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BOARDINGHOUSE LIFE, BOARDINGHOUSE LETTERS

In 1842, journalist-poet Walt Whitman could pronounce "the universal Yankee nation" "a boarding people." He went on to explain that "[m]arried men and single men, old women and pretty girls; milliners and masons; cobblers, colonels, and counter-jumpers; tailors and teachers; lieutenants, loafers, ladies, lackbrains, and lawyers; printers and parsons—'black spirits and white, blue spirits and gay'—all 'go out to board'" ("New York" 22–23). Today his pronouncement mystifies. Not only has urban boarding as a social fact all but vanished, but the boardinghouse as a cultural phenomenon, as the kind of conspicuous object-image that invited commentary to begin with, likewise has faded from view.

Yet Americans of Whitman's day truly were "a boarding people," drawn as they were to boardinghouses in astonishing numbers. While the majority of United States residents still favored the stand-alone dwelling (Martin 148), Whitman's later claim that three-quarters of Manhattan's adult population had boarded or was boarding as of 1856 hints at the central place the boardinghouse held not just in New York but in nineteenth-century American life generally ("Wicked" 95; Benedict 101).¹ But what Whitman's remarks most suggest is this: that the antebellum boardinghouse was once glaringly worth writing about and that boarding carried discursive consequences for a people pressed by urban necessity into the improvised living arrangement that once upon a time was boarding. Simply put, the process by which boardinghouse life was translated into a boardinghouse-oriented print tradition, and so became a legitimate literary genre in its own right, reveals much about the period. This essay explores that process as well as the boardinghouse's role in shaping American literary responses to the city.

To begin, where there were cities in antebellum America, there were boardinghouses. A steady stream of rural migrants and immigrants poured into the nation's urban regions between the years 1820 and 1860, precipitating a major demographic shift in the United States. As a result, citizens were increasingly urban in orientation and place of residence and living in city-boardinghouses at rates that are difficult to fathom today. Consisting of a communal housing package of food, shelter, and domestic services for five or more non-related residents, the boardinghouse—as distinct

from houses that took in occasional boarders—offered dignified living in typically urban environments which otherwise were straining to provide shelter for newcomers and natives alike. Young single men on the make made a habit of boarding in the period. Families did, too, often finding it more attractive and affordable than urban home ownership despite having to share quarters with strangers under one roof. In effect, boarding out was a modern response to the metropolitan commodification of space and a concomitant nationwide industrialization; like businesses, boarders were ever-more called upon to adapt to an itinerant mode of existence that seemed here to stay (Blackmar 64–67; Blumin 138–91; Modell and Hareven 51–68; Scherzer 97–101, 264–65; Gamber 1–59).

Not only did denizens of the early nineteenth century board, they also joined with scores of European observers, befuddled by the American penchant for boarding, to make the boardinghouse a mainstay of contemporary literature. Indeed, if they seem peculiar now, literary forms like the boardinghouse sketch, tale, and novel were once popular enough to qualify as more than mere generic curiosities. Such forms in fact were once so common that they must give pause to the scholar not otherwise impressed by boarding as a strictly social phenomenon. To trace the means by which Americans came to inhabit a modern urban world is in part to re-learn how they imagined that world through the figure of the boardinghouse, in life as well as in letters.

A quick inventory of antebellum boarder-authors is telling in this respect. Beginning with America's so-called Renaissance writers, there would appear to have been an uncommon bond between the literary life and the national pastime of boarding. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson took disciple Henry David Thoreau into his own household as boarder—and later many more boarders besides—before the latter's residence at Walden Pond. Thoreau, too, shared domestic space with boarders in his family's Concord home; it was his mother's idea. Novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne also boarded out for extended periods at least three times in his life: once in 1839, while working as a customs officer in Boston; a second try two years later, at the Brook Farm commune in nearby West Roxbury; then again in 1850, and again in Boston, just before author, wife, and children moved to a red farmhouse in rural western Massachusetts. Short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe boarded for several spells in New York. Amherst poet Emily Dickinson spent some seven months at the Cambridgeport boardinghouse of her cousins, not far from cosmopolitan Harvard and Boston, while she received eye treatment. Herman Melville, of *Moby-Dick* fame, knew equally well Liverpool boarding, Washington

boarding, and New York boarding as a young man. Then there is Whitman. The enthusiast of all things American, boardinghouses included, he spoke with personal pride when declaring the United States a nation of boarders. Whitman boarded out from his early teens until after the Civil War, never forgetting those happy New York days at Mrs. Chipman's fine boardinghouse in the early 1840s.

