

Narrative Disruption as Declaration of Dependence: Nonhuman Agency and Narrative Repetition in “Rip van Winkle”

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Summary

Rip van Winkle's prolonged slumber atop the Catskills in Washington Irving's titular story features as a narrative disruption suspending human agency and commencing nonhuman agency. Rip's narrative repetition is both a declaration of human dependence on an interactive network of cross-species actants and an establishment of anthropocentric mastery over past passivity. The conflict between human reliance and psychological superiority, this article argues, is Irving's buried truth within the story.

Opsomming

Rip van Winkle se uitgerekte slaap op die Kaatskillberge in Washington Irving se gelyknamige verhaal handel oor 'n narratiewe ontwrigting wat menslike bemiddeling staak en niemenslike bemiddeling begin. Rip se narratiewe herhaling is beide 'n verklaring van menslike afhanklikheid van 'n interaktiewe netwerk van bemiddelaars oor spesies heen, en 'n vestiging van antroposentriese beheer oor die passiwiteit van die verlede. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat die konflik tussen menslike vertroue en sielkundige meerderwaardigheid die waarheid is wat Irving in die verhaal versteek het.

Washington Irving's “Rip van Winkle” has eternal artistic appeal to critics. Particularly Rip's mountain experience, as the linchpin of the story, has become an arena of contested interpretations. Terence Martin holds that Rip's removal from “broad and simple daylight” to a wild and romantic mountain compensates for the “cultural thinness” of newly independent America, and provides seedlings for American Imagination. Irving “pretended shadow, ruin, decay as prerequisites of imaginative creation” (2014a: 140). Along the same line, Greg Smith views imagination as a “fulfilling release” from Americans' pragmatic obsession with “fact and doctrine”. Smith notes, however, that Irving fertilises American imagination “with an explicit endorsement of the supernatural explanation” (2001: 179).

JLS/TLW 32(4), Dec./Des. 2016
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2016.11893



Although for Richard Zlogar, Smith's interpretation of the mountain episode as a "supernatural ambiguity and possibility" (174) would be a misreading because of "Irving's well-known relish for debunking the supernatural" (1982: 46). Zlogar reads the mountain encounter as a didactic lesson depriving Rip two decades of prime-time life for evading his "moral responsibility". As punishment for avoiding labour, "Rip's twenty-year sleep [is] a metaphor for an existence tantamount to life-in-death," a mere physical existence that "leads nowhere and accomplishes nothing" (56). As for Rip's "life-in-death" sleep, Philip Young offers a diametrically opposed reading: "the sleep" of Rip, in fact, "has been his life" (1960: 570). In this "world of the unconscious", Young explicates, Rip as well as Irving are "groping very darkly in a world of symbol, myth and dream for meanings beyond awareness" (567-568). John Hardt casts serious doubts on the unconscious reading of the mountain section. At first sight, the mountains in the story are "perfect barometers". With Rip's further advancement into and increased knowledge of the landscape, however, the ideal American garden has been overshadowed by "paradisaal skepticism", which is a retreat from the Edenic ideal "with a recognition of limits in human knowledge" (2014: 249). Thus, paradoxically, the expanded knowledge acquired by the protagonist during his journey enables him to recognise the "severe limitations of human knowledge" (259).

While insightful, Hardt's analysis is not compatible with the incomprehensible narrative repetitions Rip gives of his strange mountain experience in the latter half of the story. Furthermore, the above mentioned scholars single out the mountain episode with elaborate explorations, but do not offer any orchestrated discussion of the integrated story: before the sleep, during the sleep, and after the sleep. Through his examination of the whole story, Quan Wang has given a convincing interpretation of the functions of sleep from the perspectives of psychoanalysis (2014a: 179) and new historicism (2014b: 320). As a matter of fact, if one delves beyond anthropocentrism and inserts Rip's mountain experience into a larger framework of cross-species order, one unlocks the broader significance of this classic short story. This article makes clear three pertinent ideas regarding Rip's sleep. First, as a narrative disruption, Rip's sleep suggests the suspension of human agency and the onset of non-human agency. Secondly, Rip's consequent narrative repetitions endeavour to establish anthropocentric superiority. Finally, the tension between human and non-human entities reveals Irving's buried truth within the story. The perspective brought by such a posthumanist reading of "Rip van Winkle" offers two benefits. Not only does it enrich the scholarship on Washington Irving, but Irving's open attitude on the dynamic relationship between non-human agents and anthropocentric actants offers a potential solution to the current theoretical debates involving literary animal agency.

