

Gut Reaction

The Enteric Terrors of Washington Irving

ON JANUARY 22, 1803, a young journalist published the following cultural observations in New York's *Morning Chronicle*:

I had marched into the theatre through rows of tables heaped up with delicacies of every kind—here a pyramid of apples or oranges invited the playful palate of the dainty; while there a regiment of mince pies and custards promised a more substantial regale to the hungry. I entered the box, and looked round with astonishment... The crackling of nuts and the craunching of apples saluted my ears on every side. Surely, thought I, never was an employment followed up with more assiduity than that of gormandizing; already it pervades every public place of amusement...

The eating mania prevails through every class of society; not a soul but has caught the infection. Eating clubs are established in every street and alley, and it is impossible to turn a corner without hearing the hissing of frying pans, winding the savory steams of roast and boiled, or seeing some hungry genius bolting raw oysters in the middle of the street.¹

Within a decade, this young food writer would become America's most famous author. His name was Washington Irving. Every schoolchild has read his "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the story of an itinerant schoolteacher, poetaster, and rejected suitor named Ichabod Crane, who witnesses the apparition of a headless horseman— that terrifying specter whose detached cranium is in fact nothing but a pumpkin.

Over the years this country's most famous ghost story has been interpreted in many ways—as political allegory, archetypal comedy, forerunner of the American gothic tradition—but never specifically as a piece about food. The following article will examine the role of squash and other edibles in Irving's work and seek to define a relationship between the early American food story and the early American ghost story, the link between "the eating mania" and gut terror.

In short, what can be gathered from that fatal, Federalist pumpkin?

Background: *Knickerbocker's History of New York*

The book that first brought Irving worldwide fame was published almost two decades before "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." It was called *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, and although it purported to be an objective account of the triumphs and travails of the earliest Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, it was just as much a comparative study of Dutch and Yankee eating habits.

Irving's focus on foodstuffs throughout the *History* can serve as an introduction to Ichabod Crane's dizzying intimacy with a pumpkin because the *History* illustrates the great metaphorical power Irving assigned to such prosaic comestibles as cabbages and onions. Indeed, war and patriotism were not topics too lofty to be figured by vegetables. After the "crafty Yankees" execute a successful surprise attack against a Dutch stronghold in Connecticut (by waiting until the fort's "vigilant defenders" have "gorged themselves with a hearty dinner"),

[a] strong garrison was immediately established...consisting of twenty long sided, hard fisted Yankees; with Weathersfield onions stuck in their hats, by way of cockades and feathers—long rusty fowling pieces for muskets—hasty pudding, dumb fish, pork and molasses for stores; and a huge pumpkin was hoisted on the end of a pole, as a standard—liberty caps not having as yet come into fashion.²

Note that "huge pumpkin" has just become the first "Yankee" flag. One hundred years before the stars and stripes, there was a squash. Is it mere coincidence that at the height of his career, Irving would hurl this same native-American specimen at Ichabod Crane, another Yankee who sought to invade Dutch turf?³

Irving's *History* details the onset of conflict between these two groups of America's seventeenth-century settlers by recounting the escalating rhetoric of New England's and New Amsterdam's hawkish leaders, particularly those moments of polemical contention bolstered by violent invocations of food. According to the Yankee "grand council of the east," the Dutch

were a race of mere cannibals and anthropophagi, inasmuch as they never eat cod-fish on Saturdays, devoured swine's flesh without molasses, and held pumpkins in utter contempt.⁴

The Yankees declare themselves outraged by Dutch “anti-pumpkinites,”⁵ while the Dutch accuse the Yankees of being a “squatting, bundling, guessing, questioning, swapping, pumpkin-eating... crew.”⁶

The punitive logic that Irving's tinhorn tyrants suggest—that revolting eating habits should bring about well-deserved death—reaches its fullest development in the figure of Peter Stuyvesant's commander in chief, General Von Poffenburgh. When this Dutch leader “found his martial spirit waxing hot within him,”

[he] would prudently sally forth into the fields, and lugging out his trusty sabre... would lay about him most lustily, decapitating cabbages by platoons—hewing down whole phalanxes of sunflowers, which he termed gigantic Swedes; and if peradventure, he espied a colony of honest big bellied pumpkins quietly basking themselves in the sun, ‘ah caitiff Yankees,’ would he roar, ‘have I caught ye at last!’—so saying, with one sweep of his sword, he would cleave the unhappy vegetables from their chins to their waistbands...⁷

Von Poffenburgh's wild ride through an enemy-strewn vegetable patch anticipates Ichabod Crane's race against a haunted pumpkin. And there are other similarities: both vignettes depend upon the physical/spiritual conflations of sorcery. If Swedes are blonde like sunflowers, they *are* sunflowers and will die as sunflowers die; if Yankees make pies out of pumpkins, they *are* pumpkins and will be similarly slaughtered. Not only can food incite masses to battle, battle itself can be waged by massacring the ghost spirits of enemies that reside within emblematic aliment.

