the passion and intensity for a ghost story or love story, unable to summon up interest in the classical past—a prerequisite for dealing with Italy—and unqualified as an American to say anything important about England or Europe.
and what did your uncle say then?” The answer is “Nothing” (p. 37). Real ghosts do not appear on such trivial and trumped-up pretexts and for the mere curiosity of a sight-seer like “my uncle.” Ghosts appear, as Henry James’s Ralph Touchett was later to tell Isabel Archer, only to those who have suffered enough—to the German student, in a later story in the Tales, for instance, who, instead of turning his back and going to sleep on his vision, leaps to embrace her. For Irving, the way out of the earlier situation is through “French” jests. “My uncle” (the phrase still ludicrously echoes Tristram Shandy) talks about the ghost as the lady who “paid me a visit in my bed-chamber” (p. 37). And the valet says that it is “not for him to know any thing of les bonnes fortunes of Monsieur” (p. 31).

Before it is finished, the next piece, “The Adventure of My Aunt,” dissolves in risqué double-entendres, and “The Bold Dragoon,” another joke on the hatchet-faced man, becomes in addition a racy comic fantasy about a hero in the lusty line of Sterne’s Slawkenbergius and Knickerbocker’s trumpeter, Antony Van Corlear, whose “instrument” stirred up untold excitement among the lasses of Connecticut (K, p. 266). The bold dragoon’s adventures are “untold” too, but the reader’s imagination is given a good deal to work on. The “haunted chamber,” we are made to understand, is not the only room in the inn in which the protagonist spends time during the night of his “ordeal.” Seen as part of a tall tale, the “pirouetting” of the furniture, “like so many devils” (TT, p. 53) in his room, becomes a graphic way of suggesting the dragoon’s sexual prowess—his exploits nearly turn the house upside down.18

17 Said the Eclectic, this story “provokingly breaks off just where it ought to have gone on. Our Author is, apparently, much enamoured of these experiments upon our love for the marvellous; for he seems to have no other end in raising our curiosity, than suddenly to let it down to disappoint us.” XXIV, 67.

18 Of this story the U.S. Literary Gazette said, “... if Mr. Geoffrey Crayon is not a thought more careful, the more recondite meaning of his double enten<lres will become a little too apparent.” I (September, 1824), 16. “Tall tale” is, I believe, the correct term for “The Bold Dragoon,” which depends a great deal on the pleasure the narrator takes in his own ingenuity and inventiveness, but which
After "The Bold Dragoon," however, Part I of Tales of a Traveller moves, and quite deliberately, from vivid demonstrations of what a ghost story ought not to be, to suggestions of what it can be, an arrangement that makes the "Adventure of the German Student" pivotal. This brief tale occupies such a delicately balanced situation in the book that it loses much of its force when it is lifted out of context and anthologized, as it frequently is. It almost allows the reader to take it as a ghost story. "The German Student" is essentially an invitation, a lure; it teases the reader with glimpses of mysterious depths to be probed but does not let him plunge gratuitously into sensationalism. It is narrated by a character with an appropriately ambiguous physiognomy, not the "nervous gentleman," who is initially only the frame narrator of Part I, but an old man, "one side of whose face" is "no match for the other." One of his eyelids hangs "like an unhinged window-shutter," giving the face the "dilapidated" look of "the wing of a house shut up and haunted." This is the half that is "well stuffed with ghost stories" (p. 22). Juxtaposed to the regular features of the other side of the face, however, the haunted half seems on occasion an extended wink. This narrator symbolizes an important relationship suggested in the sequence of stories in Part I, the proximity of the matter-of-fact and the ludicrous to the mysterious and the frightening. Irving deliberately starts by inviting and laughing at stock responses and moves gradually toward showing what it is like to be truly possessed.

The ending of "The German Student" reduces the tale to the level of one of the oldest jokes in the world—the thoroughly incredible happening, the authenticity of which the narrator facetiously establishes by the appeal, "I had it from the best authority. The student told it me himself. I saw him in a mad-house in Paris" (p. 64). And before the ending something in the style fights the force the story would have if it were is told with a straight face to mystify the slow-witted listener. It is also one of Irving's rare dialect stories. Though the narrator's brogue is basically a literary stereotype, on the whole Irving uses it adroitly and manages to make the tale reflective of an Irish love of good humor.
altogether in earnest. The language is essentially the rhetoric of the standard gothic tale, but Irving uses it a little too obviously, makes it move too fast, so that explanations come too directly and abruptly, and character is almost flaunted as stereotype: “Her face was pale, but of a dazzling fairness, set off by a profusion of raven hair that hung clustering about it. Her eyes were large and brilliant, with a singular expression approaching to wildness” (p. 61). This is a language that Poe was to use effectively by supercharging it. Irving, however, is so deft and casual that when he glibly tosses off sentences such as “He was, in a manner, a literary ghoul, feeding in the charnel-house of decayed literature” (p. 58) one suspects parody.

Yet if one gives “The German Student” half a chance and reads it as the fantasy of a psychopath, it makes a fearful sense. The protagonist is an extreme instance of a characteristic Irving hero, the overly passive and imaginative, alienated observer. The “ghost” here, a revitalized female corpse, owes her existence to the German student’s desires and frustrations, both of which she personifies. Disillusioned and disgusted by the excesses of the French Revolution, he lives a recluse, his withdrawal from action being a distinct reminder of Rip Van Winkle’s long sleep through the American Revolution. Because of his shyness his ardor for the opposite sex leads only to fantasy. Creating his mistress in a dream, he realizes her one night at the foot of the guillotine in the shape of a forsaken lady who wears a black band around her neck. In the morning, after she passes the night in his room, he discovers that she is dead. Symbolically, he has been making love to Death herself: the lady has been guillotined the day before. The nightmarish discovery exposes the guilt-ridden evasiveness of the hero’s creation of a totally abstract ideal.

Implicit in “The German Student”—indeed in the Tales as a whole—is the recognition that Poe was to make fully explicit in his famous letter on “Berenice,” that the writing of romantic fiction is often a sustained struggle with material
that is potentially, if not inherently, ridiculous. Necrophilia may lie further within the purview of Poe’s fiction than of Irving’s, but the ending of “Berenice” comes almost as close as “The German Student” to reducing psychopathic compulsion to Bedlam comedy. After all, Berenice’s thirty-two teeth rattling on the floor merely modulate the dull thud—at once ludicrous and horrible—that one hears in the chamber of the German student as a policeman loosens the black band at the lady’s throat and the guillotined head rolls to the floor.

Burlesque, parody, hoax and mystification are important components of the literature of the 1820’s, perhaps because both readers and writers needed some antidote to the extravagance of the sensationalist fiction which was currently popular. Poe claimed that “Berenice” was a not entirely successful experiment in heightening “the ludicrous . . . into the grotesque,” but one wonders whether he would not have been content to have it accepted as parody. The prose of the first paragraph, for instance, so breathless with elevated platitude and labored paradox, is hard to take seriously in the light of Poe’s burlesque of exaggerated styles and verbal sleight-of-hand in “How to Write a Blackwood Article.” Or, if “Berenice” is not Poe’s “German Student,” perhaps “Ms. Found in a

39 Poe to White, Letters of Poe, I, 57–58.
20 Poe gives a sustained madhouse joke in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.” Headlessness, it is worth observing, is an important image in two of Irving’s stories. Leslie Fiedler is probably correct in suggesting that the headless horseman of “Sleepy Hollow” is something more than a hoax. Love and Death (New York, 1960), p. xxi. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that sterility or impotence, projected in symbols of decay and drying up, is one of Irving’s perennial concerns, and that in this context images of maiming and cutting down (“Rip,” “The Angler,” “Dolph,” “Buckthorne,” “Tom Walker”) seem to carry an unconscious implication of fear of castration.
22 Poe to White, Letters of Poe, I, 57. The letter is somewhat ambiguous, but of the four varieties of heightening which Poe lists, this, from the ludicrous to the grotesque, seems most closely to correspond with what he says elsewhere in the letter about “Berenice.”
Bottle” is. Here the narrator, in a tight fix worthy of the Blackwood’s tradition, retains all the equanimity he needs to prepare a careful record of his impressions and pass them on via the bottle for posterity; meanwhile the flying Dutchman of a ghost ship which speeds him on to the Pole is freighted with an uncommonly large cargo of gothic props. The element of contrivance suggests parody; one even detects a wink or two at Irving himself. Yet the style of “Ms. Found in a Bottle,” if frequently exaggerated to the verge of burlesque, still keeps teasing the reader to surrender to the fantasy.

Had Poe ever managed to get his “Tales of the Folio Club” published as a book, his intentions might now seem clearer. We do know, however, that the stories in the series were, as in Tales of a Traveller, to be told by individual narrators—at a club-meeting—that there was a good deal of humor in the characterizations of the narrators, and that the discussions by the members after each tale were to be burlesques of literary criticism. Not all the Folio Club tales can be identified with certainty, but it is clear that they ranged from outright burlesques to pieces as apparently typical of the more exalted Poe as “Silence” and “The Assignation.” And it is possible that, particularly with the example of Irving in the Tales before him, he planned to give at least one of the tales a tone that would place it in a twilight zone between the ludicrous and the serious.

