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Bernard Terramorsi

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"Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" or The Eclipsing Revolution: an Essay on the Supernatural

"He tore lightning from the heavens and
scepters from the hands of tyrants."

(A. R. J. Turgot, about Benjamin Franklin)

"God helps those who help themselves."

(*Poor Richard's Almanac*)

I- SOME ACCOUNT OF PETER RUGG, THE MISSING MAN

The short story — whose manuscript is now lost — was originally published in three sections, between 1824 and 1827 — ten years before Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* —, in a Bostonian Masonic periodical issued on Fridays, the *New England Magazine*, edited by its founder, Joseph T. Buckingham.

The narrative, signed with the fictitious name of Jonathan Dunwell, was eventually attributed to its real author, William Austin, when it was republished in *The Boston Book: Being Specimens of Metropolitan Literature* (1841). The *New England Galaxy* was composed of miscellaneous excerpts of articles reproduced from various American or British newspapers, of travelers' tales or pieces of literary criticism, of informal economic data and domestic hints... When fictions appeared in the magazine, they were never distinguished as such by any special layout or typography.

"Some account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Laik of Boston, New England in a letter to Mr. Herman Krauff," appeared in the

Galaxy of September 10, 1824, in the "Original Communications" columns, on pages 2 and 3. Many readers mistook the text for the account of a real event:

So convincing was Austin's depiction of Rugg's fictional exploits, that the tale mistaken for fact by many of its initial readers, several of whom wrote to the *New England Galaxy* soon after the first part of "Peter Rugg" appeared in 1824 and demanded to know more of Rugg's whereabouts. Perhaps more so than any other aspect of the tale, it is the seemingly factual basis of Rugg's misadventures that has allowed "Peter Rugg" to take its place alongside Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" as one of the earliest American supernatural legends (Zimbalatti 40).¹

Despite its immediate popular success and insistent requests in numerous letters to the Editor, the two other sections of "Peter Rugg" were only published in the *Galaxy* two years later, but the magazine proposed as early on as July 1825 — the very year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution — another narrative by the same author,² which indirectly suggests that Austin, an amateur writer, had not initially planned to develop his story any further.

Two other episodes, similarly signed with Dunwell's name, offered a sequel to the original narrative: "Some Further Account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Late of Boston, New-England" (*New England Galaxy*, 1 September 1826, on pages 2 and 3); and "Arrival of Mr. Peter Rugg in Boston" (*New England Galaxy*, 19 January 1827, on page 3). The short four-month delay separating the issuance of the second and the third episodes support the hypothesis according to which Austin deliberately chose to publish the sequel of his narrative in two

¹ Zimbalatti's seminal work is the first major study entirely dedicated to Austin's short stories. Well documented, it will no doubt mark a milestone in American literary criticism. However, the author's argument centered on the anti-Calvinist allegory seems somewhat restrictive, as the place occupied by the Revolution in the text or its belonging to the Supernatural genre are never dealt with.

² William Austin, "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster," *New England Galaxy*, 8 July 1825.

sections so as to arouse his readers' curiosity... and to increase the sales of the magazine.

At the bottom of page 3 of the *Galaxy* of January 19, 1827, on which appeared the last section of the short story, the following short notice could be read, lost among other various announcements:

PETER RUGG. A further account of this wonderful personage is given in our paper to-day, though we are not without suspicion that the intelligence is not from the *real* Mr. Jonathan Dunwell.³

Is this a manifestation of Austin's taste for canards, following a tradition inaugurated by Washington Irving⁴ and perpetuated by Edgar Allan Poe? ⁵ Is it not remarkable that, from the very birth of American literature, fictional pieces were deliberately mingled with newspapers articles, unabashedly parodying the unsubtle ropes of the press which distributed them? By doing so, the first American fictions played at passing themselves off as *false reports*. On the tracks of Washington Irving who hid behind two fictitious authors — Diedrich Knickerbocker and Geoffrey Crayon — to write stories which staged the hero's disappearance, Austin in turn hid behind an imaginary narrator from New York, reporting the disappearance of a protagonist, supposedly of Dutch origin... and missing, not unlike Rip Van Winkle. Moreover, Austin resorts to a short paratext — itself *lost* among various other notices (see *Galaxy*, 1827) — to question the very origin and genre of his narrative.⁶

³ This hitherto unpublished note was "lost" since the original publication in 1827. It appears for the first time since in this volume, together with the rest of the story.

⁴ It is a well-known fact that the writer promoted his first work, *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (1809), by means of a series of canards published in *The New York Evening Post* announcing the death of the fictitious author — historian Diedrich Knickerbocker —, and explaining that he had to publish his manuscript to pay his hotel bill...

⁵ See, in particular *The Balloon Hoax* (1844).

⁶ For an exhaustive study of "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" and its connections with American and European Supernatural traditions, see: Bernard Terramorsi, *Le mauvais rêve américain* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).

The success of his tale was such that, as early on as September 1827, an anonymous writer, under the pen name of Jonas Platt, published in the *Norfolk Republican* a three-section narrative, pretending that Peter Rugg was no hoax and that he had actually met him in person... Later on, Austin's piece was republished in some thirty anthologies of short stories, as well as in several various volumes.

The three sections were published together for the first time in the third volume of the *Boston Book* (1841). The editors respected most of the original text, but in 1882, the story appeared for the first time in one special volume — *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man*⁷ — though the editor, Franklin P. Rice, revised it largely to the point of distorting the narrative.

In 1890, the writer's son, James Walker Austin, published the complete works of his father, together with a short biography, in a book entitled *Literary Papers of William Austin*. All further editions reproduced James Walker Austin's modernized version, unabashedly plagiarizing his biographical notice.

Throughout the century, the various editors of Austin's short story took ample liberties with the original text. Under the pretext of modernizing the syntax, style or general layout, they altered the story deeply. In the opening and closing sections of the 1826 version, the narrator ironically addresses the editor of the *Galaxy*:

To the Editor of the *Galaxy*,

Sir, — Perhaps you may recollect that in the summer of 1824, I communicated a few particulars respecting a man called Peter Rugg. I intimated to you that if I ever heard any thing more of the man, I would inform you. A short time after, I noticed in the *Galaxy*, a very inconsiderate complaint of yours, "that nothing more was heard of Peter Rugg;" as if it was my power to follow Mr. Rugg and relate his adventures. I have now the pleasure to inform you that I have not only, since that time, seen Mr. Rugg, but have sitten by the side of him, and conversed with him in his own chair (33, *incipit*).

⁷ William Austin, *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man* (Worcester: F. P. Rice, 1882). Re-ed. Upper Saddle River (New Jersey: Greg Press, 1970).

.....
If I ever see Peter Rugg again, Mr. Editor, you may possibly hear more
from
Your obedient servant,
JONATHAN DUNWELL.
New York. Aug. 26. 1826 (45, excipit).

These lines were deliberately discarded by later editors who balked at the epistolary style and above all at the explicit references to the *Galaxy*... For lack of working on the original text, the numerous further editors presented a truncated version of the narrative. Moreover, by keeping the titles of the first two episodes and by discarding that of the third one as well as all the closing lines, these editors gave substance to the false hypothesis according to which the story was published in only two sections.

The text presented in this work is a faithful copy of that which was published by Austin himself in the *Galaxy*. The modern English-speaking reader can thus, for the first time,⁸ read "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" in the only version really authorised by the writer.⁹

2- "Peter Rugg, The Missing Man:" *a melting plot*

William Austin deliberately mingles several legendary and literary sources to build up his fiction, which provides it with its exceptional symbolical substance and mythical reach. First, the plot is inspired by the genre of the damned traveler; as Roger Caillois, the first French editor of the story and a theoretician of the Supernatural genre, put it: "[Rugg] is a specter condemned to an everlasting, wild journey,"

⁸ The French versions of "Peter Rugg" were largely truncated in the first specialized anthologies. The first complete translation appears as "Peter Rugg, le disparu" in *Trois récits fantastiques américains*, ed. Bernard Terramorsi. New translation by Alain Geoffroy, coll. "Domaine Romantique" (Paris: José Corti, 1996).

⁹ In the United States, the unpublished doctoral thesis of Joseph A. Zimbalatti (1992) was the first attempt to unearth the complete text after the original published in the *New England Galaxy*.

adding soon: "William Austin's tale, *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man*, is the mediaeval story of the Wild Hunter and of the *Familia Herlethingi*, revisited in the nineteenth century" (trans. from Caillois 19).

The short story is in fact a "melting plot" of legends and traditions — the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman, the Nightmare — combined with more recent narratives — *Lenore*, by August Bürger (1770), *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by S. T. Coleridge (1798), *Melmoth, the Wanderer*, by Maturin (1820).

Peter Rugg leaves Boston in an open chair, accompanied by his daughter Jenny, to go to Concord. On their way back, after nightfall, they are caught in a thunderstorm, at Menotomy,¹⁰ near Boston. Rugg, declining his friend's proposal to spend the night at his place, not to put his little daughter's life in danger, thunderously replies, uttering a "fearful oath:" "Let the storm increase. . . I will see home to-night, in spite of the last tempest! or may I never see home!" (27). As though the heavenly powers had heard him, Rugg is bitterly taken at his word: he will never come back home again, and will be pursued ceaselessly by the thunderstorm. Punished by the heavens — literally "bewildered," to put it in Austin's words —, Rugg becomes "a wanderer," "a lost man," "a missing man," in his "old weather-beaten carriage [drawn by his] black horse." The damned wanderer keeps on repeating "I have lost my way," and mechanically asks "the way to Boston." Not unlike Bellerophon, Homer's melancholic hero, he is the "object of the gods' hatred, wandering lonely on the plains of Aleion, his heart consumed with grief, keeping clear of other men's tracks." (*Iliad*, VI, 200-03).

