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## Desire and Death in Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker"

Alain Geoffroy

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# *Desire and Death*

## *in Washington Irving's*

### *"The Devil and Tom Walker"*

Published a few months before his "Rip Van Winkle," Washington Irving's tale "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1819) is certainly one of his most gloomy stories, despite its derisive tone,<sup>1</sup> both because of the sinister ambience prevailing throughout the narrative and the general lack of morality affecting all major protagonists. Set, as usual in Irving's tales, in a remote place, cut off from mainstream America,<sup>2</sup> the story narrates the very Faustian peregrinations of a poor soul who makes a fatal agreement with the devil and pays dearly the earthly happiness won thanks to his easy-going disloyalty.<sup>3</sup>

Living in utter poverty in "a forlorn looking house, that stood alone and had an air of starvation" (655), Tom Walker led a toiling and harassing life under the government of a "termagant [wife], fierce of temper, loud of tongue, and strong of arm" (656). He spent his day resigned and submissive, persecuted by a greedy wife, until he met in the surrounding swamps a disquieting character, with a face "neither black nor copper colour, but swarthy and dingy and begrimed with soot, as if he had been accustomed to toil among fires and forges" (657). Quickly acquainted with the evil-looking personage, he soon accepted his terms to escape both his sour wife and his mean existence. After the mysterious disappearance, in the swamps, of his spouse who became the victim of

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<sup>1</sup> This ironical tone is typical of Irving's supernatural tales: "Even when the topic is borrowed from German literature, they are marked by humor and broken with mischievous implied references for the reader" (Asselineau 23; my translation).

<sup>2</sup> "[Irving] reveals here his predilection for . . . 'nooks and corners and by-places'" (Montfort 441).

<sup>3</sup> Michèle Merzoug already stressed the Faustian side of Irving's tale together with the German and American sources of inspiration (Merzoug 224), contradicting the affirmation according to which it would boil down to a mere copy of a New England folk lore: "'The Devil and Tom Walker' is a New England tale which Irving merely retells with very little addition" (Rodes).

her own greediness, he soon became a prosperous usurer in Boston, "gradually squeez[ing] his customers closer and closer; and sen[ding] them at length, dry as a sponge from his door" (664). However, the time eventually came when he had to pay for his debt as the devil had him ride pillion and vanished with him, body and soul.

Beyond the eerie atmosphere pervading Irving's tale, the reader is struck by the recurrent mysterious disappearances of the major characters who seem to be sucked down in turn into a series of bottomless whirlpools, whose presence triggers off the decisive turning points of the narrative. Indeed, the general setting of the story provides an unstable environment quite suitable for such strange circumstances. The story is relevantly staged "just at the time when earthquakes were prevalent in New England" (655) and all the places described are characterized by negative dramatic features: for instance, the house of the greedy couple is ringed by

a few straggling savin trees, emblems of sterility. . . . [No] smoke ever curled from its chimney; no traveller stopped at its door. A miserable horse, 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 pudding stone, 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. (655-56)

The surrounding woods do not contrast with the overall feeling of eeriness which grabs the occasional traveler who ventures in those remote places:

The swamp was thickly grown with great gloomy pines and hemlocks, some of them ninety feet high; which made it dark at noonday, and a retreat for all the owls of the neighbourhood. It was full of pits and quagmires, partly covered with weeds and mosses; where the green surface often betrayed the traveller into a gulf of black smothering mud; there were also dark and stagnant pools, the abodes of the tadpole, the bull frog, and the water snake, where the trunks of pines and hemlocks lay half drowned, half rotting, looking like alligators, sleeping in the mire. (656)

The neighboring woods are not only gloomy and disquieting, but they seem to conceal surreptitious traps ready to suck down those who

are not watchful enough to avoid them. The vocabulary used by Irving insists on the indistinctness of the place: words like "morass," "swamp," "pits," "quagmires," "smothering mud," "stagnant pools," "mire," and "sloughs," sketch out a subversive environment in which limits are systematically blurred as if nature itself was threatened with some imminent annihilation. Even the old Indian fort is reduced to "a few embankments gradually sinking to the level of the surrounding earth" (657). However, the infringement of usual boundaries does not only concern landscapes but it also encompasses the limits of decent social behavior. The treasure buried years before by Kidd the pirate "has been ill gotten" (655) and the "tall trees marked with the name of some great man of the colony," call to mind the name of a Mr "Crowninshield . . . who made a vulgar display of wealth, which it was whispered he had acquired by buccaneering" (658). As to Tom's termagant wife, she embodies dishonesty, bad-temper and even unbridled violence — "[Tom's] face sometimes showed signs that their conflicts were not confined to words" (656) — so that "the house and its inmates had altogether a bad name" (656). Her greediness, in particular, is far out of all proportion:

Whatever the woman could lay hands on she hid away: a hen could not cackle but she was on the alert to secure the new laid egg. Her husband was continually prying about to detect her secret hoards, and many and fierce were the conflicts that took place about what ought to have been common property. (655)

As to Tom himself, although he discards the devil's offer to make a quick fortune "in the black traffick" (662),<sup>4</sup> he becomes an unscrupulous usurer who eagerly squeezes his needy customers "in proportion to the[ir] distress" (664). No human being or place seems to escape the general ambience of transgression of moral standards or stability which characterizes the devilish world of evil.

The one feeling which is dramatically absent of the whole story is unquestionably love. Tom and his wife literally hate each other, and once rich, the former proves to be incapable of any sentiment of pity or

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<sup>4</sup> *i.e.* slave trade.

compassion.<sup>5</sup> The only passion which seemed to be praised by the protagonists of Irving's tale is greed and hatred, no doubt in relation with the couple's stingy life dominated by "famine" and "starvation." It even seems that Irving deliberately emphasized the frustrations of married life, as if bachelorhood was the only way to salvation:

No one ventured, however, to interfere between [Tom and his wife]; the lonely wayfarer shrank within himself at the horrid clamour and clapper clawing; eyed the den of discord askance, and hurried on his way, rejoicing, if a bachelor, in his celibacy. (656)

Indeed, Tom's crooked path to happiness led him to get rid of his termagant wife, although in a very indirect way:<sup>6</sup> by entrusting his secret to his spouse, he sent her to her death and "consoled himself for the loss of his property with the loss of his wife for he was a man of fortitude. He even felt something like gratitude towards the black woodsman, who he considered had done him a kindness" (662). Unquestionably, Irving's narrative illustrates the author's misogynic attitude<sup>7</sup> already patent in his "Rip Van Winkle" (1820), which is best expressed in his overestimation of women's destructive power as he asserts that "a female scold is generally considered a match for the devil" (661).

In such a setting, it is no wonder if the protagonists are not only threatened by pure annihilation but are sooner or later doomed to disappear. Kidd, the pirate, whose adventurous life inspired the opening of the narrative, "never returned to recover his wealth; being shortly after seized at Boston, sent out to England, and there hanged for a pirate" (655) Tom's wife lost herself in the swamps and it is said that "the tempter had decoyed her into a dismal quagmire on top of which her hat was found lying" (661). As for Tom, he was eventually carried away by the devil

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<sup>5</sup> "Dame Walker . . . 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" (Hedges 234).

<sup>6</sup> "Tom is just the husband[who] calculated to drive a wife into the forest with the household valuables as an offering to the Black Man" (Hedges 234).

<sup>7</sup> In April 1809 Matilda Hoffman, Irving's fiancée died; after a painful period of mourning, Irving eventually never married.

in the midst of a thunderstorm. The clerks stuck their pens behind their ears and stared after him from the windows. Away went Tom Walker, dashing down the streets; his white cap bobbing up and down; his morning gown fluttering in the wind, and his steed striking fire out of the pavement at every bound. When the clerks turned to look for the black man he had disappeared . . . [and he] never returned. (666)

The account of his disappearance calls to mind another doomed character who disappeared in similar circumstances. In the Bostonian William Austin's supernatural tale "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" (1824; 1826; 1827), Rugg is literally snapped up out of his time during a thunderstorm which he foolishly challenged:

"Let the storm increase," said Rugg, with a fearful oath, "I will see home to-night, in spite of the last tempest! or may I never see home!" At these words, he gave his whip to his high spirited horse, and disappeared in a moment. (27)

Not unlike his unfortunate counterpart, Tom also defies common sense, truth and supernatural powers by pitilessly dismissing one of his customers: "'The devil take me,' said he, 'if I have made a farthing!'" (665) In both cases, the oath is taken at face value by superior malevolent powers. The fate of Tom's house also parallels the fatal destiny of Rugg's estate which "had become powder-post, and been blown away" (47): the day following his disappearance, "his great house took fire and was burnt to the ground" (666), so that nothing remained of either Tom Walker or his possessions.