The ship suggests Irving’s “Storm-Ship” (B). And the little old men personifying “the spirit of Eld” could hardly have been conceived as anything but parody. On one level also the story can be taken as a spoof on German philosophy. The narrator is a variation of the stock comic figure of the German student or the student of German thought (see note 24). Though he has, he thinks, always studied the German moralists in order to reject them, the fantastic events he experiences finally make him in effect a convert.

For attempts to ascertain the contents of “Tales of the Folio Club,” see T. O. Mabbott, “On Poe’s ‘Tales of the Folio Club,’” Sewanee Review, XXXVI (April, 1928), 171-76; James S. Wilson, “The Devil Was in It,” American Mercury, XXIV (October, 1931), 215-20. In “Poe’s ‘Ligeia’ and the English Romantics” (University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIV [October, 1954], 8-25), Clark Griffith argues that “Ligeia,” not of course one of the Folio Club tales, is both the tale of terror it has always been taken to be and a satirical allegory of the dependence of English romanticism on German sources. I am inclined also to see at least some degree of satire or parody in “Ligeia.” The style seems to me, as to Griffith,
In their theoretical statements Irving and Poe both put great stress on style as the instrument for redeeming the sensationalistic material of popular fiction. In actual practice this often meant strengthening the authority of the narrative voice in the story. It is no accident that both writers were interested in the storyteller, in the relation between the tale and the telling. Both saw that an audience will accept almost any plot or story, no matter how fantastic, if it is made convincing by being put in the mouth of someone with a reason or need for telling it. Poe made fun of the stylistic excesses of current fiction—"the tone laconic," "the tone elevated, diffusive, and interjectional," "the tone metaphysical," "the tone transcendental," and "the tone heterogeneous." He pretended to have no use for the writer who goes out of his way to discover "piquant" phrases, allusions, and figures of speech. But in his own stories he out-Blackwooded Blackwood's, using styles dazzling, mystifying, and overpowering enough to call special attention to the narrators using them.

Style always creates at least one character in a Poe story—the narrator—even though the other personae, existing only through him, may remain obscure. Out of the narrator's desire and need to hold an audience spellbound (even, if necessary, by publicly incriminating himself) emerges Poe's celebrated unity of effect. The narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse," who at times too heightened to be taken seriously—the first sentence, for instance. I tend to see "Ligeia" as a much more subtle version of the basic experience in Irving's "German Student." In both stories the disordered mind of the psychotic protagonist brings to life the phantom that controls it and then loses the woman who is the embodiment. Both protagonists are students, and in each case the phantom is associated with German philosophy. Griffith sees Ligeia as a personification of German Transcendentalism. In Irving it is made much more obvious that German idealism—"fanciful speculations on spiritual essences"—has driven Wolfgang, a student from Gottingen, to create "an ideal world of his own around him." TT, p. 57.

In the important letter to Brevoort, Irving says that "in these shorter writings, every page must have its merit. The author must be continually piquant; woe to him if he makes an awkward sentence or writes a stupid page; the critics are sure to pounce upon it." WIHB, II, 186. And Poe, speaking of pieces like "Berenice," says, "To be sure of originality is an essential in these things—great attention must be paid to style, and much labour spent in their composition, or they will degenerate into the turgid or the absurd." Letter to White, Letters, I, 58.

Poe, "How to Write a Blackwood Article."
wants to tear out his tongue but cannot stop its wagging, is the archetype. He says that when finally driven to confess his crime he “spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry”—like a tale-telling heart. And now, on the verge of execution, he cannot stop writing about himself and analyzing himself, using himself as the chief example of a theory of impulse which he has devised. Tonal unity in Poe, given his use of the first person, insures unity of effect by turning everything in the story into a reflection of (because literally an expression of) the narrator, even when, as in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” he seems only a relatively passive observer. This is one way in which Poe far surpasses a writer like Charles Brockden Brown, who, for all his brooding sense of terror as a psychological and moral reality, is apt to petrify his characters, particularly his narrators, by the false rhetoric that he foists upon them.

Irving seldom managed to achieve a structural unity or compactness comparable to Poe’s, but he understood the importance of tonal unity or consistency. By experimenting with pseudonyms and narratives-within-narratives he largely avoided those disconcerting shifts back and forth between high seriousness and comic relief that mar so much nineteenth-century fiction presented under the aspect of omniscience. The shifts are disconcerting because they presuppose as narrator a being who may laugh when he should be moved to tears, or vice versa. But Irving is apt to modulate by changing narrators: the new voice justifies the change in tone. Or, by utilizing his most characteristic narrative voice, the friendly, sympathetic yet slightly whimsical voice of Crayon or one of his variants (the nervous gentleman or the later Diedrich Knickerbocker), he achieves con-

27 And what he was able to contribute to short fiction in the way of tightening structure (even in falling short of Poe) and tying symbolic significance to character and locale can be easily appreciated by comparing the Tales with a typical contemporary collection of romantic pieces such as Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations (3 vols.; London, 1823). This largely German collection, including stories by Tieck, Musäus, and Fouqué, is impressive in its wealth of imagery and incident and its symbolic suggestiveness but is often crude stylistically and structurally, and on the whole pays little attention to rendering character and setting in detail.
siderable flexibility in mood and attitude within an individual story without sacrificing tonal unity. The humor in that voice, without seeming irreverent, grounds fantasy in the familiar. Furthermore Irving’s efforts to establish a relationship between story and narrator edge toward a conception of fiction as the revelation of character. By emphasizing the telling as much as the novelty or surprise which the popular audience demanded, he, like Poe, was able to bring out connections between action and character, gesture and motive, spectacle and response.

Not all of his ghost stories turn out to be jokes. In Part I of the *Tales* the involvement of the nervous narrator in a situation calculated, even more than the one in “The Stout Gentleman,” to unnerve him finally signals the beginning of disclosures which are less easy to laugh off than the bogus sensations we have previously been given. Upon retiring for the night, he becomes himself the victim of a “haunted chamber” in the old mansion in which the hunting-dinner has been held. A combination of the room’s gloomy appointments—“lampblack portraits” and “massive pieces of old-fashioned furniture”—recollections of “haunted” rooms in the stories told earlier, and a stomach over­taxed with “wine and wassail” give the narrator “a violent fit of the nightmare.” Waking up is no real release, for he now discovers a candle, melted into a fantastic shape, throwing an un­pleasantly bright light on a portrait which he is compelled to examine. It represents a man in the throes of “intense bodily pain”; a menacing scowl and “a few sprinklings of blood” con­tribute to a total impression of “ghastliness” (pp. 66–68).

The “Adventure of the Mysterious Picture” temporarily transforms the Crayonesque observer into the eyewitness re­corder of fantastic events ultimately immortalized by Poe. The nervous narrator is forced to resort to gothic rhetoric. In this particular lonely chamber his experience moves beyond mere anxiety toward terror. The combination of objective fact and subjective suggestion, the union of what the narrator observes and his way of observing it, operates to multiply fears. The very “idea of being hagridden . . . all night, and then bantered on . . . haggard looks the next day” proves “sufficient to produce
206 WASHINGTON IRVING

the effect” (p. 69), as in the theory of impulse as self-fulfilling prophecy that Poe was to work out in “The Imp of the Perverse.”

The next morning the host gives the story behind the picture, and this time, unlike the similar occasion in “The Adventure of My Uncle,” there is no holding back. Instead of French jests, we ultimately get Italian passion. In the “Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger” the host describes his encounter years ago in Italy with the painter of the gruesome portrait, a sensitive, appealing, yet strangely guilt-ridden young man. The face in the picture represents a fantasm that haunted the painter. “The Mysterious Stranger” is not an independent tale. It serves, with “The Mysterious Picture,” to introduce “The Story of the Young Italian,” a manuscript in the possession of the host, who proceeds to read it to the gathering. Together, the two introductory pieces help arouse interest in the character of the painter Ottavio, the “Young Italian.”

Far more than with an external intrigue, the concern of this story is with the question: what compulsion drives the intelligent, gifted man whom we see in “The Mysterious Stranger” to a crime which plants the bloody image of the “Mysterious Picture” on his conscience? Pledged, in effect, to an investigation of terror, Irving does not try to buy his way out of the commitment with a melodramatic tease like “The Student of Salamanca” or the sensational pathos of a “Broken Heart” or an “Annette Delarbre.” He offers a murderer with whom the reader is expected in large part to sympathize. Indeed “The Young Italian,” like its companion piece in Part III, “The Story of the Young Robber,” is a startling work when held against the stereotype of the genial Washington Irving.

