Lecture 2: The Revolutionary Period (The Age of Reason) and the Early/Young Republic

I- A Historical overview: (a War of Words)

At the end of the 18th C the English government began demanding more from the colonies. These demands came in the form of taxes. Then those English people in America started reconsidering their relationship with England, and they began a process of separation.

The war of words began in 1763 with the introduction of the Stamp Act. Taxes were collected on the sale of revenue stamps. When the Americans complained and demonstrated about that act, the English stopped the tax. Then they started a new tax, the Townshend Acts in 1767. After several years and angrier words, the British government sent eight hundred soldiers into Boston on March 4, 1770. Five people were killed in what became known as the Boston Massacre. Another tax in 1773, this time on tea, prompted the people of Boston to throw their English tea into the harbor. This was called the Boston Tea Party. During those years before the actual fighting and killing began, there was a constant flow of words across the oceans, and written statements of protest continued from the American colonists.

American writing in colonial days dealt largely with religion. In the last 30 years of the 18th century, however, men turned their attention from religion to the subject of government. In that sense it can be said that reason replaced faith.

Breaking away from England was a great decision for Americans to make. Feelings ran high, and people expressed their opinions in a body of writing that, if not literature in the narrow sense, is certainly literature in the sense of its being great writing- a writing that boosted American patriotism.

II- The new emerging values:

The immigrant prospered in America and became fiercely loyal to the system that made possible his prosperity. That system, which included a large measure of personal freedom, was threatened by the British. Americans tried to preserve it by peaceful means. When this became impossible, they chose to become a separate nation.

During the process of defending the old puritan values (industriousness, sobriety, thrift and piety), new values systematically emerged and they characterized the mentality of the American of the revolutionary period. The most typical among these new values:

Open mindedness: the rapid growth in size and complexity of the colonies would have been sufficient to encourage toleration of religious difference, if not of no religion at all, but of course there were influences working in England to promote it as well, from the limited legal provisions of the 1689 to the more pervasive growth of the idea of 'nature' as the fundamental criterion of human judgment in all matters from the theological to the scientific. The Calvinist dogmatism faded away.

Rational thinking: things are no longer metaphysically explained (i.e. in terms of miracle or spiritual and supernatural truths) but they are rather reasonably (i.e. in terms what their brains can accept). And for them everything has an explanation and nothing is mystery.

Pragmatism: (practicality) to be realistic and to try to adapt to the situation according to the means that are available (i.e not to be dreamy)

Simplicity: they also preserved the puritan simplicity in every sense of the term. And that mindedness enforced their pragmatism.

Modesty: this puritan value was, on its turn, preserved.

Egalitarism: the mentality that considers that all human beings are equal began to flourish during that period.

Moral strength: in spite of being pragmatic the Americans of that period preserved the old puritan moral force (they did not allow materialism to kill their spirituality)

Industriousness: hard work was also considered as a virtue that lies behind the secret of success.

Literacy: they gave much importance to education in all fields that it touches (esp science).

Secularity: things (including 'literature') are no longer rotating around religion

Democracy: they had a deep sense for democracy. They were against Feudalism (the Feudal system that existed in England during the middle ages and that allows the tyranny of the

king). Those Americans estimated the traces of that system still exist during the revolutionary period.

Humanitarism: this value goes hand in hand with egalitarism

Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness: the know how (le savoir vivre) as well a great love for life became a virtue.

Economy: it is another face of the old puritan value.

The progressive disappearance of the Calvinist mentality: everyone is able to do everything with his life and success is not predestined for a specific group but there is always a chance for every person to improve. There is a shift from the predestination to the 'beneficent' community.

III- the characteristics of the writing of that period: Undoubtedly, the writing of the revolutionary period is deeply influenced by the preceding values and its style is characterized by the following criteria:

Plausibility: it is not the product of imagination, it is rather acceptable by reason, believable, realistic and convincing. And mainly influenced by the scientific spirit.

Clarity: there is no hidden meaning beneath the surface meaning, there is no allusions or hints; everything is declared and everything is said in a very direct way.

