Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* and Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow": A Curious Case of Cultural Cross-Fertilization?

Author(s): Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy


Published by: {aaass}


REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/2673075?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2673075?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.
Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* and Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”: A Curious Case of Cultural Cross-Fertilization?

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

*Yankee [ . . . ]* A nickname given to Americans; its meaning is unknown to us.

—A. S. Pushkin, “Dzhon Tenner”

As is well known, “influence” studies have fallen into disrepute in recent decades in western literary criticism. Linda Hutcheon rightly points out that this development constitutes an inevitable corollary to Roland Barthes’s announcement of the “death of the author” in 1968,1 shifting the site of meaning away from the flesh-and-blood author onto the interaction between text and reader, placing at issue “the loci of textual appropriation. On the one hand, we are dealing with *authorial* intent and with the historical issue of sources and influences; on the other, it is a question of *reader* interpretation whereby visible sources become signs of plagiarism, and influences yield to ‘intertextual’ echoes.”2 Hardly surprisingly, this Franco-American trend has made relatively few inroads in Russian criticism, for, after decades of Soviet privileging of the conceit of the writer as the source and arbiter of the meaning of his (or her) works, the author remains very much alive in Russian culture and criticism. While an exploration of the fascinating cultural implications of this divergence lies beyond the scope of this study, I would simply argue against dismissing this “aberration” as an instance of the, sadly, all too frequently invoked Russian “backwardness.” Rather we should regard it as a healthy corrective to the universalist claims of western literary theory. We know, after all, that a real historical person “makes” the literary work, even if, as Wolfgang Iser maintains, it is “the convergence of text and reader [that] brings the literary work into existence.”3 Writers are, after all, readers as well, and they react to what they read, as we all do, incorporating it into their own writing, in the process transforming it, arguing with it, making

Epigraph: A. S. Pushkin, “Dzhon Tenner,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. (Moscow, 1937–1959), 12:132 (hereafter *PSS*, 17 vols.). The article was originally published in *Sovremennik*, bk. 3 (1836): 205–56, signed “The Reviewer.” I have combined the word *yankee* Pushkin uses in English in the concluding sentence of the article with the “editor’s” footnote accompanying the word.


*Slavic Review* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999)
it their own. Moreover, while an examination of the process of crafting a literary work certainly has value in its own right, the juxtaposition of “genetically” related literary artifacts enriches the critic’s—and reader’s—experience of both texts. Taking these premises as my starting point, I will suggest that Pushkin’s writing of his masterwork Mednyi visadnik (The bronze horseman) was informed by his reading of Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

Irving’s story was published as the concluding piece in The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (1819–1820), the first work that Irving, who originally took up writing as “the gentlemanly exercise of the pen,” un- abashedly published to ameliorate his tenuous financial position and establish himself as a professional writer. The first American writer to achieve an international reputation, Irving is nonetheless credited with possessing but a limited literary talent. Yet along with the other “stand out” piece in this traveler’s compendium, “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” continues to exercise the American imagination to this day.

At first glance, Irving’s comic tale and Pushkin’s somber poem would seem to have little in common. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” focuses on an itinerant Connecticut Yankee named Ichabod Crane who has taken up the post of schoolmaster in the New York community of Sleepy Hollow, a prosperous Dutch settlement in a valley by the Hudson River. A voracious consumer of the local plenty, despite the awkward lankiness betokened by his surname, and a credulous enthusiast of supernatural tales and legends whose favorite book is Cotton Mather’s History of New England Witchcraft, Ichabod occupies a cozy, if nomadic, niche in the community:

When the school hours were over, he was even the companion and playmate of the larger boys; and on holyday afternoons would convoy some of the smaller ones home, who happened to have pretty sisters, or good housewives for mothers, noted for the comforts of the cupboard. Indeed, it behooved him to keep on good terms with his pupils. The revenue arising from his school was small, and would have been scarcely sufficient to furnish him with daily bread, for he was a huge feeder, and though lank, had the dilating powers of an Anaconda; but to help out his maintenance, he was, according to country custom in those parts, boarded and lodged at the houses of the farmers, whose children he instructed. With these he lived successively a week at a time, thus going the rounds of the neighborhood, with all his worldly effects tied up in a cotton handkerchief.


6. The 1949 Disney animated version of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (narrated by Bing Crosby) not only kept the work alive in the American cultural consciousness but also stands as testimony to the enduring appeal of Irving’s tale.