Animals, especially Wolf the dog, play a very important function in “Rip van Winkle”. At the beginning, the dog is a metaphor for Rip. Rip is under the discipline of “a termagant wife” (2014a: 35). Towards his wife’s incessant daily dinning, Rip’s responses become habit. “He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes, but said nothing”. In a parallel structure, Wolf, Rip’s only “domestic adherent”, has also established a routinised caution against the terror of the virago. The dog “sneaked about with a gallows air”, cast many sidelong glances, and flew to the door “at the least flourish of a broomstick or ladle” (37-38). In Irving’s humorous writing, the dog becomes Rip’s soulmate, and “reciprocated” his master’s sentiment. In fact, the dog is not a dog, but an anthropomorphic embodiment of human projection, totally erased of its own canine features.

Apart from the temperamental similarity, the dog is also woven into the thematic structure. Kirk Curnutt reads “Rip van Winkle” as an allegory of Irving’s “frustrated authorship” (29). Rip’s lazy eschewing against manual labour and idle listening to “village gossip”, as a matter of fact, is an intellectual process of collecting and absorbing raw materials for writing, and after his unique experience on the mountain, he begins telling his story to the public. I would argue that Wolf, as a metaphorical substitute, explicates this artistic creation. Rip, in pursuing his own freedom, is criticised as foolish and useless by society; however, upon his retreat from the village into the woods, the “hen-pecked husband” has regained “the martial character of his ancestors,” and become a gallant hunter. In following his own inclination, Rip discovers his particular life and his own story. Likewise, the dog is an “obsequious and conciliating” pet at home, but once on the mountain, the dog shakes off the civilized shackles of domestication and regains “all points of spirit befitting an honorable dog” (37). Acting upon its own disposition, the dog becomes a wild wolf, “as courageous an animal as ever scoured the woods”, and lives up to the expectation of its name. The canine transformation from tamed dog to savage wolf metaphorically underscores the importance of a writer’s liberation from social constraints and his freedom of exploration in accordance with one’s own bent.

Metaphors, fundamentally anthropocentric, use familiar human grids to filter unfamiliar animal features, seeking similarities and abandoning differences. Animal metaphors, Susan McHugh writes, offer a defense “for communicating messages about our essential humanity” rather than species differences (2014: 488-489). In short, following one’s own nature, both Rip and the dog have discovered their repressed selves. However, it is at this point of following one’s nature on the mountain that human beings and animals diverge from each other.

The difference between the canine responses and human reactions is a turning point in the story. On the lonely mountain, there is a distant voice hallooing “Rip van Winkle! Rip van Winkle” (Irving 2014a: 40). Rip just

disregards it as imaginary because this part of the mountain is a place unfrequented by human beings. “He thought his fancy must have deceived him”. In contrast, the dog immediately manifests its alertness towards the unusual circumstance. “At the same time Wolf bristled up his back, and giving a low growl, skulked to his master’s side”. At this moment, the dog is no longer a metaphorical projection of a human, but instead an animal with its distinctive agency, who instinctively perceives the direction of the strange voice: “looking fearfully down into the glen” (40). Irving’s deliberate contrast of the limitations of human understanding with the inherent awareness of the dog highlights the agency of non-human animals. “An animal might gain a temporary agency and legibility at the moment when it has ceased to function according to its assumed use value,” Raymond Malewitz continues, or “in the case of literature, by refusing to advance some anthropocentric plot” (2014: 547). The ascendancy of animal agency coincides with the descending of human agency. Irving provides readers with a careful delineation of Rip’s mountain experience. First, Rip’s eyes passively witness many strange scenes with paralyzed understanding. He “was still more surprised at the singularity of the stranger’s appearance”. Upon arrival at the amphitheatre, Rip is further confounded by “new objects of wonder” of “odd-looking personages” with “outlandish” clothes and weird beards (Irving 2004a: 41-42). Sigmund Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the ascendancy of sight with “the diminution of the olfactory stimuli” is essential to “the threshold of human civilization” (1961: 51-52). Cary Wolfe further explains that the triumph of vision over smell as the turning point in the evolution of humans from animals could be attributed to the idea that sight is often associated “with the aesthetic and with contemplative distance and sensibility” (2003: 2). But in Irving’s story, sight entails more human confusion than understanding. “There was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe and checked familiarity” (2014a: 41-42).

