

# The Dutchman in the Attic: Claiming an Inheritance in The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon.

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## **The Dutchman in the Attic: Claiming an Inheritance in The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon**

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The Dutchman in the Attic:

# Claiming an Inheritance in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*

Richard V. McLamore

Mr. Washington Irvine's [*sic*] acquaintance with English literature begins almost where Mr. Lamb's ends,—with the Spectator, Tom Brown's works and the wits of Queen Anne. He is not bottomed in our elder writers, nor do we think that he has tasked his own faculties much, at least on English ground. . . . Mr. Irvine's writings are literary *anachronisms*. . . . Instead of tracing the changes that have taken place in society since Addison or Fielding wrote, he transcribes their account in a different hand-writing, and thus keeps us stationary, at least in our most attractive and praise-worthy qualities of simplicity, honesty, modesty, hospitality, and good-nature. This is a very flattering mode of turning fiction into history, or history into fiction; and we should scarcely know ourselves again in the softened and altered likeness, but that it bears the date of 1820, and issues from the press in Albemarle-street.

—William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits*

“What are we but Empire's children? British have given us everything isn't it—Civilisation, law, order, too much.

”—Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*

We are the first born of the American family of nations.

—Washington Irving, unpublished notebook

William Hazlitt's comments in the first epigraph above show that an American claim to an English cultural inheritance could disturb a post-Waterloo England none too sure of its own cultural legitimacy. Beyond the Toryism that Hazlitt ascribes to Washington [End Page 31] Irving's “Albemarle-street” representations of English culture, their “anachronisms” provoke him to echo Rip Van Winkle's feelings of displacement: “we should scarcely know ourselves again.”<sup>1</sup> Further, Hazlitt's carping evokes the controversy over Irving's appointment to a committee “planning the construction of a Shakespeare monument” in 1822.<sup>2</sup> English newspapers griped that “a *national* monument could have been raised to SHAKESPEARE without selecting as a Committee-man, a member of a republic which has denationalized itself.”<sup>3</sup> The Baltimore *Chronicle* responded by claiming, “Hampden and Sydney, and Newton, and Locke, and Shakespeare, and Milton, and Pope, and all those literary, and martial, and civil, and legislative, and scientific luminaries . . . [are] our countrymen, in the same sense precisely as they are your countrymen.”<sup>4</sup>

This controversy called into question the cultural—or national—status of that political entity known as the United States—“a republic which has denationalized itself.” As Malaysian rulers sought to portray their affiliation with European institutions, the Baltimore *Chronicle*'s claim to English cultural capital suggests that asserting control not only of material but also of cultural resources is a postcolonial necessity.<sup>5</sup> Hazlitt's sense of anachronism, *John Bull*'s claim of “denationalization,” the *Chronicle*'s counter-claim, and much of Irving's *Sketch Book* raise the same question: if the time has become so “dis-jointed, disadjusted, disharmonic, discorded, or unjust . . . *Ana-chronique*” that an Englishman in 1820 cannot recognize himself in ancestors' texts, how can he claim sole possession of the inheritance they represent?<sup>6</sup> In *The Sketch Book*, Irving's quotations from and allusions to a wide range of Elizabethan and Renaissance texts (an

intertextuality Hazlitt ignored) enact a “living appropriation of the spirit” of English literature and culture designed to reveal the insensitivity of modern English writers.<sup>7</sup> Quotation and allusion, as narrative strategies of Geoffrey Crayon, Irving’s narrator for the sketches, are also the means by which Irving sets up a contrast between natural and spiritual metaphors of cultural transmission and inheritance. The miscellany thus traces how Crayon learns to read beyond the boundaries of a national English culture and claim the heritage Hazlitt deems anachronistic.

Using a similar strategy, Salman Rushdie concludes his omnivorously allusive novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* with three allusions to works by Washington Irving. Just as Irving’s epigraphs, quotations, and descriptions [End Page 32] demonstrate a vital claim to...



Richard V.  
McLamore

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