Ichabod, however, reserves his amorous attentions for one Katrina Van Tassel, the daughter of a flourishing Dutch farmer, enticed by her father’s abundant possessions and the bounteous fertility of his lands. He finds he has a formidable rival for Katrina’s affections in the local bully, Brom Van Brunt (nicknamed Brom Bones), who prowls the neighborhood with his gang of Sleepy Hollow boys playing pranks and generally hell-raising. One fateful evening, Ichabod goes to a party at the Van Tassel farm and finds his suit rejected. On his way home on a decrepit borrowed nag, he encounters the genius loci of Sleepy Hollow, the Headless Horseman, purportedly the ghost of a Hessian soldier decapitated by a cannon ball during a battle in the Revolutionary War who haunts the precincts of Sleepy Hollow seeking his lost head. The specter pursues Ichabod through the night, and the next day there is no trace of the hapless schoolmaster in Sleepy Hollow, leaving Brom Van Brunt free to wed the farmer’s daughter. The narrative leaves us with two versions of Ichabod’s fate: either he has indeed been spirited away by the supernatural rider or, scared out of his wits by Brom Van Brunt dressed up as the Headless Hessian and humiliated by Katrina’s rejection, “he had changed his quarters to a distant part of the country; had kept school and studied law at the same time, had been admitted to the bar, turned politician, electioneered, written for the newspapers, and finally had been made a Justice of the Ten Pound Court.”

Either way Ichabod survives in the old wives’ tales of Sleepy Hollow lore.

As a point of departure for my discussion of the striking, if not immediately obvious, convergences between Irving’s work and Pushkin’s, I would like to invoke Roman Jakobson’s account of what he terms the myth of the destructive statue in Pushkin’s works—specifically Kamennyi gost’ (The stone guest), The Bronze Horseman, and “Skazka o zolotom petushke” (The tale of the golden cockerel)—in his “The Statue in Pushkin’s Poetic Mythology.” Jakobson offers us a paradigm and typology for Pushkin’s appropriations of other works, and, moreover, a paradigm that emerges from the intersection of the poet’s personal experiences, poetic structure and image, and, at least implicitly, social and political context. Jakobson relates the significant structural parallels revolving around a statue in the three Pushkin works he surveys, all dating to the early 1830s, to the biographical facts of Pushkin’s life during the period of their composition, specifically to the problems that attended the poet’s marriage and his wife’s ambiguous relationship with the tsar. For the sake of brevity, I shall merely cite Jakobson’s topic sentences, which isolate the most significant points of similarity he identifies among the plots of the three Pushkin works and, more important, establish a structural model for Pushkin’s literary appropriations:

1. A man is weary, he settles down, he longs for rest, and this motif is intertwined with desire for a woman.
2. The statue, more precisely the being which is inseparably connected with the statue, has a supernatural, unfathomable power over this desired woman.

8. Ibid., 295–96.
3. After a vain resistance the man perishes through the intervention of the statue, which has miraculously set itself into motion, and the woman vanishes.9

Also pertinent is Jakobson's comment defending his thesis against the possible objection that Pushkin's works are borrowed from foreign sources:

Someone may object that we are not dealing with completely independent themes—The Golden Cockerel is actually an elaboration of Irving's "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer"; The Stone Guest is a variation on a traditional legend and borrows diverse details from Molière's Festin de pierre and the libretto of Mozart's Don Juan. In fact, however, a comparison of Puškin's poems with their foreign models clearly demonstrates the originality of his myth. From his models he selects only elements consistent with his own conception, and he transforms in his own way whatever contradicts it.10

I am concerned with this particular passage from Jakobson's argument for two reasons. First of all, Jakobson here gives an efficient statement describing how Pushkin employs his sources: he reshapes the source material to conform to his own personal "myth." Second, we should note the significant absence in Jakobson's list of a foreign source for Pushkin's masterpiece. Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" seems to fill this gap.11

Both "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and The Bronze Horseman are constructed around the following pattern (which, while deviating somewhat from Jakobson's paradigm, adheres to the basic principle of structural borrowing it exemplifies): the central character, a petty official, constructs dreams of future happiness dependent on marriage with a desired woman. In the course of the story, these dreams are shattered. The stories both culminate in a scene in which the "hero" confronts his "rival," the figure responsible for bringing to an end the desired relationship, in the guise of a supernatural horseman, brought to life either from death (the Headless Horseman) or out of a state of inanimateness (the statue of Peter the Great).12 The protagonists, Ichabod and Evgenii, flee their ap-