Nicknamed "the storm-breeder," Rugg becomes "a black speck," "a black cloud," which makes him a new Flying Dutchman, a messenger of the thunder. Being the terror of toll-gatherers to which he refuses to pay any charge — thus refusing to be redeemed —, Rugg is a new Tantalus, condemned to seeing his home move further and further

¹⁰ Menotomy, re-baptized Arlington as early as 1732, is today a district of Boston. When Rugg pronounced his fearful oath in 1770, the town had already changed its name: Austin seems to prefer the first toponym.

away precisely when he thinks he can eventually reach it. The generous gesture of the narrator, who accepts to pay his fares on the Hudson ferry, seems to put an end to the curse, but the wandering Dutchman, though apparently redeemed by a commercial traveler from New York, eventually reaches Boston North End to discover that his wife is dead and his deserted house in ruins.

Significantly, the word "toll" is used some thirty times in the original text, and the money lent by the narrator appears as the toll paid to an American Charon for Rugg's passage on the Hudson river. At last, the narrative closes on a public auction sale, which is a pretext for a grotesque hymn to speculation and capitalistic values. The theme of the infernal debt — treated with very restricted means in that Supernatural story — merges with the very American motif, much in fashion in 1827, of a galloping modernity, which was responsible for more fright in those days than the supernatural powers of yore.¹¹

Rugg and his chair disappear in 1770, the year of the Boston Massacre and of the beginnings of the open rebellion against British colonial authority. He will only come back among his fellow citizens in 1827, some forty years after the Revolution. As he is vainly running round and round, History progresses forward, and accelerates: but Rugg is no man of *progress*, he is, literally, a pre-historic man. Like Rip Van Winkle — who was already there *before* the Revolution and still there *after* — Rugg misses everything. He comes back — but why, and for whom? — to a brand new society, that of the United States, in which he is taken for a "nightmare" and which he takes in turn for a supernatural manifestation:

"In short," said the pedlar, "I wish never to see that man and horse again; they do not look to me as though they belonged to this world (22)."

.....

¹¹ For a critical study of money in "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" see, in this volume, Christine Dupuit, "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man: the Unacknowledged Account."

By this time we had passed into Broadway, and then Rugg, in truth, discovered a chaotic mind. "There is no such place as this in North America, this is all the effect of enchantment; this is a grand delusion, nothing real; here is seemingly a great city, magnificent houses, shops and goods, men and women innumerable, and as busy as in real life, all sprung up in one night from the wilderness. Or what is more probable, some tremendous convulsion of nature has thrown London or Amsterdam on the shores of New-England" (44).

This is pure irony from William Austin's part, who was a man of law and a politician, presenting here his very first work of fiction: the United States frightens the revenant of the colonial era, for its resemblance with old Europe makes it look — in the eyes of a Dutch immigrant, at least — like the place he left many years ago for a better world. Does that Revolution bring *him* back, so that he, a man of the past, mistakes America for old Europe? But, after all, it is not the American man of law of Charlestown who wrote this politically incorrect thing in 1824, but a commercial traveler from New York — Jonathan Dunwell — who reports the story of a lost man, missing since 1770, whose peregrinations seem of particular interest to a mysterious silent partner — Herman Krauff — who simply disappears from the other episodes...

As if to contradict the national historiography, in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution, which literally eclipsed Rugg and his time, Rugg's eventual return appears as that of the repressed part of American history which was then considered as *pre-historic*. Austin borrows the process from Irving's "Rip Van Winkle;" the myth of the unconditional new beginnings of History made possible by the birth of the United States, the dogma of progress, are publicly destabilized by the impossible return of a living witness of the past, who, by his sole existence, challenges the new certainties. Inexplicably, an American, back from colonial times, is more frightened than seduced when he discovers the United States. The Supernatural fiction, woven around traditional motifs such as spatiotemporal distortions and revenants, makes the staging of an impossible situation possible — the vindictive return of the Past —, challenging the American Dream itself. What makes this narrative supernatural is the "impossible" representation of

the very birth of the United States, perceived by Rugg as a diabolical delusion.

Rugg, "the seed storm," "the shooting star," is then a heavenly omen announcing, as early on as 1770, a universal cataclysm, namely the War of Independence. This Bostonian misses the contest, and the ship of History as well. The Revolution, always present in the background, is missed both by the protagonist *and* by the text itself. Following the tracks of "the black speck" and describing an indescribable man — foreshadowing Hawthorne's Wakefield and Melville's Bartleby —, this detective story, a meteorological report as well, misses, like its protagonist, the birth of the United States. In this short story which partakes of the birth of American literature, the founding historical event — the Revolution — is literally eclipsed by a "black cloud," by a man who slipped away in 1770, when things were about to turn out badly.¹² The supernatural wanderings of this melancholic hero, mistaken for an indescribable tempest, combines the meteorological turmoil — the thunderstorm — and the political one as well — the Revolution. So that the black cloud casts its shadow both *in* the text and *on* the text, which makes the birth of the United States, the providential foundation of the new nation, a blind spot of the literary representation. The myth of the new beginnings of History in the United States — the very foundation of the United States — becomes then an obstacle to its very representation, as it manifests itself in the form of a black whirling hole, eclipsing and engulfing half a century of History. The thunderstorm growling above the Catskills in "Rip Van Winkle" gained ground with Austin, so much so that it now menaces the whole text. The nature of the Revolution is less political than astronomical: it is not so much the overthrow of colonial values, but a historical rotation, comparable to that of a planet, which, by leaving the past in the shadow, brings the opposite side — that of modern times — into broad daylight.

Peter Rugg "will not deny his name", confides one of the witnesses to the narrator (23). He is *rugged*: indeed, his rough ways and

¹² As Austin's short story was being published, Hawthorne began his long voluntary seclusion in Salem until 1836, in order to study the history of eighteenth and early nineteenth century New England.

occasional misdemeanor gave him a reputation in Boston. His endless journey originated in an unfortunate remark, a strong word; the thunderous tone of the wandering Rugg is now well known by toll-gatherers: by doing so, he moves away from the Word, sinking deeper into the far-off *wilderness*, instead of going back to the happy medium of Middle Street and Old North Church. The Calvinist god 'who punishes him ignores redemption... and Peter Rugg is doomed simply to *peter* out: "the storm breeder," "the seed storm" is on the way to extinction and disappearance. The thundering hero is himself thunderstruck. By Jove! here is a human being, marked by Heaven, who, a long way from Middle Street, circulates endlessly in a *rugged* space time.

The first section — "Some account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Laik of Boston, New England, in a letter to Mr. Herman Krauff" (1824) — was supposedly Jonathan Dunwell's report, dated 28 August 1824 (New York). The narrator relates in it his meeting with Rugg in his old open chair, near Providence, in the course of summer 1820. Informed of the wonderful story of the man, who has been missing for half a century, but occasionally seen in various States of the Eastern coast, Dunwell leads a private inquiry and gathers testimonies on the circumstances of the disappearance of the "storm breeder." His account suggests that the protagonist is a new Flying Dutchman, cursed by God for having blasphemed one stormy night; it closes with a last testimony, that of the Charlestown bridge's toll-gatherer, and with a report according to which "Peter Rugg and his child, horse and carriage remain a mystery to this day" (29).

The second section, entitled "Some further account of Peter Rugg the Missing Man late of Boston, New England," is not addressed to the mysterious Herman Krauff, but to the editor of the *Galaxy*. Again, the contract — a commercial one? — that justifies the narrative is made explicit in the very opening lines.¹³ The action starts in Virginia, where the commercial traveler Dunwell, there for business, carries on with his inquiry. Nothing is said about Dunwell's business. His role is reduced to that of a private investigator, and that of a reporter — a significant

¹³ On the narrative as a contract, see C. Dupuit, *infra*.

mixing in one of the first heroes of American literature — even if later on, he abandons his role of observer by helping financially the poor traveler without any luggage... or dollars. The text then insists on new information, supposedly justifying the appearance of the second section in the *Galaxy*: indeed, the narrator announces, from the introduction, that he met Peter Rugg again, and that, consequently, the latter can no longer be taken for a mere rumor or superstition. Dated 26 August 1826 (New York), the text closes precisely on the arrival of Peter Rugg in New York, after Dunwell paid for his fares on the Hudson ferry.

While the first two sections fit in with the tradition of the damned traveler — the second one insisting particularly on the motif of the devilish black horse — the last section, entitled "Arrival of Mr. Peter Rugg in Boston," is inspired by the final episode of "Rip Van Winkle." Peter Rugg's thunderous return first sounds like an earthquake to the Bostonians: in a world that he sees as supernatural, he is himself taken for the Nightmare, the horse-like nocturnal genius of European legends. Peter Rugg eventually comes back home, but his memory is held up to ridicule, and his estate, in accordance with the rules of land speculation, is being sold by auction. In the genuine tradition of the *sketch*, very much in fashion then in New England, the text closes with a short moral which will later on inspire the ending of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield." But if the earthquake can be seen as a har-binger of the Apocalypse, the auction sale replaces the Last Judgment.

The legends of the damned traveler: the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman, and the Wild Army

Critics have often noticed the similarities linking Rugg to the figures of the Wandering Jew and that of the Flying Dutchman.¹⁴ With Austin however, their allegorical wanderings as well as their theological

¹⁴ For a detailed study of the myths of the Flying Dutchman and the Wandering Jew in "Peter Rugg," see Bernard Terramorsi, "Le Hollandais Volant au creux des terres," and "Le Juif Errant et les États-Unis en marche." *Le mauvais rêve américain*, 103 et passim.

and moral didacticism seem to have been slightly altered by their Americanization.

Like the Wandering Jew, Rugg seems indeed to be doomed to wander to the end of time and Doomsday. In the primitive Christian legends, the story of the Wandering Jew condenses the history of mankind since the Passion of Christ. In Austin's text, the critical opposition of times *before* and *after* Jesus Christ is secularized by its assimilation to the turn of the century and the Revolution: *before* and *after* the Boston Massacre, *before* and *after* the War of Independence... In this case, can the representation of the birth of the United States be considered as not only impossible but both sacred and damned? The curse consists in being held, as a "nightmare" or a "black cloud," outside the American Dream, excluded from the new Chosen Nation. As Elise Marienstras shows in relation to the mythical creation of the United States:

An intellectual process places America in a providential history . . . the identification of the American people with the Hebrews seems "natural" . . . the analogy with the Hebrews provides the Founders of the new nation with the means to find a mythical time again, that in which human history is still to be built. The American nation believes that this creation is its destiny. Its very birth means, for the Founders, a historical re-creation (Marienstras 77-78).