A less restricted view makes boarding loom larger still. For starters, African-American poet Phillis Wheatley closed the door on colonial letters, literally, when she died as a domestic servant in a Boston boardinghouse in 1784. Spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Philadelphian Charles Brockden Brown, arguably the nation's first indigenous novelist, boarded. So did others writing in his wake. The poet and newspaper editor William Cullen Bryant boarded in New York before his family joined him from New England. Fellow newspaperman Horace Greeley *found* a family (a wife, at any rate) in a boardinghouse not far from Bryant's, while the high-society poet, editor, and sketch-writer Nathaniel Parker Willis spent some months boarding at the expensive Astor House hotel. Another African-American writer, escaped slave Harriet Jacobs, commenced a life of freedom—as well as a narrative documenting her hardships—in a New York boardinghouse on Sullivan Street prior to the Civil War. Like Wheatley before her, she shut yet another door on yet another chapter in American letters (Dunlap 64–67; Brown 132; Beers 220–23; Jacobs 481).²

So it would seem that America's antebellum authors as a group boarded out at least as much as their non-literary peers, if not more. But that is not to say the comparative dryness of such data comprises compelling literary history, at least not ostensibly. And yet boarding out becomes more than a simple human-maintenance function when we relate it to what writers do—which is to say, when we relate boarding to the mechanics of writing, to the logistics of bringing written work to print, to the conditions of literary production *per se*. Following innovative print historian William Charvat, recent practitioners of the history of the book in America more or less have recycled Charvat's 1959 account of antebellum publishing. To wit, Charvat and his followers define the parameters of authorship in this period as decidedly urban (Charvat 1–37; Zboray). During the pre-Civil War years I have set out to study, Americans as a whole massed together in and around the nation's three biggest cities—Boston, Philadelphia, and New York—making possible an unprecedented concentration of citizen-readers. Publishers, printers, and periodicals also gathered in metropolitan centers. Taking full advantage of the easier urban access to financing and transportation networks, industry entrepreneurs invested heavily in plant

and equipment infrastructures, creating a capital base that in turn streamlined the production and distribution of literary commodities. Local consumption fueled the whole process as the expanding pool of city-readers provided the primary demand that warranted an enlarged productive capacity in the first place. Capital cities thus created the conditions for an urban print revolution, while city capital underwrote that revolution.

As for boarder-authors, the biographies already outlined reveal that literary laborers also took to the metropolis in droves, as writers became city-settlers and moved to the largest markets for their wares. Fed on the meager profits from their writings, when they were paid at all, starting authors like Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman, even Thoreau, often were just one step ahead of the starving-artist stereotype that had crossed over from the artists' garrets of London. Cut-throat competition ensured that literary supply outpaced demand, great as that demand was. It also ensured that many an antebellum author, having relocated to the new metropolis to write, scrimped and saved on living expenses so as to remain in the city. As any urban laborer knew, or as the strapped middle classes might confess, boarding offered a ready solution, perhaps the only one. It was practiced widely enough to be convenient, furnished cheaply enough to be affordable, and offered arrangements flexible enough—given the short boarding-terms and high turnover rate for boarders—to accommodate the unpredictable paydays of writers-for-hire. *Putnam's* magazine might decry the myth of American authors' hand-to-mouth existence all it wanted. For the twenty literary lions it profiled in January 1853, making much of their elegant (and paid for) homes, the magazine missed some 3000 starvelings boarding and writing under its nose in the nation's big cities. "Double insignificance" was how one of these 3000 described his plight in retrospect, conjuring up at once the precarious employment and housing prospects of the urban American boarder-writer ("Homes" 23–30; Taylor 200).

To summarize, if writers boarded in higher percentages than most Americans, it is the urban orientation of publishing that must account at least in part for their doing so. Were writers to write, they had to do so in the city. At the very least, they had to work out the terms of an all but requisite professional relationship with the urban-based producers and consumers of print (Gilmore). Were they in consequence to abandon the metropolitan periphery of a place like Concord, say, and tend to that relationship face-to-face in a hub like Boston—to work "on site," as it were—then modernity had concrete consequences for authors, indeed. They needed cities in the worst way, as cities presupposed the people and

profit margins that made authorship available as a trade. They also needed industry, and industry again meant cities, since metropolitan purveyors of print provided the dollars and technologies that turned publishing's wheels. And, finally, they needed the affordable city-shelter that the boardinghouse alone offered. Would-be antebellum writers in the main became authors, moderns, and boarders all at once. To the city they went and stayed; and to the boardinghouse they had to go at some point unless possessed of independent means of support.

It is one thing to say that authors boarded; it requires proof of a different kind to claim causality, to say that writers selected the very language, themes, settings, and images they did because of the boardinghouse frames—literal and figurative—in which they functioned. Naturally, such evidence would lie in the body of what I call "boardinghouse letters," provided one can locate a literature so paradoxically omnipresent and absent at once. Boarding's former associations with survival, rather than success, often meant that its literary equivalent would be eclipsed along with the rest of the men and women whose laboring lives were all but lost to the era's romantically inclined writers. Excepting the proletarian credentials of a Melville or Whitman, precious little actual work appears in the literature from a period more concerned with the psychological and emotional lives of Americans than with their workaday world (Bromell 2–38; Denning 2–61).