10. Ibid., 9–10 (emphasis in the original).
11. No dearth of sources have been put forward for Pushkin's Bronze Horseman. Pushkin himself, in his foreword and notes to the poem, mentions the historian Vasili Nikolaeveich Berkh, the Italian journalist Francesco Algarotti, and the poets Prince Petr Andreevich Viazemskii, Adam Mickiewicz, and V. G. Ruban as having inspired lines or sections of the poem. Critics and poets have added to this list, including Valerii Bruisov, who remarked that "the image of the statue come alive might have been suggested to Pushkin by M. Iu. Viel'gorski's story about a certain marvelous dream." See Valerii Bruisov, "Mednyi vsadnik," in his Sobranie sochinenii, 7 vols. (Moscow, 1975), 7:53. Waclaw Lednicki has gone so far as to speak of the "mosaic character of the poem" in relation to its sources. Waclaw Lednicki, Pushkin's Bronze Horseman: The Story of a Masterpiece (Berkeley, 1955), 19. To date, however, no one has proposed a source that might account for the plot structure of the poem as a whole. For a recent overview of possible sources that have been suggested for the poem, see Andrew Kahn, Pushkin's The Bronze Horseman (London, 1998), 98–108.
12. In this context, Lednicki makes the following observation in his discussion of The Bronze Horseman: "This motif of the animation of a statue or a portrait was especially pop-
parently fantastic pursuers through the night. In the aftermath of this adventure, both, in the end, disappear from the scene, exiled from the precincts over which the horsemen reign. Despite evident differences in tonality and treatment that mask their similarity, then, the tales follow isomorphous plot lines. There are also some striking coincidences in detail between the two tales, a comparison of which suggests how Pushkin may have adapted the material provided by Irving, not only to his own personal associations (as Jakobson proposes), but also to the historical and social realities of his cultural context.

Both Irving and Pushkin begin by locating the action in relation to a historically important river, thus setting the stage for the clash between historical forces played out in each work at the moment of confrontation between protagonist and horseman. As The Bronze Horseman opens, Peter stands “Na beregu pustynnykh vohn” (Upon the bank by barren waves), looking out over the Neva.15 “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” opens with the sentence:

In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at that broad expansion of the river denominated by the ancient Dutch navigators the Tappan Zee, and where they always prudently shortened sail, and implored the protection of St. Nicholas when they crossed, there lies a small market town or rural port, which by some is called Greensburgh, but which is more generally and properly known by the name of Tarry Town.14

We first note Pushkin’s economy and Irving’s loquaciousness, a contrast that may go a long way toward explaining why the similarities between the two tales have previously been overlooked. More important, the references to the Neva and the Hudson define a basic semiotic framework within which the conflict in each work unfolds. The river serves not only as a point of entry for Europe to what had hitherto been wilderness but as a permeable boundary as well, marking the limit of the privileged space that serves as the locus of each tale and also allowing the ingress of potentially disruptive outsiders. Irving emphasizes the centrality of spatial locus by identifying his tale in the title by the geographical locale in which it takes place: “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Pushkin, in like fashion, subtitles his work Peterburgskaja povest’ (A Petersburg tale). Moreover, arguably the statue of the Bronze Horseman itself, from which the poema draws its title, functions as a metonym of place.15


15. Interestingly, one translation appeared under the title Bezgalovyi mertvets (The headless dead man) thus focusing attention—as does the title The Bronze Horseman—on the supernatural character as the central figure in the work. On the significance of titles in Pushkin’s works, see Jakobson, Pushkin and His Sculptural Myth, 3–4. For an overview of
Both Evgenii and Ichabod, in the parallel passages in which they elaborate their visions of future marital bliss, reveal their powers of imagination. While Evgenii’s musings (“Zhenit’sia? Nu... za chem zhe net?...” [Get married? Well... why shouldn’t I? ...]), in which he envisions the course of his life to the grave, are pointedly prosaic, this passage is prefaced by the remark, “i razmechtalsia kak poet” (and, like a poet, set to musing), cautioning us not to dismiss his ability to dream too lightly. In the corresponding passage from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Ichabod reveals himself as a restless Yankee, his heart set more on the bounty Katrina represents than on the young woman herself. He confuses Katrina with the property owned by her father and dreams of the liquidation of these holdings, the transformation of the place into movable assets, disclosing an imagination as fertile as the land he covets:

As the enraptured Ichabod fancied all this, and as he rolled his great green eyes over the fat meadow lands, the rich fields of wheat, of rye, of buckwheat, and Indian corn, and the orchards burtihened with ruddy fruit, which surrounded the warm tenement of Van Tassel, his heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea, how they might be readily turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts of wild land, and shingle palaces in the wilderness. Nay, his busy fancy already realized his hopes, and presented to him the blooming Katrina, with a whole family of children, mounted on the top of a waggon loaded with household trumpery, with pots and kettles dangling beneath; and he beheld himself bestriding a pacing mare, with a colt at her heels, setting out for Kentucky, Tennessee, or the Lord knows where.

Both Evgenii’s and Ichabod’s dreams of course come to naught, defated by the competing visions of their more powerful rivals.

