

USABLE VS. ABUSABLE PAST. A REFLECTION APROPOS OF TWO  
(PUBLICATION-POLITICIZATION) DATES IN THE HISTORY OF U.S.  
LITERATURE

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*This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Andrzej Kopcewicz –  
in the spirit of common loyalty to a uniquely usable past.*

ABSTRACT

Using as examples two radically different classic texts, Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Stephen Crane's *The red badge of courage*, the article reflects on the scope (limits) of politicization of literary discourse in the guise of direct contextualization and radical recontextualization. In the analytical part, it is argued that both works belong properly to the realm of existential facticity (*Faktizität*) rather than historiographic factuality (*Tatsächlichkeit*).

I even believe that all of us suffer from  
a consuming historical fever and should  
at least realize that ...

(Nietzsche [1874] 1980: 8)

In *Notions of the Americans*, Cooper ([1828] 2001: 3) ventured to suggest that in the nineteenth century even a very close and detailed statistical work on the United States could not keep its place as an authority even for five short years, as though intuiting that between 1877 and 1893 the country would go through a succession of five presidents, for example. The times proved the most tumultuous and dynamic period in the history of the U.S. (a debtor nation in 1860 become the most prosperous body politic in the world in just over fifty years). In many ways believed to be representative of the new republic's paradoxical es-

sence, it was – as bears repeating – an era of territorial expansion, rapid population growth, technological advances, burgeoning cities, market revolution, mass communication, rampant individualism, entrepreneurial spirit, *laissez-faire*, phrenology, optimism, boastfulness, economic boom-and-bust, a civil war, struggle for women's suffrage, temperance, emergence of both a popular culture and a national (imperialist, as we have been self-flagellatingly advised to call it today) literature. It is a well-entrenched view, informed by the ever-present anxiety of origins, that time-past is accessible, manageable and communicable only as teleological-functional historical time. From the specific vantage point of cultural studies, Fisher (1991a: xx) notes that nineteenth-century American texts have always constituted “the battleground where shifts in national self-conception and the accompanying shifts in the cultural projects of a generation are fought out”.

1819 and 1895 happen to be two of the most noteworthy dates in the history of U.S. literature, marking respectively the publication of Washington Irving's “Rip Van Winkle” and Stephen Crane's *The red badge of courage*. From what is known, both texts were penned on the spur of the moment, by men not only aware of but also deeply engaged in the current economic and socio-political curriculum. Both works were published without any significant delay, catapulting the authors into instant and enduring fame. In the aggregate space (by any measure, in any received foliation) of no more than one hundred and fifty pages, the two works not only embrace the better part of the century but between them offer, from a comparable historical distance, fictional transcription of two truly pivotal (formative and re-formative) moments in the history of the United States: the War of Independence and the Civil War. On the assumption of a privileged access and superior insight today, 1819 and 1895 (can be made to) offer no short supply of all sorts of intriguing and/or newsworthy (“headline”, “objective”) occurrences, developments, materialities, particularities, iconography, ephemera and exotica; in a word, cultural detritus that is increasingly admitted into literary studies. Critical Discourse Analysis teaches that the circumstances accompanying the production and reception of any utterance are always an essential part of its meaning. It is very intriguing indeed, why these two particular works should have appeared on these two particular respective dates? To what extent were they informed and determined (liberated/constrained) by the contemporary context? Would they lend themselves to a significantly different appreciation had they each been published a decade later, or a couple of years earlier, for that matter, or if they had been purposely commissioned and deliberately negotiated into existence, to begin with? Should these two important literary dates be appreciated as historical events, as part of the historical curriculum? Generally, does a text in and of itself become upon publication an “event”? And, conversely, are historical events and material history always

viable (essential) literary and, more broadly, humanistic considerations? Even more broadly, do all (past) events demand/warrant (detailed) interpretation? And is all interpretation (even the so-called reasonable judgment) predicated upon its anticipated impact in the present? Are we condemned to predicative interpretation (read: politicization), or is it possible to existentialize (read: humanize) oneself out of this discourse. And how may the past, generally, be best/properly put to present use(s)? Last and certainly not least – to borrow at the level of the individual reader rather than a whole interpretive community from Doris Lessing’s quintessential Martha Quest (1970: 200) – “What has this got to do with me?”

