



# Irving, the Laughsmith: Comic Devices in "The Spectre Bridegroom", "Rip Van Winkle", and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", from The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent (1820)

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# *Irving, the Laughsmith:*

## *Comic Devices in "The Spectre Bridegroom", "Rip Van Winkle", and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", from The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent (1820)*

Comedy is a recurring feature in Washington Irving's writings, but maybe never so perceptibly as in pseudo-supernatural stories. "The Spectre Bridegroom" is set in Germany at a vaguely remote period, and it might have been a Gothic tale like the Lindenberg episode in M.G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). But "The Spectre Bridegroom" subverts all the usual patterns, themes and stereotypes of the genre. In the first place, it turns ghosts and apparitions into commonplace phenomena, stripped of their mystery and power to frighten. As Gothic occurrences are reduced to the banal level of everyday facts in "The Spectre Bridegroom," the story can be read as a burlesque version of the Gothic romance: "It is well known that the forests of Germany have always been as much infested by robbers as its castles by spectres".<sup>1</sup> The narrator also refers to the "supernatural beings, with which the good people of Germany have been so grievously harassed since time immemorial" (889), in the compassionate and fatalistic tone a medieval chronicler would have adopted to evoke unavoidable plagues, such as epidemics or the devastations of wars. Ironically, it is precisely because the Gothic supernatural is posited as undisputed (and indisputable) that its actuality is so humorously questioned and debunked. The title itself is a red herring, as we soon come to realize, and the opening paragraph sets the tone with its cultivated lexical and spatio-temporal vagueness, and its early narratorial intervention:

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Irving. *History, Tales and Sketches*. New York: The Library of America, 1983, 884.

On the *summits of the heights* of Odenwald, a *wild and romantic* tract of upper Germany, that *lies not far from the confluence of the Main and the Rhine*, there stood, *many, many years since*, the Castle of the Baron Landshort. . . . its old watch tower may still be seen struggling, like the former possessor I have mentioned, to carry a high head, and look down upon the neighbouring country. (emphasis added, 879)

Onomastics contribute to the creation of a comic and parodic mood, as Odenwald or Landshort have undeniably Germanic sonorities, but there is also something so hackneyed and sham about them that the adjectives "wild" and "romantic" inevitably sound deeply ironic, too. The setting for a Gothic romance cannot but be *romantic* according to the late 18th century taste for the sublime, for medieval castles and mountain scenery, that the narrator repeatedly derides. Similarly, the protagonists of a Gothic novel should be noble, villainous though some of them might be, and the heroine should be a paragon of virtue and beauty. Irving's story features comic characters behaving to some extent more like wealthy bourgeois than like members of the aristocracy, another way of producing burlesque results.

The narrator uses the weapons of the burlesque to deflate his "noble" characters. He first deals with the Baron, using quite an unexpected zeugma at the end of the introductory paragraph just quoted. The fair (and only) daughter of the house is not spared either, as the description of her various accomplishments shows. Of course, there is burlesque irony in the exposure of the fair maiden's shortcomings. What makes particularly funny reading is the oblique allusion to the girl's utter lack of talent through the unwonted associations of terms such as "saints" (supposed to look beatifically blissful) and the phrase "so many souls in purgatory" (evocative of very ugly face expressions), as well as the pairing "abstruse dancing of the day" (abstruse should have been used for science, and esoteric knowledge):

By the time she was eighteen she could embroider to admiration, and had worked whole histories of the saints in tapestry, with such strength of expression in their countenances, that they looked like so many souls in purgatory. . . . She had even made considerable proficiency in writing, could sign her own name without missing a letter, and so legibly, that her aunts could read it without spectacles. She excelled in making elegant good for nothing

lady nick-nacks of all kinds; was versed in the most abstruse dancing of the day. (880)