Apart from visual passivity, Rip is also deprived of human language. “During the whole time Rip and his companion had labored on in silence,” and even at their destination, there was “the most mysterious silence”. Language, as the traditional line of demarcation between humans and animals, is an indicator of human intelligence; therefore the absence of language suggests the forfeiture of intellectual agency. In the place of human language, Rip heard invisible “sounds” of nature, “like distant thunder, that seemed to issue out of a deep ravine, or rather cleft, between lofty rocks” (41). The overwhelming impression of auditory effects with incomprehensible sight is pregnant with posthumanist implications. Human sight implies the active conquest of the surrounding environment. “With the visual, the lines of determination run from the intentional subject to the object, to what we “look at”, but it is a totally different story for hearing. “With sound, on the other hand, the lines run from the object (‘where sound

comes *from*') to the subject – it is, as Derrida might put it, a 'spatialization' of the subject/object relation – so that a corollary magic would involve our *insertion* into the equation" (Wolfe 2010: 178). Removal from active visual mastery and insertion into a passive auditory environment suggests the decentring of human beings and their reintegration into nature. In addition to the visual and auditory passivity of human agency, Irving also highlights Rip's kinetic passivity. When the stranger "made signs for Rip to approach him and assist him with the load," "Rip *complied*" with the demand, "clambered up" a gully, passed through a ravine, "labored on" all the way to the destination. When the commander "made signs to him to wait upon the company", Rip, again "*obeyed* with fear and trembling" (Irving 2014a: 43). Despite his busy activities, Rip is denied of his own volition, and he is forced to obey others' orders. As carefully observed by Helen Lee: Rip is "compelled to serve them" (2014: 193). In short, Rip is not the agency of his own actions.

His only non-passive action during the episode is to take the initiative to "taste the beverage". Ironically this action further paralyzes his power of agency. After his "repeat[ing] the draught," Rip found that "his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined". His passivity finally reaches the thematic climax: "he fell into a deep sleep" (Irving 2014a: 43). Feminists contend that Sleeping Beauty is the most attractive woman in patriarchal texts because she embodies the principle of "object of desire". As an "object of desire," Sleeping Beauty has two salient features. One is that she is totally passive in her slumber, without any active actions, and the other is that she has no desire, or her desire is reduced to the minimum (Gilbert & Gubar 2000: 40). Analogously, Rip on the mountain has also reached the apex of passivity through his dearth of human desire. He is no longer a hunter stalking in the woods, but instead a mere participant in nature: living and sleeping in the mountain in harmonious coexistence with other creatures. The fundamental creed of posthumanism is the decentring of human beings in ecology. Posthumanism, Cary Wolfe maintains, "comes both before and after humanism". "Before" means that men are embedded in both biological and technological worlds, "the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms" and "after" refers to "the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks" (2010: xv). Put simply, posthumanism designates both the period of coexistence between men and animals before human domination on earth, and the historical moment in which we have systematic ecological reflections upon our anthropocentric attitudes towards environment. In light of this understanding, Rip's experience on the mountain epitomises a posthumanist relationship with the environment.

Rip's sleep is the most crucial linchpin in the story, however, it is a conspicuous caesura in the narrative. What has happened on the mountain

during his two-decade slumber? What is the significance of this narrative breakdown? Raymond Malewitz's animality taxon is particularly illuminating for our interpretation of Rip. First, an animal is often woven into "a given narrative" to shed light on readers' comprehension of human characters. Second, the animal refuses to participate in human plot and disrupts the narration, revealing its own agency. Third, "the brief moment" of the animal's "brute physicality" is reintegrated into an "anthropocentric recording" (2014: 547-548). Malewitz provides some insight into our understanding of non-human agency during Rip's sleep. The narrative goes dark for the twenty years Rip spends fast asleep atop the mountain. The happenings of this period, however, may be gleaned from the sharp contrast between Rip's pre and post-sleep activities.

Irving's careful delineation of Rip's awakening process deserves our scrutiny. Upon waking, Rip first looked around for his gun and dog. "But in the place of the clean well-oiled fowling-piece, he found an old firelock lying by him, the barrel incrustated with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm-eaten" (Irving 2014a: 43). Weapons have played a decisive role in distinguishing humans from animals in their coevolution process, and guns represent the definitive human victory over and the conquest of animals in nature. Rip's "favorite sport of squirrel-shooting" and Irving's usage of "fowling-piece" and "old firelock" evokes the aura of a primitive hunting society. However, this proud epitome of human civilization disintegrates on the mountain, with the implication of human agents giving way to non-human agents: the man-made "lock" fell off, the manufactured barrel was "incrusted with rust" by nature, and even "the stock" was consumed by worms. Paired with the dissolution of human superiority is the loss of Rip's dog. Rip "whistled after him and shouted his name, but all in vain; the echoes repeated his whistle and shout, but no dog was to be seen" (44). During his master's long sleep, the dog is no longer "his dog", a subordinate possession of human beings, but a wild wolf with its own agency. To borrow Donna Haraway's terms, Wolf's change indicates a transformation from "companion animals" to "companion species". That is to say, humans and animals, both as independent beings, become "messmates" and "comrades" at equal footing (17). Rip decided to find "the party, to demand his dog and gun" (44). "He grieved to give up his dog and gun" (45).