The equation of emblematic food and military conquest allows Irving to identify the battle with the banquet:

[A]mong [Von Poffenburgh's] other great qualities, the general was remarkably addicted to huge entertainments, or rather carousals, and in one afternoon's campaign would leave more *dead men* on the field, than he ever did in the whole course of his military career. Many bulletins of these bloodless victories do still remain on record; and the whole province was once thrown in amaze, by the return of one of his campaigns; wherein it was stated, that... in the short space of six months he had conquered and utterly annihilated sixty oxen, ninety hogs, one hundred sheep, ten thousand cabbages, one thousand bushels of potatoes, one hundred and fifty kilderkins of small beer, two thousand seven hundred and thirty five pipes, seventy eight pounds of sugar-plumbs... besides sundry small meats, game, poultry and garden stuff.⁸

To have eaten is to have “conquered” and “annihilated.” Every time we sit down to a meal we leave “*dead men* on the field.”

How will they come back to haunt us?

The American Banquet: Eating to Conjure the Dead

Of all the strange pseudonyms Irving chose in his early years as a magazine writer, the most exotic was Mustapha Rub-a-Dub Keli Khan. Intrigued and inspired by the strange habits of “enlightened Americans,” this fictional Muslim sent numerous letters to friends back home, all of which were published in *Salmagundi* (the magazine Irving had founded with his brother Peter and James K. Paulding). The issue of October 15, 1807, ran a letter from Khan to “Asem Hacchem, principal slave-driver to his highness the Bashaw of Tripoli,”⁹ in which Khan described the American version of that “practice in all enlightened governments to perpetuate by monuments, the memory of great men, as a testimony of respect for the illustrious dead”:¹⁰

[T]hey honour their great men by *eating*... The barbarous nations of antiquity immolated human victims to the memory of their lamented dead, but the enlightened Americans offer up whole hecatombs of geese and calves, and oceans of wine in honour of the illustrious living; and the patriot has the felicity of hearing from every quarter the vast exploits in gluttony and revelling that have been celebrated to the glory of his name.¹¹

The American “eating mania,” which Irving had symbolized four years earlier by the crude figure of “some hungry genius bolting raw oysters in the middle of the street,” has come a long way. What was an uncouth frenzy now composes one of the most formalized and respectful of all human rituals, that of bestowing honors and encomiums generally postponed until eulogies. Food in the new nation has become a unique element, for food and food alone can embody “the sublime spectacle of love of country, elevating itself from a sentiment into an appetite.”¹² Only in America does spirit *elevate* (and not descend) into the physical.

According to Khan, the gross excesses of a “*publick dinner*” have taken the place of garish entombment as the favorite mode of American commemoration. The American digestive tract performs the role of national repository of honor and history, for it enfolds the spirit of the dead:

[H]aving gorged so often on patriotism and pudding, and entombed so many great names in their extensive maws, thou wilt easily conceive that [American political leaders] wax portly apace, that they fatten on the fame



John Quidor, "A Knickerbocker Tea Party," 1866. Oil on canvas.

COURTESY OF THE NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW BRITAIN, CT;
CHARLES F. SMITH FUND; PHOTO: MICHAEL AGEÉ

of mighty men, and that their rotundity, like the rivers, the lakes and the mountains of their country, must be *on a great scale!* ...and when I sometimes see a portly alderman, puffing along, and swelling as if he had the world under his waistcoat, I can not help looking upon him as a walking monument, and am often ready to exclaim—"Tell me, thou majestick mortal, thou breathing catacomb!—to what illustrious character, what mighty event, does that capacious carcass of thine bear testimony?"¹³

As "enchanted" and "bewitched" a region as Sleepy Hollow itself,¹⁴ the "breathing catacomb" that is the megalithic American stomach swells with the "fame of mighty men." Digestion has become triumphalism. To ingest is to extoll. To "wax portly" is to encompass ghosts.