In this context I would finally point to what to my mind is the most significant convergence between the Pushkin and Irving works: the nature and function of the “supernatural” horsemen. In both cases, the figure represents an incursion of the past into the present. Moreover, the Headless Hessian, like the Falconet statue of Peter the Great, embodies a historical moment of revolutionary social upheaval, the effects of which shape contemporary life just as the Petrine “revolution” has created not only the physical setting but the social context that determines the sad course of Evgenii’s life and demise. The confrontations between Ichabod and the Headless Horseman, on the one hand, and between Evgenii and Peter, on the other, thus represent a clash of historical forces that, despite appearances, leaves the “victor” and his “victory” in an ethically and even ontologically and aesthetically ambiguous position. Before exploring this contention further, however, let me first lay out the evidence that Pushkin in fact read “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

readings of The Bronze Horseman that have focused on the image of Petersburg in the poem, see Kahn, Pushkin’s The Bronze Horseman, 89–97.
Recognition of the indebtedness of other of Pushkin's works to Irving dates back to the poet's lifetime.18 The American writer enjoyed a tremendous vogue in Russia in the 1820s and 1830s,19 and there were those among the original reviewers of Pushkin's Povesti Belkina (The tales of Belkin) who were quick to note the similarities in prose technique between the two authors. In the twentieth century, scholars have established more specific instances of influence. In a 1926 article, the Soviet comparatist M. P. Alekseev traced the conception of Pushkin's unfinished prose fragment “Istoria sela Goriukhina” (The history of the village of Goriukhino) to Irving's A History of New York, and in more recent years scholars have postulated sources for Pushkin's Tales of Belkin in Irving's The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (in which, of course, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” also appears).20 While other commentators have been concerned, in this context, exclusively with Pushkin's prose, Anna Akhmatova, in a well-known article originally published in 1933, extended the issue into Pushkin's poetry, identifying Irving's “The Legend of the Arabian Astrologer” as the source for Pushkin's “The Tale of the Golden Cockerel.”21

Although there is no hard evidence that Pushkin read “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” the poet would seem to have had ample opportunity to do so. Well before the first Russian translation of Irving's works, his Sketchbook became available to the upper crust of the Russian reading public in an 1822 French translation of the fourth edition of Irving's work by Albane Delpeux and Comte Joseph Villetard.22 Moreover, in April of 1823,

18. Pushkin mentions Irving only once in passing in his critical works, in “Dzhon Tanner.” (For articles concerning Pushkin's citation of Irving in “John Tanner,” see the last note in this article.) For a possible second reference to Irving by Pushkin, see A. N. Nikoliiuk, Literaturnye svoizi Rossii i SSHA: Stanovlenie literaturykh kontaktov (Moscow, 1981), 293.

19. For a detailed discussion of Irving's reception in Russia, see Nikoliiuk, Literaturnye svoizi Rossii i SSHA, especially the chapters “Washingon Irving i rannie pervoevedy amerikanskih pisatelei” (180–223) and “Pushkin i amerikanskaiia literatura” (224–55).


22. A copy of this translation in two volumes, entitled Esquisses morales et littéraires, ou Observations sur les Moeurs, les Usages et la Littérature des Anglois et des Américains, was among the books by Irving contained in Pushkin's library. Unfortunately the evidence provided by Pushkin's possession of the book remains inconclusive. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (translated as “La legende de la vallée somnifère”) appears on pages 271–326 of the second volume of the Delpeux and Villetard translation. The information given in B. L. Modzalevskii’s annotated listing of Pushkin’s library seems to indicate that, while the first vol-
The English Literary Journal of Moscow, which published parallel texts in English and French, printed an article entitled “The Literature of North America,” which included an extensive paraphrase of and excerpts from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” The first Russian translation of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” was published in issues 11 and 12 of Moskovskii telegraf for 1826. The translator, although not credited in the issues of the journal containing the translation, was the journal’s editor Nikolai Polevoi, and the translation was reprinted in his Povesti i literaturnye otryuki (Novellas and literary excerpts).23 Pushkin might have read the Irving work in any of these editions.