Simplicity: there is a use of simple, short sentences along with simple or common terms.

Economy in language: using a concise but precise language.

Committed writing: the style in that kind of literature is the one that is based on defense and persuasion. Committed literature is any writing that defends a given cause (a given ideology). The writer in that case becomes a militant. Here, it is not writing for writing's sake, but there is rather an aim behind; in that case the pen could be considered as a weapon.

In that writing there is no use of metaphors, descriptions and details.

IV- Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography (*The First American Story)

I- The biography of Franklin:

The birth of the United States was witnessed by Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) in his last years. His career began in colonial days. At 17 he ran away from his home in Boston and went to Philadelphia. How he took up printing, made enough money to retire at 42, and educated himself is the subject of his ***Autobiography***, first published book form in English in 1793. This is the first and most celebrated story of the American self-made man. Many of his rules of self-improvement (early to bed, early to rise, and so forth) appeared in his ***Poor Richard's Almanac***, first published in 1732.

Franklin's career is stunning, spread equally over the fields of science, diplomacy, and unparalleled public service. When he returned to Philadelphia from Paris in 1785, after conducting the political affairs and negotiations with both the English and the French during the crisis of the Revolutionary War as a mere yeoman, he was the most famous private citizen in the Western world. Only a portion of his life experiences are recorded in his Autobiography, a work he began in his sixties, but this piece of writing is nonetheless an indubitable American classic—it leaves for posterity the record of a paradigmatic American existence, from modest origins to world celebrity. Franklin's account of his life is larded with wit and moral precepts

Franklin is the most distinguished person among his contemporaries. He wrote and worked for American independence so much that he has been called 'the First American' Franklin is best remembered for his writing. He was a good writer. He perfected the smooth, clear, short sentences of the puritan plain style. His autobiography is the very humorous story about his life. It tells about growing up as a poor boy in Boston, and then growing to adulthood in Philadelphia. The autobiography encourages hard work and emphasizes the importance of achievement. However, and as Herman Melville has noticed: "he was everything but a poet". Though, Franklin did write some poems, Melville said this to show that Franklin only thought about the practical side of life, not the poetical. He was a great man because he was successful, but he could not tolerate those people who did not achieve similar success. He did not consider the heart of man to be of much importance. What one does during his life is more important.

Franklin's astounding list of achievements during his lifetime constitutes a record that no other American, before or since, can match.

1. His early years consisted of establishing himself as printer, then journalist and writer. From 1732 to 1757 he wrote *Poor Richard's Almanac*, the first American periodical and source of proverbs that is still a bestseller even today.

2. Franklin's accomplishments in civic and public life are even more striking. A few of his noteworthy contributions include the following: He organized the Union Fire Co. in 1736, became Philadelphia's Postmaster in 1737, proposed the idea for the American Philosophical Society in 1743, organized the Pennsylvania Militia in 1747, and founded the Philadelphia Academy in 1749 (which later became the University of Pennsylvania).

3. Franklin's exploits in science and technology are equally historic. They include his invention of the Franklin fireplace (stove) in 1741, experiments in electricity in 1745, his assistance in founding Philadelphia Hospital in 1751, and his famous experiment proving that lightning is electricity in 1752.

4. Hostilities between the colonies and England engaged Franklin from the 1760s through the 1780s, as a representative of Pennsylvania, initially, and, after 1776, as chief negotiator of both the war and the peace. Franklin signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

5. He worked to abolish slavery, to extend the vote, and to implement a bicameral legislature. He died in 1790.

II- **Extract from *The Autobiography***:

I had begun in 1733 to study languages; I soon made myself so much a master of the French as to be able to read the books with ease. I then undertook the Italian. An acquaintance, who was also learning it, used often to tempt me to play chess with him. Finding this took up too much of the time I had to spare for study, I at length refused to play any more, unless on this condition, that the victor in every game should have a right to impose a task, either in parts of the grammar to be got by heart, or in translations, etc…, which tasks the vanquished was to perform upon honor, before our next meeting. As we played pretty equally, we thus beat one another into that language. I afterwards with a little painstaking, acquired as much of the Spanish as to read their books also.