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In *The age of improvement*, Briggs (1959: 208) claims that 1819 was one of the most troubled years of the nineteenth century. Coterminous with the birth of the future Queen Victoria, in 1819 the mythopoetic designation of New World identity was formally appropriated by a South American nation (Great Colombia); Spain ceded Florida to the United States in exchange for the cancellation of \$5 million in debts; William Ellery Channing presented his “Baltimore Sermon” that once and for all split the Unitarians and the Calvinists; Missouri formally requested to be admitted into the Union as a slave state (effecting the controversial Missouri Compromise the following year); the American Anti-Quarian Society and the American Geological Society were founded (the latter at Yale College); training of students for military leadership (future ROTC) began with the establishment of Norwich University; the country experienced its first serious economic downturn (the Panic of 1819); a landmark Supreme Court decision (*McCulloch v. Maryland*) upheld the right of Congress to establish a national bank; the “Dartmouth College Case” first elaborated the distinction between public and private corporations; the first U.S. immigration law introduced procedures for numerical registry of immigrants; the American lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows was established in Baltimore; the Fellenberg manual labor school movement was inaugurated; the Underground Railroad began its operations; the top British authority on the U.S. William Cobbett published his first book on the subject; steamboat traffic began on the Missouri; the New York Picture Gallery for the display and sale of art was opened; the first American Beethoven Society was founded in Portland; the first American steamboat crossed the Atlantic; Thomas Cole and James Gordon Bennett first arrived in America, as did the saw-maker’s anvil; Thomas Jefferson helped to found and design the campus of the University of Virginia to Roman architectural standards, and completed his Bible: *The life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth*; patent leather started being manufactured in the U.S.; the

first canned (sea) food and the first bicycles (wooden “hobbyhorses”) appeared in Boston and New York – last but to many undoubtedly not least, Mme Adolphe became the first woman to perform on a tightrope in the United States.

The year 1895 records the death of Fredrick Douglass (b. 1818); the publication of the federal report “What the United States government has done for history”; the establishment of the American Economic Association, of the National Medical Association, of the New York Public Library as well as of the American Bowling Congress; Winston Churchill’s first trip to America (coterminous with the break-up of the first great Anglo-American marriage, that of his parents, Lord Randolph Churchill and Jeannie Jerome); the peak of a severe five-year depression; Theodore Roosevelt (at age 37) taking office as New York’s police commissioner (as well as completing *The winning of the West*); Joshua Slocum setting sail from Boston to become the first man to circumnavigate solo the globe; President Cleveland’s use (without statutory authorization) of troops during the Pullman Strike; the delivery of the first in a series of (“Haymarket”) speeches by female labour agitator and anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre; the beginning of the U.S. involvement in Cuba; the change of the Ancient Order of Foresters into Foresters of America; the first gasoline-driven automobile developed by an American; the first car race; the completion in Chicago of a prototype steel-frame skyscraper; the first professional football game; the first coloured cartoon (“The Yellow Kid”); first movies; the first electric Christmas lights; the first formal cat show; the first formal display of African American art-technology-and-culture at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Georgia (marked by Booker T. Washington’s “separate as the fingers” speech); the development of volleyball as a less strenuous alternative to basketball; the inauguration of the national golf championships (the U.S. Open and the U.S. Ladies Amateur Open); George T. Loher’s tour from coast to coast on his “Yellow Fellow” wheel; the opening of the world’s first enclosed amusement park at Coney Island; the discovery of chiropractic as a healing art; the adoption by the Territory of Utah of a constitution advocating woman suffrage; the publication of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s *A red record* (the first comprehensive statistical study of lynching in America over the past three years); the appearance of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The woman’s Bible*, and her eightieth-birthday gala celebration at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House – last but to many undoubtedly not least, the first noticeable shortening of women’s skirts: in bicycle costumes, up to 2 inches from the ankle, the hems weighted with lead.