The hard-luck associations of boarding, then, deserved or not, seem to have sentenced it to a life of semi-obscurity, this despite the frequent appearance of boardinghouse pieces in antebellum print. So it comes as no surprise that many boarder-authors should respond to their predicament by belittling the boardinghouse, making fun of the urban literary life even as they exposed its inner workings. What went on behind low-end boardinghouse doors accordingly became a formulaic tale for the city-initiate writer. The self-effacing nature of that formula all but ensured the young literary artist's disappearance even as he tried, in a literary way, to bring boardinghouse life to light.

Some examples help to illustrate the ways in which boarder-authors willed themselves and their fellow boarders to the margins—to the margins, that is, of antebellum life, and to the margins of pages in the many books, magazines, and newspapers they otherwise littered with boardinghouses. A standard boardinghouse plot, with its predictable urban orientation, runs as follows: green country youth comes to city; youth seeks out suitable boardinghouse shelter in said city; close metropolitan contact and a house full of fellow boarders educates youth in the best instances,

corrupts it in the worst; and, finally, fledgling youth stands on its own two feet, having abandoned the boardinghouse for the comparative independence of a separate household. Serial author Charles Frederick Briggs set the American pattern with *The Adventures of Harry Franco*. Whitman rendered an unlikely, sobering imitation of Briggs in his temperance tract *Franklin Evans*. And travel writer Bayard Taylor rehearsed a personal tale of urban migration in the highly autobiographical *John Godfrey's Fortunes*, in which he looks back twenty years at the New York boarding of his early adulthood. Each of the fictional boarders presented in these works leaves country for city, and each in turn lives and learns in a metropolitan boardinghouse whose low rent is its biggest selling-point. The rite of passage described is at once one of self-discovery and economic maturity (Greeley 80–90; Parton 122–32). Growing up translates here as moving out—out of the boardinghouse, and into a career and home of one's own. A feminized version more or less replicates this pattern. To cite but one example, the little orphan Gerty from Maria Cummins's best-selling *The Lamplighter* begins life in a shell of a Boston boardinghouse instead of arriving there from rural parts. Her sentimental journey from rags to riches runs its course only after she leaves the boardinghouse, landlady, lodging (boarding, minus the meals), and then the city to start life anew in the country. Boardinghouses anchor not only the works of Cummins, Briggs, Whitman, and Taylor, however. They also ground many more works like them. And yet the stories these works relate somehow consistently manage to sever any and all boardinghouse ties. An occasion for writing in the first place, boarding in its more working-class incarnations also seems to have been a fictional obstacle for both writers and their protagonists to overcome.

Not by coincidence, and with a touch of irony, boarder-authors often plot an escape from the boardinghouse parameters of their works (and lives) by having their fictional boarders either turn author or else begin boarding as authors. The idea is that authorship itself will be profitable enough to make the boarding lifestyle that normally accompanied it unnecessary. Moreover, given the urban imperative of both housing and writing in this period, the boarder-as-author plot-line—like its more general country-to-city cousin—betrays the metropolitan bias one would expect. It also betrays an additional irony, one based on writers' actual experience in the city: authorship seldom paid in the ways that would-be writers had hoped, thereby sentencing them to more boarding.

As common a tale as this is, the very premise of down-and-out boarding makes the boarder-author in print as much a hidden figure as the real-world

boarder-author. That is to say, the boardinghouse vanishing act is mutually reinforcing: both the boarding literary man (with a few key exceptions, boarder-authors were mostly male) and his fictional counterpart lived on borrowed time at one of the new nation's shadiest urban places, the cheap boardinghouse. Bayard Taylor's *John Godfrey*, mentioned above, provides a prime example of the boarder-author's auto-erasure at the antebellum boardinghouse. An aspiring writer, Godfrey leaves rural Pennsylvania for New York. A chapter title from his account makes clear the outcome of that move: "In Which I Go To Market, But Cannot Sell My Wares" (Taylor 179). By dashing off what he calls "moral and millinery tales" for female readers (200), Godfrey narrowly escapes the "Poet's ... poor-house" of which a friend had warned him—only to land in the kind of cheap boardinghouse that had become a familiar feature of urban working-class neighborhoods before the Civil War (169). Godfrey's landlady is thoughtful enough to supply for his room a small writing table, "with one shrunk leg" (195). Her tenant nevertheless suffers no delusions about his home environment. Across the street sits a row of foul tenements. Said street seldom gets cleaned, and the smell of garbage piled curb-side does little to offset the depressing effects of a boarders' neighborhood marked by "quiet and decay" (194). Dependable pay for his writing, like even the shabbiest gentility, eludes Godfrey. In his telling, the boarder-author's initiation into boarding is sadly lacking, and literary work itself unwise.