I have already mentioned that I had only one year's instruction in a Latin school, and that when very young, after which I neglected that language entirely. But, when I had attained an acquaintance with the French, Italian, and Spanish, Iwas surprised to find, on looking over a Latin Testament, that I understood so much more of that language than I had imagined, which encouraged me to apply myself again to the study of it, and I met with more success, as those preceding languages had greatly smoothed my way.

From these circumstances, I have thought that there is some inconsistency in our common mode of teaching languages. We are told that it is proper first with the Latin, and, having acquired that, it will be more easy to attain those modern languages which are derived from it; and yet we do not begin with the Greek, in order more easily to acquire the Latin. It is true that, if you can clamber and get to the top of a staircase without using the steps, you will more easily gain them in descending; but certainly, if you begin with the lowest you will with more ease ascend to the top; and I would therefore offer it to the consideration of those who superintend to the education of our youth, whether, since many of those who begin with the Latin quit the same after spending some years without having made any great proficiency, and what they have learned becomes almost useless, so that their time has been lost, it waould not have been better to have begun with the French, proceeding to the Italian,etc.; for, though after spending the same time they should quit the study of languages and never arrive at the Latin, they would, however, have acquired another tongue or two that, being in modern use, might be serviceable to them in common life. (***Autobiography*** **168-9**)

V- The Rediscovery of America:

The first citizens of the United States were surprisingly ignorant of their country. Of its geographical and economic resources, of its history, and of its literary and cultural possibilities. Communication between different parts of the country was slow and difficult. Few people had any extensive firsthand acquaintance with the various sections of the new republic. If they attempted to read about their land in books written abroad, especially in France or in England under the influence of French philosophers, they were likely to discover that the western hemisphere was a geographically new section of the earth in which the low forms of vegetable life flourished and the high forms of animal life decayed. The native American Indians, they would have learned, were a degenerate race, lacking in vigor and manliness. The European settlers themselves, they might have discovered with

some surprise, had decreased in size and energy under the influence of an adverse climate. Their horses and cows and dogs had all become smaller than the European ones.

No one can tell, at the present time, how much of the boastfulness and exaggerated pride found in American writing of the late eighteenth century was a reaction to that "certain condescension in foreigners" which existed as a philosophical theory before it sifted down into a popular attitude. However, much of the stocktaking indulged in by Americans after the Revolution, especially by those who wrote on the American scene, was inspired by a desire to provide factual evidence which would contradict the condescending generalizations of foreigners like Buffon, Raynal, De Pau, and Roberstson.

Thomas Jefferson's Notes on Virginia was written in answer to direct inquiry concerning conditions in his state, that first undertook to provide specific evidence against those generalizations. Jefferson presented statistics to show that animal life had not degenerated in the New World, found clear signs of nobility and dignity in the character of the Indians, and made substantial claims for the genius of the white settlers.

The process of stocktaking—this rediscovery of America—is exemplified by other writers in various ways. The botanical interests of William Bartram led him to explore the fringes of the new nation with such enthusiasm that the strange flora and fauna of tropical Florida made a more than scientific impression upon him. His awesome description of the alligators was so effective that these particular beasts were to appear again and again in French and English Romantic literature. There they would roar defiance to all the earlier philosophers who considered American animals degenerate in size. Noah Webster discovered virtues which did not cease until he had completed his great dictionary in 1828. The patriotic poets had already trumpeted that the United States had produced a race of heroes during a race of heroes during the first years of its existence. But the full possibilities of patriotic mythmaking were left for the exploration of prose biographers whose portrayals of American courage and virtue were to fill the pages of popular school readers for generations. Parson Weems's account of Washington and the cherry tree was inspired by nothing more than enthusiasm and the desire to do good. "Exult each patriot heart!" might have served as a proper opening phrase for more than one book written in the three or four decades which followed the Revolution.