Irving's insistence on these successive disappearances invites further analysis of their structural part in the narrative. First of all, the story opens with that of a treasure and of its illegitimate owner. This is the pretext the author uses to introduce the main protagonist of his tale, without whom nothing would have happened, namely the devil in person:

The old stories add, moreover, that the devil presided at the hiding of the money, and took it under his guardianship; but this, it is well known, he always does with buried treasure, particularly when it has been ill gotten. (655)

However, Irving does not stage the Evil One himself, but satisfies himself by reporting "old stories" to which he grants enough credit to nourish his own narrative. Similarly, he resorts with insistence to

the same literary trick when he reports the most plausible end of Tom's wife in the swamps:

What was her real fate nobody knows, in consequence of so many pretending to know. It is one of those facts which have become confounded by a variety of historians. Some asserted that she lost her way among the tangled mazes of the swamp and sank into some pit or slough; others, more uncharitable, hinted that she had eloped with the household booty, and made off to some other province; while others assert that the tempter had decoyed her into a dismal quagmire on top of which her hat was found lying. In confirmation of this, it was said a great black man with an axe on his shoulder was seen late that very evening coming out of the swamp, carrying a bundle tied in a check apron, with an air of surly triumph. The most current and probable story, however, observes that Tom Walker grew so anxious about the fate of his wife and his property that he set out at length to seek them both at the Indian fort. During a long summer's afternoon he searched about the gloomy place, but no wife was to be seen . . . Such, according to the most authentic old story, was all that was to be found of Tom's wife (661; my italics).

Tom's knowledge of the surrounding woods rests also on similar stories "handed down from the time of the Indian wars" (657). As to his new life in Boston and his incomprehensible idiosyncrasies — probably the result of the "little crack brained [he grew] in his old days" (665) — , they are similarly evoked through rumors and gossiping: "This, however, is probably a mere old wives' fable. If he really did take such a precaution it was totally superfluous; at least so says the authentic old legend which closes his story in the following manner" (665; my italics). Even the denouement of the tale is based on such unreliable reports, one more time evoking Peter Rugg's mad wanderings around Boston:<sup>8</sup>

A countryman who lived on the border of the swamp, reported that in the height of the thunder gust he had heard a great clattering of hooves and a howling along the road, and running to the window caught sight of a figure, such as I have described, on a horse that galloped like mad across the fields, over the hills and down into the black hemlock swamp towards the old Indian fort; and that shortly after a thunderbolt falling in that direction seemed to set the whole forest in a blaze. (666)

In fact, not only are the most relevant turning points of the narrative centered on disappearances, but they are systematically evoked through other narratives in the form of rumors, gossip or legends so that

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<sup>8</sup> Rugg is ceaselessly followed by a thunderstorm which literally persecutes him.

the tale itself, like the sub-tales nourishing it, revolves around inexplicable facts which are so many breaches in the logic of the story. They remain untold and seem to be recurrently and obliquely evoked in the narrative as bottomless holes, pits or swamps, in other words hollow structures which both constitute the pivots of the story and generate other sub-stories — legends, pieces of gossiping.

According to the general structure of the tale, the original hole "under the oak trees, whence he dug Kidd's money is to be seen to this day" (666) and the story of Tom Walker which stemmed from it "has resolved itself into a proverb, and is the origin of a popular saying, prevalent throughout New England, that of "The Devil and Tom Walker." (667) All this is convincing evidence that these fictional holes which generate gaps in the narrative constitute the structural "germs"<sup>9</sup> of the story which literally revolves around them, generating a whirling narrative centered on a vacuum, the nature of which still remains to be specified, although it definitely seems to be alien to the series of fictional speeches it suggests: rumors, hearsay, legends, proverbs as well as Irving's tale itself.

Unquestionably, these structural pivots are linked to the most ineffable of all human experiences, that of death. Kidd never returned because he was hanged in Great Britain, Tom and his wife, like their famished jade, are almost starving to death. In the woods, Tom meets the devil in a clearing where "the savages held incantations . . . and made sacrifices to the evil spirit" (657). Moreover, the very place seems to have been the scene of a bloody massacre during the old Indian wars, which Tom discovered as he unearthed "a cloven skull with an Indian tomahawk buried deep in it, [which] was a dreary memento of the fierce struggle that had taken place in this last foothold of the Indian warriors" (657). "The tall trees marked with the name of some great man of the colony, and all more or less scored by the axe" (658) are so many ominous tokens of the imminent death of "great m[e]n of the colony" (658). The place where Tom's wife supposedly disappeared was haunted by "carrion crows hovering about a cypress tree" accompanied by "a great vulture perched hard by" (661). As to Tom's own disappearance, it is no doubt an under-

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<sup>9</sup> We borrow the term from Henry James's *Notebook*.



statement for his death, since from then on "the neighbouring swamp and old Indian fort are often haunted in stormy nights by a figure on horseback, in a morning gown and white cap, which is doubtless the troubled spirit of the usurer" (666-67).