After exposure to several predicaments such as Godfrey's, readers of the hard-luck school of boardinghouse letters might decide his case was typical. On the one hand, the modern "vagabond life" he describes fits many a boarder-author's unmoored condition to a tee (200). On the other, vagabondage comes at a high cost: trapped as they often are in incipient urban boardinghouse ghettos, boarder-authors go the way of the working-class neighborhoods in which they reside—ever downward, fading more and more from a mainstream middle-class view.

Boardinghouse texts reveal just this pattern. Nathaniel Parker Willis goes slumming as a hard-pressed writer in a boarding piece he wrote for the *New Mirror* newspaper. The "small money" in his persona's pocket confines his "low-priced brain" to a cheap boardinghouse like Godfrey's (38). Boarder-author Twitter enjoys high-priced houses by skipping out before rent comes due. Advances from his publisher, Harper's, keep him regularly in between residences ("Screw Loose" 629). The "penny-a-liner" Bob Jenkins fends off an all but inevitable socioeconomic slide at Mrs. Kolltater's Snob House boardinghouse, this despite his "seedy coat and calamitous countenance" ("Meredith Demaistre" 132). And a self-identi-

fied "poor-devil author" from Manhattan slaves away at sensational tales in one Mrs. Screwby's Bleecker Street boardinghouse. His fellow boarders, also tormented by "the Demon of Starvation" in unheated rooms, include "Brown, the unpublished poet in Number Three," and Jones, of Number Eight, whose "inky fingers and untidy aspect" announce at once his occupation and housing condition ("Bored" 658-59). Today's recognized literary masters, meanwhile, wrote down their own renditions of the disappearing boarder-author. Melville's *Pierre* is perhaps the most famous. His fictional literary enthusiast, Pierre Glendinning, toils away at a never-to-be-realized masterpiece in a strange domestic setting that one contemporary reviewer called a "modest boarding-house chamber" (qtd. in Parker 132). Doomed to a retired life in an out-of-the-way corner of the city, which the narrator deems "rather secluded and silent" during business hours, and "remarkably ... depopulated" from dusk 'til dawn, Pierre eventually instances the perverse logic of literary boarding by vanishing altogether in an untimely death (Melville 220, 237, 242, 269).³ As a colleague of Melville's said in reference to his own fictional lament of boarding-writing, boarder-authors like Pierre were bound to be "Bored to Death" ("Bored"). Suffering not only from "double insignificance," the author as boarder was likewise prey to being doubly silenced through the choice of urban authorship as a career and the working-class, boardinghouse self-exile attendant on that choice.

But not all boarders were alike. Boardinghouses were not uniform. Nor did boardinghouse letters restrict themselves to a single, working-class formula. Big-city boarding was as much a middle-class response to the metropolis as it was a "blue-collar" affair. Like its working-class counterpart, a sturdy urban bourgeoisie more often than not boarded out because it had to. Inner-city housing was often too costly for all but the outright rich and upper-middle classes. Yet even the smallest domestic amenities could alter the big-city boarding experience, not to mention the price of board. And so clients who patronized boardinghouses occupied as full a spectrum of class status as there were a range of boardinghouse choices a cut or two or more above the cheap variety. True, big-city workers resided at low-end houses in higher numbers than did the middle classes at more well-equipped ones. Yet it was to the mid-range houses that workers aspired. Middle-class boarding set the general tone for boarding before the Civil War and thus was arguably just as important as low-cost boarding, if not more so.

It was likewise to the middle-class boardinghouse that writers moved if and when they had the means to do so. The boarder-author who was not

strapped for cash—and there were enough to form an important exception to the general Grub Street rule—could pass along at his leisure a more reliably middle-class experience in sketch- or story-form to high-circulation journals like *Harper's* and *Putnam's*. Once in print, pieces on middle-American urban-boarding complemented for these magazines' (by and large) middle-class readers the down-and-out boarding material that simultaneously retained its place in month after month of publication. The weekly edition of *Harper's* explained what all the boardinghouse fuss was about, stating that "every body," at least among its New York readers, "has had, has, or will have" a brush with "one of the most striking institutions of this metropolitan city," the boardinghouse ("Wanted" 652). Thus the middle mass of urban boarders in some respects provides a representative case of antebellum boarding practices as a whole. Middle-class boarding might have been out of reach for many urban mechanics, artisans, day-laborers, and upstart authors, but it was on average just that—an average experience to which most boarders, boardinghouses, and boardinghouse letters tended.