In most of the narratives inspired by the myth, the Wandering Jew appears as an omniscient old man. In Austin, the Wandering Dutch-American-Jew is an eternally young man of thirty, "dejected," and "in sorrow;" he is the Man of Sorrows of the Bible. Rugg committed a sin of language, he is a blasphemer. As Augustine put it:

Blasphemy lies in the assertion of false things about God . . . These things can be the attribution to God of what does not belong to Him, or the negation of what is His property, or else the usurpation of such or such exclusively divine prerogative . . . To blaspheme is nothing but pronouncing an offense or an insult (quoted by and trans. from Casagrande and Vecchio 174-75).

By the border of the Puritan enclosure — during an outing with his daughter —, Rugg robs God of what is his property; he blasphemes, challenging the divine order of the universe — the weather — and pretends he can rely only on himself, abjuring God's help. Rugg claims publicly that he will come back to Boston whenever *he* wants, forgetting that *He* must want it as well. Rugg will never be allowed to *go back* on what he said so lightly, for it was the duty of the Middle Street people to stand in the happy medium: blasphemy is a departure from the rule, whose retribution is the departure of the sinner; thus, Rugg is eternally condemned to *depart this world*. The one whose tongue once *slipped* is condemned to *slip* away from his home — in fact, nobody saw him disappear —, unable to *slip* back: when he eventually comes back to Middle Street, the noise made by his chair evokes that of an earthquake. For Rugg's cross is to be lost at crossroads. Cleaved to his blasphemous words, he is taken away to the devil's realm by a horse with cloven hoofs:

A devilish word par excellence, blasphemy turns the human mouth, created to say grace to God, into the mouth of Satan, which is an immediate sign that the speaker belongs to the Devil — that he is possessed by an uncontrollable diabolical power (Casagrande and Vecchio 177-79).

The damned traveler remains blind to his curse: by the end of the narrative, when Rugg wonders at the sight of the ruins of his burnt house, an anonymous voice from the crowd — *vox populi, vox dei* — lectures him, but as the story comes to an end, nobody will ever know about Rugg's repentance. In fact, his obstinacy in passing the toll-gates forcibly was already convincing evidence of his blindness as to the nature of his curse and the opportunities he had to be redeemed.

"Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" is still impregnated with the Anglo-Saxon gothic literary tradition, and, not unlike Lewis' or Maturin's gothic heroes, Rugg stays away from both light and truth. He is just a "black speck," a black spot of History, that even strokes of lightning cannot illuminate. In this Supernatural story, there is nothing like Cain's revolt nor any messianic reach. Rugg's return is only due to his resignation and affliction during his ordeal in the wilderness, and to

a financial help which appears like a *god-sent* unexpected present — a blessed gift from the financial paradise whose representative is Jonathan Dunwell, a businessman from New York.

When Rugg, the Bostonian, wants to pay his fares on the Hudson ferry with a coin of 1649, he realizes that his English currency will not be accepted by a pilot as inflexible as Charon himself. The New-Yorker Dunwell — who is no bad *dun*, no malevolent creditor — pays in dollars for his passage, thus allowing the lost soul to reach the opposite bank, that of New York, the prosperous paradise, whose boundless expansion is a marvel to Dunwell. Symbolically, the dollar appears — anachronistically — as the strong currency of a socio-political power that has enough *credit* to dissipate the *incredible* and appease supernatural powers...

“Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” is one of the first Romantic fictions based on the myth of the Wandering Jew. Goethe’s *Der Ewidge Jude* (1775); Schiller’s *Der Geisterseher* (1786); Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796); Potocki’s *Manuscript found in Zaragoza*; and Maturin’s *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820) were so many European sources of Austin’s narrative. One notices however that the early American literature contributed, due to the peculiar process of its birth, to an original rewriting of many literary myths. Austin’s short story was published four years after the gothic novel by the Irish writer Charles Robert Mathurin. By integrating many echoes of the legend of the Wandering Jew, Austin transplants into America both the Christian Supernatural and the Anglo-Saxon gothic, much in fashion at the turn of the century. As Marie-France Rouart put it:

The Wandering Jew is the eternal traveler, doomed to wander restlessly until the Last Judgment . . . Immortality on Earth appears paradoxically as the most terrible retribution . . . The theological argument of the exemplary voyage, submitted to a transcendental revelation, contradicts the versatility of a human history that the Wandering Jew reminds us ceaselessly of his incredible capacity for longevity . . . on

this account, he can be compared to the Wild Hunter of the German legends, or to the Flying Dutchman (trans. from Rouart 857; 60).¹⁵

Taking up again the legend of the Flying Dutchman and adapting it to the American *land*, Austin suggests that America — the new Garden of Eden of the Pilgrim Fathers — has now become a fluctuating, unfathomable space. It is an old Nordic legend, very popular among the peoples of the sea, which inspired Richard Wagner's opera, precisely entitled *The Flying Dutchman* (1843). A Dutch mariner, the only master on board after God, swore, as his ship was taken in a hurricane, to round the Cape of the Tempests, even if he should spend eternity to achieve his aim. Taken at his word by Heaven, he is condemned to wander on the seas from one pole to the other, and to serve as a harbinger of impending wrecks for the ships he meets. In the Romantic years, the legend was largely revised, by Heinrich Heine in particular, and from then on, the sacrifice of a loving woman who loses her life in the ocean will possibly put an end to the malediction.

Fitzball's play, *The Flying Dutchman of the Phantom Ship*, performed for the first time in London's Adolphi Theatre (4 December 1826) and played again several times in the United States between 1830 and 1850, is based on the confusion in the person of Captain Kidd — the Scottish pirate hung in London in 1701 — and the Flying Dutchman. In his "Rip Van Winkle," Irving already mingled this old legend with that of Henry Hudson's crew, lost out at sea.¹⁶ "In Peter Rugg the Missing Man," this reference is made still more explicit.

Like the legendary mariner, Rugg is cursed by God for his blaspheming during a tempest: "heaven sometimes sets a mark on a man, either for judgement or a trial. Under which Peter Rugg now labours, I cannot say; therefore I am rather inclined to pity than to judge." The nautical hints are paradoxically numerous in this narrative of inland

¹⁵ The oral legend was fixed for the first time by the English Benedictine Mathieu Pâris in the eighteenth century, in his *Historia Major*. The first chronicle of the Wandering Jew was published in England as early on as the seventeenth century.

¹⁶ Irving used the myth of the Flying Dutchman again in "The Storm-Ship."

wanderings: Rugg's chair, compared to a "Nantucket coach" which literally *flies* above the toll-gates, is a symbolic version of the ship of the Flying Dutchman lost on the ocean, and Boston is an inaccessible harbor which "shifts with the wind, and plays all around the compass." Moreover, New-Yorker Dunwell carefully notices that "it was plain that Rugg was of Dutch extract," which Peter confirms several times by referring to his mother country:

"The man is a wag, and would persuade me I am in Holland" (37).

.....
 "I may be dreaming, though the night seems rather long, but before now *I have sailed* in one night to Amsterdam, bought goods of Vandogger, and returned to Boston before morning." (45, emphasis added)

Here is a Dutchman who both flies and cruises on the ocean, repeatedly meeting water under diverse forms — the rain of the thunderstorm, the Hudson, the sea —, implicitly confiding that he is — or dreams he is — a sailor, which is corroborated by a minor protagonist who asserts that he was seen near Cape Horn. The text even evokes the undeniable kinship of the hero with adventurous navigators, when Rugg asks in Boston: "has John Foy come home from sea? he went a long voyage, he is my kinsman" (24).

When Rugg's devilish horse orders the other horses on the bank to draw the ferry at an incredible speed — as if he himself were the captain of the horse-drawn barge —, Austin produces a fantastic tableau of his own of the Nordic legend's flying vessel, thus contributing, after Irving, to make of the Hudson river a landlocked sea, which becomes the theater of an American Flying Dutchman's high deeds:

The Hudson was a sea of glass, smooth as oil, not a ripple. The horses, from a smart trot, soon pressed, into a gallop; water now ran over the gunnel; the ferry boat was soon buried in an ocean of foam and the noise of the spray was like the roaring of many waters. When we arrived at New-York, you might see the beautiful white wake of the ferry boat across the Hudson (43).

Good Heavens! This American settler, whose family emigrated from a country reclaimed on the ocean — Netherlands — to find a better land,

a new Eden, and who once left the "city upon a hill" built by the Puritans, sees, because of an unfortunate slip of his tongue, his hopes of a good life turn into a shipwreck off Boston... In fact, his wanderings give way to an eschatological crossing: Middle Street, now inaccessible, becomes, from this point of view, the symbol of Rugg's exclusion of the Puritan ideal of the "middle way" (Gilmore; 1977) Peter Rugg is the victim of the Calvinist sense of guilt and depravity: he is an updated version of the *New England's Errand into the Wilderness* of Puritan mysticism. Peter Rugg's "Waste howling wilderness" (*Deuteronomy*, XXXII, 10) is a fluctuating space.

Earthquake: the word appears repeatedly to evoke the dreadful swaying which accompanies each of Peter Rugg's passages. For what is an earthquake, if not the formidable swelling of the ground, like the sea's heavy surf under a squall, like some immeasurable fluctuation. We can easily imagine Rugg's personal rout, as he, a castaway on dry land, looks desperately for John Foy, one of his relatives, lost too, but on the seas... Rugg, an earthbound spirit, a lost soul and heart, a "storm-breeder," metonymically evokes the loss of his estate, of his home, of his roots, through his fantastic navigation in a diluvian space.

No doubt, former naval chaplain Austin had also Coleridge's *The Rime of an Ancient Mariner* (1798) in mind when he wrote his short story. Austin's vocabulary — "small speck," "mist", "nightmare," etc. — oddly recalls some verses of Coleridge's ballad, in which such themes as those of the curse, supernatural wanderings, or the Flying Dutchman, expiation, were already present:

At first it seemed a little speck, / And then it seemed a mist. . . . A speck, a mist, a shape... (III, 14-17); The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she / Who thicks man's blood with cold (III, 24); Then like a pawing horse let go, / She made a sudden bound... (V, 46); What makes that ship drive on so fast? (VI, 4).