“The Young Italian” is a flawed story because it attempts to cover too much of Ottavio’s lifetime in too short a space and fails, on the whole, to linger over individual scenes long

28 One reviewer, in praising “The Mysterious Picture,” said that it was “so graphical, that we fear our unfortunate friend Geoffrey is himself an occasional sufferer from the nocturnal visit of Ephialtes.” Anonymous review, Edinburgh Magazine, XV (September, 1824), 330.
enough for the reader to become thoroughly involved. There is material enough here for a novella or novel. Irving must have partly realized this himself, since he went to the trouble of breaking up the long narrative line and putting parts of the story into the two introductory pieces, each of which, being more concentrated, is artistically more satisfying. A casual reading may make it seem that Ottavio is too often a victim of circumstances, that what happens to him and what he does have too little relation to the kind of person he is. In both "The Young Italian" and "The Young Robber," though Irving can sympathize with his impassioned protagonists in the extremity of their ordeals, he has trouble fully identifying with them. The terror in these stories—Irving's only attempts to deal with emotions of an intensity comparable to those in Poe, Monk Lewis, or Brockden Brown—avoids being "of Germany" only by being, according to another gothic convention, "of Italy" and not entirely, as Poe claimed his to be, "of the soul."29

Of course he does not plunge directly into terror with the zest of a high gothic novelist. The whole complicated process of arranging stories in a sequence building to a violent climax shows an effort at something more subtle—and this is a necessity, since Irving obviously remains self-conscious about his gothic appropriations. Yet his embarrassment is in one sense a good sign, for, like Brockden Brown, he understands that in fiction violent action is virtually meaningless except as a reflection of character in deep conflict with itself. Both writers see the need for getting inside the soul in torment, though in comparison with Poe and Hawthorne, both fail to do so convincingly—Brown, because of the pretentious jargon with which he overlays introspection and character analysis; Irving, because on the whole, in spite of his inability in the Italian stories to get away completely from gothic rhetoric, he underplays his material.

Where Hawthorne, perhaps following Brown's lead, in a few years would begin to probe directly into hidden sources of the

29 Preface to Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840).
difficulties of his characters and Poe would exhibit their distractions more fully, Irving still tended to stay on the surface. His method is more appropriate to the seriocomic vein in which he worked best. He uses symbols almost exclusively as his means of hinting at Ottavio’s real trouble—which is not so much his trying to win the heroine Bianca as his desiring her to begin with. And the symbols do not call so much attention to themselves that a reader looking only for action would stop to ponder them. Yet settings, events, and secondary characters are consistently set up in “The Young Italian” so that they mirror aspects of Ottavio’s inner difficulty. And this difficulty is referred back to his childhood situation in his family in a way that, if initially somewhat stereotyped, gradually becomes compelling. One wishes “The Young Italian” could have been done as pure fantasy or dream. There is a discrepancy between the story’s failure to convince as literal narrative and its fullness as imagery. But the force it gathers at the second level indicates that Irving knows something, consciously or unconsciously, about violent impulse, guilt, and remorse.30

Like the protagonist of “The Young Robber” and Buckthorne, the central character in the longest and most important narrative in Part II of the Tales, Ottavio is a highly emotional and imaginative young man trying to free himself of parental domination and establish himself as an adult husband or lover. His mother dies early, leaving him spoiled, subject to tumultuous emotional upheavals, and at the mercy of a harsh father, who shows his favoritism for an older brother. The monastery where Ottavio is later sent becomes a metaphor of the motherless, femaleless family to which the boy now belongs. He is given in charge of his uncle, a rigidly puritanical monk and an obvious surrogate for the father. He acquires, in other words, a father “superior” in loco parentis. His confinement in the monastery connects his father, whom he fears and hates, with the more for-

30 One American reviewer, who was extremely critical of the Tales and complained of “triteness in the thoughts and barrenness of incident” in “The Mysterious Stranger” and “The Young Italian,” still curiously acknowledged that matters “have been arranged and presented in a manner tending to the strongest effect on the reader.” Minerva (New York), New Series, I (4 September 1824), 348.
bidding aspects of religion. The superstition of the monks, who are shut off from the world in an isolated mountainous region not far from Mt. Vesuvius, turns the volcanic terrain under the monastery into the beginning of the infernal regions, about which the monks frighten the boy with stories. Fatherhood, the authority of religion, punishment, hellfire, and death thus come close to standing for one another in Ottavio’s experience.

As his life develops, further symbolic extensions or duplications of his relations with the members of his immediate family give substance to Ottavio’s capacity for hate and love, violence and remorse. His growing-up becomes a constant re-enactment, usually with surrogates in the roles opposite him, of the original drama of his childhood—his effort to regain his mother’s love, his jealousy of father and brother, his revolt against them or flight from them. After several years he escapes the monastery and his father and goes to Genoa, only to be confronted at every turn, in effect haunted, by replicas of an overidealized mother. Emblems of death and decay give way to those of birth and life. Amid the splendors of palaces and gardens in Genoa, Ottavio is overcome by a painting of the Madonna in the “church of the Annunciata” (p. 95). Again, however, as elsewhere in Irving, the roles of mother, sweetheart, and sister are to become blurred. Ottavio finds a temporary foster father in the painter to whom he is apprenticed, the painter of the Madonna—the apotheosized mother-wife. At the same time he falls in love, and the very name of his beloved, Bianca, emphasizes her purity, which the imagery makes fully religious. While she is immured in a convent for her education, Ottavio nurtures his love and reproduces her face in numerous paintings. “I have stood, with delight, in one of the chapels of the Annunciata, and heard the crowd extol the seraphic beauty of a saint which I had painted. I have seen them bow down in adoration before the painting; they were bowing before the loveliness of Bianca” (pp. 96–98).

Before long, however, the painter dies, bequeathing to Ottavio “his little property,” and commending him to the protection of a Genoese nobleman, another “foster-father” (p. 98).
coincidence Bianca loses her father too and is taken into the same house under the same protection. That overtones of incest should develop, suggesting a fear of, or longing for, the forbidden as an essential emotion, is almost to be expected of gothic fiction, but the intrafamilial relationships in “The Young Italian” seem even more hectic than the convention demanded. Bianca, whose purity and saintliness already seem to reflect Ottavio’s unconscious devotion to his dead mother, inevitably becomes something of a sister to him at this juncture, and the situation is further complicated by the presence of a foster brother, the nobleman’s son Filippo, a young man close to Ottavio’s age.

Thus, to lose Bianca to Filippo just when he does—after his real father and brother, by a striking coincidence, have died, setting him free and bequeathing him an inheritance—is, in one sense, to be deprived again of maternal love, to be rejected once more in favor of a brother. His frenzied murder of Filippo, who steals Bianca from him, becomes explicitly a kind of fratricide: “I fled from the garden like another Cain—a hell within my bosom and a curse upon my head” (p. 117).

The Hawthornesque overtone here is consistent with other aspects of Irving’s treatment of Ottavio’s experience. He accepts, for the sake of his fiction, the Italy of romance, the Italy of Ann Radcliffe. But his Italy to a degree also anticipates that of Hawthorne and James. He manages in the introductory piece, “The Mysterious Stranger,” to suggest that there is a second story, just as important as that of the murder, the story of the Englishman’s reaction to the gradual unfolding of Ottavio’s history. What intrigues Irving as much as the cloak-and-dagger aspect of Italy, the Latin passion and sublime vistas, is a contrast or interplay between the spectacle of Italy and the more staid responses of the Anglo-Saxon spectator. We see this, for instance, in the fact that the host at the hunting dinner was compelled years earlier, because he was basically a sympa-

---

31 Heiman has noted Irving’s personal dependence on his brother William as a substitute father after the death of Deacon Irving. “Rip Van Winkle: A Psychoanalytic Note,” American Imago, XVI, 12–13.
thetic human being, even though encumbered with "an English­man's habitual diffidence and awkwardness" (p. 80), to minis­ter to Ottavio's appeal for friendship and instinctive under­standing. On that occasion the agony of Ottavio's unutterable guilt transformed the Englishman into a kind of priest, who granted absolution before hearing the confession.

The English host is to Ottavio as Kenyon is to Donatello in The Marble Faun. After he kills Filippo, Ottavio, like Donatello a "creature of passion before reason was developed" (p. 86),\(^32\) suffers an almost Hawthornesque remorse: "Oh could I but have cast off this crime that festered in my heat—could I but have regained the innocence that reigned in my heart as I entered the garden at Sestri . . ." (pp. 117-18). He too surrenders to justice after the moral firmness and sympathy of his older friend (a last substitute for father or brother?) have helped him achieve a full realization of the significance of his crime. And Ottavio anticipates Donatello in his reliance on the church. As the narrator says of Ottavio in "The Mysterious Stranger," "His had always been agony rather than sorrow" (p. 84).