The unusual yoking of words (such as "elegant," pointing to aristocratic refinement and "good for nothing," reminiscent of the middle-class utilitarian ethos) and the use of different types of discrepancy (both in style and in content) generate irony, as here in the case of the gap between the learning and high abilities of the young girl that the hyperbolic phrase "a miracle of accomplishments" had led us to expect and the actual achievements mentioned. The facetious narrator's address to the reader as "The erudite reader, well versed in good for nothing lore" (in the footnote to *A Traveller's Tale*, the subtitle of the story) rests on the same type of incompatibility. Likewise, the combination of the pompous and the ludicrous in the picture of the duenna-like aunts protecting their niece's virtue belongs to the same comic strategy. Moreover, the numerous physical and psychological connotations of "thorn" reveal a lot as to the "immaculate spinsters" appearances and personalities: "she was coyly blooming into fresh and lovely womanhood under the protection of those immaculate spinsters, like a rose bud blushing forth among guardian thorns" (881). This mock-heroic passage is all the more striking as it comes after the burlesque demoting of the two aunts who "having been great flirts and coquettes in their younger days, were admirably calculated to be vigilant guardians . . . for there is no duenna so rigidly prudent, and inexorably decorous, as a superannuated coquette" (880).

Paradox is another comic device in "The Spectre Bridegroom;" it is resorted to for the very witty presentation of the Baron's household of "spongers":

But, however scantily the Baron Von Landshort might be provided with children, his household was by no means a small one, for providence had enriched him with abundance of poor relations. They, one and all, possessed the affectionate disposition common to humble relatives: were wonderfully attached to the Baron, and took every possible occasion to come in swarms and enliven the castle. (881)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Rip Van Winkle" presents another paradox, concerning the eponymous character who "was ready to attend to any body's business but his own" (771).

This story by Irving sometimes makes it difficult for the reader to draw the line between the burlesque and the mock-heroic, unless we agree with the idea that the early part of the story being undeniably burlesque, the proportionately lower status of the characters after the first two pages enables the narrator to tap the mock-heroic vein. Once the Baron has been introduced to the reader as "a dry branch of the great family of Katzenellenbogen" (879) (with an amusing warping of the image of the genealogical tree, consisting of a shift from the abstract to the literal level), and a short, self-conceited, bellicose man, he can be submitted to mock-heroic treatment (with the use of antithesis and hyperbole):

The Baron, though a *small man*, had a *large soul*, and it *swelled* with satisfaction at the consciousness of being the *greatest* man in the *little* world about him. He loved to tell long stories . . . He was much given to the marvellous. . . . The faith of his guests even exceeded his own: they listened to every tale of wonder with open eyes and mouth, and never failed to be astonished, even though repeated for the hundredth time. Thus lived the Baron Von Landshort, the *oracle of his table*, the *absolute monarch of his little territory*, and happy above all things, in the persuasion that he was *the wisest man of the age*. (emphasis added, 881)

Irving is adept at the writing of maxim-like, or aphoristic sentences relying on unexpected, and unforeseen reversals. Irony is deftly used with a sense of pleasant surprise, and exhilarating novelty. The following sentence starts as apparently rather flattering but it is then diverted from its predictable direction and turns out to be overtly critical: "The Baron, it is true, like most great men, was too dignified to utter any joke but a dull one" (887). Nothing fierce, sarcastic, caustic, or bitter, except maybe when the narrator mentions how interesting the fawning poor relations find the new son-in-law: "he was so gallant, so generous, and so rich" (893). The final position of "so rich" should of course be stressed, as it is intentionally placed at the end of the sentence, and draws our attention. "Gallant" and "generous" definitely belong to the moral sphere as knightly virtues, whereas "rich" is unambiguously



financial, hence totally out of place and shocking. Indeed, it sounds like free (in)direct speech.