The frequent juxtapositions of his loss of gun and dog imply the fading of cultural superiority and the reintegration of man into nature as well as the emergence of non-human agency. "He again called and whistled after his dog; he was only answered by the cawing of a flock of idle crows, sporting high in air about a dry tree that overhung a sunny precipice, and who, secure in their elevation, seemed to look down and scoff at the poor man's perplexities" (44-45). Calling the dog's name bestows individuality upon the animal and whistling suggests the human adoption of animal language to

have interspecies communication; that the calling and whistling are “answered by the cawing of a flock of idle crows” implies the dialogue between two different species rather than the demand issued from human beings to would-be human beings. “Human-animal relations cannot be regarded as incomplete versions of human-human relations but must be regarded as complete versions of relations between different kinds of animals” (Patton 2003: 97). Furthermore, animals, instead of being “blank pages onto which human write meanings” (Fudge, “History”), have gained their own subjectivity by gazing back at human beings. The idle crows “secure in their elevation, seemed to look down and scoff at the poor man’s perplexities”. Likewise, the cat’s gaze of his naked body makes Jacques Derrida realise the fact that “the animal has been looking at us” and refreshes his memory of “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (2002: 372). Also the animal as an agent, in returning “the gaze of the knowing subject,” is further silhouetted by “the poor man’s perplexities”.

Irving’s ambidextrous coupling of ascending animal intelligence with descending human understanding accentuates the non-human agency of Rip’s mountain experience. In fact, Rip’s passivity on the mountain activates not only the agency of animals, but also the agency of inanimate things. From the empty gully, “to his astonishment a mountain stream was now foaming down it” and the stream became an actant with its own language: “leaping from rock to rock, and filling the glen with babbling murmurs” (Irving 2014a: 44). Even the ravine is found to have transformed. “At length he reached to where the ravine had opened through the cliffs to the amphitheatre; but no traces of such opening remained” (44). The juxtaposition of amplifying the diversity of agencies and accentuating the passivity of human beings indicates the limitations of anthropocentric order. From the author’s attempt to “find ways of describing agency at work through the interactions of a complex and widely dispersed network of actants, both human and other-than-human” (Armstrong 2008: 196), we can fathom Irving’s buried truth: human beings should stand under nature to *understand* the surrounding environment and our appropriate position in nature. The separation of human beings from animals is reversed with the reintegration of man into the sphere of non-human agents. Rip’s sleep in the mountain, his passivity in a natural environment, and his dependence among non-human agents in nature reframe human beings into a larger order of mixed species.

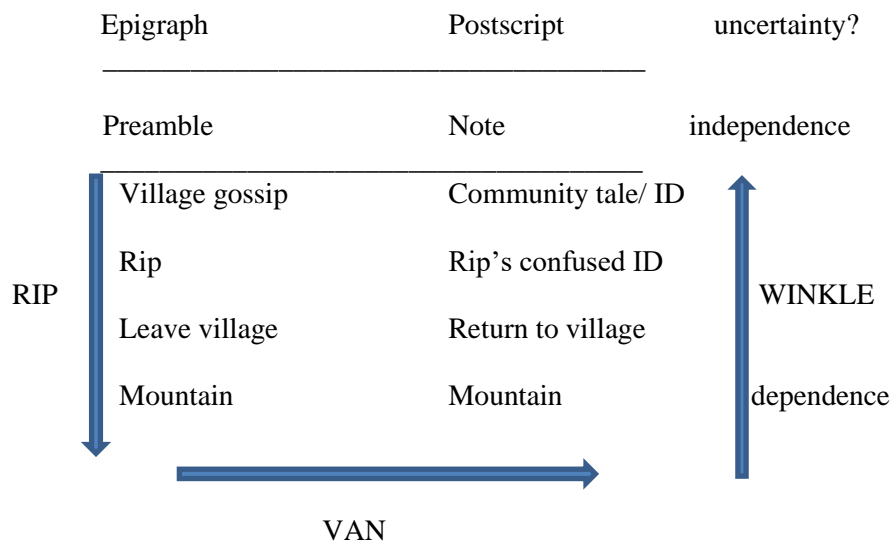
Rip’s harmonious coexistence with non-human agencies on the mountain is incompatible with anthropocentrism. Thus his return to the village is greeted with an identity crisis. “I’m not myself – I’m somebody else” but “I was myself last night” (Irving 2014a: 49). To solve his confounded identity, Rip resorts to language. Language, as the classic mark of human distinction from animals, is often prioritized. “Rip’s story was soon told” (51). His story reintegrates him into village society and he himself becomes “a