However, for all the spirits quivering in ample guts there has been very little haunting going on. How can such sublime "names" "entombed" in "maws" be set at liberty? Again, the answer lies in the supernatural powers Irving assigns to the new American rituals of social eating.

In "Tea, a Poem," Irving presents himself under yet another pseudonym, this time as the parodically esoteric poet, Pindar Cockloft, Esq. Cockloft's lampoon of the American "tea party" articulates a direct relationship to the practice of witchcraft, for the "tea party" is

like meeting of witches...brewed up at night:
Where each matron arrives, fraught with tales of surprize,
With knowing suspicion and doubtful surmize,
Like the broomstick whirl'd hags that appear in Macbeth,
Each bearing some relick of venom or death,
"To stir up the toil and to double the trouble,
That fire may burn, and that cauldron may bubble."¹⁵

Through the magical intervention of "sweetmeats," "cake," and "*souchong*,"¹⁶ "matron[s]" become "witches," the teapot their bubbling "cauldron," and gossiped "tales" the rhymed couplets of necromancy. Like the revered names of patriotic heroes elevated "from...sentiment into an appetite," the reviled names invoked through private gossip sessions rise from the realm of verbal derogation to physical—indeed, edible—presence:

Our young ladies nibble a good name in play,
as for pastime they nibble a biscuit away.¹⁷

For these “gloomy cabals—the dark orgies of tea”¹⁸ quite literally “conjure” “shades”:

And as the fell sisters astonished the scot,
In predicting of Banquo’s descendants the lot,
Making shadows of kings, amid flashes of light,
To appear in array and to frown in his sight.
So they conjure up spectres all hideous in hue,
Which, as shades of their neighbours, are passed in review.¹⁹

The direct allusion to Shakespeare’s witches and Banquo’s ghost is no anomalous flight of fancy, but the logical result of the enteric structure Irving has asserted Americans utilize when they wish to express themselves on sublime occasions. Yankee pumpkins become talismanic declarations of primal nationalism. Dutch banquets transmogrify into martial conquests. The grand “*publick dinner*” of the early republic literalizes the glorious “fame” of revolutionary heroes into the massive girth of aldermen. Now, the less monumental tea party employs ancient Celtic sorcery to transform “neighbours” into “spectres.” In each case, the rites of food enact occult metamorphoses. Peristalsis begets a ghost.

Irving had established the necessary relationship between American spirit and flesh in the best-selling literary genres of the Federalist decades: Knickerbocker’s history, Khan’s epistolary episodes, and Cockloft’s mock epic poem. There was one genre left, the most popular of all. A completely realized sentimental melodrama of eating-as-ghosting had yet to be written.

Eating is Believing: The Landscape of Sleepy Hollow

Like his Puritan forefathers, Ichabod Crane was convinced of the real and present danger of the devil.

[He] was a perfect master of Cotton Mather’s *History of New England Witchcraft*, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed ...He was, in fact, an odd mixture of small shrewdness and simple credulity. His appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary...No tale was too gross or monstrous for his capacious swallow.²⁰

Irving had tested the metaphorical strengths and transformative powers of American appetite and found it could figure martial bombast and even drive military conquest; it could substitute for the cathartic celebrations of entombment and mediate magical conjuring. But not until “Sleepy Hollow” does Irving align appetite with belief

itself, particularly the kind of stubbornly unassailable, dangerously quixotic belief that may result from “swallow[ing]” too many stories.

To “swallow” a story, of course, is not to engage in the mental discipline of critical reading. Like the mindless state that may result from witnessing supernatural horrors, an “appetite for the marvelous” comes from the gut. “Wit,” Irving wrote in “The Christmas Dinner,” “is a mighty tart, pungent ingredient, and much too acid for some stomachs.”²¹ If comedy and satire are “too acid,” might not parody and melodrama border on the poisonous?

Since believing in ghost stories is to “digest[]” and “swallow” them, the identification of “marvelous” tales with enteric processes might explain a fair bit of American dyspepsia. Thus, in Irving’s most reflective moments, he expressed an unambivalent physical distaste for “superstitious fancies”:

In the early chronicles of these dark and melancholy [Colonial] times we meet with many indications of the diseased state of the public mind. The gloom of religious abstraction and the wildness of their situation among trackless forests and savage tribes had disposed the colonists to superstitious fancies, and had filled their imaginations with the frightful chimeras of witchcraft and spectrology.²²

If the involuntary urge to “swallow” ghost stories can be submitted as clinical evidence for a “diseased state of the public mind,” then according to the conflated processes of witchcraft and foodcraft that Irving had been articulating since his first years as a professional writer, the unique habits of early American eating must be equally diseased. Can the customs that constitute the “eating mania” elucidate some particularly American ailment? And could that ailment manifest itself as mindless terror?