It is, however, the music in an Easter Week service rather than clerical exhortation that is chiefly responsible for the final contrition—one recalls the passage in Travel in Europe which describes Irving's being deeply moved by Easter music in Rome.\(^33\) In both Hawthorne and Irving it is the aesthetic side of Catholicism that carries the primary moral force. Haw­thorne, of course, the greater Puritan as well as the greater

\(^32\) Ottavio also has affinities with the narrator of Poe's "William Wilson," another "self-willed" child, "addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions," who is immured in a gloomy gothic boarding school affiliated with the church and presided over by a paradoxical pastor, all "demurely benign" and fatherly in appearance but stern and "sour" in administering "the Draconian Laws of the academy." And the narrator's other self, his conscience, which seems both to stimulate and reproach his rebellion, is embodied in another student, who is for a while mistaken for the narrator's own brother. Irving, who thought highly of "William Wilson," was intrigued by the idea of the double, a man haunted by his alter ego, and he may actually have been partly responsible for Poe's inspiration for "William Wilson." See STW, II, 358; Edward Wagen­knecht, *Washington Irving* (New York, 1962), p. 202.

\(^33\) *TIE*, III, 68.
WASHINGTON IRVING

writer, felt much more keenly the impact of a religion that utilized music, painting, sculpture, and elaborate ceremony. What Irving merely sketches in, Hawthorne later worked out with elaborate care. Several weeks before his crucial Easter experience, for instance, we see Ottavio, "haggard and agitated," going to "operas, masquerades, balls" (p. 83), mingling with the crowds in the pre-Lenten carnival celebration. Effective as it is to conceive of the fugitive from justice trying to mask his despair in Mardi gras festivities, Irving gives little more than the bare idea, whereas Hawthorne fully develops a scene in which Kenyon catches a glimpse of the guilty couple, Miriam and Donatello, in a carnival procession; the suggestiveness of costume, décor, and gesture almost turn the episode into a ballet.

The geographical distinction in Part I supports a contrast between the commonplace and the romantic. Underlying everything in the "Strange Stories" is the ordinariness of the fox-hunting dinner, the heavy eating, the resulting dullness, the humor without great imagination. In the general torpor powerful disrupting emotions seem only a remote possibility, something foreign or alien. It is proper to have a certain amused curiosity about a crime of passion provided one doesn't become really concerned about it. Yet the interest in ghost stories itself comes to seem a sign of a latent capacity for being emotionally aroused; at bottom there turns out to be a connection between England and Italy.

Stereotyped as Irving's conceptions of national character are in the Tales, he manages to use them suggestively as emblems of varying attitudes toward fiction, art, and imagination. And through the contrasts the investigation of possibilities and limitations in various modes of fiction becomes more explicit. Part III repeats the basic pattern of Part I, exposing English reserve to Italian openness and emotion. Meanwhile, Part II, located entirely in England, maintains a consistently humorous tone but manages to present humor itself as an accommodation to a world in which imagination and emotion are constantly up-
setting balance and self-control. Finally, in Part IV, Irving shifts again to America, a setting in which for him the comic and the gothic, the humdrum and the grotesque, the real and the illusory, the natural and the supernatural seem almost to become aspects of one another.

Part II of *Tales of a Traveller*—"Buckthorne and His Friends"—offers a variation on the theme of storytelling by using authorship or the lives of authors as subject matter. It reminds the reader that authors are fundamentally all-too-human beings. What Crayon discovers to be an essential element of the artistic temperament is a thoroughly normal, if usually self-defeating, impulse to see the world as magical, mysterious, romantic. The literary frame of reference for Part II is no longer the gothic tale or the sensational anecdote but the periodical essay, as Irving sets the subject of authorship in the context of a world very much concerned with fashions. The first two pieces, "A Literary Dinner" and "The Club of Queer Fellows," show us authors both in and out of popular favor, poor devils, authors trying to keep up with the latest literary fads, grubstreet hacks elbowing their way toward success, and successful writers trying to live up to their roles. A later piece, "Notoriety," discusses the "oddity fanciers among our ladies of rank," whose "routs are like fancy balls, where every one comes 'in character,' . . . playing a part, and acting out of his natural line. . . . The fine gentleman is always anxious to be thought a wit, and the wit a fine gentleman" (pp. 165–66).

The narratives in Part II accordingly stage re-enactments of the standard neoclassical drama which turns on the conflict between provincialism and urbanity. Buckthorne and most of his friends have at one time or another left the country, where they were brought up, to go to London to be writers or to get ahead in the theater. Their stories superficially have the appearance of those eighteenth-century récits in which a young person in difficulty through his ignorance of the ways of the world implores an editor for advice, or in which the deviator from the norm confesses the error of his ways and resolves to mend them.
But there are important differences. As in Irving’s earlier works, the assumption is that eccentricities are an inevitable part of being human and, if not to be admired or cultivated, perhaps not to be censured either. For, after all, while his writers and actors sometimes behave like country bumpkins, their rebuffs from the town are viewed by an author who has himself been through the mill of literary fashion. Sympathetic as he was with the plight of the artist, Irving could not help feeling, at least on occasion, that he, like Buckthorne, had been “beguiled away by the imagination . . . from the safe beaten path of life” and had lost himself “in the mazes of literature.”\[^{34}\] Like one of the other characters, he had been a literary success in his home town before going out in the world to try to make good in the literary capital. In Part II his purpose is to show a constantly recurring relationship between aspiring imagination and cold hard facts. Irving gives us the comic view, but there is poignancy in the comedy. The attitude of the “practical philosopher,” who is Buckthorne himself, is to accept one’s limitations, to be a small frog in the big pond. But the wear and tear still show on those who have reached this sensible solution.

In the frame narrative Crayon gets to know Buckthorne in London, is taken by him to literary gathering-places, is introduced to writers and grubstreet hangers-on, and listens to shop-talk and stories of various careers. These narratives develop a single basic impression, and their cumulative effect is to make it possible for Irving sometimes to cut a story short without giving us the protagonist’s whole life history because its general outlines can be inferred through analogy to what has already happened to him or to other characters in other narratives. This is particularly true of the main story of Part II, which Crayon finally teases out of Buckthorne himself. Except for a brief epilogue, it stops when Buckthorne gets to Grub Street. It is concerned only with an earlier period of his life, which is viewed from the perspective of a mature man looking back ironically on the callowness of his youth.

\[^{34}\] Irving to Pierre Paris Irving, 29 March 1825, PMI, II, 233.
In general outline "Buckthorne, or The Young Man of Great Expectations" follows a pattern familiar in eighteenth-century letters to editors: a youth, who takes the fortune he expects to inherit too much for granted, reaches an advanced state of waywardness, alienates family and friends, is disinherited, repents of his folly, changes his ways, and proves himself worthy of the position for which he was originally intended. But Buckthorne's weakness is not vice or luxury. His story focuses on the anxiety and delight, as well as the imaginative self-deception, that a literary bent can engender. He does not so much fall from the good graces of his rich uncle as fail ever to get into them. Nor does this seem very much his fault; it stems from his imaginative temperament; he and his uncle were not made to love each other.

Buckthorne starts out in high hope and almost makes a great success of himself, only to miscalculate his talents, fail, and find himself once more back home where he began. The pattern is repeated several times; he partly learns from, and is partly confirmed in, his tendency to mistake dream for reality. In the process Irving suggests mysterious affinities between the events in a hero's life and an intention in natural forces. By providing a world at large shaped to a central character and reflecting his problems, he begins to produce an effect of fantasy even though he is not consciously adapting legends. Buckthorne’s prevarication turns into a kind of dance in which the powers of life or nature seem constantly to lead him on.

"Buckthorne" ought to be considered in relation to the Tales as a whole, and specifically in contrast to "The Young Italian." Both stories go to extremes: Ottavio’s embodies imagination in a virulently self-destructive form, virtually indistinguishable from psychosis, while Buckthorne’s miraculously rides, or is ridden by, the vagrant inclination through a series of clashes with reality to eventual good fortune and a state as close to liberation from whimsy as Irving can envision or tolerate. The usual truth is obviously somewhere in between, and Irving stalks it throughout the Tales. All around Crayon, Grub Street is littered with poor devils, most of whom will neither stop
chasing phantoms altogether nor find the security of accepting their third-rateness.

Though less passionate than Ottavio because he was subject to milder repressions as a child, Buckthorne has been conditioned by an analogous set of circumstances, spoiled by “the most excellent, the most indulgent of mothers” (p. 171) and governed by a father who is a stern believer in the educative value of flogging. The rich and miserly uncle, again a surrogate for the father, is “a veteran spider, in the citadel of his web.” Buckthorne, when he visits him, occupies the room that had been his mother’s before her marriage, sees little of the old uncle, and is denied entrance to his “stronghold,” which is located “in a remote corner of the building, strongly secured, and generally locked.” On Sunday “this withered anatomy” issues from his private quarters to compel the household to listen while he reads at length from the Bible or Pilgrim’s Progress (a caricature, incidentally, of Irving’s own father’s Sunday ritual). Taking a page from his uncle’s favorite book, Buckthorne makes an early mistake in writing a poem in which he describes the old man’s estate “under the name of Doubting Castle” and transforms its owner into the “Giant Despair.” When he loses the poem about the house, the uncle finds it (pp. 175–79).