Few of these explorers of the new country discovered perfection. On the contrary, they and their fellow observers of life in the early U.S discovered much that was wrong with the country and its people. But they found solid ground for the belief in progress which had been expressed by the earlier poets who wrote on the future glory of their country.

VI- The Beginnings of Romanticism:

WHAT has been called political or social romanticism—a belief in the perfectibility of man or society—was widespread in the United States during the first two decades of the nation's existence (America was the perfect setting for human improvement).

- A growing interest in the past. Philip Freneau became interested in the romance of the past. He made several attempts at an imaginative poem on Columbus and the discovery of America. He also revealed a genuine interest in nature.

VII- The Early Romantics:

AFTER the great controversy which followed the Revolution, Americans who had been taking stock of their national resources settled into a period of optimism and growth. The period has been variously described as an "era of good feeling" and as an era in which new political lines were being drawn and new controversies were in the making.

To writers, literature became a profession rather than an avocation. For the first time since the country was settled the "professors of the fine arts" of literature were able to achieve fame if not fortune by the practice of their profession. Washington Irving was the great transition figure. Irving had a romantic interest in "American antiquities," but he cultivated it for the amusement of his readers rather than for the glory of his country. He used "ancient history" of Dutch New York for the purpose of satirizing contemporary democracy as it was exemplified in the administration of Thomas Jefferson (this is one view). His style is entirely humorous in *The Sketch Book*.

VIII- Washington Irving (The First American Storyteller)

"*Rip Van Winkle"* is assuredly Irving's true claim to immortality, and this story of a man who falls asleep for twenty years seems indeed to escape the law of time, for it haunts us still with its mystery. Once we realize that Rip sleeps precisely through the American Revolution, the story begins to bristle with cultural overtones. Yet its deepest riddle has to do with the strange

vision and potion that caused Rip to sleep in the first place, and this question is inseparable from Rip's own odd temperament, his refusal to grow up. It is a prophetic American hang-up. Washington Irving is important because he is writing in the early years of the 19th century, at the beginning of the American experiment, his work sheds an interesting light on the cultural anxieties of the young nation.

"Rip Van Winkle" (RVW) (1819) is unquestionably Irving's greatest claim to fame. Although this is a story that most Americans are familiar with, it is doubtful that we have thought through its odd particulars.

A. We all know that the hero has fallen asleep for twenty years, but under what circumstances?

1. The event that Rip has slept through is, of course, the American Revolution. Irving is again telling us something about this new America, a country now liberated from England and embarking on its own path. We may wonder how appetizing this new country is for the author.

2. What changed in the twenty years during which Rip slept? Irving sketches for us a new realm of politics, a new landscape.

B. We recognize, in Rip's visionary experience on the mountain-top, a classic variant of religious epiphany, or illumination.

1. Rip, summoned by the strange figures he sees bowling and drinking, experiences a classic initiation: serving the gods, entering their world.

2. The unanswered question in Rip's encounter with the gods is: Why are they so "grave"? Is this a Christian punishment? Are they harbingers of death? Irving furnishes a number of explanations later, in the story and in the notes.

C. Why is Rip singled out for this strange initiation and experience? How does Irving characterize this odd protagonist?

1. We see that Rip is no less than the eternal child: he frequents children, and he shuns responsibilities of all sorts.

D. We would expect the protagonist of such an "initiation" story to be altered by his experiences. How is Rip changed by the vision?

1. America is altered in powerful political ways; even nature is altered, as Irving's language suggests. But Rip remains unchanged.

E. Rip's momentous return to the village is arguably Irving's most fascinating touch. The setting is entirely changed, the family Rip earlier sired has grown up, and Rip undergoes what can be seen as a crisis of identity.

1. Being confronted with his grown-up son, also named Rip, with a grandson as well, Rip "unravels" and experiences an existential collapse; can we not speak of the fissured self?

F. The legacy of "Rip Van Winkle" is rich and various, and we are still working our way through it.

1. Hart Crane invokes, in *The Bridge*, Rip as "the muse of memory."

2. James Joyce's hero, Leopold Bloom, is memorably figured as Rip Van Winkle: the work of time is seen as the corrosion that besets married life.