In "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Irving borrowed many fictional elements from the German tradition of

the Wild Army or that of Odin's Hunt (*Odinsjagt, Woedende Jager*).¹⁷ William Austin follows the same mythical vein by integrating in his narrative many echoes of the Romantic German ballads dealing with devilish cavalcades. So, although Peter Rugg himself does not fail to call to the reader's mind a combination of the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman, the narrative evokes also, in its first and second sections, the mediaeval tradition of both Odin's Hunt and the Wild Army (*Feralis exercitus*): an army of specters (*exercitus mortuorum*) wanders endlessly in a tempest and carries on its fight into the beyond, during stormy nights, when the sinister anniversary of the battle comes round again. The careless passer-by who would not fear the thunderous ride, might be caught in an eternal cavalcade.

"Just after I had closed the gate for the night, down the turnpike, as far as my eye could reach, I beheld what at first appeared to me, *two armies engaged*. The report of the musketry, and the flashes of their firelocks were incessant and continuous. As this strange spectacle approached me with *the fury of a tornado*, the noise increased, and the appearance rolled on in one compact body over the surface of the ground. The most splendid *fireworks* rose out of the earth, and encircled this moving spectacle. . . . In the midst of this luminous configuration sat a man, distinctly to be seen, in a miserable looking chair drawn by a *black horse*. The turnpike gate, ought, by the laws of nature, and the laws of the state, to have made a wreck of the whole, and have dissolved the enchantment; but no, the horse without an effort passed over the gate, and drew the man and chair horizontally after him without touching the bar. This was what I call enchantment — what think you, sir?" (40, emphasis added).

"Some few years afterward, during *the late war*, I saw the same man approaching again. . . . Accordingly I stepped into the middle of the road, and stretched wide both my arms, and cried, 'stop, sir, on your peril!' At this, the man said, 'now, Lightfoot, confound the robber!' at the same time, he gave the whip liberally to the flank of his horse, who bounded off. . . . An *ammunition wagon* which had just passed on to Baltimore, had dropped an *eighteen pounder* in the road; this unlucky ball lay in the way of the horse's heels, and the beast, with the sagacity of a *demon*, clinched it with one of his heels and hurled it behind him. I feel dizzy in relating the fact, but so nearly did *the ball*

¹⁷ See Reichart.

pass my head that the wind thereof blew off my hat, and *the ball* bedded itself in that gatepost" (39, emphasis added).

Not only does Austin know the legend of the Wild Army, but he is also familiar with his fellow countryman Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow;" in that sense, the above-mentioned intertextual connections induce a generic effect which contributes to establishing a specific literary corpus and, concurrently, an American literature of national scope.

Austin's fiction borrows also from the legends of damned couples who are the unfortunate hostages of a devilish mount:

For a long time after, on every dark and stormy night, the wife of Peter Rugg would fancy she heard the crack of a whip, and the fleet tread of a horse, and the rattling of a carriage, passing her door. The neighbours, too, heard the same noises, and some said they knew it was Rugg's horse; the tread on the pavement was perfectly familiar to them. This occurred so repeatedly, that at length the neighbours watched with lanterns, and saw the real Peter Rugg, with his own horse and chair, and child sitting beside him, pass directly before his own door, his head turning toward his house, and himself making every effort to stop his horse, but in vain (27).

One thinks here of *Lenore*, the famous ballad by August Bürger: Lenore, failing to see her fiancé Wilhelm in the long procession of soldiers coming back from the war, curses the Heavens. When at nightfall Wilhelm eventually appears, he cannot dismount his black horse nor join his wife-to-be in the marital bed unless he covers a distance of "a hundred miles" before daybreak... Lenore then jumps behind her fiancé, but having reached the term of their fantastic ride, she realizes that the marital bed was nothing but the knight's tomb: "Woe betide the blasphemer!" retorted the choir [the ball of the dead], at the end of the ballad...

Austin borrows much from Bürger: the imprecation, the woman, faithful until her death, and the wild cavalcade. However, in Austin's American version, the blasphemous oath is uttered by a man, and the fiancée changed into the cursed man's daughter.¹⁸ "*His child*

¹⁸ See Edgar A. Poe, "Lenore," in *Poems* (1831).

looks older than himself, and he looks like time broke off from eternity, and anxious to gain a resting place" (22, emphasis added), reports someone. Jenny shares his guilty father's chair, but whereas he is eternally thirty, *she* surreptitiously grows old... The aging child is no eloquent speaker in this text. She only says a few words at the end of the last section, significantly asking "where [her] mother is?" (51). She seems then to be a little girl again. Jenny is no more than a shadow beside her missing father: she has literally given her youth to him, who can then stay an eternal young man of thirty. This is but another fatal blindness of the wandering Dutchman, who proves to be more Fantastic than Romantic for he will not be saved by the sacrifice of an innocent soul.

The thunderous horse and the nightmare

Austin makes liberal use of the horse figure, an ominous chthonian conductor of the dead souls, a mourning harbinger who conducts the "dejected," "anxious" protagonists to ruin... The word "horse" appears no less than a hundred and twenty-five times in the text. At the outset, Lightfoot is just a "large bay horse" (27) but he soon becomes "a large black horse" (20) of unnatural power with cloven hoofs, who throws cannon balls at toll-gatherers and leaves a fire trail behind him. This sulfurous beast, repeatedly associated with thunder strokes, shooting stars, eclipses, rainbows and earthquakes is even able to take off:

The little black cloud came on rolling over the turnpike, and doubled and trebled itself in all directions. The appearance of this cloud attracted the notice of all the passengers; for after it had spread itself to a great bulk, it suddenly became more limited in circumference, grew more compact, dark, and consolidated. And now the successive flashes of chain lightning caused the whole cloud to appear like a sort of irregular network, and displayed a thousand fantastic images. The driver bespoke my attention to a remarkable configuration in the cloud: He said every flash of lightning near its centre discovered to him distinctly the form of a man sitting in an open carriage drawn by a black horse. But in truth, I saw no such thing. The man's fancy was

doubtless at fault. It is a very common thing for the imagination to paint for the senses, both in the visible and invisible world (20).

.....
"The first time", said he, "that man ever passed this toll-gate was in the year 1806, at the moment of the great eclipse" (39, emphasis added). . . . You would have thought all the stars of heaven had met in merriment on the turnpike. In the midst of this luminous configuration sat a man, distinctly to be seen, in a miserable looking chair drawn by a black horse (40).

.....
Lightfoot interfered with nothing, his course was straight as a shooting star (45).

The horse and his fantastic master evoke the supernatural celestial phenomena recorded by the Puritan Cotton Mather in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, to which Austin pays his debt in a most cryptic manner:

One Woe that may be look'd for is, A frequent Repetition of Earth-quakes, and this perhaps by the energy of the Devil in the Earth. . . . Once more, why may not Storms be reckoned among those Woes, with which the Devil does disturb us? It is not improbable that Natural Storms on the World are often of the Devil's raising (Mather 45; 46).

The sporadic appearances of the damned traveler, a harbinger of storm, are thus to be attributed to the action of the Devil, whose representative on Earth is the black supernatural horse. The Supernatural story becomes then a meteorological report and it testifies to the impossibility of describing a celestial body, a storm, from within.

Traditionally, thunder is a manifestation of the divine wrath: Zeus, Jupiter, Thor, Indra... are "thunderous" gods. In European folklore, a thunderstorm can either be beneficial — fruitful rains, signs of divine distinction, Saint Elijah's chariot pursuing the Devil — or malefic — floods, signs of damnation. In Austin's tale, thunder announces God's wrath against the blasphemer, and Hell's fires as well. Though he is a "storm-breeder" and a "seed storm," Rugg is a sterile, ill-fated being, condemned by divine wrath: strokes of lightning do not bring him any interior illumination — he never sees his fault, and hence cannot *go back* over it — nor any historical vision — he does not see

the impending Revolution, nor the brewing political storm. The thunderstorm carries him away from the society of men who take him for a bad omen. The rain which follows him is not fruitful, it is only the sign of the disorganizing power of demons, of foul weather engendering itself *ad infinitum*.

During the years of political turmoil (1770-1825) — a watershed period in the history of the United States—, Peter Rugg appears like a heavenly curse, an unlucky star. Failing to represent the mythical birth of the new nation — unlike the humorous scene in which a staggering Rip Van Winkle discovers the spangled banner —, Austin's narrative tells how an unlucky star was born in the skies of New England: Rugg's chair-body is depicted as a new celestial body — "a shooting-star" — whose "depression" — it soon sinks below the horizon — portends war and catastrophes. By a strange irony of fate, Austin's narrative, conveying such a peculiar astral symbolism, was published in *The New England Galaxy*... It is no wonder then if that "shooting star," that "luminous configuration," is, by an extraordinary combination of circumstances, temporarily brought to a standstill on the Hudson ferry. Dunwell, among the bystanders, then remarks: "Rugg appeared to them to be *a man not of this world*; and they appeared to Rugg *a strange generation of men*" (emphasis added). Austin's tale even foreshadows some science fiction narratives in which Rugg's chair would be the time-machine and the hero an extraterrestrial from an old-fashioned galaxy... who discovers a technologically more advanced one. Colonial America would then be seen as an old planet eclipsed by a younger one called the United States of America.

But what is the meaning then — in the American historical context — of the return of this "remarkable configuration in a cloud," of this "shooting star," precisely in the year of the great 1806 eclipse, and "on every dark and stormy night" as well? And what is it that makes Rugg's return similar to an earthquake which shakes both downtown Boston *and* the text itself, whose ending sounds like a brutal collapse? As Gilbert Durand put it:

Folklore, like myth, represents thunder in the guise of a noisy skittish horse. This is what popular superstition means when it asserts that

thunder sounds like "the Devil shoeing his horse." . . . German and Anglo-Saxon popular traditions and folklore have seen in this ill-fated, macabre meaning of the horse [a representation of] the German horse-like demon, the *mahr* (trans. from Durand 79).