Most of the men he encounters—fox-hunting friends of his father, his uncle and his uncle’s servant Iron John, schoolmasters, parsons, and the fathers of the girls he pursues—function to thwart his desires or frustrate his expectations. These men, who are largely unimaginative, ridicule the poetry he writes or see his interests as worthless. Meanwhile, mothers and sentimental girls lavish affection on him and wax ecstatic over his poetry. He generally responds in kind, penning verses to girls in which he addresses them with names like “Sacharissa.”

On one occasion, a soft, sensuous form of religion, combined with the attractions of a girl in a provincial city who swoons over his poetical advances, brings him to the verge of his total undoing. Small-town piety works on him to produce an agony of

PMI, I, 23.
apparent remorse and contrition: "Sinner that I was!" he says, "the very dignity and decorum of the little community was rebuking to me. I feared my past idleness and folly would rise in judgment against me. I stood in awe of the dignitaries of the cathedral . . ." (p. 228). But Buckthorne has not turned into Ottavio. His early life has not been nearly so wasted as he, in his desire to find ideal meaning in it, now pretends. His self-humiliation is a function of his sentimental need to believe that the girl he is wooing is too good for him. The psychology of the gesture is quite clear: "This routine of solemn ceremony continually going on, independent, as it were, of the world; this daily offering of melody and praise, ascending like incense from the altar, had a powerful effect upon my imagination" (p. 227). One is reminded of Irving's delight in the music and ritual in the Italian churches and suspects him here of self-mockery. He seemed sometimes to doubt the genuineness of the very experiences that moved him most.

Thus the imagery in the story functions systematically to illuminate the conflicts of the artistic temperament confronting the practical world. On his uncle's gothicized estate stagnant ponds and fallen statues, suggestive of sterility or impotence, reflect the fears which at times render Buckthorne ineffectual as a human being. Similarly a temporary connection which he forms with the theater makes him a clown, the dupe of his illusions. As Pierrot in the traditional commedia dell'arte pantomime, he plays a role that mirrors the failure of his off-stage attempts to make life conform to his vision of the way things ought to be. "I had merely," he says, "to pursue the fugitive fair one; to have a door now and then slammed in my face; to run my head occasionally against a post; . . . to endure the hearty thwacks of Harlequin's wooden sword" (p. 194). He falls in love with the girl who plays Columbine, and on the day on which a girl who has previously spurned him shows up in the audience, he is stung into returning Harlequin's thwacks. The effort to give dramatic proof of his manliness breaks up the pantomime and costs him his job.

36 TIE, III, 68.
Yet, ironically, by this particular bit of clowning he does win Columbine, at least temporarily. Buckthorne makes much of the incongruity in his situation at the fair grounds after his expulsion from the theater, "my mountebank dress fluttering in rags about me; the weeping Columbine hanging upon my arm, in splendid but tattered finery," the tears ruining her make-up. "Having wandered through the fair," he says, going on to a Miltonic allusion that ought to have delighted Hawthorne, "we emerged, like another Adam and Eve, into unknown regions, and ‘had the world before us where to choose’" (p. 199). Being a clown thus becomes curiously synonymous with being human, with being thrust out into the world to make one's way, as is emphasized when in the course of their wanderings Buckthorne and Columbine come to the spot overlooking London where Dick Whittington first heard Bow bells.\(^37\)

The story should probably end here, or on a similar note of romantic irony, for this represents Irving's deepest insight into the nature of the artistic temperament. But he goes on to have the rich uncle die and leave his fortune to a suddenly revealed illegitimate son, so that Buckthorne is forced to become a grubby street hack in order to support himself. Once he proves that he can put imagination to work for him instead of throwing it away on silly females, he earns an inheritance: his bastard cousin conveniently dies and leaves him the estate.

Rude awakenings, unfortunately, have at last brought Buckthorne too much to his senses, for in the process of reforming and becoming respectable he not only gives up girls like Columbine for a commonsensical squire's daughter; when he goes to live on his estate, he also retires from literature.\(^38\)

\(^37\) Another time Buckthorne takes up boxing and is thrashed; lying on his bed, he moralizes "on this sorry ambition, which levels the gentleman with the clown" (p. 223).

\(^38\) "Buckthorne and His Friends" reflects Irving's conception that at best a career as a professional writer is a precarious one. The failure of the Tales would not brighten his view of authorship. Writing to his young nephew, Pierre Paris Irving, who was already dabbling in letters, Irving, in the midst of his disappointment at the reception of the Tales, warned him against a writer's career, saying, "I hope none of those whose interests and happiness are dear to me will be induced to follow my footsteps, and wander into the seductive but treacherous paths
formula of the periodical récit may have seemed promising to Irving as a way of handling his subject without running the risk of romantic excesses, but it finally pushed him into creating a world of pat reasonableness where imagination is denied a legitimate place. One knows, however, from the excitement of Buckthorne’s own narrative, which is produced by the protagonist’s response to a world charged with illusion, that the problem was not as easy as the neat ending makes it seem.

The inn at Terracina, the locus of storytelling in “The Italian Banditti” (Part III), stands much closer to the scene of action than the bachelors’ hall in Part I. The persons telling and listening to the stories are themselves travelers on the bandit-infested road between Rome and Naples. When the stories are finished, the travelers resume their journeys. In the end, the frame narrative itself emerges from the inn and pursues a group of travelers along the road until they run into trouble. In the meanwhile the stories, as in Part I, have begun in burlesque and worked up to a violent climax, an arrangement which invites the reader to ponder the implications of the vogue for gothic sensation.39

In “The Story of the Young Robber” a girl is first raped by a gang of outlaws and then handed over to the protagonist, her sweetheart, to be executed. But for all the terror of this tale, the prevailing tone of “The Italian Banditti” remains comic or satiric, the frame narrative being rendered in a deliberately...
exaggerated, melodramatic style, which the irony of studied remarks or the ludicrousness of situation pulls against. The dominant tone is set at the beginning when a government courier gallops up to the inn in his underdrawers. Bandits have stripped him of his “leather breeches,” which “were bran new, and shone like gold” (p. 274). While this indication of the way bandits behave is blunt and prosaic enough, most of the travelers depicted in Part III prefer to wrap the possibility of an encounter with them in some sort of illusion. They see “banditti” instead of bandits, the Italian word carrying delicious romantic connotations. The sentimental view is that bandits are noblemen in disguise, noble at least in spirit if not by title. In “The Adventure of the Popkins Family” two daughters of a London alderman, who are “very romantic” and eager to sketch the “savage scenery” that reminds them of Mrs. Radcliffe (p. 322), go through an attack, watch bandits plunder their parvenu papa’s rich equipage, and emerge “quite delighted with the adventure,” which they can’t wait to write into their diaries. They find the chief of the band “most romantic-looking” and the whole group “quite picturesque” (p. 325).

Still another attitude is embodied in a young Venetian woman, who exudes passion and sentiment at the slightest provocation and enjoys giving herself chills of fear by listening to accounts of the atrocities the bandits are supposed to inflict upon their captives, especially women. It is the Italian characters who are generally the most emotional about the bandits (excluding the silly Popkins females, whose romanticism is a naïve, virginal sentiment, derived solely from books). The Roman poet and improvisatore who tells “The Belated Travellers” is so charmed by his own capacity for romantic exaggeration that he seems almost to believe his story, though it is a stock tale of coincidence and hairbreadth escape from bandits, which is largely, for Irving, a parody.

Irving’s satire, working up to the horror of “The Young Robber,” exposes the dishonesty of fiction that gives the reader the vicarious thrill of experiencing what is evil or forbidden without having to suffer any consequences. He brushes aside
the pious pretensions of the sentimental romance, in which the reader is teased by the glamor of sin only to have the heroine finally resist it or to have a blond secondary heroine brought in to save the day for chastity after the dark heroine has been debauched. He reminds his readers throughout Part III that the appeal of much sentimental and gothic fiction is the allure of illicit sex. The bandits, who are, to begin with, symbolic of the forbidden, the outlawed, come before long to stand in the eyes of the travelers for the ultimate in sexual dexterity.

The opening impression of the frame narrative, the “Crack! crack! crack! crack! crack!” of the estafette’s whip as he rides trouserless toward the inn, turns into a refrain conveying the suggestion of male sexual prowess. When asked by the “fair Venetian” if the bandits are cruel, the estafette exults in asserting his own masculinity, swearing by the body of Bacchus and, in one quick thrust of activity, glancing at the lady while simultaneously giving his fresh horse the spur and returning the sharp answer, “They stiletto all the men; and, as to the women—-’ Crack! crack! crack! crack! crack!” (pp. 273–83). The whiplash of the courier as he rides off functions as a comic leer, but the sadistic overtone foreshadows the climax of Part III.40

Against the main force of bandit virility stands the chaste virgin of sentimental fiction, facing exposure to, or initiation into, the mystery of sex or love. Innocence is constantly tempted or threatened in the bandit tales, except in the case of the Misses Popkins, where it has already been galvanized to desex them. The heroine of “The Belated Travellers” has the conventional narrow escape from bandit molestation, and the contrast between her miraculous reunion with her true love at the end and the fate of Rosetta, the victim of the assault in “The Young Robber,” epitomizes the effect Irving continually strives for in Part III.