That returns me to the problem with which I began. For all its exposure in real life and in print, even middle-class boarding seems absent from the literary record. I say *seems*, because that apparent absence is deceptive. Literary boardinghouses are there for readers who seek them. The point, however, is that they must go looking at all. Literary boardinghouses should be obvious, but they are not. Such constructs were, and remain, nearly invisible with good reason. One explanation lies with the houses proper. Run-of-the-mill accommodations denominated themselves with a brash "BOARDING" sign that put up no pretenses as to what went on inside. The less than finicky landlord also advertised aggressively for boarders in metropolitan dailies. By contrast, middle-class houses made not even half as much noise. Outward appearance alone revealed none of bourgeois boarding's secrets, as the genteel home in the genteel neighborhood bore not a single external marker that would indicate its being a place of business. An understated brass plaque inscribed with the landlord's name replaced the vulgar boarding notice. And middle-class landlords often held themselves to entirely different standards of decorum than their working-class peers. Rather than advertise for boarders, for example, they secured them by word of mouth, expecting and receiving letters of reference from applicants. Self-concealment represented savvy management by landlords. Operating in what historian John Kasson calls a "marketplace of appearances," sharp boardinghouse owners had a vested interest in making no appearance whatsoever. In a culture that prized the

stand-alone home, all the more so as that style of dwelling increasingly became rare in the nation's cities, a house that looked like a boardinghouse reduced its own social currency (28).

That accounts for what I earlier termed the "human function" of boarding, but there is another side to boardinghouse life that speaks to the apparent lack of middle-class boarders' tracks in American letters. Right alongside boarding's human function is theorist Michel Foucault's "author function," which necessarily applies to the boarder as writer. By "author function," Foucault means the limited rights of ownership a writer enjoys for material he creates for the marketplace in his own name (108-09). The more successful boarder-authors saw their work into high-profile print venues at a steadier rate than those lower down on the boardinghouse ladder. In that sense, at least, middle-class boarder-authors enjoyed *more* nominal recognition than plebian members of the brotherhood; by Foucault's terms, they were *more* functional and so held greater authorial rights of ownership and image.

But in their non-literary lives, remember, boarder-authors were renters, not owners, and so to some extent had no name, no author function, even within those rooms they occupied as they wrote the literary boardinghouse into being. Whatever partial, individual identity boarder-authors did possess was subsumed by the city household group that constituted their immediate surroundings. Washington, DC, boarders provide a case in point. Known about town by their landlords' surnames—"Downson's crowd," for instance, or "Coyle's family" (Young 99)—capital city-boarders, authors or not, blended with the "crowds" found indoors at their domestic residences. Like city-dwellers generally, they also took on a certain anonymity in a faceless urban context, where pedestrians' public profiles amounted to little more than masks (Halttunen). If non-authors were subject to this kind of city-specific loss of selfhood, then identity "theft" might be an apt word for the *disownership* felt by boarder-authors, left as they were without a home of their own, without a personal name, and without an identifying stamp for their completed works.

Boarder-authors effectively, if implicitly, *reattribute* texts sprung from their authorial selves to the houses in which those texts were produced, leaving boardinghouse texts *unattributed*. This is no theoretical vacuum: so often do antebellum boarder-authors, even the middle classes among them, make boardinghouses the substance of their work that author, boarder, house, and text frequently blur. What emerges from this overlap is as much a literary *occasion* as it is a literary subject, event, or artifact. As dispossessed boarder-authors themselves fade from view—joining the

elusive modern act of boarding and the receding middle-class boarding-house in an urban netherworld—boardinghouse texts seemingly begin to speak for themselves. Relying as they do on a narrator, narrative situation, and setting that are all absent without leave, boardinghouse letters become a kind of transparent commentary on big-city life without much of a big city to look at, and without even the most basic literary conventions in place to steer readers through what hint of a city there is. If we have trouble locating middle-class boardinghouses in print, then, perhaps it is the dysfunction of the middle-class boarder-author's author function that accounts for our critical blindness.

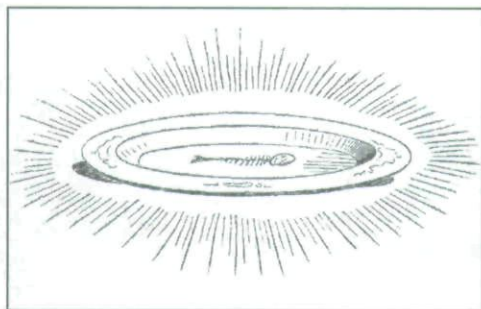
Middle-class boarder-authors become one with their boardinghouse texts and the boarding context of those same texts in three essential works on boarding from the period. These are Donald Grant Mitchell's (*Ik Marvel's*) *The Lorgnette, or, Studies of the Town by an Opera-Goer*, Thomas Butler Gunn's *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses*, and Oliver Wendell Holmes's *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*. Middle-class boarding, like working-class boarding, follows a standard script in writings devoted to boardinghouse life. The three titles above provide the basics of that script: well-read male (again, females are scarce) evinces a literary bent; said male begins boarding or continues to board—*by choice*; author-boarder situates himself in a city by turning his writer's eye to the very boardinghouse(s) he occupies, commenting on its distinguishing features; boarder-author, boarding, and boardinghouse become indistinguishable, as disembodied writer retires from the foreground of his own account to a background ostensibly occupied by the house itself. Consider the boarder-author and boarder-narrator both evicted.

