

Copyright © 2015 Takuya Nishitani. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

## Melville's Experiment with Domestic Fiction in "The Apple-Tree Table"

*Takuya NISHITANI\**

### MELVILLE AND THE MAGAZINE MARKET

When branching out to write stories for magazines, after the commercial failures of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852),<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville used a middle-class narrator in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), who boasts, at the outset of the story, of his ability to gratify the tastes of contemporary readers: "[I] could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep"(13). We could take these words as Melville's expression of his own ambition to be a popular magazine contributor, and Melville indeed wrote "diverse" stories for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and *Putnum's Monthly Magazine* in a period of four years from 1853 to 1856, a fact which proves his versatility in the craft of fiction. As Sheila Post-Lauria argues, Melville used different writing styles for the two magazines according to their editorial principles and the interests of targeted readers. For *Harper's*, which was "a magazine of 'light' literature aimed at 'parlor' readers," Melville contributed stories that had sentimental façades and plots, while in the stories for *Putnum's*, which "appealed to a more intellectual, politically liberal, and thus smaller audience," he dealt with contemporary social problems such as poverty, the working

---

\*Professor, Kobe University

environment, and racial issues (Post-Lauria 167, 177).<sup>2</sup>

“I and My Chimney” and “The Apple-Tree Table: Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations,” published in March and May 1856 respectively, are the last two of Melville’s magazine stories. The two stories do not necessarily make up a “diptych,”<sup>3</sup> but they are companion pieces that share a group of characters consisting of an old husband (the narrator), his wife and two daughters, Julia and Anna, and a female servant called Biddy.<sup>4</sup> Though written for *Putnum’s*, they are both light literature depicting the comic fuss over a cumbersome chimney or a haunted piece of furniture in a household where the strong-minded wife has ascendancy over the husband. “I and My Chimney” and “The Apple-Tree Table” are variations on the domestic fiction that was a very popular literary genre in antebellum America. The genre was associated with the idea of what has been called “the cult of domesticity,” which celebrates the home as sanctuary. Stories of this group were written and read mostly by women. “I and My Chimney” and “The Apple-Tree Table,” though written and narrated by males, belong to the category of domestic fiction in the wider sense of the term.

As for the critical acclaim they received, these two stories are not equal. “I and My Chimney” has provoked a very broad range of interpretations: in an autobiographical reading, the chimney suggests either Melville’s precarious physical condition or threatened position as a writer; in light of the politics of the time, the chimney could stand for the American slavery system attacked by abolitionists. Critics and scholars have tended to “find in the apparently inexhaustible symbolism” of the story “a reflection of their own compelling concerns” (Newman 251).

“The Apple-Tree Table,” in contrast, has been relegated to obscurity and much less critically acclaimed; the story may seem, even to Melville scholars, to be a far less serious work or to be a mere farce or slapstick. Warner Berthoff finds fault with the story’s narration, which “quite noticeably runs out of steam and drags to a flat, anti-climactic ending” (362). Another critic considers the old apple-tree table of the title to be insufficient as an “‘objective correlative’ for the underlying dark and dangerous stuff of his [the narrator’s] emotions” (Fogle 8). Newman concludes, after a survey of readings of the story, that its status as “one of Melville’s minor works” will not change (17). In spite of these negative comments, “The Apple-Tree Table” is, in my view, one of Melville’s masterpieces, especially in its art of narration. As Newman notes, “Melville’s ‘verbal facility’ is ably demonstrated” (17) in the story, which demonstrates the author’s artistic control of the distance between the narrator (the person

who narrates a story) and the narrated (what is told in that story), a distance that is indispensable for the production of comedy and laughter. The purpose of this article is to examine the narrator's dexterous storytelling in detail and to show that Melville critically used the mode of domestic fiction and recast the conventions of the genre in "The Apple-Tree Table."

#### DIFFERENT STYLES AND THE COMIC DISTANCE

The narrator of "The Apple-Tree Table," who lives in an old New England house and is himself an old man, finds a strange, ancient table in the attic and puts it into everyday usage, but strange sounds begin to be heard, and then a bug, followed by another, gnaws its way out from within the table. The same kind of events were seen in New England's earlier history and were reported in Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York* (1821), and *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts* (1829) edited by D. D. Field. Henry D. Thoreau also refers to a similar incident in *Walden* (1854) as a symbolic example of the immortality of the human soul:

Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts,—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in *a resurrection and immortality* strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows *what beautiful and winged life*, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of *its well-seasoned tomb*,—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board,—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last! (222–23; emphasis added)

As these references show, the story of the revival of a bug entombed in an old table was circulated through antebellum New England, and it was interpreted scientifically as well as preternaturally as a kind of spirit rapping

or transcendentalism, as seen in Thoreau. Melville read *Walden* in 1854 or 1855 and *A History of the County of Berkshire* (Sealts 93–94), but it is not clear whether he read Dwight's *Travels*. Melville's point in using the well-known story in "The Apple-Tree Table" might have been to give it a different, and in this case comic, treatment in order to subvert Thoreau's and others. In my opinion, Melville intended to experiment with the distance between the narrator and the narrated or between the narrator and the narrative style. (As we shall see, Melville used an assortment of styles in the tale.)