In *Sleepy Hollow* (a physical space that Irving explicitly identifies with the “original Dutch settlers,” and thus with the food metaphors of his own *History of New York*), “witchcraft and spectrology” once again manifest themselves as forms of mass infection:

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... 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 marvelous beliefs, are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air. The whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions...²³

The “listless” (or, to employ the far more clinical term Irving used throughout the *History*, “phlegmatic”) Dutch settlers have been enthralled by some mass “witching power.”²⁴ They see and hear what is not there and their frequent “trances and visions” result in a morbid “reverie.” Out of this sickened state emerge terrifying “tales,” just the sort of “marvelous” and gut-chilling stories fit for Crane’s “capacious swallow.”

The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region and seems to be commander-in-chief of all the powers of the air is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War...²⁵

Sleepy Hollow’s “powers of the air” dominate the mind and closely resemble Irving’s description of yet another airborne disease, the contagion of yellow fever that intermittently sent waves of panic through Federalist New York: “Raise but the cry of yellow fever, and immediately every head-ache, and indigestion, and overflowing of the bile is pronounced the terrible epidemic.”²⁶ The paranoid social dynamics of a New York yellow-fever scare coincide with the hallucinatory dynamics of Sleepy Hollow’s “continual reverie.” In both cases, the bewitching and sub-logical “powers of the air” rule the powers of the mind.

On second thought, there may be no powers of the mind—not in New York, where “the public” “love dearly to be in a panic,”²⁷ nor in Sleepy Hollow. In neither settlement does ratiocination hold sway. The Dutch magistrates of Manhattan “were generally chosen by weight,” and thus their phlegmatic vegetable minds were “tranquil, torpid and at ease”²⁸ and their “huge, spherical,” stomach-like skulls stuffed with a swallowed, foodlike “prodigious mass of soft brains.”²⁹ As for Sleepy Hollow’s “commander-in-chief,” he holds court without a head. Might this headless Hessian’s powers of office, like the command of General Von Poffenburgh and the dominion of those “round, sleek, fat, unwieldy” early rulers of New Amsterdam, emanate from the gut?³⁰

Indeed, in the headless “Hessian trooper” Irving had discovered his best figure yet for the American “eating mania”: A body with no brain. Without a mind to bridle its appetites, the stomach reigns supreme. And so our hero Ichabod Crane appears as Irving’s archetypal American. Like Von Poffenburgh’s “big bellied pumpkins quietly basking themselves in the sun,” he is all stomach:

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.³¹

Within this single context of ingestive capacity, Crane resembles Knickerbocker’s obese aldermen, who

feast[] lustily on the fat things of the land, and gorg[e] so heartily oysters and turtles, that in process of time they acquire the activity of the one, and the form, the waddle, and the green fat of the other.³²