However, a psychoanalytical study of the depiction of the famous treasure's hiding place and its surroundings casts some new light on the latent significance of that puzzling hole.

a deep inlet winding several miles into the interior of the country from Charles Bay, and terminating in a thickly wooded swamp, or morass. On one side of this inlet is a beautiful dark grove; on the opposite side the land rises abruptly from the water's edge, into a high ridge on which grow a few scattered oaks of great age and immense size. Under one of these gigantic trees, according to old stories, there was a great amount of treasure buried by Kidd the pirate. (655)

Following Freud's interpretation according to which landscapes in dreams represent parts of the human body,<sup>10</sup> the psychoanalyst is struck by the profusion of sexual symbols in Irving's description. The place is unquestionably a secret one, hidden in the depths of "a deep inlet winding several miles into the interior of the country." The intimacy of the place, added to the presence of a "wooded swamp" edged with a "beautiful dark grove," classically suggests a symbolic representation of the female sexual organs. The buried treasure which arouses considerable envy and greed would consequently represent sexual appetite, whereas the presence of "scattered oaks of great age and immense size" suggests a phallic representation of male desire. The absence of manifest hints at sexuality in the narrative would thus be counterbalanced by the unconscious symbols around which the whole story revolves.

If this interpretation is valid, the sexual meaning of earthquakes which were "prevalent in New England" (655) in those very Puritan days<sup>11</sup> would account for the excessive reaction of "so many tall sinners

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<sup>10</sup> "Landscapes in dreams . . . may clearly be recognized as descriptions of the genitals" (Freud 473).

<sup>11</sup> For further details on the Puritan representations in Irving's works see Merzoug "Puritanisme et spéculation" (Merzoug 441-52).

[who were consequently shaken] down upon their knees" (655). Living in a "land of famine"(656) marked by "sterility" (656), this hen-pecked husband dreams to get rid of his "termagant wife" (656) and to live a life of lust in which he would suffer no rival, starving all the "needy" (664) men around. In this megalomaniac position, it is no wonder if Tom "grew a little crack brained in his old days" (665) and became "all of a sudden, a violent church goer" (664). Surpassing in sin all his fellow citizens, 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 clamour 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. (664)

Now the general atmosphere of unlawfulness pervading the narrative seems perfectly justified and the hidden meaning of Tom's greed for money becomes clear: the story satisfies temporarily Tom's frustrations in married life, making Irving's tale a derisive version of Faust's fatal agreement with the devil.

The lurking presence of death throughout the narrative however deserves a more complex interpretation. The elimination of Kidd, the pirate<sup>12</sup> reveals no mystery: being the original owner of the treasure, his father role is transparent in an oedipian context, and he has to disappear to give up his place to Tom who coverts the most precious object that the body of Mother Earth harbors. The scheduled death of his competitors in wealth, all of them "great m[e]n of the colony" (658) and symbolized by tree-trunks "all more or less scored by the axe" (658), expresses his wish to do away with his too potent rivals and accounts for the castration symbol which fallen trees suggest. As to the devil himself, he proves to be a perverted image of the father who, instead of interdicting, becomes an unexpected ally of Tom and uses his power to satisfy the unfortunate husband's lustful wishes. However, 'the tempter" (661) eventually retains his father role by causing Tom's own disappearance and punishing him for his reprehensible behavior. Death thus becomes the inseparable

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<sup>12</sup> He is derisively called "Kidd" (kid), which appears as a denial of his rank in the symbolic family.

attribute of lust and is logically attached to every element which triggers it off in this subversive narrative which eventually boils down to a very moralistic fable.