40 The U.S. Literary Gazette (I, 229) complained of “indecency drowned in the crack! crack! of the postillion’s whip.”
A persistently risqué innuendo suggestive of illicit or suppressed sexuality threads its way through the repeated encounters of innocence and experience. The "delicate and drooping" (p. 301) naïveté of the heroine of "The Belated Travellers," for instance, is offset by the worldly sophistication of an old Spanish princess, who, with the girl, is besieged by bandits at an isolated carriage stop. The princess, we are told, "mingled the woman of dissipation with the devotee. She was actually on her way to Loretto to expiate a long life of gallantries and peccadilloes by a rich offering . . ." (p. 308). And the bawdy comedy of "The Adventure of the Little Antiquary" substitutes for the innocence of a young girl that of another of Irving's "rusty, musty" old bachelor-scholars, "always groping among ruins." Instead of robbing him of his prize possession—the Venus in his antique intaglio ring, which he worships with the "zeal of a voluptuary"—the bandits simply show him that the ring is a counterfeit and "his Venus a sham" (pp. 289–94).

But it is in the comic relationship between the Venetian lady and an English gentleman in the frame narrative that the sexual suggestion becomes clearest as commentary on the basic allure of sensational fiction. Irving is refreshingly frank in his treatment of this woman, making her, significantly, not a virgin but a young wife on her honeymoon, and hinting that initiation has not so much deepened her love for her husband as heightened her general sexual curiosity. The stories she hears about the bandits are an outlet for this curiosity, though to herself she disguises it as fear, and her exaggerated display of fear serves as a device for attracting male attention. The plot of the frame narrative turns on her attempts to provoke an amorous response in a skeptical English Milor, a stock character who absolutely refuses to believe in the threat of attack by bandits and dismisses all the stories as nonsense. The "fair Venetian's" sexual interest in the man is allowed to become all but overt: "'I have no patience with these Englishmen,' said she, as she got into bed—'they are so cold and insensible!'" (p. 368). In the end, after they have left the inn, he is aroused, though he remains as undemonstrative and inarticulate as ever; and in what in the
context is another parody of the conventional thriller, she comes as close to getting what she seems unconsciously to want as Irving's comedy can allow. Bandits attack her party and are on the point of ravishing her when the Englishman, coming along the road behind, rescues her, noiselessly and singlehandedly. Freed from the gang that has overpowered her husband, she throws herself into the arms of her deliverer: he has finally proven himself, in that ambiguous phrase earlier invoked in Part III, _un gallant uomo_.

A good deal of the time, it must be admitted, sex is introduced furtively in _Tales of a Traveller_ through innuendo that is not expected to register on the pure of mind.\(^41\) And when Irving deals with the subject overtly in "The Young Robber," one sees, as in the violence in Part I, both compulsion and constraint. Something in him apparently has to be expressed, but when it finally bursts out, the abruptness suggests compunctions. Unable to transform himself fully into the young robber, he uses as narrator an intelligent and educated Frenchman, who gives the story in the youth's own words "as near as I can recollect" (p. 353). The Frenchman's memory is imperfect and his own style too elevated for the savage disclosures it conveys. Irving thus softens the blow for his readers and himself. Nonetheless, the situation carries considerable force.\(^42\)

The gruesome appropriateness of "The Young Robber" to Part III is that it actually gives the sentimental heroine the savage love that, one is inclined to argue, the reader always unconsciously hopes she will get, a love that, destroying what she is—the embodiment of purity and innocence—means her death. During one of the robbers' forays the young protagonist secretly visits Rosetta but is detected by the others, who are constantly on the lookout for kidnap victims. They carry her off, and when her

\(^{41}\) And what the _U.S. Literary Gazette_ remarked about "the description of Dolph Heyliger's mistress" applies in parts of the _Tales_ as well—that which "might have been said openly without any breach of propriety" is "slyly smothered" and thus becomes an "indelicacy" (I, 229).

\(^{42}\) The _U.S. Literary Gazette_ called "The Young Robber" a "shocking story," in which "a scene the most revolting to humanity is twice unnecessarily forced on the reader's imagination" (I, 229).
father refuses to pay ransom for the girl on the ground that she is already dishonored, bandit law dictates that she must die.

Rosetta’s chastity is emphasized by her fairness in contrast to the “sunburnt females” (p. 354) of her town. On the day that she is carried off for ransom by the robbers, she is appropriately arrayed in white, for it is to her death-marriage that she is bound. The hero cannot—perhaps will not—rescue her. Although he does not participate in the mass ravishing, he realizes that he has been an accomplice, having been solely responsible for her capture, and he has hoped, once she was taken captive, to keep her for himself. Even before her death sentence is pronounced, he plans to demand to be her executioner. And when he finally has her to himself in the blackness of the forest at night, he has no thought of suicide or of sacrificing himself in an attempt to free her. Rather, he flatly accepts the bandit law and performs his joint act of love and execution with a deliberateness that suggests ritual. Rosetta lies locked in his arms the better part of the night, and—the most convincing touch in the whole story—he takes a lover’s pride in describing his agility with the dagger. In contrast to the raping, her death comes with “a painful and concentrated murmur, but without any convulsive movement” (p. 363).

It is a demonstration of Irving’s antididacticism that he withholds judgment or indictment. Terror and revulsion do not cut off sympathy, even though the young robber transforms himself, without quite realizing that it is he who has undergone initiation, into a full-fledged outlaw. There is a sense in which her father’s refusal to ransom Rosetta has had compelling appropriateness: she was already dishonored in the young robber’s intention. One interprets motives here, without pretending certainty. The narrative is not explicit, but one begins by observing the combination of horror and satisfaction in the final killing, implying who is to say precisely what permutations of love, reverence, fear, hate and profanation, directed toward what objects. Irving’s own conscious awareness of the ambiguities was no doubt less than complete. But this rather heightens than discourages interest. The image of female innocence had inspired enough devotion in him,
as both his life and work attest, that the savagery of the assault on the sentimental heroine in "The Young Robber" implicates him in his own fiction.

Rosetta, it should be noted, like Bianca in Part I, is an example of the dominant figure of what Leslie Fiedler calls the "Sentimental Love Religion," that is, the virtual deification of the sentimental heroine in fiction in the wake of Richardson. Fiedler sees this as part of a general reaction against the austerity of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism. The imagery of "The Young Italian," as we have seen, virtually transforms Bianca into Virgin and Mother. Ottavio's love for her is part of a revolt against the paternal aspect of religion. The murder and remorse suggest the intensity of hatred and guilt attached to the reaction. One can't be sure whether fear of his father or antipathy to puritanical religion moved Irving most, but there is no doubt of his aptitude for using the two emotions as metaphors for each other.

In "The Young Robber" we find another protagonist in conflict with paternal authority. He defies his father's wish that he go into the church—which would mean celibacy as well as submission to rigid discipline—and finds "easy success" among the "sunburnt" girls of the town (pp. 354–55). But his promiscuity, which never fully satisfies him, seems a function of a capacity for idolizing women, probably in part a compensation for failure to reach the inaccessible. As the story goes on, it is Rosetta's father who becomes the chief embodiment of the paternalism which the suitor is driven to oppose. He keeps Rosetta secure at home, so that the young man can get near her only in church, or by stealing into the vineyard where she occasionally walks. When the father picks out a potential husband for her—another older man to block the young man's way—the two suitors fight, and the older is killed. Eventually taking refuge in a gang of robbers, the hero soon discovers himself under the domination of an outlaw as rigidly authoritarian as any in the community he has fled: his new "father," the robber chief, though originally himself a rebel against tyranny, has become an absolute sovereign.

43 Love and Death, chap. i.
Again in "The Young Robber" the church has two sets of connotations, male and female. Its severity and discipline relate it to paternal authority, which the protagonist rejects in refusing to become an ecclesiastic. Yet he establishes his own "Sentimental Love Religion" by going to church to worship Rosetta, his private virgin, whose white raiment mirrors his immaculate conception of her. And while mothers, on the literal level, are omitted from this story, the church becomes a virtual mother to the young robber after he kills Rosetta's suitor, since it offers him temporary sanctuary from law, judgment, and punishment.

The yearning for a maternal manifestation of divinity thus makes itself felt through Irving's young Italians. For all his apparent casualness about religion, he shared in certain attitudes that had much to do with the shaping of American literature's concern with the puritan tradition. Part of him joins the quest for a god of love as refuge from the terrible vengeance of a god of power, a quest that was to become fully explicit in the corposants scene in Moby-Dick, where Captain Ahab defiantly orders God the father to appear in His "lowest form of love," as "holy mother," if He wants to be worshiped.