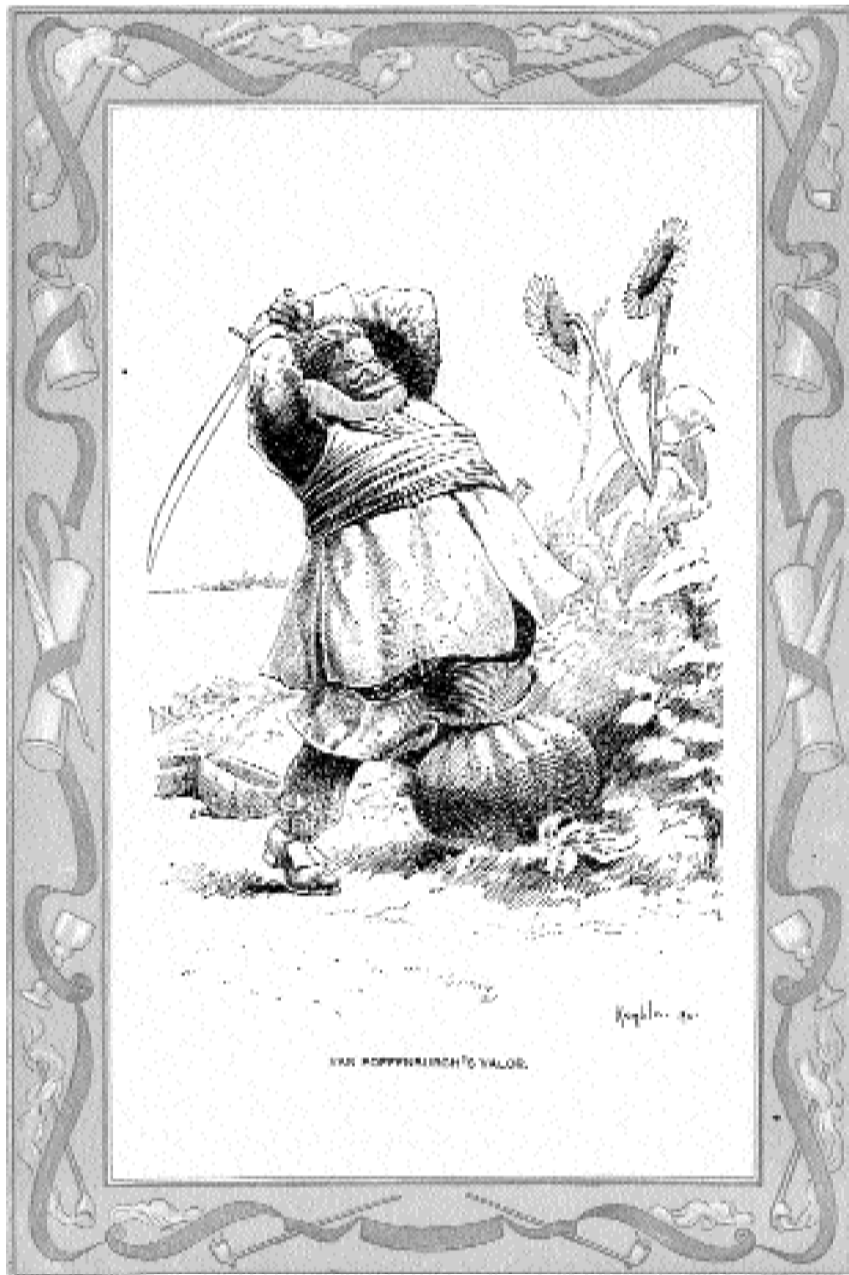
However, Crane retains one singular feature. Although a “huge feeder,” his frenetic Yankee metabolism opposes the Dutch phlegmatic tendency that has made Manhattan aldermen into the living doubles of the torpid turtles and oysters they engulf. The tall and svelte images associated with the name “Crane,” along with the schoolteacher’s “lank” body, prove it.

[H]e was in form and spirit like a supple jack—yielding, but tough; though he bent, he never broke; and though he bowed beneath the slightest pressure, yet, the moment it was away—jerk! he was as erect, and carried his head as high as ever.³³

Crane’s ever “dilating” hunger defines a strange, quasi-supernatural “power.” It swallows things whole yet remains eternally rapacious. Unlike the stolid, settled, and sluggish Dutch, Crane is marked by a heightened level of nervous energy, which craves its own emblematic forms of nervous sustenance. Thus, Crane’s eternally unsatisfied desire for food can be matched only by his ceaseless appetite for the “fearful pleasure” of ghost stories:

Another of his sources of fearful pleasure was to pass long winter evenings with...dutch wives as they sat spinning by the fire, with a row of apples roasting and spluttering along the hearth, and listen to their marvelous tales of ghosts and goblins, and haunted fields, and haunted brooks, and haunted bridges, and haunted houses, and particularly of the headless horseman, or galloping Hessian of the Hollow, as they sometimes called him.³⁴

Like the witchy matrons of Federalist tea parties, the “dutch wives” combine eating with “ghost[] and goblin[]” talk. The evening snack remains a forum for conjuring the dead, with the essential difference that here the belief in ghosts and the ingestion of food converge in a single protagonist who absorbs both the edible and the spiritual landscape at the same time. While Ichabod feeds the ever-gaping maw of his nervous system with tales of local spirits, he devours that row of “roasting and spluttering” apples. As his own “skin” fills, his own nervous “spirits” rise. The “spluttering” fruit and the spluttered tales both serve to sustain his twin nervous and enteric excitements.



Van Poffenburgh's valor.