chronicle of the old times ‘before the war’” (52). He does not tire from repeating his tale, it being noted “he used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived at Dr. Doolittle’s hotel” (53). Narrating his experience on the mountain becomes paradoxical: both passive and active. On the one hand, telling the villagers of his twenty-year torpor is a public acknowledgement of his passivity, and a declaration of his dependence on non-human agencies. Why then is he compelled to tell his story or even enjoy telling his story? Sigmund Freud’s insightful analysis of repetition compulsion sheds light on this issue. Contradictory to “the Pleasure Principle”, many patients frequently dream about past traumatic experiences, therefore repetition compulsion overrides sexuality and becomes a more elementary, more primitive drive instead. From his careful observations of traumatic neuroses, Freud discovers that the sudden occurrence of traumatic events often paralyzes the patients’ comprehension. This paralysis leaves them in the vulnerable position of passive witness. Nonetheless their verbal repetitions enable them to build up a psychological mastery over past passivity, just like a child playing the Fort/Da game: “at the outset he was in a passive situation ... but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part” (Freud 1955: 285). In Freud’s line of psychoanalytic theory, Rip’s narrative repetitions could be interpreted as an attempt to retrospectively “master” his original passivity in a psychological sense, although this does not accord with actual mastery in reality. That also explains the inconsistency of Rip’s narration: “He was observed, at first, to vary on some points every time he told it, which was, doubtless, owing to his having so recently awoken” (Irving 2014a: 53). He has to verbally repeat the story to squeeze his radically new experience into the procrustean bed of anthropocentric narrative order, until “it at last settled down precisely to the tale I have related” (53). In short, Rip’s constant narrative repetitions of the mountain episode exemplify a human attempt to master one’s feelings and experiences about relating to an environment, but not over the environment itself.

If Rip’s narration is an individual behaviour, Peter Vanderdonk’s account broadens it to include a collective effort to transform public disbelief into the suspension of that disbelief. Interesting enough, Peter’s testimony of Rip’s story also resorts to linguistic signifiers. “He proves its intertextual consistency with the equally ‘marvellous’ but historically established legend of Hudson”. Therefore the local story becomes “historic nutrient for national identity, a founding myth of American culture” (Wang 2014: 321). Moreover, Diedrich Knickerbocker’s repetition of the posthumous writing has transcended what was a localized American tale into universal knowledge of human beings. Knickerbocker first explores the form of “a posthumous writing” to add weight to its authenticity. “Posthumous” implies detached objectivity with its successful passage of the test of time, and “writing” carries more weight than an oral tale in people’s psychology.

Then, Knickerbocker appeals to the Symbolic power of justice, another metamorphosis of linguistic signifiers. “I have seen a certificate on the subject taken before a country justice and signed with a cross, in the justice’s own handwriting” (Irving 2014a: 54). The result is that the justice’s signature imbued confidence in its absolute certainty and quelled any natural human skepticism. “The story, therefore, is beyond the possibility of doubt” (54). Finally, the story becomes a book of human knowledge. As “the result of all these researches”, it becomes “a little clasped volume of black-letter” for historians to study “with the zeal of a book-worm” (33). Indeed the book is widely circulated in libraries. “It is now admitted into all historical collections, as a book of unquestionable authority” (33). Its extensive circulation as a library book suggests that the story has surpassed the stage of being a local American tale, and has reached the realm of knowledge for all humankind. Irving has deliberately underscored the universal implication in his description of peoples from various countries: Dutch governors, American Citizens, Old England subjects, German Emperor Rothbart, French Queen Anne, as well as Tartars and native Indians.

Irving’s well-designed structure of the story dovetails with the ingenious name of the protagonist Rip van Winkle, as is illustrated by the diagram:



“Rip” means “to cause to tear quickly and violently” in its dictionary definition (*Longman Contemporary English-Chinese Dictionary* 1988: 1223), and the word suggests that Rip the character has stripped away his cultural coat of knowledge as he moves from the village to the mountain, and there he gives up his anthropocentric control over the non-human creatures to “let things rip” in their own ways. Then on the mountain, he is transported as if by a special vehicle (“Van”) to a different time and space, where anthropocentric linear temporality is suspended and transformed into a territory of interactive networks of agencies among which a human actant is just one of many participants. In this special territory, each creature depends on others in mutual ways. After Rip’s twenty-year-stay on the mountain, he returns to the village. “Winkle” refers to “a type of small sea animal that lives in shell and is eaten as food” (*Longman ...*: 1625). On his way back to culture, he is picking up language to build up the imaginative mastery of his passivity and surrounding environment. He becomes a “winkle” living in his imaginative shell. After frequent narrations, his tale becomes “the food for thought” for the villagers to comprehend and consume, for readers to contemplate over the shell of anthropocentric imagination of mastery. For this reason, the wandering Wolf is again integrated into human narration. Upon his arrival at the village, Rip found that “a half-starved dog that looked like Wolf was skulking about it”. When “Rip called him by name”, the dog responded with violent rejection: “the cur snarled, showed his teeth and passed on”. Still stubborn to his own imagination, Rip provides a thought-provoking explanation. “‘My very dog’, sighed poor Rip, ‘has forgotten me!’” (Irving 2014a: 46) The dog “has forgotten me,” but it is still “my dog,” a human possession, a topic still within the sphere of human narration, albeit in negative responses. If the dog simply wanders away in the middle of the story, or disappears from the plot, it would mark an absence in the anthropocentric narrative, an indicator of men’s incapability which is unbearable to human imagination. Through constant narrative repetitions, Rip’s encounter in the woods gradually progresses from individual story, to collective myth, and finally to a “volume of black-letter” human knowledge circulated in the libraries, “as a book of unquestionable authority” (33). Thus, human confidence in their mastery over the environment reaches an apex.