Many of the above developments are reflected in the history of just one place, namely, New York City. This special intersection of time and space is transcribed for instance by Andrew Delbanco (2005: 3) in his acclaimed recent study *Melville: His world and work*: “When Melville was born in 1819 in New York City, it was a town of about a hundred thousand people with streets lit dimly by oil lamps ... By the time he died in New York in 1891, its population had grown to

over 3 million ... and the city was forested by so many telegraph, telephone, and electricity poles ... These changes in how Americans lived were matched, and probably exceeded, by changes in how they thought about their lives”.

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It turns out that as a story of all things (of whatever that is not “no-thing”), the discourse of popular culture is a rather comfortable space to enter and appropriate; especially in what Martin Heidegger exposes as a common mode of “no-think”: curiosity, idle talk, and the resultant insouciant ambiguity. Working in an unintentional-intentional way, it is a substitute and down-graded conduit of knowing and knowledge. Without extending the present exercise in historiographic provocation (functional, contextual, originarian, anecdotal, speculative, synthetic, finally affirmative and egalitarian fallacy), it is safe to assume that given a little presupposition and a little slant, any of the major dates in the history of nineteenth-century U.S. literature would likely yield a similar coincidence, a similar additive bundle of facts, figures, sensations, and impressions, a similar superabundant antiquarian inventory of vignettes and quasi-pericopies. With the benefit of hindsight and superior acumen, culture in exigent action and Adamsian acceleration of civilizational processes may be traced at any point in time-past practically at will. Any one of these dates, as Gumbrecht (1997) paradigmatically demonstrates over a certain apparently inconspicuous year in the twentieth century, can excite the sensation of living “at the edge of time”. Any date can be retrodictively made to garner attention as a fact-grabbing year, a culminating moment (momentum) of history, a coincidence of uniquely inspirational thinking and a time of new beginnings. Practically any date could be excited today as an explanatory *annus mirabilis* (*Wunderjahr*), or *année terrible*, for choice. With Marx’s single most famous publication (of 1848) blending in perfectly at any point for ready ideological support, such junctures can be endowed with a panoptical, mediational, and attestational value. Furthermore, any number and any combination of these dates could be put together to narrativize-problematize a proleptic chronological *re-citatum*; ultimately (on the logic of the so-called demonstration effect), a projection objectifiable as “self-evident” socio-political and cultural relevance (i.e. truth).

It certainly makes sense to ponder the phenomenon of how a text so central to American culture as *Leaves of grass* (1855-1892) could not have emerged – to use Walt Whitman’s (b. 1819)<sup>1</sup> own appreciation – from any other era than

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<sup>1</sup> Besides Melville, this particular year records also the birth of such notable figures as James Russell Lowell, William Wetmore Story (destined, incidentally, to live till 1895), Charles Lanman, Thomas Dunn English, Edwin Laurentine Drake, David Ruggles, or Julia Ward Howe.

the latter half of the century, nor (even more centrally) from any other land. In general terms, however, it is certainly sobering to recall in some such context the renowned modern Oxford historian, archeologist and philosopher R. G. Collingwood. As against the notion of *ars historica*, he identifies (over) enthusiastic contextualists as scissors-and-paste dustbin amateurs – those who study periods by collecting doggedly all the extant testimony about a certain limited group of events hoping that somehow something will emerge out of it (see Fisher 1970: 3). To offer an independent illustration of the discourse of random exemplarity and accumulation of facts as a way of making sense of the world, Kammen (1984: 29-30) – referencing Bradstreet’s “Upon the burning of our house”, Curzon’s “The fire”, and Hawthorne’s “Earth’s holocaust” – calls for a broad investigative research into the cultural impact of fires, building his argument round the fact that: “Nine *major* fires occurred in New York City between 1791 and 1836. In 1829 alone there were 151 lesser fires there ... P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York City was devastated in 1865, 1868, and again in 1872”.<sup>2</sup> As Nietzsche cautions in his well-known early essay on the utilities and liabilities of history, “with a certain excess of history life crumbles and degenerates, and finally, because of this degeneration, history itself degenerates as well” ([1874] 1980: 14).<sup>3</sup>