Yet something in Irving seems also to revolt. One wonders whether the outrage he commits against the sentimental heroine through the agency of the chief, the band, and the young robber is an act of vengeance or an attempt at exorcism that he feels compelled to make. Defining the personal significance of any detail is impossibly risky. Yet one can hardly overlook the fact that only recently, as he was trying to write Tales of a Traveller, he had been paying court to another young woman who seemed a perfect embodiment of purity and innocence. Indeed, if anything, Emily Foster seems to have carried the pursuit of goodness and virtue even farther than Matilda Hoffman had. An ardent evangelical, Emily took an active interest in Irving's religious attitudes. He did not respond, however, to the low-church side of her.44 Just how much he did care for her, whether he actually proposed to her and was rejected, is not clear. Once more, the situation was complicated by his interest in a mother,

in this case Emily's own mother, and the theory has been advanced that again Irving, though he couldn't admit it to himself, was actually in love with the mother rather than the daughter.\(^{45}\)

In any case, this was a period when memories of Matilda, her stepmother, his engagement fifteen years earlier, and Matilda's death were, we know, revived and intensified. Of Irving's unhappiness on leaving the Fosters after the Dresden interlude there is no doubt.\(^{46}\) He was thrust back into a loneliness to which he had never fully accommodated himself. His emotional life was destined to incompleteness, to a division between casual flirtations or, possibly, sexual encounters and an almost quixotic worship of the ideal from afar.

*Tales of a Traveller* seems surely in part a product of the turmoil of this period. One must at least observe the conflicting emotions: the lure of forbidden sex and the consequent sense of guilt in "The German Student," the murderous frenzy of Ottavio and the young robber over the loss of Bianca and Rosetta, and the final violence of the deflowering of innocence. More seems to lie behind these stories than simple, unadulterated grief or frustration. One senses a confusion in Irving's motives, and some shame at the confusion. Something in him, perhaps resentment at having, in one way or another, been forbidden full emotional satisfaction, perhaps resentment at having almost desexed himself out of loyalty to Matilda's memory, seems to seek vengeance on the sentimental heroine. Given free rein with conventional gothic material, he half-consciously exposes the suppressed and possibly distorted feelings implicit in the appeal of the sentimental or romantic ordeal of innocence. The more exaggerated the ideal of purity, the greater the likelihood that the basic desire which creates and enshrines the ideal is tainted. This was to be the great discovery of Melville in *Pierre*.

For the end (Part IV) of *Tales of a Traveller*, Irving goes back to his American scenes and subjects and to the type of story that he was especially suited to write. His legends, largely com-

\(^{46}\) Reichart, pp. 104-5.
pounded from scraps of folk tales and popular fiction that he was apt, like the traveler and reader he was, to have picked up almost anywhere, are a good compromise between gothic urgency and the looseness of eighteenth-century narrative (whether in picaresque or periodical récits), between focusing on the matter of fact and on the extraordinary or supernatural. They enable Irving to utilize his eye for image and to characterize by reflection and suggestion, since in the folk stereotypes he uses he has no particularly complicated personalities to contend with. He does not, of course, work very well inside character unless the persona is someone more or less like himself—Crayon, for instance, or one of the other nervous narrators. Legends also bring his sense of place and sense of time or timing into greater play, for with characters who are neither significant enough to stand by themselves as universals nor sufficiently introverted to ignore the external world, he needs at least an immediacy of impression. He achieves this in part by establishing harmonies between character and terrain, by producing the picturesqueness of local color.

Furthermore, without resorting to parody or burlesque of the form he is using, he is able in the American section to continue reminding his readers of the fictitiousness of fiction and to tie Tales of a Traveller together by his most convincing demonstration of the fact that the effect of the story depends primarily not on what it is but how it is told. His narrators have a way of telling pretty much the same story in different forms, and Irving does not seem to mind our seeing the similarity. In Part IV the story becomes the vanity, the mutability, of what the subtitle of “Wolfert Webber” calls “Golden Dreams.” In “Buckthorne” they were called “Great Expectations,” a phrase which, while specifically anticipating Dickens, serves also as a reminder of the extent to which the didacticism of the eighteenth century and the romanticism of the nineteenth made coming of age the substance of fiction, using youth as an archetype to represent the frustrations of being human.

Parts I and III tell with passion the basic story of the unfulfilled promise, the exploded illusion, and Part II tells it philo-
sophically, “without vexation of spirit,” though Buckthorne and Crayon both “perceive the truth of the saying, that ‘all is vanity’” (p. 168). After the hopes and despairings of youth—the German student, Ottavio, the “poor-devil author,” Buckthorne’s “strolling manager,” the bandit chief, and the young robber—Irving turns youthful desire, longing, or lust into middle-aged avarice in Tom Walker and Wolfert Webber and presents much the same story—as an old story, as a legend.

It was essentially the story that the alienated observer had been fond of telling on himself and his world all along, the nervous narrator’s story (“The Stout Gentleman”) of the final satisfaction that gets away. Before long, the burden of this lament was to become an impediment to Irving’s development as a writer. For the time being, within the framework of Tales of a Traveller, it did not hurt to have situations and characters repeating themselves in the same way that Webbers from one generation to the next continue to resemble one another, to have the “inquisitive” gentleman’s literal-mindedness in Part I evolve not only into the skepticism of the Milor in Part III but into the indifference of a “one-eyed” captain in Part IV, who has little to say in response to tales of buried treasure but “Fudge!” And there is a general appropriateness in reminding the reader that the devil is ubiquitous, that is, in one sense a commonplace: “in all the stories which once abounded of these enterprises, the devil played a conspicuous part” (p. 387). These “enterprises” are the treasure hunts of Part IV, “The Money Diggers.” The devil presides “at the hiding of the money,” taking it “under his guardianship; . . . this, it is well known, he always does with buried treasure, particularly when it has been ill-gotten” (p. 391). He changes only his name from one context to another:

“I am the wild huntsman in some countries; the black miner in others. In this neighborhood I am known by the name of the black woodsman. I am he to whom the red men consecrated this spot, and in honor of whom they now and then roasted a white man, by way of sweet-smelling sacrifice. Since the red men have been exterminated by you white savages, I amuse myself by presiding at the persecutions of Quakers and Anabaptists; I am the great patron
and prompter of slave-dealers, and the grand-master of the Salem
witches.”

“The upshot of all which is, that . . . you are he commonly called
Old Scratch.” (p. 396)

Almost everyone attends to the tale of golden dreams and
great expectations. People who have any imagination at all are
busy listening to it or re-enacting it. Most, like the “fair
Venetian,” Tom Walker, and Wolfert Webber, do both. No one
ever learns enough from this story to get what he most desires,
and this is the story. It is always, in a larger sense, a folk tale.
Man spends his life verifying it. Buckthorne’s adventures lead
to the resignation of laughing at, as one of his friends says, “the
humbug of the great and little world; which I take it, is the
essence of practical philosophy” (p. 268). Even so, there can
hardly be a happy ending unless it is imposed by an author
from without. Only a few, like Wolfert Webber, are granted this
reward.

Part IV again leaves plot up in the air: “In fact, the secret of
all this story has never to this day been discovered; whether any
treasure were ever actually buried at that place” (p. 471). Irving
gives rumors instead of truth and even treats character
cavalierly. Wolfert Webber, almost dead of being unable to
find buried treasure, hears that he has become rich through an
unexpected increase in the value of his modest property and
cries, “Say you so?” Whereupon, “half thrusting one leg out of
bed,” he announces, “why, then I think I’ll not make my will
yet!” (p. 475). He gets up to finish out a long life.

For all the gothic machinery of rumors of treasure, dreams,
and mysterious figures rising out of the sea and returning to
it, there is no ghost in “Wolfert Webber” but “the ghost of a
money-bag” (p. 458). What occasionally makes the story in-
tense is Irving’s sense of humor (or ruling passion), which
threatens to transform caricature into monstrosity. He begins to
speak of the Webbers quite whimsically: “The whole family
genius, during several generations, was devoted to the study and

47 The quotation is from “Wolfert Webber.” The same device is used in “The
Devil and Tom Walker.” TT, p. 400.
development of . . . one noble vegetable,” the cabbage. And he goes on mock-heroically, “The Webber dynasty continued in uninterrupted succession; and never did a line give more unquestionable proofs of legitimacy. The eldest son succeeded to the looks as well as the territory of his sire . . .” (pp. 410–11). Naturally enough, the Webbers look like cabbages. This is normality. But after three seemingly prophetic dreams Wolfert stops raising cabbages by day and begins to work his land for gold at night. Now the harder he works the poorer he becomes. He digs away the rich soil and turns up “sandy barrenness.” Fruit ripens on the trees, birds fly from their nests, and caterpillars turn into moths fluttering “with the last sunshine of summer.” But with the falling leaves whispering of winter, Wolfert Webber has no harvest.