However, in the “Postscript”, the very last section of story, Irving casts doubt on anthropocentric superiority. In “the Garden Rock”, a skilled Indian hunter is reported to “pursue his game within its precincts” (55). Hunting is a symbolic rite of passage for a boy moving into the world of adulthood. If the boy can demonstrate his resources and skills in killing or conquering a dangerous animal, he will pass the test and be accepted as a qualified member of civilized society. But in Irving’s story, the initiation rite of “a hunter is hunting” is rewritten into an opposite version of “a hunter is being hunted”. An Indian hunter, well-known for professional skills, is duped by

his wild game and follows it to a raging torrent before perilous precipices, and then the hunter as well as his supreme anthropocentric confidence was washed away and “swept down precipices, where he was dashed to pieces” (56). Irving’s skepticism on human superiority in the postscript is also echoed in the epigraph at the very beginning of the story: his doubt about human confidence becomes the buried truth in the grave. “Truth is a thing that ever I will keep/ Unto thylke day in which I creep into/ My sepulcher –” The stages in the downward order of the diagram are ingeniously paired with the phases in the upward order of it. The ephemeral uncertainty in the epigraph immediately gives way to our supreme confidence in the “unquestionable authority” of the story. Then from “the idle personages” who are “talking listlessly over village gossip” (38), Rip is singled out to “leave the village” to seek the buried truth. Next, while on the mountain, he discovers his authentic life and appropriate human position amid the non-human agencies of mixed species. Upon his “return to village”, he is eager to regain “his gun and dog”, a symbolic gesture of hunter’s conquest over non-human counterparts in nature. But he failed. The picking up of cultural superiority in his “return to village” forms a sharp contrast with the stripping away of anthropocentrism in the “Leave village” section. His failure to regain anthropocentrism results in his “Confused Identity”. To cope with the problem, he resorts to linguistic repetitions to reconstruct his psychological mastery over his passivity. With the efforts of venerable Peter Vanderdonk, Rip’s story becomes an indispensable local tale in the community, which invalidates the paralleled “village gossip”. Then Diedrich Knickerbocker further renders it into a written document and confers upon it judicial verdict. The narrative “fidelity” of the “absolute fact” in the Note is also reverberated in the Preamble: “its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has been completely established” (33). The final defeat of the brave hunter in the Postscript makes salient the enigmatic message buried in “my sepulcher” in the epigraph: Irving is uncertain about human independence from their dependent networks with non-human agencies in their surrounding environment. In sum, Irving doubts man’s ability to separate from his surrounding environment, full as it is with dependent non-human agents.

If we contextualise “Rip van Winkle” in the setting of the American Revolution, a theme of dependence becomes salient. Among the townsfolk, it seems to be universally accepted that the United States of America has broken from the Old World and become an independent nation in the New World. However, Washington Irving is very skeptical of the radical claims made for the American Revolution, and he ingeniously organizes his Declaration of Dependence¹ in three orchestrated forms: domestic, political, and existential. The first point is about domestic dependence. Humanists glorify individualism, the uniqueness of each person. But in Irving’s story, Rip van Winkle, after his arrival at the village, “beheld a precise counterpart

of himself" (49) who was not only "a ditto" of his appearance but also a doppelganger of his "hereditary disposition to attend to any thing else but his own business" (52). The individuality of the father and son is further erased by linguistic signifiers. Their sharing of exactly the same name (Rip van Winkle) runs contrary to our convention that language can help us to differentiate identical entities. Thus the humanist claims to individual distinction have been completely undermined. The descendant of the absent Wolf further reinforces the theme of generational reproduction. Given the fact the typical canine lifespan well below the 20 years of Rip's sleep, the dog Rip encountered in the village must be Wolf's offspring. The skulking dog "looked like Wolf" to such a degree that even Rip, the dog-owner who has been sharing weal and woe with the canine as a "fellow-sufferer in persecution" (39) for many years, mistakes it for Wolf: "My very dog has forgotten me" (46).