The singularity of Mark Twain’s writing, for one, certainly cannot be explained by such dubious external co-incidences as the fact (blatantly *unnützes Wissen*) that on his journey East in August of 1853 he went “[o]nward on the *Lighting Express*, passing close to Saratoga Springs, where just a few days earlier a [Native American] resort chef named George Crum had invented the potato chip” (Powers 2005: 64), just as – one might still chip in – Herman Melville was in all likelihood applying in New York City the last finishing touches to (the first installment of) the magazine version of “Bartleby the scrivener, a story of Wall-street”. In a letter in 1824, commenting on the (rather surprising) success of his first tales and sketches, as though in anticipation of the late-twentieth-century re-contextualizing fever, Washington Irving talks about his own intuitive self-fashioning as an author: “I chose to take a line of writing peculiar to myself rather than fall into the manner or school ... there is a constant activity of thought and a

<sup>2</sup> The obvious political subtext in the second half of the nineteenth century of the radical modernization of Paris (de-revolutionization through boulevardization, accompanied by appropriation for purposes of public interest) by Baron Haussmann (hence the abomination of Houssmannization) is a conspicuous exception rather than a dormant universal reality.

<sup>3</sup> At another point in the essay, Nietzsche (1980: 21) speaks emphatically about “the repugnant spectacle of a blind lust for collecting, of a restless raking together of all that once has been”. In broad humanistic terms, however, he acknowledges: “That life requires the service of history ... must be understood just as clearly as the proposition ... that excess of history is detrimental to life” (Nietzsche 1980: 14).

nicety of execution ... more than the world appears to imagine ...” (Irving 2006: 399). Interestingly, the genesis of *The red badge of courage* offers a similar hermeneutic: “I deliberately started in to do a potboiler ... I got interested in the thing in spite of myself, and I couldn’t, I couldn’t! I *had* to do it my own way” (Stephen Crane quoted in Williams 2003: 175).

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Evidently, we are living at a time of performing discursive practices, when celebration of residual – by definition, hitherto almost always suppressed – local commonalities, particularities, peculiarities, conflictualities, contingencies, cases, causes, casuistries, of things disruptive and transformative seems to be the (politically correct) order of the day. In a post-theological environment, apparently nothing too digressive, nothing too obscure, nothing too trivial, and nothing too sensational is ruled out, and it does not stop at the bedroom door, either.<sup>4</sup> On his return from pre-history, Rip Van Winkle walks precisely into this kind of bustling contemporary discourse: the “haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens – elections – members of congress – liberty” (Irving [1819] 1963a: 38). However, notwithstanding the tempting possibilities galore of drawing parallels with his personal situation – liberation from the yoke of matrimony coupled with the country’s liberation from the yoke of political tyranny – Irving’s protagonist registers the new curriculum as “a perfect Babylonish jargon”. And even though he is eventually “made to comprehend [it]”, and is introduced into “the regular track of gossip”, he resolutely re-asserts himself as “no politician” – “the changes of states and empires made but little impressions on him” (Irving 1963a: 38, 42). *The red badge of courage*, a story that is doggedly historicized today – to pastiche Auden (1966a: 298) – “With might-be maps of might-have-been campaigns, / Showing in colour the obediences / Before and after” – deliberately deconstructs its specific grand historical moment. It con-founds (scrambles) its ideological and topographical context with a rather similar “hollerin’ here an’ hol-