To begin, let us examine the description of the table in the opening paragraphs of the story and see how it is well in accordance with Gothic conventions. The narrator finds "a necromantic little old table as might have belonged to Friar Bacon" in "the old hopper-shaped garret" (378). The table is "set out with broken, be-crusted old purple vials and flasks" as if it had been used in the laboratory of a magician or alchemist, and there is also "a ghostly, dismantled old quarto" on top of it, which later turns out to be Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (378). The pillar of the table is so twisted and forked into "three crooked legs, terminating in three cloven feet" as to look very devilish (378). The narrator's house, which he purchased five years earlier, is itself very old and located in "an old-fashioned quarter of one of the oldest towns in America" (378). Melville's artistry is often displayed in the depiction of this kind of mystic architecture or space, and, here also, the repetition of the word "old" and the concentric setting of the house have much to do with deepening the Gothic quality of the story.

The ghostly atmosphere is soon countered, however, with the narrator's confession, which seems a sort of joke: he says that he did not willingly refute, at the time of buying the house, the rumor that it was haunted, because "it tended to place the property the more conveniently within [his] means" (378). This distancing from the Gothic rhetoric is already seen in the repetition of the word "old," which also has a comic effect. In another instance, the narrator goes still further away from the gloominess by revealing the true reason why he entered the garret, which he had initially been afraid of going into. He had not gone up there, he says, because there had been no need to do so. One day, though, he happened to pick up in the garden a rusty key that turned out to be to the garret door, and he decided to explore the place. The act was "from a mere instinct of gratification," according to the narrator, and "irrespective of any particular benefit to accrue" (379). The fact is that he was drawn there by the expectation of finding a hidden treasure. The narrator is consciously tickling the reader by

pretending innocently to betray his pecuniary interest and calculation.

The narrator discovers the apple-tree table and refinishes it to use as his own reading desk. His wife, though disliking the narrator's "idea of domesticating the table" (381) at first, takes a fancy to the newly varnished look of the wood and decides to employ it as a breakfast and tea table. The table thus joins in "the polished society of more prosperous furniture" and gains "an honorable position in the cedar-parlor" (381). It is noteworthy here that the parlor meant "a repository for consumer objects that attested to the family's financial success and refined taste," especially for middle-class women in antebellum America (Shamir 38). In this way, the once devilish-looking table is "domesticated" and even accepted as a valuable, antiquarian piece of furniture in one of the most cherished interior spaces of the home.

As the story proceeds, however, the domestic peace is threatened by strange sounds coming from inside the table. On a quiet December midnight, when the narrator is alone drinking punch and reading Mather's *Magnalia* in the parlor, a ticking or rasping noise seems to come from nowhere. He wonders whether it is a noise from the clock in the room or his watch or "a death-tick in wainscot" (383). The horrified narrator goes to the bedroom and consults with his wife, who is already in bed and gives little heed to his concerns:

"Wife, wife," hoarsely whispered I, "there is—is something tick—ticking in the cedar-parlor."

"Poor old man—quite out of his mind—I knew it would be so. Come to bed; come and sleep it off."

"Wife, wife!"

"Do, come to bed. I forgive you. I won't remind you of it tomorrow. But you must give up the punch-drinking, my dear. It quite gets the better of you." (384)

The contrast between the narrator's repeated anxious calling "Wife, wife" and his wife's pitying but nonchalant response clearly shows that he is dependent on or dominated by his wife. The above passage, with the reversal of the traditional, hierarchical relationship between husband and wife, is one of the funniest lines in the story or, perhaps, in all the antebellum domestic stories.

The husband is not to be despised, though. He may be weak and untrustworthy as the head of the family, but his narrative technique should not be made little of. He knows the right buttons to push to make the reader

laugh. Let us corroborate this with another instance of comical exchange among the family members. The following morning, when the narrator goes downstairs for breakfast, he finds the whole family in a panic caused by the ticking noise. The scene constitutes not a comedy of speech but of action. It is almost a farce or slapstick. The wife is frantically ransacking, on her knees, the carpet for the source of the noise, and the daughters Julia and Anna are running around the room, crying hysterically, “The table, the table!” and “Spirits! Spirits!” (385)—maybe an echo of the narrator’s “Wife, wife!” The narrator stands still, looking at the fuss, and will not move even when his wife orders him to come to her. The excitement of the women and the stillness of the husband make a comic contrast here, but, in truth, he is afraid of the strange noise and does not want to get closer to the table. He suggests that his wife have breakfast in the next room, instead of the parlor, and begins to move toward it “in high self-possession” (385), hiding his real wish to leave the parlor as quickly as possible.