FROM WASHINGTON IRVING'S KNICKERBOCKER'S HISTORY OF NEW YORK, VOLUME 1. ILLUSTRATED BY EDWARD W. KEMBLE (NEW YORK: G.P. PUTNAM'S SONS, 1894); COURTESY OF THE SEYMOUR B. DURST OLD YORK LIBRARY AND READING ROOM AT THE GRADUATE CENTER OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

He was a kind and thankful creature whose heart dilated in proportion as his skin was filled with good cheer, and whose spirits rose with eating as some men's do with drink.³⁵

Crane's special "dilating powers" may grant him ghost-conjuring and apple-eating privileges among the wives, but he clearly does not belong here. A Yankee among Dutch, he is also a sexual alien. Indeed, as his romantic passion will soon demonstrate, Crane is no pragmatic evaluator of his social landscape. Like his dinner and those ghost stories, he believes that women, too, can be swallowed whole.

**Metaphors of Contiguity:
Just Desserts for Enteric Conquests**

From his earliest days as a journalist, Irving had deployed a strategy of replacing the figure of the American brain with the figure of the American stomach, most often in the throes of a frenzied "eating mania." By the time he wrote "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," his recurrent descriptions, invocations, and metaphors of food had come to permeate the essence of his plots and characters. If one of the only processes that really mattered in such a literary world was the digestive process, then it might be possible to gather quite a bit from that fatal, Federalist pumpkin. Indeed, as Irving worked to align occult beliefs and romantic tensions

with digestive powers, Ichabod Crane's ever-dilating stomach begins to dominate every detail of this tale.

Katrina Van Tassel, the single figure that focalizes Crane's intestinal and romantic desires, "was a blooming lass of fresh eighteen, plump as a partridge, ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father's peaches." Katrina is "so tempting a morsel"³⁶ that Crane cannot contemplate marrying her without launching into a dietary reverie that recalls the "trances and visions" that characterize Sleepy Hollow's diseased air. When Crane approaches the Van Tassel farm,

[t]he pedagogue's mouth watered.... In his devouring mind's eye he pictured to himself every roasting pig running about with a pudding in his belly and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cozily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce. In the porkers he saw carved out the future sleek side of bacon, and juicy relishing ham; not a turkey but he beheld daintily trussed up, with its gizzard under its wing, and, peradventure, a necklace of savory sausages; and even bright chanticleer himself lay sprawling on his back, in a sidedish...³⁷

Crane does not see a duck as a duck or a goose as a goose, but all are tokens of a magically transforming world he can "devour" with his "mind's eye." The concretely empirical (and entirely prosaic) phenomena this eye digests has melted into a liquid metempsychosis of "porker" to "bacon" to chyme. Appetitive power drives these metaphors. The Van Tassel farm, divided and conquered and allegorized into culinary ends, has become a canto of mutability.

Even more might be asserted. Since it is not the reflections of Crane's brain but the demands of his gut that snuggle pigeons into pie-crusting beds and drive ducks into dishes like "married couples," his imagination—the "devouring mind's eye"—has itself become a digestive apparatus. Since a digestive apparatus is essentially an absorbent or a leeching system that depends upon the contiguity of one substance to another, the metaphorical structures Irving employs to describe Crane's imaginative transformations also acquire their resonance through contiguity.

There is no intrinsic connection between a pig and a baked ham; only through the complex mediations of slaughter and food preparation do the two become one. The living pig does not contain a roast ham, nor does the roast ham contain a living pig. In Crane's conjured landscape, two entirely whole figures stand contiguous to one another in the "devouring mind's eye."

Metaphorical figures that access their evocative power through such contiguity have a special, technical name. They are called metonymies. As we shall see, the meaning of the climax of "The Tale of Sleepy Hollow"—the contiguity of a brain with a pumpkin—depends upon the emblematic logic of metonymy.

Irving's submission of his story to the domination of infinitely dilating appetitive metonymies not only allows the stomach to overwhelm the raptures of Crane's romantic contemplation, it permits digestion to subsume the supposedly freestanding fungibilities of money and property.

As the enraptured Ichabod fancied all this...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 wagon 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.

When he entered the house the conquest of his heart was complete.³⁸

Given free reign, the entire American continent would soon be digested by Crane's expansionist, imperialist, devouring gaze. His stomach is as far-reaching as it is engulfing, for as soon as he digests what is at hand he will go forth to envelop more. Is this the true—and truly terrifying—dimension of the American "eating mania"?

Crane's parodic journey of "conquest" on a borrowed horse leads him through an abundant landscape, all of which immediately transmutes into his "culinary" property. All the "treasures" that lie contiguous to Crane become his possessions, as though the journey were through some gigantic alimentary canal, and Crane himself the spirit of digestive absorption incarnate.