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<sup>4</sup> Randomly, cf. the expository (“embarrassment”) anecdotal beginning (the opening paragraph) of a book tracing the rise of the novel in America, a study considered to be a groundbreaking model of contemporary literary scholarship: “Throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century, Ethan Allen Greenwood, a rather pedantic young diarist, each day recorded both the weather and the title of the book he was reading ... and occasionally noted the library from which the volume was borrowed – the Adelphi Fraternity Library, the Social Friends Library, or the unnamed circulating library he joined in 1806. ... But then we encounter a curious entry: ‘Rode out with the ladies. Returned and spent the evening agreeably. What I do not write here will not be forgotten.’ ... What did go on between Greenwood and the ladies? That question is pertinent in the historical record precisely because it is not answered in the autobiographical one” (Davidson 1986: 3).

lerin' there ... until I couldn't tell t' save m' soul which side I was on. Sometimes I thought I was sure 'nough from Ohier, an' other times I could 'a swore I was from th' bitter end of Florida". It is a stance foot-noted with a superbly ab-surd: "Nobody seems to know where we go or why we go ... nobody knows what it's done for" (Crane [1895] 1984a: 152, 170).

While, indisputably, people always live in some specific anthropological world "around here" rather than in the world "in general" (Geertz 1996: 262) – as far as literature is concerned, not all of it is born out of the so-called historical moment/contingency, and not all of it depends primarily on social genealogy or materialist etiology. As creatures of a particular time, place and circumstances, human beings are always informed by historical, cultural and ideological codifications. In one of his early novels, Melville ([1849] 1983a: 172) explains stoically that human world is a constantly mutating and evolving realm, with each age churning out busily its own manuals and guidebooks, and discarding as busily the old ones as waste paper in the process. Understandably, the present always holds the right to govern itself as it may please, events in the public domain always have underlying causes, and public discourse always holds sway over individuals. However, one is only to a certain extent inscribed (determined) as a set of larger cultural texts, engage(d) in the current curriculum, enterprise, the cultural productivity and material practice of the polis, subjected to the officialdom of circumscription, commission, imposition, regularity, duty, and necessity. In an open society serviced by market economy, given the freedom of choice (including the freedom of abstention), there can be found an alternative (*antho-logy*) to anything. Proverbially, everyone seems to be aware of the readily available superfluity of at least twelve different ways of worshipping God and the freedom of at least twelve different ways of not worshipping God at all. Literature, besides, is certainly different from the majority of practices, practicalities and, indeed, necessities. There is no literary legislature, strictly speaking, no legal code taking literature under its scope. "Wherever there is a table and quiet, there the novel may be written ... [be it] Washington Territory or Washington Square" (Norris [1902] 1964: 39).

Cultural literacy is not a *sine qua non* of social enfranchisement. Writing and reading as such may be generally taken for granted, but no one is condemned to literature. It bears repeating that belles-lettres is a zone of voluntary participation. Novels, stories, plays and poems need not be really written, to begin with, nor later read, for that matter. When literature does get written, it is usually informed immediately by literal rather than literary purposiveness-without-a-purpose, and as a body it is finally never a mechanical sum of "works". An exceptionally prolific, erudite, and self-conscious contemporary author offers provocatively: "Books are written out of ignorance, and if they go on living after they are written, it's only to the degree that they cannot be



understood” (Auster 1992: 40).<sup>5</sup> As though articulated against the present-day dogged orientation towards the specificity and particulars of the times-“when”, the places-“where”, the methods-“how”, and the reasons-“why”, a certain nineteenth-century storyteller of fabulous international renown – born April 2, 1805, in a one-room house on an island famous for its castles and manor estates, of (probably) a sickly 22-year-old shoemaker and an illiterate alcoholic laundress several years older than her spouse – announced happily on November 11, 1843 in a short text destined to become one of his best-loved tales that to come into the world in a duck’s nest in a farm-yard need not be of any lasting consequence whatever. Conversely, as Updike (2007: 7) points out with reference to a hugely celebrated early-nineteenth-century British novelist, there is no explanation as to why one secluded clergyman’s daughter (the sixth of seven children in the family) should prove a literary genius while hundreds (thousands?) of others do not.