His wife then bids the maid Biddy to remove the table from the parlor and bring hammers to take up the carpet. “Now, husband, do you take up that side of the carpet, and I will this,” the wife, dropping on her knees, says to the narrator, who “follow[s] suit” (386). From this moment on, the husband-narrator’s apparent aloofness is encroached on by his wife’s agitated movements. Unable to find the source of the noise under the carpet, the wife commands Biddy to bring back the table to the room, which Biddy refuses to do. The wife then turns to the husband and asks him, “in a frightful, businesslike manner,” to bring back the table: “Shall I go to the wood-house for it, or will you?” (386). The husband “immediately” goes out and “hurriedly” returns with the table (386). Biddy refuses again the wife’s order to set the table and asks to quit her job and leave the house by saying, “Will you pay me my wages?” (386). The narrator, infuriated by her attitude, insists that she set the table, threatening that he will “go for the police” if she will not do what she is told (386). The narrator “follow[s] suit” and join forces with his wife, because his fear of the uncanny table is superseded by the fear of displeasing her. It is quite an undignified attitude, to add, that he depends not on his own patriarchal authority but on that of the police in order to make the servant Biddy obey.

These flustered responses of the husband to his wife are very amusing and well written, but their ludicrousness lies in his actions and not in the words used to depict them. In the above scene, the narrator looks at himself rather ironically and laughs at his own ludicrous actions. The ironical look puts a distance between the narrator and the narrated (i.e., the narrator

himself, in this case). That distance is deftly implanted in the sentences, and they help to effectively amplify the comical quality of the parlor scene. What is laughed at here, however, is not exactly the language itself but the excited behavior of the characters.

The situation is different in the following passage from a later scene, in which the sentences come to the fore with their oddities. Out of the table appear two bugs, the first of which is captured by the narrator, but, unfortunately, is soon put into the fire by Biddy. Yet there comes the ticking noise again, and the whole family sits up all night, waiting for the appearance of another bug. The narrator makes a record of the night as follows:

I shall here transcribe from memoranda kept during part of the night:

“One o’clock. No sign of the bug. Ticking continues. Wife getting sleepy.

“Two o’clock. No sign of the bug. Ticking intermittent. Wife fast asleep.

“Three o’clock. No sign of the bug. Ticking pretty steady. Julia and Anna getting sleepy.

“Four o’clock. No sign of the bug. Ticking regular, but not spirited. Wife, Julia and Anna, all fast asleep in their chairs.

“Five o’clock. No sign of the bug. Ticking faint. Myself feeling drowsy. The rest still asleep.”

So far the journal. (395)

The family members fall asleep one after another, and finally the narrator himself goes off into a doze. The scene looks all the more comical because of the great gap between the narrator’s inadvertent lack of resolution and the pseudoscientific style of his “journal” that pretends to be a careful and precise recording of fact. Here, not merely the narrator’s behavior but also his peculiar literary style is made fun of.

Another instance of the ridicule of scientific language can be found in the passage where, toward the end of the story, a Dr. Johnson tries to explain the table rapping as a natural phenomenon, using mathematical terms:

The wood of the table was apple-tree, a sort of tree much fancied by various insects. The bugs had come from eggs laid inside the bark of the living tree in the orchard. By *careful examination* of the position of the hole from which the last bug had emerged, in relation to the cortical

layers of the slab, and then allowing for the inch and a half along the grain, ere the bug had eaten its way entirely out, and then *computing* the whole number of cortical layers in the slab, with *a reasonable conjecture* for the number cut off from the outside, it appeared that the egg must have been laid in the tree *some ninety years*, more or less, before the tree could have been felled. But between the felling of the tree and the present time, how long might that be? It was a very old-fashioned table. Allow *eighty years* for the age of the table, which would make *one hundred and fifty years* that the bug had lain in the egg. Such, at least, was Professor Johnson's *computation*. (396–97; emphasis added)

The narrator makes the most of Dr. Johnson's way of explaining the wondrous phenomenon, referring to the latter's "careful examination," "reasonable conjecture," and so on. Dr. Johnson's "computation" turns out, however, to be so problematic that, by his calculations, ninety and eighty years make "one hundred and fifty years."

As we have seen so far, there are a variety of comic distances in the story: the distance between the narrator and the narrated and the distance between the narrator and the language he uses in his narration widely differ from scene to scene. The narrator looks ironically sometimes at his own actions, sometimes at those of the others, sometimes at his own language or narration itself, and, at other times, he looks at all these things together. This is because his attitude toward the table fluctuates. It is a spooky "necromancer"'s table at first, but it becomes, having been revarnished, the narrator's favorite piece of antiquarian furniture. He, at one time, works alongside his wife in trying to find the source of the noise, but, at another time, he becomes as frightened as his daughters are of the haunted table. It is not clear what he really makes of the table.