Irony is usually good-natured and mild and coexists with a very marked taste for tongue-in-cheek humour, and occasionally for farcical scenes or details, such as the allusion to the "huge pair of antlers [that] branched immediately over the head of the youthful bridegroom" (886), or the young man's alleged "engagement" with "the worms" that "expect" him, and his grotesque assertion that he is "a dead man" and his body "lies at Wurtzburg" (889). By the way, is not the fictitious place name a playful echo of the German word "wurst," meaning "sausage"? Of course, the Baron's dismay after the mysterious disappearance of his daughter, presumably abducted by the "spectre bridegroom," gives rise to hilariously ludicrous genealogical forecasting: "What a heartrending dilemma for a fond father, and a member of the great family of Katzenellenbogen! His only daughter had either been rapt away to the grave, or he was to have some wood demon for a son in law, and, perchance, a troop of goblin grand children"(891). The comic effect arises from the incongruous juxtaposition of realistic and fantastic elements, from the absurd evocation of marriage and parentage between living persons and ghosts. Here the grotesque (not taken in its etymological or architectural sense, but meaning "ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant," and denoting an unnatural hybridization) is subservient to comedy, and can also be found in "Rip Van Winkle," and above all in "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow."

The grotesque can lie in situations themselves, as in the skittle game played in a mountain amphitheatre by the silent and gloomy Dutch ghosts, in "Rip Van Winkle," or in the night attack of Ichabod Crane by the "Headless Horseman" (alias Brom Van Brunt, or "Brom Bones"), culminating with the hurling of the supposedly lost head, in "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow":

... and now Ichabod cast a look behind to see if his pursuer should vanish, according to rule, in a flash of fire and brimstone. Just then he saw the goblin rising in his stirrups, and in the very act of hurling his head at him. Ichabod endeavoured to dodge the horrible missile, but too late. It encountered his

cranium with a tremendous crash — he was tumbled headlong into the dust. (1085)

The grotesque also frequently springs from images and comparisons: similes and metaphors can easily bring into contact two totally unlikely elements. Humans can therefore be likened to animals, or the other way round; likewise, unexpected associations between objects and men can be effected. On the whole, what prevails is a sense of the incongruous, the ludicrous, but also of great inventiveness, of unprecedentedly felicitous combinations of words, and enjoyable stylistic innovations.

The old Baron, shortly before the visit of the bridegroom and during the hectic preparations for the wedding, appears "as idly restless and importunate as a blue bottle fly of a warm summer's day" (882). "Rip Van Winkle" provides very good illustrations of the point, with, first, the application of human characteristics to the Kaatskill Mountains called "a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family" (769), then with the brutal conclusion of a seemingly poetic passage by a materialistic and trite simile: "Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives far and near as perfect barometers" (769). The sense of laughable incongruity is even stronger when objective or mechanical properties are attributed to human beings, as with old Nicholas Vedder, "a patriarch of the village, and landlord of the inn, at the door of which he took his seat from morning till night, just moving sufficiently to avoid the sun and keep in the shade of a large tree; so that the neighbours could tell the hour by his movements as accurately as by a sun dial" (773).

"The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow" offers even more variety, and even purple patches. The character of Ichabod Crane (who was possibly called so because of his oddly-shaped head, and because of what could be called dramatic irony considering his "cranium" is hit by the pumpkin head) possesses very rich grotesque potential, because of his unattractive appearance and his ever ravenous appetite.

Humour stems both from the shifting borderline between human / non human in the imagery used in the story (about Crane, about animals, and about food, the character's almost obsessive concern), and from exaggeration, sometimes going as far as caricature: "To see him striding along the profile of a hill on a windy day, with his clothes bagging and fluttering about him, one might have mistaken him for the genius of famine descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield" (1061); or "he was a huge feeder, and though lank, had the dilating powers of an Anaconda" (1062); or again, still resting on food imagery: "His appetite for the marvellous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary" (1063), or lastly the ludicrous figure Crane cuts on the "broken down plough horse" lent to him by Hans Van Ripper: "He rode with short stirrups . . . his sharp elbows stuck out like grasshoppers' . . . the motion of his arms was not unlike the flapping of a pair of wings" (1073).