In "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man," the mythical flying horse is linked with chthonian powers. The "fine large bay horse" of the beginning of the story, which gave way to a "large black horse," betrays a change of perspective in the voyage. The devilish charger carries away the lost souls, doomed to *pass* — to go away — because they can neither *pass on* — die — nor rest in peace: "[he looked] anxious to gain a resting place. . . . 'But will you not stop and rest,' said I" (23; 22). Lightfoot adds to the literary tradition of the night-mare, already present in Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The legend of the "headless horseman" — the "galloping Hessian of the Sleepy Hollow" — meets that of the Anglo-Saxon *Wodans Jagt*, to which Irving implicitly alludes, when he mentions "the nightmare, with her whole ninefold." Indeed, the *mare* — *Mähre*, in German — was soon mistaken for a nocturnal evil spirit, the *mahr* — revenant, demon — originally a malevolent dead person supposed to swoop on sleepers and to crush them under his weight so as to possess them. The French word "*cauchemar*" — nightmare — precisely means to be "*cauché*" — an old word for "oppressed," "trampled under foot", from the Latin "*calcare*" — by the *mahr*. Interestingly, this oppression has strong sexual connotations, for "*caucher*," becoming "*côcher*" as early as the seventeenth century, also means "to cover a female," an activity dear to Irving's proud rooster — "cock" — in his "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Moreover, "to ride" is traditionally associated with "having sex," which confirms the imaginary association of women and mares in popular male-oriented superstitions.

The German "*Nacht-maar*," the Flemish "*nacht-merrie*," the English "nightmare" evoke the revenant, the "*mahr*, who is the embodiment of the nightmare, of the dead who trouble the living during their sleep" (trans. from Lecouteux 20).¹⁹ In European folklore, the night-

¹⁹ Lecouteux contests the assimilation made by some scholars between the *Mahr* and the *mare*.

mare is not only a bad dream, but a revenant on horseback who presses his body against the impotent sleeper until he suffocates him or her. According to some scholars, the *mahr* was very early mistaken for the mare — *Mähre*. The linguistic confusion between the revenant — *mahr* — and the mare, originating in latent fears of horses and of their devilish symbolism, makes of the nightmare a horse-like demon — or one on horseback — who springs out of the night to *ride* his victim. At the end of the eighteenth century, Heinrich Füssli took this interpretation at face value and illustrated it in his famous painting “The Nightmare,”²⁰ several copies of which had been exhibited repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century.

This literary mythology fed many a Supernatural narrative in the Romantic years in Europe, after the publication of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.” Let us merely mention here this excerpt of Théophile Gautier’s “La morte amoureuse” (1836), a text apparently directly borrowed from these two American short stories:

At the door, two *black horses*, as dark as *night*, were stamping out of impatience and breathed out on their breasts two long streams of *smoke*. He held the stirrup for me to help me to mount one, and then jumped quickly on the other. . . . *we were eating up the miles* . . . [As] we were riding through a forest, . . . I perceived on my skin a running shiver of superstitious *terror*. . . . The bunches of *sparks* torn from the stones by the shoes of our horses left behind us a trail of fire; . . . [a bystander] would have taken us for *a couple of specters riding the night-mare* (Gautier 131, emphasis added).

Ten years earlier, “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” adapted the literary mythology of the nightmare in the American context, which gives it a specific dimension: as the colonists, inaugurating the collective epic of the Frontier,²¹ begin to leave the East coast in their wagons,

²⁰ Heinrich Füssli: “The Nightmare” (1781), Detroit Institute of Arts; *The Nightmare* (1790), Goethe Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main.

²¹ Peter Rugg’s supernatural ride is contemporary with Fenimore Cooper’s Western novels, whose hero, Leatherstocking, was based on the trapper Daniel Boone: *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); *The Prairie* (1827).

landmark of the Boston "Freedom Trail," is now signaled as such by a bust of the great man. It is a well-known fact that Franklin's reputation originated partly in his *Poor Richard* almanacs, whose front page read as follows: "Almanack and Ephemeris of the Motions of the Sun and Moon; the True Places and Aspects of the Planets; the Rising and Setting of the Sun; and the Rising, Setting and Southing of the Moon, for the Year of our Lord 1753." The almanac dealt, among other topics, with "Lunations, Conjunctions, Eclipses, Judgments of the Weather, Rising and Setting of the Planets..."²⁴

Among the numerous inventions of this notable of colonial America, that of the lightning rod provided him with international fame. Ten years before Rugg's disappearance, Franklin published his scientific observations on lightning, breaking with the old beliefs of demonology and Puritan almanacs. In 1749, Franklin submitted to the Royal Society in London a paper entitled: "Observations and Suppositions towards forming A New Hypothesis for Explaining Several Phaenomena of Thunder Gusts." Franklin's experimental physics challenged the traditional supernatural conception of noisy celestial phenomena, such as the one advocated by Cotton Mather and the Puritan culture. His text, addressed to Dr. John Mitchell, was read by William Watson to an incredulous assembly, on 9 and 16 November. The paper was translated into French as early on as 1752, under the influence of Buffon, thus adding fuel to the fire of the conflict which opposed him to Abbot Nollet. From then on, European scientists of the mid-eighteenth century began to show some interest in electricity and to equip public buildings with lightning rods.

²⁴ Joseph T. Buckingham's *New England Galaxy* was a Masonic magazine. Remarkably, Franklin was admitted in the Masonic Lodge of Philadelphia in 1731, and the following year, he participated in the drafting of the lodge's statutes. He then edited *Constitutions*, the first Masonic book ever published in America. Austin's narrative looks, on many aspects, like a cryptogram that the modern reader endlessly deciphers. Paul Revere, another Freemason, studied further on in these pages, may also have his place in this cryptogram, according to Geoffroy.

passion: "his impatient horse . . . seemed to *devour all before him*" (24, emphasis added). This nocturnal *transport* of the "storm-breeder," of the "storm-seed," in the company of a night-mare, *breeds* however a series of catastrophes — tempests, eclipses, rains of stars, wars, etc. — and *sows* around "black specks" and "black clouds;" a sterile journey made fecund by the work of the Demon.

"If the present *generation* know little of him, the next will know less, and Peter and his child will have no hold on this world. . . . It was evident that the *generation* to which Peter Rugg belonged had passed away" (25; 26, emphasis added). The syntagm "the man and his child" appears some ten times in the narrative, which recalls the *paternity* of the man now changed into a "storm-breeder," but also underlines the fact that the curse has struck a generation. The omnipresent Jenny reminds us that Rugg, who was once a father by the Grace of God, is now stigmatized as a bad father. Between the storm and his daughter, he chose the storm, becoming then the father of black clouds, which accounts for his being cynically nicknamed "the storm-breeder." Rugg's ordeal consists in assuming, every hour of his doomed existence, the paternity of his "fatal oath."

In "The Devil and Tom Walker," strangely published by Irving a few months before "Peter Rugg," the motif of the thunderstorm and that of the abduction by a diabolical horse are also present, illustrating once more in the narrative composition the literal meaning of "night-mare." Irving's short story is staged in Puritan Boston, "in the year 1727, just at the time when earthquakes were prevalent in New England" (Irving, *Tales* 655).²³ Tom Walker comes to terms with the Devil — significantly nicknamed "the Wilde Huntsman" — who, in exchange for his own soul and his wife's, and provided he becomes a usurer, accepts to yield him the treasure of Kidd, the Pirate. Tom soon becomes a ruthless usurer, but one night, as "just a terrible black thundergust was coming up," he loses his temper with an unfortunate land speculator — whom he ruined — and eventually cries out: "The devil take me if I

²³ *Tales of a Traveller* was published in four volumes between August and October 1824, in Philadelphia.

have made a farthing!” Straight away, a “black man” appears, with an impatient “black horse” whose hooves generate the same infernal fireworks as Lightfoot’s:

The black man whisked him like a child into the saddle, gave the horse a lash, and away he galloped, with Tom on his back, in the midst of a thunder storm... (665)

The American Supernatural tale contradicts the epic narrative of the conquering ride spreading civilization. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Peter Rugg,” the first two fictional cavalcades of American literature, unquestionably belong to the genre of the Fantastic, that of the *nightmare*. The Supernatural hero is an anti-hero, a far cry from the Yankee ideal of the Western epic. This dual opposition is condensed by Austin in the image of the *golden dreams* and that of the nightmare. The miserable return of the Supernatural hero — the nightmare —, as the auctioneer praises both famous national heroes and capitalist prosperity — the golden dreams — suggests that Peter Rugg, eclipsed by and from the American Dream, brings home, *in return*, nothing but shadows.

The “revolute” Revolution: from the Supernatural hero to the Epic

Most strikingly, Irving’s first short stories as well as Austin’s “Peter Rugg,” borrow largely from European legends but find their identity by Americanizing them. From a different point of view, these narratives also undermine — in a more subtle way — the official political mythology of their time. Austin’s irony, when he shows his protagonist more terrified than fascinated on discovering the newborn United States, which he mistakes for old Europe, is undeniable. Remarkably, following the pattern of “Rip Van Winkle,” though in a more caricatured fashion, “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” evokes largely the history of the United States — the Boston Massacre, the Revolution, the war of 1812, President Monroe’s campaign — even offering a list of Bostonian Revolutionary heroes: James Otis, Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, Josiah Quincy... But the Supernatural hero is missing. Ex-

The numerous analogies between Paul Revere and Peter Rugg cannot fail to puzzle the reader.²⁶ Rugg's fictitious home was supposedly situated a few yards off Paul Revere's house, now a historical landmark in Boston North End. Both of them are known for their nocturnal rides on outstanding horses, in a period of political turmoil. Rugg's fictitious ride follows the tracks of Paul Revere's faithfully — the Charlestown bridge, the Mystic River, Menotomy, Concord... So that Peter Rugg, who scoured the American countryside during the Revolution, firing now and then cannonballs, would not only be a reminiscence of the Wild Army of the mediaeval tradition, but also a cryptic allusion to the historical hero, Paul Revere,²⁷ whose high deeds were only acknowledged publicly in the 1830s, after his death.