With reference to a painting of a(n) apparently disconnected, disembodied pair of peasant shoes, Martin Heidegger, who in his own right as a philosopher would famously scoff at anecdotalism and historiographic details in his discussions of classical thinkers, argues principally that a work of art is not to be confused with a report about the process of making shoes.<sup>6</sup> (Instructively, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> One might want to refer the present argument to a larger discussion: “Much of what is canonical is the result not of conscious planning but of the serendipitous development of the ever-shifting contours of a culture, a discipline, or an interpretive community. To be sure, individuals and groups may fight vigorously over what is canonical, but what emerges may be very different from what they desire. To paraphrase Marx, individuals and groups construct canons, but not as they intend. ... Ultimately, canons and the canonical are collective enterprises involving both the conscious and unconscious elements of a culture ... creations in which rational design and precision engineering are wishful thinking” (Balkin – Levinson 2000a: 24).

<sup>6</sup> See Heidegger (1971a: 33-36, passim): “From Van Gogh’s painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand”; and yet, “[t]he art work lets us know what shoes are in truth”, Van Gogh’s “pair of peasant shoes comes in the work to stand in the light of its being”. The imaginary exemplary peasant woman wears undaunted the shoes without really noticing, let alone philosophizing about them; she simply dwells in the overtness of being and more immediately in the overtness of things. Day in and day out, she is (being) convinced through the aggregate and ongoing accretion of common practices, concerns and beliefs – *überzeugen* rather than *überreden* – about the focal phenomena of human life, about the “sameness” of things that *are*.

Instead of addressing and trying to take firm hold of the most fundamental issues, such as “I am” or more properly “being-there”, the contemporary discourse is generating a deplorable hustle and bustle, “troubling ourselves with peripheral matters that [have been] transformed into fundamental problems” (Heidegger 1998: 5). For Heidegger the true sense of history does not obtain in the ontic acquisition and sifting through material remains and records, or present-to-hand observable entities. His phenomenological ontological appreciation of the past as ongoing process of sedimentation and familiarization, the “handing down and repeating”, articulates the existential concept of authentic “historicality”, which does not necessarily require “historiology”. Against the putting once-for-all of individual events into “a series”, Heidegger talks about history as resolute recurrence of the possible, whereby “the future and having been are united in the Pre-

most visibly, cinema started being properly appreciated as art only when it moved decisively away from the strictly speaking documentary mode.) As is well recognized, there is an element of inherent weakness – read: naiveté, clumsiness, ineffectuality, vulnerability – in all humanism. Certainly, as William Carlos Williams (1968a: 150) puts it poignantly: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems”, it is difficult to get a sense of “what passes for the new”. Still, it was certainly (also) the nineteenth-century’s sentiment that the chief merit of any given poet is the spirit brought to the contemplation of humanity. “What think you I take my pen in hand to record? / The battle-ship, perfect-model’d, majestic, ... / Or the vaunted glory and growth of the great city spread / around me?—no; / But merely of two simple men I saw to-day on the pier in the / midst of the crowd ...” (Whitman 1982a: 284). Probably no other realm than literature endorses more fully the familiar chiasmic observation that not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.

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As indicated for instance by the title of the first American newspaper – *Publick Occurrences: Both Foreign and Domestick* (1690) – print journalism and periodical press used to be the bedrock of contextualization: trans-mission of information and dissemination of popular culture. A cornucopia of the so-called primary (*quelle*) sources for contextualists today, in broadly modern times the newspaper has been instrumental not only in recording but in actually shaping history. In his *American notes for general circulation*, Dickens ([1842] 2000: 270) identifies newspaper politics as something of a national obsession in the United States. To invoke the historical context of Washington Irving’s story: “In the long build-up to the outbreak of hostilities in the American Revolution of 1775 the press played an early part in dissenting against the authority of the British Crown ... one thing which seems to be clear is its role in the run to the conflict itself” (Conboy 2002: 37). Consistent with “Rip Van Winkle”’s deconstructive take on history (complete with a virtuoso dismantling of history’s primary tool and emblem, the gun<sup>7</sup>), Irving quite specifically denies (ridicules, in

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sent”, a condition “inherited” and yet “chosen” (Heidegger 1962: 438, 448-449, 435).