Although the most persuasive evidence supporting the contention that Irving may have in some sense provided Pushkin with a morphological impetus for his writing of The Bronze Horseman remains circumstantial, it is nonetheless convincing. Not only have scholars already argued cogently for Irving’s Sketchbook as a source for other Pushkin works, but Pushkin wrote all those works on which the influence of Irving has been postulated during roughly the same period, the years bounded by the Boldino autumns of 1830 and 1834. (The Bronze Horseman was written during Pushkin’s stay at Boldino in November of 1833.) During these years, Pushkin began to evince increasing interest in prose composition, and Irving’s works seem to have served him as one source of inspiration. Thus, to return to Jakobson, in his article discussed above, elaborating on Akhmatova’s argument for Irving as a source for “The Tale of the Golden Cockerel,” he suggests that Irving’s “The Legend of the Arabian Astrologer” might in fact have supplied Pushkin with the epithet “the bronze horseman” as well:

In the model the astrologer tells the sovereign about a metal cockerel, but he makes him a “bronze horseman.” Puškin read Irving’s tale in 1833, and his first attempt at writing it in verse adjoins the first drafts of the Petersburg story about Evgenij in his manuscript. The figure of the bronze horseman became the main character of that poetic story, and only the cast cockerel remained for the tale, which was not realized until a year later. The combination “bronze tsar,” not “bronze horseman,” as one reads in Irving, appears in Mickiewicz’s “Monument of Peter the Great,” which inspired Puškin’s description of the Falconet statue. Sometimes another author’s work which is the starting point for one of Puškin’s creations simultaneously provides a stimulus for another of his related works.24

---

23. Nikolai Polevoi, Povesti i literaturnye otryuki (Novellas and literary excerpts) (Moscow, 1829).
24. Jakobson, Puškin and His Sculptural Myth, 10.
Jakobson's argument here becomes all the more significant in the light of my postulation that another Irving work was crucial to the conception of The Bronze Horsemam.

While the evidence that Pushkin read “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is, to my mind, compelling, I also believe that precisely because the two works represent analogous moments in the evolution of their respective indigenous literary traditions, their juxtaposition would be rewarding on its own merits quite apart from the question of “influence.” In other words, invoking the distinction with which I opened this article, I will switch my focus at this point from influence to intertextuality. In this context, the enduring appeal of Pushkin’s and Irving’s works in their homelands bespeaks the success with which each writer gave artistic expression to the “insoluble antinomies” shaping his native culture as well as his writing career.25

Tellingly, the histories of the critical receptions of The Bronze Horseman and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” have each been characterized by a persistent difference of opinion, centering on the confrontation between protagonist and horseman. In both cases the related issues of “who wins” and, concomitantly, of what the two rivals, beyond their own persons, represent, has occupied center stage. Critical debates have focused on how the works explore the consequences of historical rupture—the Petrine “revolution” and the American Revolution—as they shape the lives of the tales’ “present-day” protagonists. Thus, scholars of The Bronze Horseman have been virtually unanimous in viewing the showdown between Evgenii and the statue of Peter the Great as representing the inevitable clash of interests between the individual and the state, while disagreeing sharply on the question of which of the two figures prevails (ethically if not historically) and over where Pushkin’s sympathies lie.26 Scholars of Irving’s “Legend” have been equally divided in locating the author’s bias with either Ichabod or Brom Bones as incarnations of forces shaping the young American culture. I would suggest that it may well have been precisely the literary embodiment of historical strains with competing claims to legitimacy that

26. Here, of course, I am somewhat oversimplifying. Valerii Briusov identified three major trends in criticism, pointing out that from the beginning critics had been inclined “to see in the images of Evgenii and Peter personifications, symbols of two principles.” See Valerii Briusov, “Mednyi vsadnik,” in his Moi Pushkin (Moscow-Leningrad, 1929), 64–65. David Bethea, in his own thoughtful article on what he terms the “dialogic confrontation” between the traditions of European statuary and Russian heraldry in The Bronze Horseman, begins by summarizing Briusov’s argument and pointing out that most critics of the poem have tended to “take sides”: “After Belinskij, Valerij Briusov was one of the first to see an emerging shape to scholarship on Puškin’s Mednyi vsadnik (Bronze Horseman). He outlined three dominant tensions responsible for the ideological meaning of the work: collective versus individual will, paganism versus Christianity, and rebellion versus despotism. [. . . ] These tensions, which subsequent generations of readers have tended to resolve by accenting one or the other member of the opposing pairs, correspond roughly to interpretations on the ‘social,’ ‘religious,’ and ‘political’ levels,” David M. Bethea, “The Role of the Equus in Puškin’s Bronze Horseman,” in David M. Bethea, ed., Pushkin Today (Bloomington, 1993), 117, 99.
attracted Pushkin to Irving’s fiction.27 Key concerns in Irving scholarship, then, offer a new perspective from which to read The Bronze Horseman.