Gunn's *Physiology* is emblematic in this respect. Despite the confessional nature of his assembled, nonfiction boardinghouse miscellanies, it is the houses and boarders on offer here that assume the starring role. Gunn begins boarding for a reason we might guess—authorship. Like others of his class, he has passed through a phase in which literary labor makes a "quiet abode" in which to work essential. Much of that work is hackwork, however: "Parisian correspondence for two Sunday papers," serial romances, "testimonials for patent medicines, rhyming advertisements for a puffing tailor, and also ... tracts for a religious Society" (148). But Gunn is well past that point in his career now. He opens his account with a dedication "To All Inmates of Metropolitan Boarding-Houses,... By an Ex-Member of the Fraternity." That "Ex-Member" status is key. Gunn informs us in not so many words that he lives and writes currently among the non-boarding middle classes, suggesting that he no longer needs to

board and probably does not. That is not to say he can live without the boardinghouses that appear in his work. As a home owner, he has shed his dependence as boarder. As a literary man, Gunn is all dependence, as he would cease to exist as author, or at least as first-person narrator, without the boarding material he parlays into print.

Gunn's "Ex-Member" status has another effect as well: there is real first-person authority in his varied snapshots of urban boarding, an immediacy which ultimately sacrifices that very first person to his greater subject. Gunn runs the full gamut of New York boardinghouses and loses himself in the process. He has tasted boarding at its best and worst, from the "mean" and "cheap" to the "tip-top" house—something the aforementioned Marvel and Holmes's "Autocrat" would never dare do. Gunn earns his authority the hard way, then, and converts his wealth of boardinghouse experience into an aesthetic of overwhelm. That aesthetic relies on an unrelenting taxonomy of type after type of boardinghouse that occludes the type-caster in a roundabout way. There is the "Hand-To-Mouth Boarding-House" (Fig. 1). There is the "Fashionable Boarding-House Where You Don't Get Enough To Eat" (Fig. 2). Gunn hits the "Artists' Boarding-House" (Fig. 3), the "Medical Students' Boarding-House" (Fig. 4), the "Serious Boarding-House" (Fig. 5), the "Vegetarian Boarding-House" (Fig. 6), and the "Boarding-House Where the Landlady Drinks" (Fig. 7). The list goes on and on. Gunn has seen them all and appears to have proceeded on a principle of total inclusion rather than discriminating exclusion. He consequently crowds himself out of his own book. Kept on the run between houses—his is, he reminds us, a modern, "mutable generation,... unwilling

Figs. 1–8. All illustrations by Thomas Butler Gunn and his co-illustrators, Alfred Waud and Frank Bellew, from Gunn's The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses.



Figs. 1 and 2: Bare-bones boarding, a "hand-to-mouth" existence (48); Meager-portion boarding (40).

to pause, ever jostling onward, considering nothing final"—the author cedes first-person narrative privileges to the boarders and boardinghouses whose staggering multiplicity never gives the narrator a fighting chance in the tacit competition for readers' attention (12).

Gunn insists that most boardinghouses are "*sui generis*," inasmuch as they take on the unique characteristics of their individual proprietors and occupants (15). No less *sui generis* is Gunn. Hidden as he is by his houses and their colorful characters, he is everywhere and nowhere at once. He diminutizes one of these alleged prototypical boardinghouses in an illustration from his book (Fig. 8),⁴ playfully intimating that New York boarding, like death, is a universal rite of passage. And yet it is the author, not the house, who seems small here.

Writers like Gunn nevertheless were not prone to panic. What the middle-class account of boarding primarily omits from the working-class formula is a sense of urgency, and with that omission is the loss of some central, acknowledged consciousness at the center of middle-class boarding texts. Gone in most instances is the hungry search for food, shelter, and literary respect that would otherwise cry out in a steady stream of first-person woe. Gone, too, is the search for some firm ground to stand on in the city. Middle-class boarder-authors like Gunn supply self-reflexive narrators for



Fig. 3: Boarder-artists assembled for an evening's parlor entertainment. Narrator Gunn crowds himself out of his own account (101).

their boardinghouse texts who have reached that stage in an author's life where the next meal or lodging spot are not the most pressing questions. In fact, their narrators are well-enough positioned in life that the only questions that press at all are the more abstracted ones of how and what to think, as opposed to bread-and-butter concerns like how and where to live and get a living. This abstractedness is not, however, occasion for middle-class boarder-authors to turn irretrievably inward, contemplative as they



Figs. 4 and 5: Boarding for what ails you: Gunn's Medical Students' Boardinghouse (192); prayer-time at a "Serious" Boardinghouse (74).



