

Reflections on Jürgen Wolter's "Metafictional Discourse in Early American Literature"*

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After a strategic acknowledgement of self-reflexive characteristics in the work of Sterne, Richardson, and Fielding, Jürgen Wolter sets the context for his discussion with a review of the American case against the imagination virtually institutionalized by Scottish Common Sense philosophy in the early decades of the nineteenth century and proclaimed more colloquially in warnings to youthful female readers about the dangers of reading fiction. Against such a conceptual and moralistic backdrop, as we know, many early American novels struggled into apologetic and didactic existence.

But not all: Wolter's emphasis is on works that relinquished the assurances of common-sense orthodoxy and introduced an early form of metafiction to American literature. Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) is his primary example, and although Wolter's analysis is necessarily succinct, it is worth the price of admission (or of *Connotations*). Beset by trauma, Clara Wieland, Brown's narrator, not only becomes unsure of what is happening around her; she reflects on her uncertainty, broods over the authenticity of what she is writing, and gradually identifies her *self* with her narrative. Wolter concludes perceptively that Clara "reaches the climax of her self-reflexive, metafictional discourse when she states: 'my existence will terminate with my tale.'" It is an observation I wish I had made.

As he develops the terms of his inquiry, Wolter moves from the tortuous metafiction of Brown's *Wieland* to the puckish reflexiveness

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of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." In these texts the problem for narrators and readers alike is one of ascertaining the "truth" as the tales are filtered through a succession of frames and further conditioned by reports of native-American legends. Quite rightly, Wolter sees the "multiplicity of genres and narratives" in *The Sketch-Book* (1819-20) as foreshadowing "the complexity of narrative techniques in some twentieth-century texts." His laudable focus on postures of self-reflexiveness and uncertainty in that salmagundi of a book, however, leads him to look past what happens in the tales themselves, specifically in the making and unmaking of Irving's best-known protagonists, Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane. It is a consideration that could serve the dimensions of Wolter's argument well—for it would recognize Irving as a writer who acknowledged even as he challenged the assumptions of his culture.

Rip and Ichabod are childlike protagonists, one with an "insuperable" aversion to labor and a love of play, the other with a comprehensive gullibility and an addiction to ghost stories ("No tale," as Irving writes, "was too gross or monstrous for [Ichabod's] capacious swallow"). Amid the narrative postures and protestations in *The Sketch-Book*, these characters stand as would-be heroes of the imagination whom Irving brings to comic (and touching) defeat in a society that could be entertained by (and even sympathize with) such models without fundamentally endorsing them. Portentously, Rip sleeps through the American Revolution. Ichabod loses the hand of the fair Katrina Van Tassel and the largesse of the Van Tassel farm to Brom Bones, "hero of the country round" (in Irving's words), who has the temerity to impersonate a ghost. What these protagonists represent—a penchant for play, a vulnerable orality—has no part in the making of a nation intent on forging its identity.

In his Preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860), Nathaniel Hawthorne explains that the setting of Italy served him as "a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon, as they are, and *must needs be*, in America" (my italics). What Hawthorne recognized, with characteristic ambivalence, was that the common-sense realism that constrained the imagination in the early decades of the American republic also bred a sense of assurance and stability necessary to a non-feudal,

non-aristocratic, non-fabled, hopefully burgeoning democracy. It is a lesson that scholars engaged in American literary/cultural studies (certainly including the writer of these reflections) need to keep in mind. Wolter's article bristles with implication: not only does he bring us to a fresh understanding of the genesis of metafiction in American literature; importantly, he sees the ways in which a sense of crisis engenders narrative self-reflexiveness, the imagination turning back upon itself (as in *Wieland*) in an attempt to express the elusiveness of reality. Moreover, he writes in a style fashioned for insight and (a welcome bonus) is thoroughly responsible to previous scholarship. It makes a strong package.

But his argument would be even stronger, I believe, if he did not choose sides and cast champions of the imagination in the role of good guys, liberators, and admonitors of fiction in the role of bad guys, despots (as James Fenimore Cooper once termed common sense). Both were necessary parts of a society still concerned about a quest for nationality in its various forms; both were aspects of a cultural dialogue that sought to bring a national identity into being. Hawthorne said that a "common-place prosperity" inimical to the imagination was "happily the case with my dear native land." Happily, too, as Wolter demonstrates, there were those (including Hawthorne) who transcended the boundaries of the commonplace.

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