Haggard care gathered about his brow; he went about with a money-seeking air, his eyes bent downwards into the dust, and carrying his hands in his pockets, as men are apt to do when they have nothing else to put into them. He could not even pass the city almshouse without giving it a rueful glance, as if destined to be his future abode. (pp. 426–27)

Remembering now the beginning of Moby-Dick, with Ishmael, the “hypos” getting the better of him, discovering that he is “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral,” one comes to appreciate the persistence of comic compulsiveness or “gothic risibility” as an approach to character in nineteenth-century American fiction. Wolfert Webber, frantically bent on unearthing buried gold, is a not-too-distant relative of General Von Poffenburgh, who madly decapitates cabbages in Knickerbocker, and he is the next of kin to Hawthorne’s Peter Goldthwaite, who, as a treasure-hunter, goes him one better, tearing apart the inside of his house instead of digging up his garden.

Irving’s best work starts with the ludicrous and pushes to the verge of the fearful. “The Devil and Tom Walker,” sparing

48 In a lecture for a course on the novel at Harvard in 1951, Thornton Wilder attributed what he believed was a false style in the early pages of Moby-Dick to Melville’s efforts to emulate the Knickerbocker school.
the reader an obvious moral, is able, in its somewhat harum-scarum, folkatalish way, to bring certain aspects of Puritanism into dramatic focus by connecting Yankee shrewdness and Puritan respectability. Irving starts with the comic Yankee stereotype, like the lean, litigious New England lawyers of Knickerbocker, but develops, in advance of Hawthorne, an imagery of darkness, rottenness, and emptiness to contrast with the seemingly shining solidity of proper and pious professions; he sees the traditional encounter with the devil in forest and swamp as a function of attitudes visible in pulpit and counting house. For Irving gothic props ultimately help make a legend out of something ordinary in American experience. The commonplace becomes slightly fantastic or grotesque. It is in this transformation that he relies most on those elements in fiction which he told Brevoort he most valued: the "play of thought, sentiment, and language; the weaving in of characters, . . . the half-concealed vein of humour."

The comic clash of mundane and erudite connotations in Irving's prose style often enhances this sense of oddity in the narrative. Tom Walker's horse, for instance,

whose ribs were as articulate as the bars of a gridiron, stalked about a field, where a thin carpet of moss, scarcely covering the ragged beds of puddingstone, tantalized and balked his hunger; and sometimes he would lean his head over the fence, look piteously at the passer-by, and seem to petition deliverance from this land of famine. (p. 392)

Playing off the commonplace against the elegant and the refined sustains the seriocomic tone which is so essential to the voice of Crayon, the nervous gentleman, or to the later Knickerbocker.

In both "Tom Walker" and "Philip of Pokanoket" Irving begins to depict the Puritan's sense of being in close contact with the "invisible world." In part at least he derived his knowledge of the Puritan conception of the supernatural directly from reading the Mathers. In "Philip of Pokanoket" (SB, p. 364) he refers specifically to Increase Mather. Osborne's "Irving's Development" suggests that Cotton Mather's Magnalia is the source of some of the ideas and images in "Tom Walker." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1947, p. 369. The impression that Cotton Mather made on Irving can be further gauged in Ichabod Crane's superstitiousness (tied directly to his reading of Mather—see SB, pp. 423-24) and in the treatment of the witchcraft delusion in Knickerbocker. K, pp. 281-84.
bocker, who is again the narrator in Part IV of the Tales. Much of the time the voice is at least mildly ironic, perhaps almost unconsciously whimsical, as when it brings studied witticism and wordplay, alliteration, balanced antithesis, hyperbole, literary allusion, and extensive metaphor to bear on the homely subject of Tom Walker’s hypocrisy:

Having secured the good things of this world, he began to feel anxious about those of the next. He thought with regret on the bargain he had made with his black friend, and set his wits to work to cheat him out of the conditions. He became, therefore, all of a sudden, a violent church-goer. He prayed loudly and strenuously, as if heaven were to be taken by force of lungs. Indeed, one might always tell when he had sinned most during the week, by the clamor of his Sunday devotion. The quiet Christians who had been modestly and steadfastly travelling Zionward, were struck with self-reproach at seeing themselves so suddenly outstripped in their career by this new-made convert. Tom was as rigid in religious as in money matters; he was a stern supervisor and censurer of his neighbors, and seemed to think every sin entered up to their account became a credit on his own side of the page. (p. 404)

But in the end Tom Walker’s pretensions are undercut by the bluntness of the language used to describe the sudden deterioration of his estate. “On searching his coffers all his bonds and mortgages were found reduced to cinders.” Here was an image of which both Irving and Hawthorne were fond: “In place of gold and silver his iron chest was filled with chips and shavings. . . .” And Irving finishes Tom off with, “two skeletons lay in his stable instead of his half-starved horses, and the very next day his great house took fire and was burnt to the ground” (pp. 406–7).

Irving’s American legend develops out of a few basic themes or images. Around Tom Walker’s “forlorn-looking house” stand several “straggling savin-trees, emblems of sterility” (p. 392). What sends him to the devil is a wife like the one from whom Rip Van Winkle was unconsciously running. Yet at the same

---

60 I have made a more extensive comment on Irving’s style in my introduction to the Irving section in Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller (New York, 1962), I, 189–90. See also Stanley T. Williams’ Introduction to Irving’s Selected Prose (New York, 1950), pp. xi–xv.
time Tom is just the husband calculated to drive a wife into the forest with the household valuables as an offering to the Black Man. Who is to say which comes first in the Yankee (American), acquisitiveness or emotional or sexual barrenness? The important thing is that, as so often in Irving, the qualities are implicit in each other. It is the stark imagery of the lovelessness of Tom Walker’s marriage that momentarily gives a routine tale of New England miserliness a nearly numbing intensity like that which, for all the underplaying, occasionally takes the reader unawares in “Rip Van Winkle.” Dame Walker rushing off with her “silver teapot and spoons” in her apron (pp. 398–99) is a woman either completely desexed by miserliness and hatred or so starved for love that she is willing to set up housekeeping in the forest with the devil. And perhaps in her these are the same thing. In any event, the encounter with the devil consumes her much more quickly than it does her husband, who subsequently discovers her apron in the forest, “hanging in the branches of [a cypress] tree, with a great vulture perched hard by.” Symbolism can hardly convey more than we sense at this point.

Tom Walker, looking at the actual remains of his wife, sees also in the vulture the symbol of the thing that gnawed on her in her life, the thing that in the form of the Black Man destroyed her and that still presumably preys upon her in hell. But he is also contemplating the emblem of what will happen to himself: “As he scrambled up the tree, the vulture spread its wide wings, and sailed off screaming into the deep shadows of the forest. Tom seized the checked apron, but woeful sight! found nothing but a heart and liver tied up in it” (pp. 399–400).

Yet Irving’s America, when it is de-puritanized, is still, if not the land of milk and honey, at least the land of the fat cabbages and pumpkins renowned in native humor and folklore. In “Wolfert Webber” moneygrubbing temporarily transforms a rotund Dutchman into a lean Yankee, but cabbages and not savin trees are the dominant image of this story. Initially, as the city expands and encroaches upon the suburbs, Wolfert’s small farm is “hemmed in by streets and houses,” intercepting “air and sunshine.” City riffraff molest his property. “The
expenses of living doubled and trebled; but he could not
double and treble the magnitude of his cabbages; and the
number of competitors prevented the increase of price; . . .
while every one around him grew richer, Wolfert grew poorer
. . .” (pp. 412–13). But if he becomes before long a dreary
autumnal figure, his daughter belongs to spring and summer.
She “ripened and ripened, and rounded and rounded.” At
seventeen we find her “ready to burst out of her bodice,
like a half blown rose-bud” (p. 414). And it is the practical
daring of his daughter’s suitor which pulls Wolfert out of his
middle-aged slump. The love that redeems greed here is a
very mundane affair, not idealized or pedestaled but made
deliberately profane, if not indeed sacrilegious. Locating a
“soft valley of happiness” between her breasts, like a landmark
toward which pilgrims progress, Irving decorates the “entrance”
with a “little cross,” suspended from a “chain of yellow virgin
gold” as though to “sanctify the place” (p. 414). As one might
expect, Amy becomes explicitly an antisentimental heroine.
Wolfert, in his anxiety about his finances, forbids the house to
Dirk Waldron, her suitor, who, though a “lively, stirring lad,”
has “neither money nor land.” On the surface Amy proves
a pattern of filial piety and obedience. She never pouted and sulked;
she never flew in the face of parental authority; she never flew into
a passion, nor fell into hysteries, as many romantic novel-read
young ladies would do. Not she, indeed! She was none such
heroical rebellious trumpery, I’ll warrant ye. On the contrary, she
acquiesced like an obedient daughter, shut the street door in her
lover’s face, and if ever she did grant him an interview, it was either
out of the kitchen window, or over the garden fence. (pp. 416–17)

Here, for better or worse, was the spirit that was to conquer
the continent. And when Wolfert stops looking for Eldorado
in his cabbage patch, abandons the hope of pirate loot in
favor of a more modest form of profiteering “over the garden
fence” in real estate, he steps out of the grave he has been
digging for himself and returns to life again.