As Golomb (1995: 81) usefully points out, “the concept of the individual’s historicity is intended to emphasize the active dimension of authentic being. This balances the weight accorded to moods and such states of mind as anxiety and guilt”.

<sup>7</sup> “He looked round for his gun, but in place of the clean well-oiled [one], he found an old firelock lying by him, the barrel incrustated with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm-eaten” (Irving 1963a: 35). The author extends the point by having his hero – against “common sense” – “shoulder” the grossly inadequate artifact of history and parade in this equipage back into the village. He does so in a manner prefiguring the hopelessly displaced Billy Pilgrim in WW II – marched with other U.S. prisoners of war through the thoroughfares of the European theater

fact) the historical validity of the newspaper discourse. Instead of bringing home revolutionary alertness and exciting revolutionary spontaneity, instead of advancing a liberating new factuality, it proves to be a conduit of deferral, artifice, de-mobilizing intextuation, ultimately of stupefaction:

[W]hen by chance an old newspaper fell into their hands from some passing traveller ... they would listen to the contents, as drawled out by Derrick Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, a dapper learned little man, who was not to be daunted by the most gigantic word in the dictionary; and how they sagely they would deliberate upon public events some months after they had taken place

(Irving 1963a: 30).<sup>8</sup>

As for the discursive specificity of the Civil War: “Since the art of military intelligence was only in its infancy, generals and cabinet officers often learned from newspapers what was going on in the battlefield before they found out through the chain of command. / Above all the people lived by and through the newspaper during the four dreadful years of war. The newspapers described the battles in full detail, explained and analyzed the implications of the drift of events, published maps, and ran lists of dead and injured. ... As Oliver Wendell Holmes put it at the time, ‘Only bread and newspapers we must have. Everything else we can do without’” (Douglas 1999: 56).<sup>9</sup> *The red badge of courage* emerges quite literally out of this discourse: “He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts” – “every day the newspapers printed accounts ...” (Crane 1984a: 83, 84). However, almost as soon as he actually enters the theater of war, Henry Fleming rather inexplicably loses all (proper) interest in things contextual and topical. “After receiving a fill of discussions concerning marches and attacks, he went to his hut and crawled through an intricate hole that served it as a door. He wished to be alone with some new thoughts that had lately come to him” (Crane 1984a: 82). Henry’s interest in the topography of war (literally in the situation on the ground) is rekindled only when he becomes pathetically dislodged from the formal registry of his primary identity now, i.e. the 304<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment. For some time, driven by “a great desire to see, and to get news” (Crane 1984a: 145), the pro-

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of operations, dressed in a salvaged make-shift Cinderella costume: “You thought we would enjoy being *mocked*? [a pedestrian asked]. And do you feel *proud* to represent America as you do?” (Vonnegut 1971: 152).

<sup>8</sup> To reinforce the point, in the third part of the story, the central character of the scene, the “little man”, is evoked again as “Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, doling forth the contents of an ancient newspaper” – now replaced by an equally inconsequential “lean ... fellow, with his pockets full of hand-bills” (Irving 1963a: 38).

<sup>9</sup> One of the great legends of Walt Whitman, nursing injured soldiers during the Civil War, was instigated by his search for his own wounded brother, about whose fate he learned from a newspaper.

tagonist wanders helplessly around in a surreal landscape of deserted battlefields. The book comes in a sense full circle when – rather incredulously – he chances in the middle of the text’s geographical “nowhere” upon a newspaper. This time round, however, the newspaper does not provide information and orientation, and consequently fails as a possible source of specular confirmation and exultation. Henry registers the conspicuously abandoned gazette as de-faced (blank, mute), i.e. void of any relevance whatsoever. The prime mover of historical discourse is buried grotesquely in history’s rubbish-heap, and the hero does not make the least attempt to retrieve it and reignite it to any positive orientational or ideological use

He came to a fence and clambered over it. On the far side, the ground was littered with clothes and guns. *A newspaper, folded up, lay in the dirt.* A dead soldier was stretched with his face hidden in his arm. ... This forgotten part of the battle ground was owned by the dead men, and [Henry] hurried, in the vague apprehension that one of the swollen forms would rise and tell him to begone

(Crane 1984a: 145, 129; emphasis added).