In the second place, generational dependence in domestic form is amplified to challenge the humanist claims of individualism, and moreover, political dependence is also re-examined in light of revolution and reproduction to reconsider American patriotism. America has "thrown off the yoke of old England" and become a new and independent nation, and Rip is now "a free citizen of the United States". Everyone is excited about elections, rights, congress, and liberty. Ebullient patriotism is overflowing everywhere. "There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it," with inquiries about "Federal or Democrat" abound (47). But, for Rip, it is just an ephemeral novelty and "the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him," and "Rip now resumed his old walks and habits" (52). The only significant change is a portrait of General Washington replacing that of King George inside "the Union Hotel". Yet a scrutiny of the contextual details reveals that even this metamorphosis turns out to be problematic. Rip "recognized on the sign the ruby face of King George," but the same countenance "was decorated with" different things: the initial red coat replaced by a blue buff, the sceptre by a sword, with the addition of "a cocked hat" on the head and "large characters" of "General Washington" to differentiate him from King George (46-47). Then readers come to realize Irving's buried truth: the tavern sign is King George's face repainted as George Washington. This symbolic redrawing in itself suggests something about how the tale undermines humanist claims to individual distinctiveness, which the appearance of Rip's son and doppelganger frames in terms of descent. This is further underscored by the similarity of the names of the British King and American General. Despite the historical fact of their names, Irving is very artistic in presenting their names. He stresses "George" in their first names, and juxtaposes their names in the tavern scene to give readers the impression that "General Washington" is just a subordinate commander of "King George". And "his Majesty George *the Third*" of "*old England*", instead of King of Great Britain, further accentuates the

implication of descendent dependence. In light of this thinking, the political independence of America from old England is no more than a decorative disguise of the same continuing dependence, a bluffing gesture to satisfy Americans' patriotic vanity in desiring to become an independent nation. The theme of revolution and reproduction on a political stratum is further paralleled in the depiction of nationalized animals: English foxhounds and American foxhounds.

Irving's emphatic treatment of Washington as the national symbol also suggests an animal connotation. That Washington is an avid fox hunter is a well-known fact to his contemporaries, including Irving. Before moving to Philadelphia, this Virginia farmer was extremely passionate about dog breeding. Washington's diaries were filled with detailed experiments of "crossing and mating of dogs" because he was eager to create perfect "American hounds" (Coren 2002: 252). English foxhounds are pack-orientated and slower, not suitable for "the broader expanses of open ground in the Americas". After his careful breeding of English foxhounds, Washington successfully creates "American foxhounds". "Washington's foxhound also has a uniquely American personality that contrasts it to its English cousin". American foxhounds tend to "act individually", and "take the lead" as needed by circumstances. The canine personality mirrors the nation's aspiration, and becomes a model for American citizens. These animal qualities of "staunch, tough individualists who would work together when called upon [are] a perfect match for this Founding Father's view of the citizens of his new nation" (261). The boundary between dogs and men is deliberately blurred. Moreover, Washington was an enthusiastic fox-hunter but simultaneously, a dog lover who bred foxhounds. And Washington's hobby of fox-hunting is a notably British practice, but is exercised on American continent. All of this raises a paradox about the theme of dependence organically woven in the story. The fact that Washington developed the American foxhound from its English precursor suggests the themes of revolution and reproduction are closely related in this cluster of images: Washington and American foxhound, the younger Rip and Wolf's offspring.

American foxhounds are evolved from British foxhounds, and they have lots of similarities. People, however, arbitrarily choose to celebrate their distinctions and ignore their connections to flatter the breeders' vanity for individualist creativity. Likewise from a political viewpoint, the United States of America evolved from Britain, but Americans decide to eulogize their unique American-ness and repudiate any dependence on their mother country to satisfy their patriotic vanity for independence. In fact, this phenomenon is not confined only to Americans, but it is a universal phenomenon among all human beings. This leads to the third point of the essay.

Irving evinces existential dependence of human beings on animals. Human beings evolved from animals, and share many common grounds. Humans, however, choose to glorify their differences from animals and repudiate their connections with their wild counterparts to boost their anthropocentric pride. Irving dismantles this anthropocentrism by inserting human agents into larger networks of non-human agents, as analyzed in the above-mentioned sections. The insertion of human beings into a larger biological order is a theme Irving continues in his later works. The featuring of the mountain environment is the foreground of “The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow”. At the beginning of the story, Irving purposefully delineates non-human agents: the gliding brook, the whistling quail, and the tapping woodpecker. “Sleepy Hollow” opens a cosmos larger than just the human world, and its “Legend,” rather than its story, carries a sense of natural mystery and exceeds anthropocentric comprehension. “The Birds of Spring” continues to accentuate animal agency, “The Enchanted Island” and “The Voyage” put human beings in maritime settings to underscore human dependence on the overwhelming environment. The idea that the sea becomes an animated agent and exposes the vulnerability of anthropocentrism is further reinforced in Irving’s historical works of *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus*, as well as *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* and *Astoria*.