The narrative works at mingling the obscure Fantastic hero and the Revolution, causing the disastrous meeting of the Supernatural and the Political. Peter Rugg disappears in the year of the Boston Massacre — his disappearance is thus an indirect hint at the historical date — and reappears sporadically during the Revolution, throwing the reader into confusion as to historical and fictitious — meteorological — facts. Rugg wages his own war, but a war of the *shadow*. Significantly, the title of the short story borrows from the military lexicon: by preferring "missing man" to "lost man" or "wanderer," Austin chose to give his character the dimension of a spectral warrior. Peter Rugg may also be the devilish double of Paul Revere: William Austin, a man of law and a politician, turning to fiction to write a politically-oriented rehabilitation of the local hero, thus subtly castigates the American political mythology.

In doing so, Austin merges intelligently European war folklore with the new American political mythology: the supernatural side of his narrative coincides with its American identity. Nevertheless, the wanderings of the Supernatural hero is definitely no epic ride, no climax of

²⁶ For a detailed study of the analogies between Paul Revere's ride and Peter Rugg's, see *infra* A. Geoffroy, "From Peter Rugg to Paul Revere."

²⁷ It is worth noticing here that a statue of Paul Revere on horseback was erected recently near Old North Church and that Rugg repeatedly associates North Church with his home for it stands at a stone's throw from Middle Street.

because they saw in the wild Western lands a "New Garden of Eden," "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" turns the ride in the Frontier wagons into a series of derisory nightmarish wanderings:

A large black horse, and a weather-beaten chair once built for a chaise-body, passed in great haste, apparently at the rate of twelve miles an hour (20).

.....
Rugg himself is, in some sort, *under the controul of his horse* (36) . . .
A more beautiful horse I never saw; his hide was as fair and rotund and glossy as the skin of a *Congo beauty* (36).

.....
A demon (39).

.....
If such a contingency could check the spirit of enterprise, farewell to all mercantile excitement. Your surplus money, instead of refreshing your sleep with the *golden dreams* of new sources of speculation, would turn to the *nightmare* (49, emphasis added).

Rugg is an American colonist, placed under the control of a devilish horse, fleetingly compared to a "Congo Beauty," a black woman figure who carries him away, dominates him, makes him go out of his mind — and off the beaten tracks — and prevents him from coming back to Middle Street. The dark color of the night, the hardy femininity, the tempest, are so many conventional satanic signs borrowed from the tradition of the Supernatural. Forced by the black mare — the nightmare — to wander night and day around Boston — and in his mind as well — Rugg, soaked with rain, is certainly no Frontier rider. The sexual connotations of the nocturnal ride of the "storm-breeder" together with a black beauty²² partakes of the demoniac, supernatural dimension of that fiction. If Rugg never managed, for forty years, to come back to Dame Rugg, it may be because he was literally seduced — from the Latin word *se-ducere*, to drive aside, to separate — by a devilish beauty who keeps him under her control and wears him out by her devouring

²² See Jones. In a Freudian perspective, Jones asserts that the nightmare is always the expression of an intense psychic conflict, centered on a repressed wish, often of incestuous nature. This casts an interesting light on the literary function of Jenny as regards the fault of his father. For further details on the father's fault, see *infra* A. Geoffroy's psychoanalytical study.

Franklin's theory was the following: thunderclouds are loaded with electricity, but the electric "fluid" does not come into existence from nothing; it is a natural component of the elements. Scientific research was then firmly based on the study of the causes, thus challenging the old superstitions. When a thunderstorm was close, people used to ring bells to send the Devil away, but many a bell ringer was thunderstruck, in spite of the maxim engraved on a number of church towers: "*Fulgura frango*" — "I break the lightning."

If Franklin was the one who mastered lightning, he was also the one who improved the mail as postmaster of Philadelphia. In 1776, he participated in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, and he is known as the founder of the American Society of Philosophy. Franklin was at the same time a diplomat, a physicist, a publisher, a philosopher, a reporter, a businessman, a civil servant... He was all that Peter Rugg failed to be... However, Peter Rugg's conception of the fire was not based on physics but on superstitions and devilish traditions, and there was nothing on earth which could shelter him from thunderstorms. However, someone suggested roguishly that he could be hired to transport the mail:

"He is a famous traveller, held in light esteem by all innholders, for he never stops to eat, drink, or sleep. I wonder why the government do not employ him to carry the mail." "Aye," said a bystander, "that is a thought bright only on one side; how long would it take in that case to send a letter to Boston, for Peter has already, to my knowledge, been more than twenty years travelling to that place" (22).

To cut a long story short, Peter Rugg, lost in his thundercloud, surrounded with strokes of lightning, was no enlightened character, nor a man who could bring light. History just happened without seeing him, and without him seeing it. He completely missed the War of Independence, and if he occasionally fired at toll-gates, it was just rearguard fighting, for a man who enrolled against his will in a Wild Army which cyclically scoured the American countryside.

Assuredly, Franklin could not bring any help to Rugg. Only Dunwell, the charitable — philanthropic? — commercial traveler, managed to protect him from lightning strokes, but only to bring him to

the ruins of his "burnt" house, inexplicably showing no "signs of conflagration;" "who has demolished my house?" (51), Rugg asked, who never knew about the protection of lightning rods.

The Supernatural hero remains in the shadow of the epic hero, Benjamin Franklin, who exorcised the skies of New England from their satanic celestial phenomena and rid them from the dark designs of the Demon, whereas Rugg testified to the persistence of irreducible dark points and of alienating beliefs.

In modern Boston, near old Middle Street — now Hanover Street — one can now see two statues: Benjamin Franklin's bust and a statue of another national figure on horseback, Paul Revere. But that of Peter Rugg, eclipsed since 1770, is still missing.

If Franklin unequivocally appears as an explicit allegory, it is remarkable that another great Bostonian figure, that of Paul Revere — a Revolutionary hero, praised for his "Midnight Ride" —, is never openly mentioned. The auctioneer's "nationalist" tirade opposes in a most Manichaean fashion Peter Rugg to Benjamin Franklin by trying to hide the nightmarish, unlucky star behind other more authoritative stars, those of the United States. But whereas the auctioneer does not hesitate to lay it on thick, he deliberately avoids mentioning Paul Revere...

Paradoxically, this omission brings Rugg closer to Revere by establishing a cryptic link between the fictitious hero and the historical hero.²⁵ In the night of the 18 April 1775, Paul Revere left Boston for Lexington and Concord to warn the American militia that the British Redcoats were about to seize the rebels' ammunition stores. He crossed the Charles River, left Charlestown on a powerful horse, escaped the vigil of British regulars, and met the highway to Concord at Menotomy — today's Arlington. Though he managed to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock in Lexington, he was eventually captured by the British, and he never reached his final destination...

²⁵ Alain Geoffroy was the first critic to advocate this interpretation, as he made of Paul Revere (1735-1818) the "true" missing man, and of Peter Rugg the fictional Supernatural figure of the historical hero (Geoffroy, "Mais qui était donc Peter Rugg?").

cluded from the pleiad of local great men, Rugg — the unlucky star, the storm-breeder, the obscure past — is not considered an exemplary hero: he is a star unworthy of appearing among those of the spangled banner.

“Men of the North End! Need I appeal to your patriotism, in order to enhance the value of this lot? The earth affords no such scenery as this; there, around that corner, lived James Otis; here, Samuel Adams — there, Joseph Warren — and around that other corner, Josiah Quincy. Here was the birth place of Freedom; here Liberty was born, and nursed, and grew to manhood. Here man was new created. Here is the nursery of American Independence — I am too modest — here commenced the emancipation of the world” (50).

Which shows that even a man born in Boston North End can miss the Revolution... The Fantastic hero, alienated by supernatural powers, is a man of darkness — eclipses, overcast skies and nightmares. He is the blind spot *of* the text and *in* the text, which swallows up all possible historical vision, in an endless loop, generating distortion: the text is literally *buckled* — not unlike a damaged wheel —, distorted by the hero's exodus which both gives it shape and brings meaning to it. Suggestively, Peter Rugg, the “storm-breeder,” is implicitly opposed to Benjamin Franklin, the inventor of the lightning rod:

The birth place of one, who, all the world knows was born in Middle-street, directly opposite to this lot; and who, if his birth place were not well known, would now be claimed by more than seven cities. To you, then, the value of these premises must be inestimable. For, ere long, there will arise in front view of the edifice to be erected here, a monument, the wonder and veneration of the world. A column shall spring to the clouds; and on that column will be engraven one word that will convey all that is wise in intellect, useful in science, good in morals, prudent in counsel, and benevolent in principle, a name, when living, the patron of the poor, the delight of the cottage, and the admiration of kings; now dead, worth the whole seven wise men of Greece. Need I tell you his name? He fixed the thunder, and guided the lightning (49).

In fact, Franklin, another Bostonian, used to be Rugg's neighbor, since on the corner of Milk and Washington Streets stood the house where Franklin was born on January 6, 1706. The historical site, a

American History. Mikhaïl Bakhtine's proposition must at this point be recalled:

The epic, as a specific genre, comprises three constituent features: 1) Its object is inspired by the national epic past, the "absolute past" . . . 2) The source of the epic is the national legend . . . 3) The epic world is cut off from the present time by the absolute epic distance . . . The world of the epic narrative is the world of the "beginnings" and that of "climaxes" of national History, that of the fathers and ancestors. . . . The epic past . . . comes to existence and unveils itself only in the form of a national legend, . . . it is a closed world, severed from future eras and above all from the present of the children and the descendants by an impassable frontier . . . It is ready to use, accomplished, immutable, as a real fact is, in its meaning and value (trans. from Bakhtine 452 et passim).

But Rugg's Fantastic legend meets the national legend only to differentiate itself from it. To the linear, mechanically meaningful discourse of the epic, illustrating, in a most edifying mode, the founding events of a nation, the Supernatural substitutes a *buckled* narrative, distorted by its *excursi*, its loops and its obscurities. It is a text which fails to say what it deals with, *i. e.* here, the impossible representation of the mythical foundation of the United States.