3. Rip Van Winkle is particularly present and accounted for in our upcoming literary performances among the American classics.

a. Thoreau's performance in moving to Walden Pond can be seen as ambivalent: Face reality or flee reality?

b. Melville's Captain Delano, "Benito Cereno," will display the frightening dimensions of the childlike vision.

c. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, our most famous literary children, make us wonder if avoiding adulthood is an American vocation.

d. Hemingway's Jake Barnes, of *The Sun Also Rises*: emasculated male, is a bitter version of Rip's fate—that is, fit only for men.

e. Faulkner's Quentin Compson, in *The Sound and the Fury*, expresses Irving's chief theme, albeit in a tragic key: you cannot grow up.

4. The universal warning of Irving's story goes beyond literature altogether: Where has life been? How did we lose it?

The following analysis is adapted from: **Blakemore, Steven. "Family Resemblances: The Texts and Contexts of "Rip Van Winkle"" *Early American Literature*, 2000, Vol. 35, No.2: 187-212**

Irving writes "out" his own anxieties and ambivalence toward ***America, the Revolution, and himself*** the expatriated author living abroad in England, in the wake of his family's bankruptcy (1818), feeling guilty for years of authorial idleness, in a profession considered suspect in nineteenth-century America. In a self-conscious sketch book about England and its Anglo-American audience, Irving tells an ambivalent tale about his country, celebrating the American Revolution and yet questioning its Puritan "democratic" origin and its revolutionary "French" resemblance. In the end, the story's overt comedy and deceptive simplicity belie the complexity of this intricate American classic.

In a story that is a complex intertextual meditation on the significance of America, it is not coincidental that Irving prefaces "Rip Van Winkle" with its putative origin—the tale "found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman of New York, who was very curious in the Dutch history of the province, and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers." "The result of" Knickerbocker's "researches was a history of the province, during the reign of the Dutch governors, which he published some years since": i.e., The History of New York (1809), which Irving wrote in the persona of his fictional Dutch historian.3 The self-reflexive allusions(s) to the History, a history also "found," like RVW, among Knickerbocker's papers and books (see History 376), contextually establishes the story's thematic frame. Similarly, in the opening paragraph of RVW, Irving intertwines two histories, commencing with "the little village . . . founded by some of the Dutch colonists" at "about the beginning" of Peter Stuyvesant's reign (1647-64). Stuyvesant was the last Dutch East India governor of the province of New Netherlands before it became the English colony of New York, so the story alludes to specific historical beginnings and ends: the end of the Dutch presence and the beginning of English rule. Thus, the story's beginning with the village's foundational Dutch history (the last seventeen years of Stuyvesant's reign) is actually in context of the story's true temporal beginning, when "the country was yet a province of Great Britain" (RVW 770). RVW ends, of course, with the American Revolution and the

"beginning" of the new "union." Irving hence encodes a series of historical times that impinge on and overlap each other. Rip's Dutch patrimony is, for instance, in context of European war in the new world. Rip is a "descendent of the Van Winkles who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant, and accompanied him to the siege of Fort Christina" (RVW 770)—the Swedish fort taken by the Dutch in 1655. This battle precipitated the subsequent expulsion of the Swedish colonists from their settlement in the new world. The paragraph hence thematically evokes the European conquest of virgin America.

RVW is thematically grounded in the contexts of the History, in which weak European powers surrender to stronger the Swedes to the Dutch, the Dutch to the English, and, by extension, in RVW, the English to the Americans. Thus the intertextual allusion to the battle of Fort Christina and Rip's family resemblance actually affirms that Rip thematically embodies the ancestral fate of the Dutch. In addition, the opening paragraph of RVW establishes the theme of the national "British" family breakup "while the country was yet a province of Great Britain": the Kaatskill mountains "are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family" (RVW 769). The imagery suggests a family that is split off and broken, and Irving employs the "branch" metaphor for families in other essays in *The Sketch Book* (see 793, 879, 928, 931). In a story dealing with the change from British to American rule, Irving allusively evokes the commonplace family metaphor used before, during, and after the Revolution: England was the "mother" or "parent" country, and the American colonists were her children. But there is another pertinent cultural metaphor, for Rip is a henpecked husband, badgered by his demanding wife, and soon finds himself separated from his family.