Figs. 6 and 7: Food-reform faddists at the urban American boardinghouse (181); The "Boarding-House Where the Landlady Drinks" (117). Gunn's houses are filled with urban eccentrics.

can be. Rather, they use the combined bookishness and leisured resources of their unhurried narrators as an excuse for observing the boardinghouses and fellow boarders that together provide enough literary material to keep the commentary coming for pages on end. As that commentary comes, something strange occurs. Middle-class boarder-narrators with so much to say, so seemingly (self-)important in their imposing intellectual and financial presence, in the end become afterthoughts in their own narratives. Faint traces of a house, housing, and the housed become the boardinghouse text's *raison d'être*.

And yet, for all the humility of the houses, and all the internal contradictions of dysfunctional boarder-authoring, the antebellum boardinghouse remains precisely where we would expect to find it—in the literary city. Reading for the boardinghouse in print is as easy as locating those landscapes in literature that take the city as their subject. Boarding frequently figures as a landmark of such landscapes, or else as an inconspicuous vantage point on them. Eager as critics have been, however, to explore the wider implications of the urban in literature, they have skipped past the boardinghouse as a too obvious dot on the metropolitan map. Apparently lacking the grandeur of the panoramic “bird’s eye” view so common in



Fig. 8: Modern portable boarding. Gunn himself, and not his boardinghouses, gets diminished in his *Physiology* (14).

antebellum writing, and perhaps wanting the visceral appeal of "mole's eye" examinations of subterranean street-life, the more mundane boardinghouse gets swept up into the city in literature. Despite, or maybe because of, the intense scrutiny expended on urban America during the two decades prior to the Civil War (Siegel 6),⁵ the boardinghouse dissolves into the larger literary city.

By providing a neighborhood to watch without, and a diverse collection of close-quartered city-dwellers within, the boardinghouse recedes behind its utility as a microcosm for an unwieldy city that resists literary simplification. Boardinghouse distractions, boardinghouse crowding, and boardinghouse intrusions are all "urban" suggestions without the grit and grime of the city *per se*. Stumbling across such suggestions in print, readers could and can take the short figurative step that allows one small *part* of the antebellum city—the boardinghouse—to stand for that city as a *whole*. Synecdoche, yes, but the boardinghouse's role in this literary canvassing of the country amounts to more than an inventive application of a centuries-old literary device. Just as the horizons of boarder-authors (or their narrators) sometimes extend no further than the boardinghouse door of their cheap rented rooms, the boardinghouse often becomes a complex substitute for the real city outside those doors: setting, metaphor, figure, trope, point of view, and more, and all at once. Metropolitan boardinghouses thus did not vanish from print into thin air. One might say instead they performed their cultural work with too much efficiency rather than too little. After calling up the city, the boardinghouse enacts a literary version of the bait-and-switch: having reeled us in, it becomes a secondary concern. Only by adjusting our critical lenses can we restore the boardinghouse to its proper place in antebellum letters.

We might begin that restoration, finally, by putting our urban sensibilities back in touch with a more familiar quintessential city-dweller from the period, the *flâneur*. It was the full-fledged transatlantic discourse of the *flâneur* that set a new precedent for nineteenth-century writing that made the city its overriding interest (Brand). The European-derived *flâneur* was the age's sidewalk connoisseur. He (again, there are few female *flâneurs*) was the sometime theater critic and newspaper reporter with cosmopolitan flair. And with some consistency, and to a degree until now overlooked, the *flâneur* was the well-to-do boarder (and vice versa, the well-to-do boarder was often the *flâneur*) one finds in middle-class boarding pieces from antebellum periodicals no less than in the "great" works of the American Renaissance. On either side of the Atlantic, it was the *flâneur* who first inhabited the new metropolis because it was a metropolis,

full of the sights and sounds and sensations of modern city-living that perhaps only the pampered, upper-middle-class, city-sketch man who was a flâneur could appreciate. At the same time, it was the flâneur who first systematically imagined an urban existence, even in the midst of that existence, by becoming one with the city in a backhanded way: upon solitary, studied reflection of the metropolis, he could keep it at arm's length by reducing its multiplicity to a more epistemologically manageable form. In wandering through the commercial city, exploring its arcades, boulevards, architecture, citizens, and of course its hotels and boardinghouses, the flâneur lost himself in the urban crowd. And yet for both himself and the readers of his *feuilletons*, or printed newspaper sketches, the flâneur was quick to recover an autonomy otherwise denied by the city in his practiced ability to make sense enough of the modern metropolis so as to render it habitable as a home and available as a mental category (Benjamin 163).⁶

Emphatically of the city, the flâneur managed to observe his environs from a critical distance. He converted his world—perhaps from some boardinghouse window several stories above street-level—into a spectacle to be consumed in the interior confines of his consciousness, enacting what Dana Brand calls the “privatization or domestication of public space” (40). A metropolitan Western world thus found its *lingua franca* in the very same ambivalence that characterized modern boarding. How to find personal urban space where it sometimes seemed there was none, how to be at home in cities which had forever changed the meaning of home, how to merge with the metropolitan crowd without sacrificing self-hood—these were the modern problems that the flâneur addressed in life and in letters, and that the antebellum boardinghouse, boarders, and boarding texts continued to confront in the unrelenting tendency of cities to absorb everything in their path. Long before there was urban sprawl, or a term for that trend, there were socially responsive authors, flâneurs, and boarders (sometimes one and the same) who played out the drama by which the city was lived, meditated, and written.