With Peter Rugg, the high deeds of American history are eclipsed. The revolutions of the ecliptic hero around the "Lost Town" do not make him a Revolutionary hero. When he eventually comes back, Rugg, like Rip, does not bring with him any innovative or reactionary political message, though he strategically stood back from History. Rugg's eclipse is no literary pretext to elaborate, like in the philosophical tales of the Enlightenment writers, a detached — Persian or Huron — point of view. The literature of the Fantastic is based on a radical exclusion from the social world and on a definite loss of any stable prospect. Rugg, like Rip, merges with a black cloud — the impossible representation — on which nothing can be represented. This corroborates the new critics' definition of the genre of the Fantastic:

The literature of the Fantastic underwent a Copernican revolution, which brought us *dis-aster*, dismissing any unifying viewpoint. Space

proper no longer exists but as a separation, a breaking-in. . . . The real presents itself as a break, and at the same time as a voracity. . . . In the literature of the Fantastic, there is no longer any question of knowing or understanding the world, since it implies the very disappearance of any possibility of rationalizing the world. This brings us to a central notion which may be useful for thinking about the Fantastic itself: that of a "displacement," the loss of *any* viewpoint, the renunciation of the "distance" thanks to which "I" can grab the "original synthetic unity" (Kant) of things. . . . The locus from which "I" could turn myself into a subject-spectator of the vision cannot be occupied (trans. from Bozzetto et al. 29-30).

By missing the ship of History, Rugg, in his chair, becomes an unlucky star — "a shooting-star," "a luminous configuration" — revolving around Boston to herald, on a supernatural mode, tragic political events. Rugg represents the specter of the American colonial past, too rapidly buried by a nation whose citizens want to see its birth escape History and fit into a providential time, in some absolute new beginning.

3) "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man:" *the tail of the comet*

We saw that this short story rapidly gave birth to a whole series of literary legends inspired by its matrix-like narrative. It also preoccupied several American writers in the first half of the nineteenth century, who paid tribute to it in a most subtle manner. In 1855, Irving evoked, in *Woofert's Roost*, Rambout Van Dam, punished for not having respected Sunday as a day of rest. One Saturday, the scoundrel sails across the Tappan Zee; he tarries and revels on the opposite bank, but when he wants to come on board again to sail back across the Hudson, he is warned that it is already Sunday. Van Dam swears that he will cross the river, even if he had to sail a whole month of Sundays for it. He has never been seen again, but he will be heard, rowing, until Doomsday. One recognizes clearly here the argument of Austin's short story, and more particularly the episode of the crossing of the Hudson river.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson very soon noticed the influence of this story on Nathaniel Hawthorne, in a paper entitled "A Precursor of Hawthorne" (*The Independent*, 29 March 1888). In his "Wakefield,"

Hawthorne merged very suggestively Austin's narrative and Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Hawthorne's protagonist leaves his wife after ten years of marital life, on the pretext of a short stay in the country. He gets in the stage-coach but soon stops in "the next street to his own." The self-banished Wakefield hides there for twenty years, in "the great mass of London life." Missing, but living in secrecy a minute away from his home, he observes with "a morbid vanity" the gap he left behind him, before he eventually comes back home one stormy night. The influence of "Rip Van Winkle" is here crystal-clear, with the motifs of misogyny and of the magical stretching of time.

In Wakefield the magic of a single night has wrought a similar transformation, because, in that brief period, a great moral change has been effected. . . . Dear woman! Will she die? . . . Wakefield is spell-bound . . . He ascends the steps — heavily! — for twenty years have stiffened his legs... (Hawthorne, "Wakefield" 293; 295; 298).

Other fictional elements echoing "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" are also easily identifiable:

He has informed Mrs. Wakefield that he is to take the night-coach into the country . . . Though he slept and awoke in the next street to his home, he is as effectually abroad, as if the stage-coach had been, whirling him away all night. . . . An almost impassable gulf divides his hired apartment from his former home. . . . To haunt around his house, without once crossing the threshold . . . Pausing near the house . . . at that instant, a shower chances to fall . . . Shall he stand, wet and shivering here, when his own hearth has a good fire to warm him . . . Stay, Wakefield! Would you go to the sole home that is left you? Then step into your grave! . . . By stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe... (Hawthorne, "Wakefield" 293; 295; 298).

In a narrative published in 1842 — *A Virtuoso's Collection* —, Hawthorne takes up again, this time explicitly, the character of Peter Rugg. The narrator is visiting a new museum, when his attention is attracted by a sign reading "To be seen here, a Virtuoso's Collection." When he offers "three shillings" to the doorman, the latter replies immediately: "No, I mean half a dollar, as you reckon in the days."

(Hawthorne, "Virtuoso" 697) The narrator gives the following description of the disquieting door-keeper:

He wore an old-fashioned great-coat, much faded, within which his meagre person was so completely enveloped that the rest of his attire was indistinguishable. But his visage was remarkably wind-flushed, sun-burnt, and weather-worn, and had a most unquiet, nervous, and apprehensive expression. It seemed as if this man had some all-important object in view, some point of deepest interest to be decided, some momentous question to ask, might he but hope for a reply (697).

Then the Virtuoso appears, and acts as his guide. The inventory of the heterogeneous collection soon swings over to aberration: among other things are exhibited the shadow of Peter Schlemihl, the sandals of Empedocles, the philosopher's stone, Orpheus', Homer's, and Sapho's lyres, etc. As the narrator is about to go out, he meets the doorman again who asks him with a melancholic voice: "Have pity on the most unfortunate man in the world! For heaven's sake answer me a single question! Is this the town of Boston?" The Virtuoso then addresses the narrator and says:

You have recognized him now. It is Peter Rugg, the Missing Man. I chanced to meet him, the other day, still in search of Boston, and conducted him hither; and, as he could not succeed in finding his friends, I have taken him into my service as door-keeper (712).

The narrator soon realizes that the Virtuoso is the Wandering Jew and that he may as well have visited Hades under his conduct...

Herman Melville, in his first short story, "Bartleby" (1853), introduces a narrator who, like Jonathan Dunwell, is incapable of grasping the personality of a very peculiar central protagonist: "No materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable" (Melville, 2234 et passim) But Bartleby, the scrivener, progressively occupies more and more often the office of his employer, a man of law in Wall Street. If Peter Rugg, the *extra muros* man, becomes a supernatural being after his disappearance, Bartleby, "this man or rather ghost," acquires his supernatural dimension by being "always there" — *intra muros*. The narrator,

who soon becomes, like Dunwell, an investigator, reports his eviction by Bartleby, the scrivener, a being who cannot be reduced to what the text makes him, though it is meant to define him:

[With] his cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance* . . . [h]e seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid of Atlantic. . . . A vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge (2236 et passim).

Panic-stricken, the narrator takes flight, frightened by the immobility and the silence of this spectral employee: as the latter wanders about in New York in his chair, Melville implicitly alludes to the episode of Peter Rugg's passage in New York:

For a few days I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway, crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. In fact I almost lived in my rockaway for the time. (2256)

“Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” also inspired two women poets of New England: Louise Imogen Guiney, in a poem entitled “Peter Rugg, the Bostonian,” published in the *Scribner's Magazine* (December 1891), and Amy Lowell, who published her ballad “Before the Storm: the Legend of Peter Rugg” in *The North American Review* (September 1917). Here are some more examples of modern narratives inspired by “Peter Rugg:” Frank Luther Motts' short story “The Phantom Flyer,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* (28 January 1950); “The Legend of Peter Rugg,” by Lewis A. Taft, in an anthology of New England legends, *Mysterious New England* (1971).

4) The Supernatural and Super-History

Pierre-Yves Pétillon, in one of the rare French studies comparing “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” remarks that these three narratives of the Fantastic inaugurated an American mysticism of space:

Based on the loss of the familiar marks of the ego, and on the strangeness of the world turned into an unknown land, this theme haunted American fictions for two centuries. It is the American version of Ulysses' peregrinations: the impossible *nostos*. When he came back to Ithaca, he could not find it again. The locus of the origins had been, in the meantime, erased from the map (trans. from Pétillon 71).

After Irving's founding stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" contributed to merging the birth of American literature and the literature of the Fantastic. Remarkably, both Irving and Austin hid behind pen-names — respectively Geoffrey Crayon and Jonathan Dunwell. They created heroes, missing both in the space of the text and in the text as space. Their literary works play at passing themselves off as *false reports*, by adopting successively the tone of the social chronicle, of the police inquiry, of the weather report, and of the Supernatural tale.

However, if "Peter Rugg" is close to Irving's first matrix-like narratives, it liberates itself from them in many respects. Indeed, there is no trace in Austin of the particular magic of Irving's texts, which situates them half-way between the fairy tale and the Supernatural. It is true that the Fantastic dimension of "Rip Van Winkle" rests on the transgression of the rules of the fairy tale, questioned by the intrusion of the socio-political reality: Rip is not awoken by the kiss of a princess, but by the noise of History. During his twenty-year sleep, a revolution has broken out, and Rip is not longer a British subject of "His Majesty George the Third" but "a free citizen of the United States." The vocabulary of the narrative then is a far cry from that of a fairy tale: "a Tory," "members of congress," "Bunker Hill," "heroes of seventy-six," "Federal or Democrat," etc. However, the narrative is still deeply rooted in the legendary: the hero climbs up a magic mountain — Odin's kingdom —, drinks a philter offered by supernatural beings — Odin's Army / Henry Hudson's crew —, falls blissfully asleep — as in Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" — to get away from a witch-wife, and eventually come to life again, twenty years later, in a totally transformed country: all is well that ends well...

But in "Peter Rugg," less that five years after Irving's narratives, this gradation no longer appears: the Supernatural is not announced — and thus tempered — by elements of the fairy tale. No more enchanted hollows or mountains than goblins teasing the nocturnal walker, nor providential elopement into a fetal sleep...