Undoubtedly, "The Devil and Tom Walker" pertains to the supernatural genre,<sup>13</sup> then nascent in the United States, initiated by narratives such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799),<sup>14</sup> Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) or William Austin's "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" (1824; 1826; 1827) and flourishing with Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1835) and the puzzling stories of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849).<sup>15</sup> They share a structural pivot, characterized by its alienness to the narrative itself, which however generates the story which revolves around a textual hole according to a "vortextual" scheme.<sup>16</sup> The depths of the female body in Irving's tale foreshadows those of Poe's maelstrom<sup>17</sup> and echoes Peter Rugg's lost home and his denial of the American Revolution (Geoffroy 1996; Terramorsi 1994, 1996). Although it is neither typical of the genre<sup>18</sup> or of this literary period, this particular narrative structure announces modern and even post-modern literature and makes of Washington Irving in this tale not only a brilliant copyist but a most fecund — though probably unintentional — precursor.

*Alain Geoffroy* <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Merzoug is quite cautious about the supernatural nature of Irving's tale: "the Fantastic merely appears in a few particular episodes of Irving's tales; it cannot be considered as a genre." (Merzoug 226; my translation) She further argues that "[The Devil and Tom Walker] shifts from the supernatural to the allegory" (Merzoug 225; my translation).

<sup>14</sup> See Amfreville (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mysteries and Imagination*.

<sup>16</sup> The concept was first introduced in our study "Like peas in two inkwells': Text and Vortex in Faulkner's Sanctuary" (1995).

<sup>17</sup> "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841).

<sup>18</sup> See Sophie Menoux (1996) or our study "D'un manque essentiel à l'écriture, ou 'La vie privée' d'Henry James"; or else the ineffable notion of "the horror" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

<sup>19</sup> University of La Réunion, 15 rue René Cassin, 97715. Saint Denis (France).

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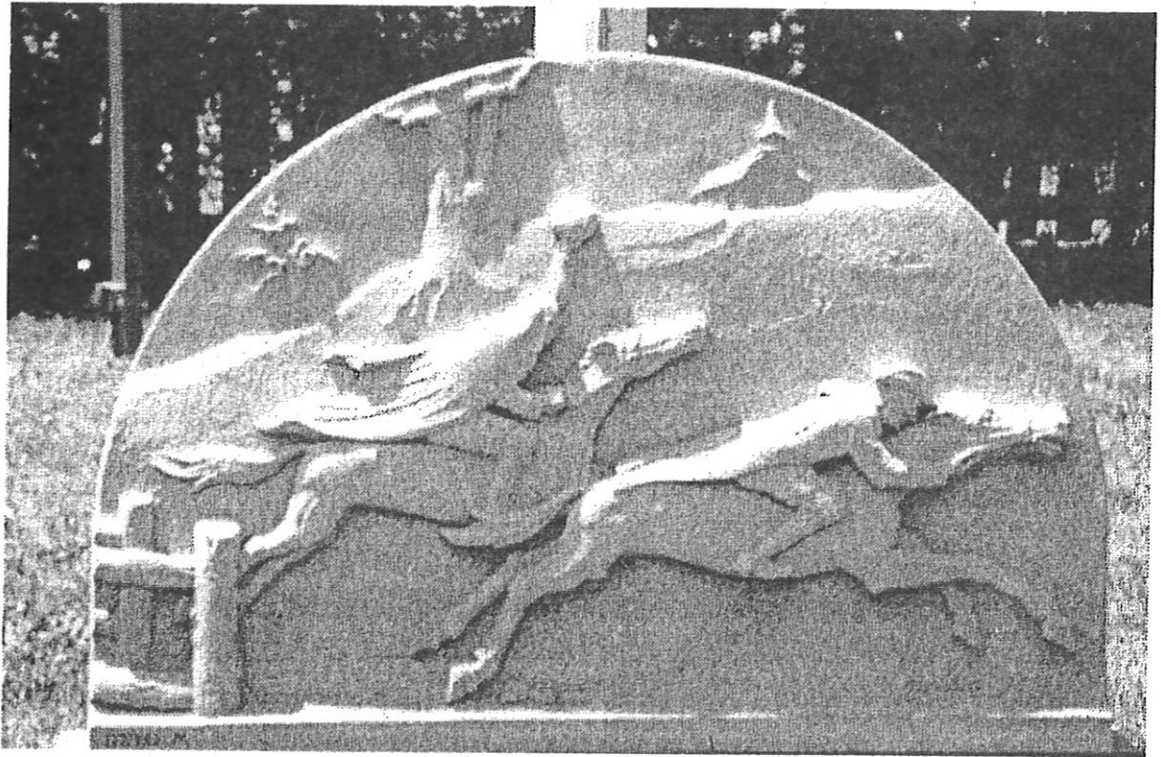
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Stele illustrating Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" in Tarrytown, NY  
(photograph: Bernard Terramorsi)