As Ichabod jogged slowly on his way, his eye, ever open to every symptom of culinary abundance, ranged with delight over the treasures of jolly autumn. On all sides he beheld vast store of apples, some hanging in oppressive opulence on the trees, some gathered into baskets and barrels for the market, others heaped up in rich piles for the cider press. Farther on he beheld great fields of Indian corn, with its golden ears peeping from their leafy coverts and holding out the promise of cakes and hasty pudding; and the yellow pumpkins lying beneath them, turning up their fair round bellies to the sun, and giving ample prospects of the most luxurious of pies...³⁹

Of all the vegetables in this food-haunted realm, the “yellow pumpkins...turning up their fair round bellies to the sun” (a clear echo of Von Poffenburgh’s “big bellied pumpkins quietly basking themselves in the sun”⁴⁰) most emphatically emblemize the human stomach. This conflation of belly and pumpkin allows Crane, the stomach incarnate, to traverse a land of incarnate stomachs.

[A]non he passed the fragrant buckwheat fields, breathing the odor of the beehive, and as he beheld them, soft anticipations stole over his mind of dainty slapjacks, well buttered and garnished with honey or treacle, by the delicate little dimpled hand of Katrina Van Tassel.

Thus feeding his mind with many sweet thoughts and ‘sugared suppositions,’ he journeyed along the sides of a range of hills which look out upon some of the goodliest scenes of the mighty Hudson.⁴¹

Ichabod’s “sweet thoughts” have come full circle: from Katrina who, once romantically digested, frees Crane to contemplate the literal digestion of the bounty of her father’s farm; to the farm which, figuratively digested, allows Crane to contemplate cashing out and heading for “Lord knows where”; to capitalist fungibility itself, symbolized by an untethered stomach, which finds a correlative in the disembodied “round bellie[d]” pumpkin in the field. This pumpkin field traversed becomes a buckwheat field which, “well buttered and garnished,” brings us back to the “little dimpled hand of Katrina.” Indeed, this series defines a marvelous mental cycle of imaginative digestion that never leads to excretion, but endless ingestion.

After such glorious and imaginative “feeding” of the mind, the actual feeding of the body should ascend into paeans of ecstatic description. And Irving does prepare his readers for epicurean transcendence by meticulously representing the “sample charms of a genuine Dutch country tea table,” which include

heaped-up platters of cakes of various and almost indescribable kinds, known only to experienced Dutch housewives! There was the doughty doughnut, the tenderer oly koek, and the crisp and crumbling cruller; sweet cakes and shortcakes, ginger cakes and honey cakes, and the whole family of cakes. And then there were apple pies and peach pies and pumpkin pies; besides slices of ham and smoked beef; and more-over delectable dishes of preserved plums, and peaches, and pears, and quinces; not to mention broiled shad and roasted chickens; together with bowls of milk and cream...⁴²

As has become increasingly evident, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is almost entirely about food. Yet here, at the appetitive climax, words can hardly describe the “indescribable”

mysteries. So Irving, like a true acolyte struck dumb before the sublime presence of his god, must stop short of detailing the consummation of Crane’s passion.

I want breath and time to discuss this banquet as it deserves, and am too eager to get on with my story. Happily, Ichabod Crane was not in so great a hurry as his historian, but did ample justice to every dainty.⁴³

Crane eats his fill of sweet “oly koek,” but he cannot engulf Katrina. Rejected by his “morsel,” he heads into the dark wilderness.

Only a few paragraphs of “Sleepy Hollow” remain, but the ghost story (the only part of the tale anyone remembers) cannot be separated from what has come before. First, the physical appearance of the horseman embodies the digestive dynamics that have driven the narrative from its beginning. When Ichabod Crane realizes he is being shadowed by a terrifying apparition,

[he] was horror-struck on perceiving that he was headless! But his horror was still more increased on observing that the head, which should have rested on his shoulders, was carried before him on the pommel of the saddle.⁴⁴

The ghost holds the brain that is the “round bellie[d]” pumpkin contiguous to his stomach. When this contiguity is extrapolated into the metonymy it implies, the brain and the pumpkin and the stomach become one. And so the enteric brain, exaggerated through amputation, can now appear in its true, monstrous form. Of course, it induces brainless horror.