Conversely, human attributes, attitudes, and modes are projected onto objects or animals; as a matter of fact, the little brook by the school house is said to "whimper" (1064), and the guinea fowl of the Van Tassel farm are described as "fretting about like ill tempered housewives, with their peevish discontented cry" (1066).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Crane, back from the farm at night can hear "the guttural twang of a bull frog, from a neighbouring marsh, as if sleeping uncomfortably, and turning suddenly in his bed" (1081). Anthropomorphism reaches a delightfully amusing climax with the gastronomic hallucinations of Crane, walking round the wealthy Dutch farm:

The pedagogue's mouth watered, as he looked upon this sumptuous promise of luxurious winter fare. In his devouring mind's eye, he pictured to himself every roasting pig running about with a pudding in his belly, and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cosily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce . . . not a turkey, but he beheld daintily trussed up,

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<sup>3</sup> Irving has a special talent with descriptions of birds, it seems; his choice of unusual (often anthropomorphic) imagery permits a very refreshing and amusing approach to nature: "and the blue jay, that noisy coxcomb, in his gay light blue coat and white underclothes, screaming and chattering, nodding, and bobbing, and bowing, and pretending to be on good terms with every songster of the grove" (1074).



with a gizzard under its wing, and, peradventure, a necklace of savoury sausages. (1067)

The presence of all these comic devices is meant to place (mock) supernatural events at arm's length, and even to "contaminate" them. Indeed, comedy and humour are so prevalent, and even ubiquitous (lying both in style and situations) that they even impinge upon the "ghost world." The narrator pulls the reader's leg while at the same time telling us that he is doing so, thereby implicitly warning us we should take all his yarn with a pinch of salt, as when, with feigned naiveté, he pretends to wonder at the peculiar quality of the air in the Sleepy Hollow, and to believe in its fantasy-producing properties: "It is remarkable, that the visionary propensity I have mentioned . . . is unconsciously imbibed by every one who resides there for a time . . . they are sure, in a little time, to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative--to dream dreams, and see apparitions" (1060).

In both of these tall tales (Rip Van Winkle is supposed to have slept for twenty years, for instance!), the context is as reassuringly domestic as in Dutch and Flemish paintings, so much so that another comic reversal is afforded at the end of "Rip Van Winkle." In Gothic and fantastic stories, the daylight everyday world is more or less supposed to be a haven protecting the characters from the threat and inroads of the supernatural. On the contrary, at the end of his tale, in its punch lines, Irving presents fantasy as a last resort, a desperate remedy, or a refuge for bullied husbands: "it is a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighbourhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon" (784).

The narrator also treats himself to another reversal when he introduces his legends (like many Gothic writers who pretended they were just editing ancient documents, or telling stories from the distant Middle Ages) as if he wanted to authenticate them, indicating their origin or the name of their author, thus quoting what should be authoritative sources, but turn out to be unmistakable hoaxes. Dietrich Knickerbocker, the alleged author of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow," is another comic instrument whose completely farcical name straightaway deprives the whole story of the little verisimilitude it might

have had at the outset. Subversion goes very far as Mr Knickerbocker is supposed to be a historian of the Dutch settlers "and the manners of the descendants" (767), as the vaguely Dutch sonorities make the name even more absurdly improbable, and that, to crown it all, a "Postscript" is appended to the narrative as "travelling notes from a memorandum book of Mr Knickerbocker" (784). Now, this type of addition, be it extracts from newspapers, journals, diaries, or personal papers is theoretically intended to increase the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" by giving the narrative more credibility. With Irving, this is a further step towards the undermining of literary conventions. The source of "The Spectre Bridegroom" is not any better, and even more shadowy, as it appears in a footnote, and in smaller type: "The erudite reader . . . will perceive that the above tale must have been suggested to the old Swiss by a little French anecdote, of a circumstance said to have taken place at Paris" (879).