Irving’s open attitude towards the dynamic relationship between human beings and their surrounding environment is very instructive for current theoretical debates involving animal studies. To expose anthropocentrism in our representations of animals, many writers endeavour to narrate stories from the animal perspective, as if human beings could really experience “what is it like to be a bat” (Nagel 2003: 435). Thus our representations of animals involve a paradox: “human language appropriates animal experience while critiquing the anthropocentrism inherent in human’s relations with animals” (Caracciolo 2014: 485). Susan McHugh crystalises the issue into an essential question of representation: if animals are “serving [as] a metaphor for the poetic imagination and voicing the limits of human experiences,” then how can human beings actually access “literary animal agents?” (2014: 487) McHugh advises us to reject metaphorical animals with “anti-representational forms,” and pay especially close attention to the failures between “the representational forms and material conditions of species life” (489-490). Inspired by McHugh’s seminal essay on animal agency, Malewitz has extended the metaphor to cover anthropocentric narration, and defined animals as the assigned functions within a human framework. His theory of animality taxon stipulates three phases. At the beginning, an animal functions as a “rhetorical device” in a given human narration. Then, the animal temporarily resists the advancement of “some anthropocentric plot”, and its own agency will “emerge in the brief moment before, or perhaps during, anthropocentric recoding” (2014: 548). Finally,

the ephemeral “trans-signification” of animal agency will be reintegrated into the narration. David Herman summarizes it as “the emplotment, resistance to plotting, and re-emplotment of the [animal]” in human narration (2014: 432). Original as the model is, Malewitz leaves some essential questions unanswered: Why does animal agency “emerge in the brief moment?” How do human beings reintegrate the wandering animal into their orbital account? What is the significance of the discussions of animal agency?

Irving’s “Rip van Winkle”¹ offers potential answers. Rip stands under nature and *understands* the appropriate position of humans among the non-human agencies on the mountain. The recognition of non-human agency represents an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of animals, but subjectivity is traditionally regarded as an exclusive privilege of human beings, and is inveterately denied to animals. Therefore, the acknowledgement of animal agency becomes temporary, and Rip’s twenty-year stay on the mountain becomes a “wink”, a “brief moment”. After his return to the village, Rip builds up his anthropocentric confidence and mastery of the incomprehensible experience through constant linguistic repetitions. The repetitions from Peter and Knickerbocker have further erased the traces of animal agency and developed anthropocentric mastery from passive dependence.

Moreover, Irving’s open attitude toward dialogic communication with nonhuman agents frees the either/or binary opposition found in current animal studies. Many scholars, Caracciolo, McHugh, and Malewitz among them, persistently pursue literary animal agency with a minimum degree of anthropocentric appropriation, but their persistence ultimately leads to scientific observations and standard animal behaviours. It “runs the risk of ahistorical, universalist prescriptions about how to treat or interact with nonhuman animals” (Lundblad 2009: 500). The “ahistorical, universalist prescriptions” of animal agency are incongruent with the requirements of artistic appreciation of literary works: ambiguity, complexity, multiplicity. As a solution to this dilemma, Jeffrey M. Peck views animals from a different perspective to re-examine “the epistemological structures that organise how we know, how our knowledge gets transmitted and accepted” (1985: 51). This is the fundamental reason Michael Lundblad calls for a shift

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1. This phrase is borrowed from Robert A. Ferguson. For Ferguson, the theme of “Rip van Winkle” is “how Rip comes to be taken care of” in the New World (2005: 530). Before Judith Gardenier, Rip cried “I am your father!” which is “a declaration of dependence” on the daughter for his helpless old age (537). This paper differs fundamentally from Ferguson’s understanding of dependence in both scope and depth. Ferguson, “Rip van Winkle and the Generational Divide in American Culture”, *Early American Literature* 40(3): 529-54 (1995).

from “animal studies” which is about “advocacy for nonhuman animals”, to “animality studies” which “emphasizes the history of animality in relation to human cultural studies” (2009: 500). The shortcoming of Lundblad’s model is that animals are employed as inferior counterparts to silhouette the edifice of human civilization. In short, the current debate involves two battling sides: one party sides with animals to advocate nonhuman agency and the other, fundamentally rooted in anthropocentric superiority, suggests that human beings condescend to animals for purposes of self-reflection. Irving does not align with the either/or binary opposition, but is open to the dynamic “humanimal” (Mitchell 2003: xiii) process. Ultimately, we should be hampered by neither our claims of animal agency nor our deep entrenchment of anthropocentrism; instead, we should maintain a dialogic relationship between human and animals.

* Acknowledgement

This article is supported by “2015-2016 U.S.-China Fulbright Visiting Research Scholar Program”.

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