As in the case of The Bronze Horseman, there has been relatively little dispute in the scholarship devoted to Irving’s “Legend” over the opposed sociohistorical vectors, tensions created by the emergence of the new American republic, the story dramatizes. To cite Lloyd M. Daigrepont: “Generally, critics have probed the tale’s portrayal of the conflict between civilization (or progress) and the idyllic dream of a new Eden in the American landscape.”28 In one of the passages from “Legend” most frequently adduced by critics in this connection, Irving’s tale figures this opposition in terms of the threat posed to the peaceful landscape by flood waters:

I mention this peaceful spot [Sleepy Hollow] with all possible laud; for it is in such little retired Dutch valleys, found here and there embosomed in the great state of New York, that population, manners, and customs, remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved.29

In this context, Donald Ringe directs particular attention to “a fundamental regional conflict—the mutual hostility between New York and New England. [. . .] Ichabod Crane is clearly a Connecticut Yankee invading—and threatening—a New York Dutch society.”30 In his most succinct statement of the competing values that feed this regional enmity, Ringe argues that “to oppose the material values they see in the Yankee desire for change, improvement, and profit, the New York writers affirm a stable society that places its emphasis on order, tradition, and the family values that accompany social stability.”31 In the same vein, Robert V. Wells plumbs Irving’s work for “signs of what was going to happen in the nineteenth century when a commercial, industrial world replaced more traditional agrarian patterns.”32 In sum, then, critics have seen Ichabod Crane and Brom Bones, rivals for the hand of Katrina Van Tassel—“whose virtues are

27. I would add here in passing a subject certainly worthy of further study. While critics have been inclined in the cases of both works to cast their interpretations in terms of binary oppositions, in each case there is a “third term” that stands in ambiguous relationship to the horseman—the elemental force of nature in The Bronze Horseman and the complex of associations surrounding the Hessian mercenary in “Legend.” Note, for example, that Richard Gregg has contended in relation to The Bronze Horseman: “The basic dynamics of the poem is, then ternary (not binary, as is commonly claimed).” Richard Gregg, “The Nature of Nature and the Nature of Eugene in The Bronze Horseman,” Slavic and East European Journal 1, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 170. Arguably it is precisely this structural tension between binary and ternary relationships that gives the two much of their interpretive richness.


29. Irving, Sketchbook, 274 (emphasis mine).


31. Ibid., 459.

those of the settled landscape itself"—as embodiments of two competing social orders, one that cultivates land and lore and the other that consumes it, the former destined by history to be "washed away."

Many critics of Irving's "Legend," however, go beyond sociohistorical analysis to view the story as more specifically concerned with the plight of American literature and the American writer caught in the forces of social transformation. Certainly, "Legend" invites such approaches, for it is very much a tale about tales, just as Sleepy Hollow itself is a place defined by the origination and preservation of stories:

From the listless repose of the place, and the peculiar character of its inhabitants, who are descendants from the original Dutch settlers, this sequestered glen has long been known by the name of SLEEPY HOLLOW, and its rustic lads are called the Sleepy Hollow Boys throughout all the neighbouring country. A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere. Some say that the place was bewitched by a high German doctor during the early days of the settlement; others, that an old Indian chief, the prophet or wizard of his tribe, held his powwows there before the country was discovered by Master Hendrick Hudson. Certain it is, the place still continues under the sway of some witching power, that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie. They are given to all kinds of marvellous beliefs; are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air. The whole neighbourhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions; stars shoot and meteors glare oftener across the valley than in any other part of the country, and the night mare, with her whole nine fold, seems to make it the favourite scene of her gambols.

Yet, as is suggested later in the narrative, Sleepy Hollow stands threatened by the "torrent of migration" shaping life in the New America:

Local tales and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered, long settled retreats; but are trampled under foot, by the shifting throng that forms the population of most of our country places. Besides, there is no encouragement for ghosts in most of our villages, for they have scarce had time to finish their first nap, and turn themselves in their graves, before their surviving friends have travelled away from the neighbourhood, so that when they turn out of a night to walk the rounds, they have no acquaintance left to call upon. This is perhaps the reason why we so seldom hear of ghosts except in our long established Dutch communities.

Drawing on such passages in Irving's tale, scholars have tended to view the story as a parable of American literary culture, a figuration of the cultural tensions that shaped Irving's own career as a writer. Most frequently, Ichabod Crane emerges from such exegeses as a writer or "erzatz man of whole, however, explores how both of Irving's stories reflect the social transformation of postrevolutionary New York.

34. Irving, Sketchbook, 272–73.
35. Ibid., 289.
letters.”36 defined and ultimately defeated by the bipolar tensions created by the cultural growing pains of the new nation: the absence of a past comparable to the rich cultural legacy of Europe,37 the concomitant threat to the stability of ethnic communities rich in folklore posed by the mobility of a frontier-oriented life, the passing of the European patronage system and the growing commercialism (and even “feminization”) of American literature, and the challenge posed to imagination by a Protestant ethic privileging practicality and utility.38 One critic has suggested that it is Brom Bones who is the true bearer of the new American creativity and that the confrontation thus becomes a contest of rival artists.39 Virtually all these commentators, however, are united in viewing the tale as having a (perhaps unduly) optimistic ending as concerns the prospects for the future of American literature.