The purposeful incoherence and lack of logical connections between people, places, and events create a form of nonsensical humour also evidenced in the list of Ichabod Crane's belongings after his final disappearance in "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow": "They consisted of two shirts and a half . . . a pair or two of worsted stockings, . . . a rusty razor; a book of psalm tunes, full of dog's ears; and a broken pitch pipe" (1085). The list is both ridiculously vague and unbelievably precise, and the odd combination is another source of comedy. So is the discrepancy between the singular and implicit plural meaning in: "The musician was *an old grey-headed negro, who had been the itinerant orchestra* of the neighbourhood for more than half a century" (emphasis added; 1077).

The description of the morning after the "goblin's" persecution of Crane abounds in unlikely associations: Hans Van Ripper's "uneasiness about the fate of poor Ichabod, and his saddle" (1085) (could this be read as a kind of zeugma, or only as a crazy yoking of seemingly incompatible notions?), and the result of the investigation to find the trace of the schoolmaster, resulting in the villagers' almost surrealistic discovery of "the hat of the unfortunate Ichabod, and close beside it a shattered pumpkin" (1085).

The narrator's praise of Rip Van Winkle as a kind-hearted (if slightly foolish) character surprisingly ends on: "and not a dog would bark at him throughout the neighbourhood" (770), which finally proves a very useful (and original) landmark to measure change, as after his twenty-year "torpor," he does not "have a blessed time with Dame Van Winkle" (777), but is barked at by the unknown village dogs, "not one of which he recognized for an old acquaintance" (778), with a subversion of the habitual use of "acquaintance," rather reserved for human beings.

The deliberate mixing of utterly heterogeneous lexical networks (chivalry/food), and types of diction (the mock-heroic and pompous/the trite and mercenary), and the reversal of values (Medieval knights' quests and fights reduced to mere child's play compared to contemporary courtship) should also be mentioned as another of these devices that turn the "normal" upside down:

From the moment Ichabod laid his eyes upon these regions of delight . . . his only study was how to gain the affections of the peerless daughter of Van Tassel. In this enterprise, however, he had more real difficulty than fell to the lot of a knight errant of yore, who seldom had anything but giants, enchanters, fiery dragons, and such like easily conquered adversaries, to contend with; and had to make his way merely through gates of iron and brass . . . all of which he achieved as easily as a man would carve his way to the centre of a Christmas pie . . . Ichabod, on the contrary, had to win his way to the heart of a country coquette, beset with a labyrinth of whims and caprices . . . and he had to encounter a host of fearful adversaries of real flesh and blood, the numerous rustic admirers, who beset every portal to her heart . (1068-69)

The narrator of Irving's tale is obviously not only a word-lover but a gifted ironist. Hyperbole and exaggeration (often combined with pompous, old-fashioned words) are employed the better to deride the characters, first "inflated," and looking larger (as under an entomologist's magnifying-glass), then shrinking into mere ridicule. Ichabod is called "our man of letters" (1063), and the use of the possessive stresses out that the narrator is taking pains to show he is sharing the joke with the reader. The Van Tassel farm is called "the castle," and presented as "thronged with the pride and flower of the adjacent country" (1075). The village itself undergoes a similar "attack" in the opening paragraph of "The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow":

In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the Eastern shore of the Hudson . . . there lies a small market town or rural port, which by some is called Greensburgh, but which is more generally and properly known by the name of Tarry Town. This name was given, we are told, in former days, by the good housewives of the adjacent country, from the inveterate propensity of their husbands to linger about the village tavern on market days. (1058)

Narratorial intrusions and omniscience can be irritating in "serious" works (as we do not always like to be lectured, taken by the hand, and bullied along), not so in Irving's, in which the adequate reading of dramatic irony is felt as a gratifying privilege also shared by the reader, as the free, alert, laughter-addicted equal of the narrator, and whose interventions are not perceived as "bossy" but as likely to increase the comic appeal of the narrative: "I want breath and time to discuss this banquet as it deserves, and am too eager to get on with my story. Happily, Ichabod Crane was not in so great a hurry as his historian, but did ample justice to every dainty" (1076). Like Irving's (anti) hero, we should do justice to this delicious feast of words!

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