The contiguity of stomach and head through the ghostly intervention of a pumpkin serves as the first of two metonomies Irving will develop through the figure of the Hessian, and if this first metonymy can be abbreviated as pumpkin/stomach/brain, the second might be called pumpkin/stomach/brain/Crane’s cranium. It is the logic of this final metonymy that drives our interpretation of the climactic collision of skull and squash:

Another convulsive kick in the ribs and old Gunpowder sprang upon the bridge; he thundered over the resounding planks; he gained the opposite side; and now Ichabod cast a look behind to see if his pursuer should vanish, according to rule, in a flash of fire and brimstone. Just then he saw the goblin rising in his stirrups, and in the very act of hurling his head at him. Ichabod endeavored to dodge the horrible missile, but too late. It encountered his cranium with a tremendous crash—he was tumbled headlong into the dust, and Gunpowder, the black steed, and the goblin rider, passed by like a whirlwind.⁴⁵

Throughout his career, Irving had exploited the symbolic possibilities of pumpkins to trope a wide variety of martial figures. The pumpkin's final metamorphosis turns it into an offensive weapon, a "horrible missile" which, when brought into contact with Crane's cranium, not only explodes into the farcical climax of the tale, but consummates a long-anticipated and long-enduring metaphor of contiguity, nothing less than Irving's definitive statement about the mind with the gut.

In "Sleepy Hollow's" climactic metonymy, the brain and the pumpkin and the stomach and the cranium and the weapon all unify. Of course, in that moment of melodramatic fusion, it is the brain that loses most. Enteric terror has banished rationality. The appetitive drives that have conjured the headless Hessian spirit warrior have simultaneously induced Crane's "convulsive" terror, which trumps all other human capacities. In short, Ichabod Crane relinquishes himself to the pumpkin within. And it is this gut reaction that finalizes the transformation of the ghost story into the food story. Unlike Von Poffenburgh's "unhappy vegetables," Sleepy Hollow's victorious pumpkin stomach holds the field long after its adversary has fled.

Irving's dogged exploration of the possibilities inherent within early American food writing had paid off. After two decades of practice, an appetite-driven narrative structure had reached its fullest development in this most famous of all American ghost stories. Not only had the embodied (and disembodied) stomachs of Sleepy Hollow vanquished the brain, they had replaced it.

Washington Irving was, of course, a social critic, and his historically ignored food writing was one of the essential vehicles he commandeered to articulate what has since become a standard critique of his country: that Yankee America is a vast, engulfing power, a grand, nationalist stomach which views the entire continent—if not the world—as its manifest dinner. Embedded within this criticism lie subsidiary charges of anti-intellectualism and a reliance on gut reaction over and above the brain's sober ratiocinations.

Is this the American disease? If so, Irving diagnosed it two centuries ago. 🍂

NOTES

1. Washington Irving, *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 6 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 22–23. The original *Chronicle* article of 1803 was printed as "Letter VII" of the "Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent." Throughout this article Irving's spellings, punctuation, and grammar appear as originally published.

2. Washington Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 192–93. Throughout Irving's life, the *History* went through many editions and redactions. This 1927 scholarly edition is a reprint of Irving's original 1809 version.

3. See Waverly Root's argument for squash's native-American status in *Food* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 474.

4. Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 269.

5. *Ibid.*, 269.

6. *Ibid.*, 194.

7. *Ibid.*, 292.

8. *Ibid.*, 304–305.

9. Irving, *Complete Works*, 260. The original letter ran in *Salmagundi*, No. xvi.

10. *Ibid.*, 261.

11. *Ibid.*, 262.

12. *Ibid.*, 263.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 330.

15. Irving, *Complete Works*, 299. The original verse ran in *Salmagundi*, No. xix.

16. *Ibid.*, 300–301.

17. *Ibid.*, 300.

18. *Ibid.*, 302.

19. *Ibid.*, 300.

20. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 335.

21. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Christmas Dinner," 225.

22. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "Philip of Pokanoket," 289.

23. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 330.

24. Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 76, 169, 324, 444.

25. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 330.

26. Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 281.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 124.

29. *Ibid.*, 125.

30. *Ibid.*, 124.

31. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 333.

32. Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 126.

33. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 341.

34. *Ibid.*, 336.

35. *Ibid.*, 347–348.

36. *Ibid.*, 337.

37. *Ibid.*, 338.

38. *Ibid.*, 338–339.

39. *Ibid.*, 346.

40. Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 292.

41. Irving, *The Sketch Book*, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," 346.

42. *Ibid.*, 347–348.

43. *Ibid.*, 348.

44. *Ibid.*, 355.

45. *Ibid.*, 356–357.