As boarder-flâneurs for an urbanizing nation west of Paris, American boarders and boarder-authors were in a position to elaborate that drama in the New World. My claim is that they did just that. American writers of the antebellum period taxed themselves with coming to grips with the imaginative fact of the city through what most contemporaries agreed, with partial accuracy, was the unique institution of the United States boardinghouse. There was little guess-work in the nation's writers fixing on the city in this way. The modern metropolis having emerged States-side as a glaring sociological fact during the first half of the nineteenth century,

and United States boardinghouses having grown up with and in America's burgeoning cities, the city was ripe for full imaginative exploration in literature by way of the boardinghouse (Machor xi). Given the perceptual difficulties of that task—the busy modern city being an undifferentiated mass of data, a tangled web of ceaseless change (Brooks 7–11; Hassan 97–99)⁷—the boarder-flâneur became a tool to allow writers to inhabit the city as they pondered its problems and possibilities from the confines of a self-contained urban boardinghouse. A diorama-like, scaled-down solution to the big American city (Brand 8), the boardinghouse fit that big city's unruly constituent pieces together in an organized way. But in contrast to the flâneur, literary boarders did not indulge in passive spectatorship. Their literary posture was active: a metaphor actually to inhabit, a trope that stood on its own, a set-piece within the city that put writers and readers alike within striking distance of that same city. At a cultural moment when it mattered most, the literary boardinghouse began to make interpretive sense out of the spatial, social, and perceptual *nonsense* that the modern metropolis otherwise might have remained.

In the end, boardinghouse letters form an American mythology in their own right. It is by way of the boardinghouse that the original United States urban archetype, Mose, the Bowery b'hoy of antebellum print and stage, brought city streets into the nation's folklore. It is the boardinghouse where New York's German immigrants set their amateur beer-hall farces in a smiling celebration of *volk*-life (Leuchs 72–73). William Dean Howells, spokesman for American literary realism, unveiled the nation's Gilded Age city at a mother-daughter run boardinghouse in his *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. More recently, twentieth-century playwright Tennessee Williams added a touch of tragedy to boarding in plays that remind his countrymen that we are all, in a sense, American boarders, a people passing through. And it is the boardinghouse, doubling as a haunted house, where Nobel laureate author Toni Morrison sets her second novel, *Sula*, updating a national discourse on race even as she revives an American obsession with the boardinghouse. Boardinghouse letters are as significant as we are willing to make them and demand recognition. Once recognized, the literary boardinghouse merits as thorough an inspection as a next generation of scholars is willing to give it.

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NOTES

¹ New York was not the only American city with boarders. Metropolitan areas up and down the eastern seaboard, as well as boomtowns like St. Louis and southern port cities like New Orleans, boarded out with the rest of the nation's urban industrial northeast.

² Brown boarded shortly in Philadelphia during the early 1790s with boon companion William Wilkins. A few years later, on his frequent trips to New York before moving there on a permanent footing, he stayed in a private home occupied by two close associates.

³ Melville never explains the exact status of the Church of the Apostles, where his protagonist spends most of his miserable urban experience. En route to the Apostles, however, Pierre does encounter two instances of boarding: one at the hotel (most likely a stand-in for New York's Astor House) of his estranged cousin, Glen Stanly; the other at the hotel/board- inghouse (Melville keeps things vague) where Pierre and his female companions stay before settling in, again, at the Apostles.

⁴ Gunn's two co-illustrators were Alfred Waud and Frank Bellew.

⁵ Adrienne Siegel writes that between 1774 and 1839, only 38 urban novels appeared in the United States. For the years 1840-60, that number climbed to 340, an increase that accords with the most intense period of American urbanization.

⁶ The flâneur's twentieth-century philosopher, Walter Benjamin, argues that the flâneur saw the city as *continuous* with self rather than *external* to self. The flâneur that Benjamin had in mind when making this assertion was the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, in whose work the urban masses lurk as a shadowy absence instead of an overt presence. The "Physiology" of Gunn's *Physiology* derives in part from a flâneur tradition. The *feuilletons* mentioned above constitute a *physiology* when collected in full-length book form like Gunn's.

⁷ Two French writers—novelist Honoré de Balzac and poet Charles Baudelaire—pondered modern urban formlessness at least as early as America's literary establishment. Each a flâneur in his own way—Balzac being ambivalent about cities, Baudelaire oblique in his poetic handling of them—the two men provide a benchmark against which to measure contemporary American treatment of the city in literature.

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