Irving in his "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1824) or Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown" do not make use of the Devil to build weird stories based on supernatural elements which are coded and ritualized. But Peter Rugg never meets the Devil, nor any specter: even if the presence of supernatural components is still essential in the narrative — the curse, the persecuting storm, the chthonian horse —, Austin gives his fiction a very modern turn, by saving the expected supernatural characters and by staging most of its major episodes in an urban setting.

As early on as 1824, the Bostonian Austin introduces the town — and the debate on urbanization — into American fiction. Making liberal use of this powerful reality effect, he invents a modern version of the Supernatural, far from rustic legends and country culture,²⁸ in a universe close to that of psychosis.²⁹ Rugg is "dejected," "in sorrow," "anxious," in great trouble," "bewildered." No doubt, there will be *hell-to-pay*... When he is confronted with the American reality — the birth of the United States —, Rugg thinks that he is the victim of some evil spell or that he is just seeing things: "There is no such place as this in North America, this is all the effect of enchantment; this is a grand delusion, nothing real."³⁰ When Rugg appears, then the text itself disappears:

²⁸ These two short stories by Irving pertain largely to rural ethnography: see the slightly condescending descriptions of the habits and customs of the Dutch community settled along the Hudson, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

²⁹ Bozzetto suggestingly put forward that the modern Supernatural narrative follows a psychotic structure, whereas its classic, Romantic form answered a kind of neurotic compromise (see Bozzetto, 1992).

³⁰ On the psychotic side in Austin's text, see *infra* Geoffroy, "What Drove Peter Rugg Raving Mad."

A strange rumbling noise was heard which arrested the attention of every one. Presently, it was like the sound of many shipwrights driving home the bolts of a seventy-four. As the sound approached nearer, some exclaimed, "the buildings in the new market are falling in promiscuous ruin." Others said, "no; it is an *earthquake*, we perceive the earth joggle." Others said "not so; the sound proceeds from Hanoverstreet, and approaches nearer;" and this proved true, *for presently Peter Rugg was in the midst of us* (50, emphasis added).

With the earthquake, the text itself shuns what it says without being able to say it, and then collapses. Peter Rugg is just an empty shell, an obscure moving shape. The hero, whose role it was just to *peter out*, incarnates the structuring question posed by the text, and once he is here in person, the text gives way to mere "noise." The text vanishes as soon as the missing man is present again, brought back by the story itself, "in the midst of us." There is some peculiar disposition in Peter Rugg himself which determines his very fictionalization: the text is pregnant with blanks, with the dark sides of the protagonist. The hero *and* the text *pass over what should be said*. What prompts this fiction is precisely a "black speck" which cannot be analyzed — *i. e.*, cut into pieces, decomposed —, and which, when it passes by, *buckles* the text.

Peter Rugg's malediction comes to an end when a businessman accepts to pay for his crossing in dollars. But what economic power can surpass the supernatural powers? A Power which can undo what another Power did in the past, and which seemed capable of lasting for ever. What is that Power which, in "Rip Van Winkle," wakes up a man who was put to sleep by another Power, and which, in "Peter Rugg," redeems the cursed wanderer? Such a Power is assuredly a *superpower*, for it exceeds all supernatural powers. Rip's and Rugg's return to the United States can thus be read as the symbolic, literary — hence anachronistic — birth of the American superpower in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This superpower suggests that the Supernatural is now exceeded not so much by History, but by what should literally be called *super-History*.

The story of the specter gives way to the specter of History: the American Revolution broke out at the core of these fictions in the form

of a frightening apparition which cannot be represented. The simultaneous apparition of History and the Supernatural generates some confusion as well as tensions between the old supernatural powers and the new political and economic powers, omnipotent and omniscient. What we call here the specter of History, *is* History, as an apparition which cannot be identified — replacing the traditional ghost — and which rests on a modern system of beliefs and fears. This specter situates the narrative not in the unreal, but *in the real*. It is, literally, an apparition, *i. e.* an irreducible, solid thing, which was there even before it was mentioned or represented, and which makes, by its sole presence, the operation by which it should be represented impossible. *The specter of History* is the desultory mode of apparition of *super-History*. It is its *Dasein*, cut off from the rest, from its very cause. It is a peculiarity which cannot be identified because it is severed from any global perspective. *The specter of History* is the literary spectral incarnation of *super-History*, as a vast devilish machination.



American literature opens on fictions which eclipse History — the birth of the United States —, behind the curtain of the impossible description of the dream, of the tempest, or of the revenant. These fictions pertain to the Supernatural through their failed attempts to represent a historical passage. In literature, the patriotic rhetoric of the historians needs to be “told twice” in the form of naive and conformist stories, rather than in the narration of the controversial and conflictual History which is everybody’s praxis. As French Marxist critic Pierre Barbéris put it:

The writers’ literature, the stories they tell, often anticipate on the historians’ History, and consequently, become only actually readable once a new History, differently motivated and equipped, otherwise rooted in History, formalizes and theorizes what in the text has only been so far a blurred, ill-controlled overhang in the process of writing and reading as well . . . In every historical situation, there exists

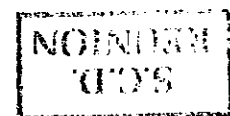
something historical which is not mastered yet, and which is the very object and material of literature . . . History appears in the text through a change . . . the change is rarely here a positive, exalting one; it is a change which sounds like a blank, a loss, a flight. . . . History appears in the text through a change which, instead of promoting and integrating the individual into a superior system, rejects him to his private life [and appears as] the closure of hope, the consolidation of new powers of exclusion (trans. from Barbéris 18; 142 et passim).

Paradoxically, Supernatural American literature appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century to narrate its impossible accomplishment, *i. e.* to represent the mythical birth of the United States. The un-represented apparition of that birth — a devilish machination which both the hero and the text miss, though it weighs heavily on them like a *nightmare* —, engenders a "depressive" literature in which a protagonist, "more in sorrow than resentment," is in eternal mourning for the lost object, unmentioned and unmentionable, of a past that will never pass. With "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man," the mythical short story written by a man of law once tempted by fiction, American literature stages the rise of the black sun of melancholy.

Bernard Terramorsi, March 1996.³¹
(Translated by Alain Geoffroy)



³¹ Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 rue René Cassin, B.P. 7151 - 97715 SAINT DENIS cedex 9 (FRANCE).



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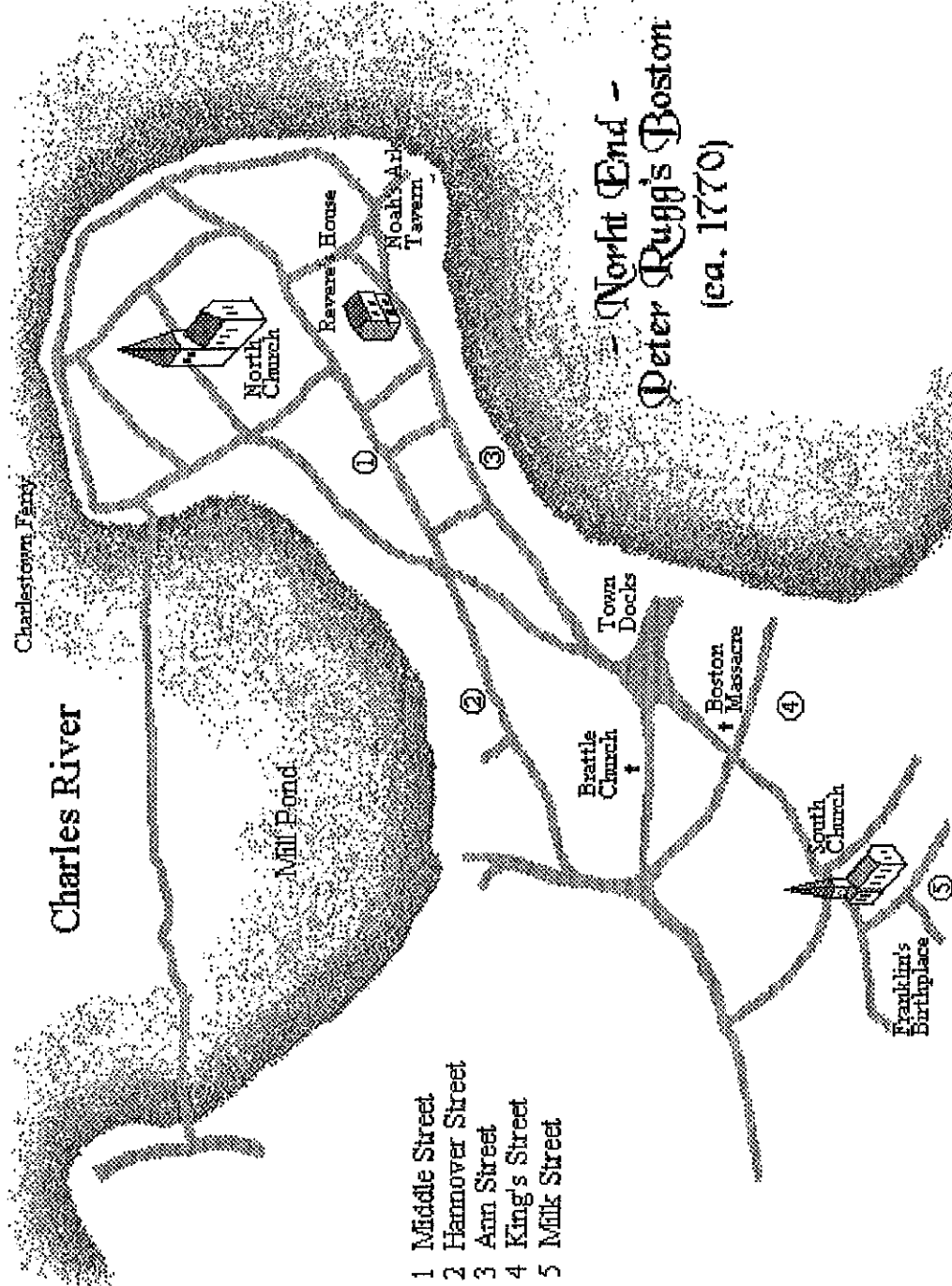
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(Map by Alain Geoffroy, 1995)