We might do well to emulate Irving’s critics in suggesting that the prevailing sociopolitical, historical, and even religious readings of The Bronze Horseman may yet not exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the poem. I have argued elsewhere that there is sufficient evidence in Pushkin’s poem that Evgenii may be read as a poet figure.40 I will not repeat that argument here, but will merely adduce briefly the evidence I believe supports a reading that views Evgenii as a “writer” caught in the same net of constraints that conditioned Pushkin’s own literary endeavors. Pace any number of scholars on The Bronze Horseman, I am not suggesting that Evgenii be read “autobiographically” (although autobiographical parallels between Pushkin and his protagonist support my argument).41 Evgenii “is” no more Pushkin than the comically preposterous Ichabod Crane “is” Washington Irving. Rather, I am suggesting that Pushkin placed Evgenii in a situation with unquestionable resonances with his own literary context.

37. Irving himself cast a jealous eye on the cultural riches of Europe’s past in “The Author’s Account of Himself” that opens The Sketchbook (8–9):

—no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.

But Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age.

41. “Autobiographical” readings of Evgenii rest on the postulation of a “genetic” relationship between The Bronze Horseman and poetical fragments, most notably “Rodoslovnaia moego geroia” (The genealogy of my hero) and “Moia rodoslovnaia” (My genealogy), Pushkin drafted during the early 1830s. See, for example, Lednicki, Pushkin’s Bronze Horseman.
The Bronze Horseman and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” 349

In this regard we must first recognize that the confrontation between Evgenii and the tsar, autocrat and subject, constitutes at least as much a writer’s problem—that is, specifically a defining condition of the literary culture of Pushkin’s day—as it does a purely political issue. Pushkin’s own tormented relationship with the tsar is too well documented to demand revisitation here, except to recall the extent to which it dominated Pushkin’s literary fortunes. In this respect, The Bronze Horseman offers a characteristic case in point. Pushkin was counting on the profits from the sale of the works he hoped to produce at Boldino in the autumn of 1833 to ease his ever precarious financial position, as evidenced by the letter he wrote to the tsar on 30 July of that year requesting leave to absent himself from the capital:

In the course of the past two years I have been occupied with historical research alone, not writing a single line of the purely literary. I must spend a month or two in complete isolation, in order to rest up from my very important occupations and to finish a book I began a long time ago, and which will bring me money I need. I am myself sorry to waste time on vain pursuits, but what can I do? They alone bring me independence and a means of living with my family in Petersburg, where my labors, thanks to the sovereign, have a more important and useful goal.42

Nicholas I’s fundamental objections to the publication of The Bronze Horseman dashed Pushkin’s hopes. Thus, while Irving lamented the absence of aristocratic patronage of the arts left at the mercy of the growing commercialism of American literature, Pushkin in essence found himself between these two worlds: his dependence on the tsar (a vestige of the old patronage system) and his need to live primarily off his own works in a cultural economy that favored potboiler prose over “gentleman poets.”43 Moreover, Pushkin’s distaste for the “rabble” of the reading public, given voice most famously in such works as his “Razgovor knigoprodavtsa s poetom” (Conversation between the bookseller and the poet), are echoed in The Bronze Horseman as well. If Evgenii is to be viewed as a representative of the “people,” then the callous indifference of the Petersburg narod to his fate appears all the more jarring, particularly Pushkin’s insistence on its mercantile nature:

В порядок прежний всё вошло.
Уже по улицам свободным
С своим безчувствием холодным
Ходил народ. Чиновный люд,
Покинув свой ночной приют,

42. PSS, 17 vols., 15:70.
43. It is notable in this context that both Irving and Pushkin began as “gentleman” writers and were forced to become “professionals.” What might be viewed as a nostalgia for a more aristocratic past is registered in the names of both of their protagonists. Daniel Hoffman observes in this connection: “Ichabod Crane is a sorry symbol of learning, of culture, of sophistication, of a decayed religious faith, of an outworn order in the world. His very name suggests decrepitude: ‘And she named him Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel’ (1 Sam. iv. 21).’” Hoffman, “Prefigurations,” 94. In like fashion, the name Evgenii, broken down into its Greek roots, suggests “well born,” which only serves to underscore by contrast the lowly state into which Pushkin’s protagonist has fallen.
In the final analysis, Evgenii is a “writer,” a clerk who “serves” (sluzhit) the state for money, a sad comedown for the scion of a noble family that once “shone beneath Karamzin’s pen” (pod perom Karamzina . . . prozvuchalo) and a sad commentary on the writer’s abasement, not only before the public, but also before the state for his livelihood.45