In this context, Jay Fliegelman has shown that on the eve of the American Revolution, there was a flurry of newspaper articles and pamphlets dealing with the misery of bad marriages and "bad wives" who made the marriage union impossible, and hence divorce an inevitable reality. Indeed, there was a psychological dimension to the sudden discourse on divorce, as if the colonists were rehearsing reasons for their inevitable divorce from England. Fliegelman quotes an illustrative article in the December 1775 issue of *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, edited by Thomas Paine, titled "One Cause of Uneasiness in the Married State," in which a beleaguered husband complains that once his wife "established her empire over me," she became even more demanding. In this context, Fliegelman notes that in Irving's famous story, "Rip, driven from home by the tyrannical 'petticoat government' of his 'termagant' virago of a wife, sleeps through the Revolutionary War and awakens to find his wife dead and George III

deposed. Irving's tale in its stress on domestic politics is more historically acute than has perhaps been realized." Irving, like most of his generation, still breathed the air of the Revolution, and his story thematically mimes the discourse of independence associated with the Revolution.

Rip is, for instance, characterized as "an obedient, hen-pecked husband," but he is actually disobedient, looking for pretexts to escape "petticoat government." Consequently, his patrimonial estate "had dwindled away under his management" (RVW 770, 771) a "British" view of the Americans, who were accused of not doing their part, especially after the French and Indian War (1754-63). The Americans were hence accused of neglecting their domestic, economic duty in maintaining the British empire in America. Rip, in this context, engages in a kind of passive resistance à la the pre-revolutionary colonies. There are a series of suggestive family resemblances encoded in RVW, and Rip's escape constitutes a metaphoric rebellion against the monarchic wife, the domestic, colonial, petticoat governor. Although Rip helps his neighbors with their labor, especially the "good" village wives, who significantly take his part against the "bad" wife (770), and although the scene is primarily comic, the tale nevertheless includes recognizable familial commonplaces impinging on Rip's eventual independence and integration into the new American family.

Critics, of course, have routinely commented on the revolutionary references and the contrast between British, colonial time and the new American Revolution that replaces the portrait of George III with that of George Washington. Vedder's Anglo-Dutch inn, for instance, becomes the Union Hotel, with the political pun on national "union." When Rip first awakes into the new American reality, there is the contrast between the crow he saw when his name was first called by the phantom stranger and the soaring eagle he now sees—symbol of the new American nation (RVW 774,776). In addition, Rip's confusion, his identity crisis, is clearly political; when he returns home after twenty years, he is disoriented and bewildered, identifying himself as "a loyal subject of the King—God bless him!" Accused of being a Tory spy and seeing in his son "a precise counterpart of himself," Rip is "completely confounded" and doubts his "identity," exclaiming, "I am changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am" (780, 781). Once he is reidentified, however, and taken to his new home, he obtains his new social, political status "as one of the patriarchs of the village and a chronicle of the old times 'before the war' " (RVW 783)

Integrated into the new American union, Rip becomes the oral historian of the prerevolutionary past, "the old times 'before the war' " (RVW 783), and his popularity with the "rising generation" implicitly suggests the obvious: Rip does not nostalgically extol the "English" past—he is a witness to how bad it was. This explains his popularity with the new nationalistic generation: initially identified as an alien, Tory spy, Rip is finally integrated into the new American family when he affirms a revolutionary reading of "the old times 'before the war' " (RVW 783). In this sense, Rip and Irving also share family resemblances. As story-teller and historian, Irving, the expatriated American, self-consciously writes about the English past and, conscious of English readers and critics, tells an American tale as a way of coming home. The story then is a celebration of the great political change that Rip awakens to experience, but it also encodes Irving's own ambivalence toward the "new" America the Revolution had created.