It does not take a Lacan to realize that every past event partakes of the discourse of fiction. Even though Washington Irving’s script emerges from the archives of gentlemanly “historical researches” (courtesy of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker), historicizing his own life for public consumption Rip would “vary on some points every time” (Irving 1963a: 26, 43).<sup>10</sup> Also Henry Fleming proves (in fact inadvertently incriminates himself) to be a historicizing liar: “Over on th’ right, I got shot. In th’ head. *I never see sech fightin’*” (Crane 1984a: 154; emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> In fact, both cases confirm Maxwell’s well-known (if uncomfortable) contention that “in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw ...” (1979: 27).

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<sup>10</sup> For a recuperative reading along lines of positive historical validity cf. Wilczyński (1997: 2047, 2048), who claims that the story “deprives [Rip] of his own, private sense of integrity which is the cost of the mythical-historical continuity of the American enterprise”; “Rip is able to enter the present once more only *because* of the past, for his role is to recapitulate it for the benefit of the contemporaries. The cultural value of his narrative is inestimable even without its European roots ...”.

<sup>11</sup> For simple, direct, linear (read: forced) historicization of the novel investing it with elements that are not even remotely there cf. Lentz (2006: 9-10): “In the autumn of 1862, Henry Fleming had withdrawn from school and, defying his widowed mother’s arguments, left their New York dairy farm to enlist in the company forming in a nearby town. On the morning of May 2, 1863, he finds himself in a line of battle advancing through the part of northern Virginia known as the Wilderness Spotsylvania ... [I]t is clearly the historical Second Corps, commanded by the historical General Darius Couch. Their corps was one of the seven that along with cavalry and supporting formations, constituted the Army of the Potomac, under the command of Major General Joseph Hooker. Fleming and his fellows will be soon engaged in combat with Confederate soldiers from Major General Lafayette MacLaws’s division of the Army of Northern Virginia ...”.

“Rip Van Winkle” and *The red badge of courage* evade both direct contextualization (both primary and secondary politicization) and radical re-contextualization (anecdotalization). In the best tradition of classic American literature, both narratives prove instead to be stories about the human situation-condition as such rather than about any specific cultural and political situatedness. They are both immediately and definitely informed by *Sitz im Leben* [embeddedness in life] rather than any particular *Sitz in der Ideologie* [embeddedness in ideology]. No amount of detailed historiographic factuality (*Tatsächlichkeit*) – especially of the kind that is visited on the text from the outside – will en-lighten the protagonists’ troubled existential facticity (*Faktizität*); or rather existential vulnerability, as is the case here: “Who are you, anyhow?” (Crane 1984a: 97) – “I’m not myself – I’m somebody else” (Irving 1963a: 40). Admittedly, it is not fashionable today to extol the virtues of authenticity. Against the odds, despite the apparent insubstantiality of this discourse, the ultimate existential truth, originating and authenticating its own validity, may nevertheless prevail. Transcending a whole range of differences (reflected most visibly by the divide between the formulaic narrativity of the fairy-tale on the one hand and a thoroughly modern novelistic technique on the other), it may assert itself in a resolute pan-contextual articulability-repeatability: “Sure enough! ... it is himself!” (Irving 1963a: 41) – “Yes, it’s – it’s me” (Crane 1984a: 154).

As a function of the moment, the triumph of existential authenticity is never final and as such it offers no providential pattern. Generally, it is easy to conclude that humanism only too frequently lets us down. Still, it continues to offer the best discursive practice there is of finding an answer to Martha Quest’s haunting me-meaningful question. It is a discourse that may be facilitated by Ishmael’s congenial appreciation of time: “Some years ago – never mind how long precisely ...” (Melville ([1851] 1983b: 795).

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