Let us then turn to the crucial confrontation between Evgenii and the statue. First of all, we should note that Evgenii’s challenge to the statue—“Dobro, stroitel’ chudotvorny! . . . Uzho tebe!” (Just wait, proud miracle creator!)—constitutes the sole instance of direct speech in the poem, and his words are specifically addressed to Peter the Great as the miraculous builder of the city, the poser, dare I say, of a creative challenge.46 The Bronze Horseman’s response to Evgenii’s challenge lends itself to two possible interpretations: either the statue really comes alive or the event transpires only in Evgenii’s imagination. I would argue, however, that the latter, “naturalistic” explanation yields a richer reading of the poem. If the statue comes alive only in Evgenii’s mind, then the poor clerk becomes a poet surrogate who not only forces a reaction from the hitherto impassive statue but in essence “rewrites” Peter in the Gothic mode, “displacing” the statue out of material reality into the realm of the poet’s fantasy. It would seem, then, that the poem presents us with two symmetrical creative acts—Peter’s at the beginning and Evgenii’s at the end—the juxtaposition of which suggests a mode of being for the writer in the autocratic state. Thus, Pushkin seems to suggest, the creative imagination may yield to political reality on the historical plane—Peter’s city will remain standing long after Evgenii’s fleeting moment of poetic inspiration has passed. Yet, at the same time, the artistic act—intangible though its fruits may be—has the power to transform, to “displace” the matter of the historical world. In the confrontation between poet and tsar, the poet emerges victorious in the invisible space of the mind.

Let me conclude by reiterating that, hardly surprisingly, both Pushkin and Irving address in what are among their most enduring works the forces that shaped and circumscribed their own careers as writers, stand-

44. PSS, 17 vols., 5:145; Pushkin, “The Bronze Horseman,” 154. We should also note that the ships Peter’s “window into Europe” brings to his imperial city are, at least by implication, merchant ships.


ing at the beginning of the emergence of their national literatures on the world stage, haunted by the specter of the overtopping legacy of the western European cultural past. Clearly the threats posed to literature by their respective cultures were different, as history has generously demonstrated. Equally clearly, Pushkin’s knowledge of America was limited and his attitude toward the new democracy, as he would express it several years after completing The Bronze Horseman and only shortly before his death, mixed grudging admiration with distinct hostility. Yet in Irving, it would seem, he found a kindred spirit, or, perhaps more to the point, a fellow writer caught, like himself, in the growing pains of a young literary culture to which he, like Pushkin after him, gave enduring shape through his works.

47. Pushkin read his best documented sources on the United States—John Tanner, A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner during Thirty Years Residence among the American Indians (French translation, 1835); Alexis de Tocqueville, De la démocratie en Amérique (first two volumes, 1836); and Gustave de Beaumont, Marie, ou l’esclavage aux États-Unis (1836)—only after completing The Bronze Horseman. On Pushkin’s attitudes toward America and specifically on his “John Tanner” article, see J. Thomas Shaw, “Pushkin on America and His Principal Sources: His ‘John Tanner,’” in his Collected Works, vol. 1, Pushkin: Poet and Man of Letters and His Prose (Los Angeles, 1995), 231–59; Glynn Barratt, “Pushkin’s America: A Survey of the Sources,” Canadian Slavonic Papers 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1973): 274–97; B. Mar’ianov, “Ob odnom primechanii k stat’i A. S. Pushkina ‘Dzhon Tenner,’” Russkaiia literatura, 1962, no. 1:64–67; Mark Al’tshuller, “Pushkin o problemakh demokratii (‘Dzhon Tenner’),” Russian Language Journal 38, nos. 129–30 (Winter–Spring 1984): 69–78; and M. P. Alekseev, “K stat’i Pushkina ‘Dzhon Tenner,’” in his Pushkin i miraia literatura (Leningrad, 1987), 542–48. Lednicki, in support of his hypothesis that The Bronze Horseman expresses Pushkin’s belief that Peter the Great’s reforms caused the decline of the old Russian nobility, cites an article Pushkin wrote in 1832 deploring both the “chûte de la noblesse” in Russia and democracy in America: “The table of ranks has been sweeping away the nobility for 150 years now, and it is the present emperor who is the first to have put up a dike, still very weak, against the torrent of a democracy worse than that of America” (Voilà déjà 150 ans que la table of ranks balaye la noblesse et c’est l’Empereur actuel qui le premier a posé une digue, bien faible encore, contre le débordement d’une démocratie pire que celle de l’Amérique). Lednicki, Pushkin’s Bronze Horseman, 65.