In "I and My Chimney," the relationship between the narrator and the chimney does not change so much throughout the tale. He is strongly attached to the gigantic chimney, which is placed at the very center of the house, and desperately defends it against his wife and daughters, who want to destroy it to make a wide, elegant hall in its place.

It is now some seven years since I have stirred from my home. My city friends all wonder why I don't come to see them, as in former times. They think I am getting sour and unsocial. Some say that I have become a sort of mossy old misanthrope, while all the time the fact is, I am



simply standing guard over my mossy old chimney; for it is resolved between me and my chimney, that I and my chimney will never surrender. (377)

This is the basic stance of the narrator, and it shall not be changed or shaken by any means.

In "The Apple-Tree Table," though, the narrator's reactions to the table are much more ambiguous. He considers his wife, who cannot accept mystery but seeks a rational explanation of the ticking table, to be "a female Democritus" (394), an ancient Greek philosopher who reduced natural phenomena to the workings of atoms in a void. At the same time, the narrator speaks self-consciously of his ambivalent attitudes as follows: "For my own part, my present feelings were of a mixed sort. In a strange and not unpleasing way, I gently oscillated between Democritus and Cotton Mather"—that is, between positivistic elucidation and spiritual mystification. "But to my wife and daughters I assumed to be pure Democritus—a jeerer at all tea-table spirits whatever" (394). As one scholar says, the narrator is laughing at himself, and that laughter is for the purpose of "accepting the swaying self in order to survive" (Noma 63). To misuse the literary term "unreliable narrator," one might say the narrator of "The Apple-Tree Table," who thus drifts to and fro, may be unreliable as husband and head of the family. As for the narrative technique, however, he is such a subtle and formidable storyteller as to deftly use several sorts of prose for various situations and to make the reader laugh by keeping a proper distance with each of the styles he adopts. As if to prove this, the narrator admits, in a relaxed tone, that it is "not unpleasing" to oscillate between extremes.

Another key phrase in the above passage is the narrator's reference to his feelings as being of "a mixed sort." These words could be taken as an oblique signal to the reader that the narrator is well aware of the true nature of his story in which a variety of literary modes are used. In its multiple narrative forms, "The Apple-Tree Table" has something in common with *Moby-Dick*, parts of which are made up of realistic fiction, romance, and metaphysical allegory, while other parts consist of the ecological study of the life of whales and the historical record of whale fishery. The language of *Moby-Dick*, too, swings widely from Ishmael's jolly sailorly colloquialisms to Ahab's Shakespearean harangues. Touching on the heterogeneous composition of *Moby-Dick*, Sheila Post-Lauria links the novel to the genre of "mixed form" narratives that were "a popular yet radical trend in both English and American antebellum literary cultures" (111). It could not be

said that “The Apple-Tree Table” is a work of the mixed form like *Moby-Dick*, yet the narrator of the story is an able storyteller who can handle a variety of literary genres, as Melville did in *Moby-Dick*.

#### ESCAPE FROM THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

If the narrator turns out to be very clever and deft in telling a story, though untrustworthy in practical household matters, there arises a vague apprehension in the mind of the reader: we have laughed at his actions or narration, but isn't it we, the readers, who are being made fun of by the narrator? As if to corroborate the idea, the jeerer and the jeered at exchange their positions toward the end of the story. The narrator gives an ironical look, not at himself as in the first half of the story, but at the other characters.

Following the explanation by Dr. Johnson, the narrator asks his daughter Julia: “after that scientific statement of the case (though, I confess, I don't exactly understand it), where are your spirits? It is very wonderful as it is, but where are your spirits?” (397) “Where, indeed?” (397), the wife says, in perfect accord with her husband. This is a pointed difference from the former part of the story: they also have changed places. Julia answers in words that remind us of Thoreau's in *Walden*:

“Say what you will,” said Julia, holding up, in the covered tumbler, the glorious, lustrous, flashing live opal, “say what you will, if *this beauteous creature* be not a spirit, it yet teaches a spiritual lesson. For if, after one hundred and seventy years' *entombment*, a mere insect comes forth at last into light, itself an effulgence, shall there be no *glorified resurrection for the spirit of man?* Spirits! spirits!” she exclaimed, with rapture, “*I still believe in spirits*, only now I believe in them with delight, when before I but thought of them with terror.” (397; emphasis added)

Just like Thoreau, Julia regards the bug as quite a “beautiful” creature, which, having been “dead” in the “tomb” for a long period, resurrects to verify the “immortality” of the human soul (Thoreau 222–23). Contrary to her optimistic view, however, the life of the insect is very short; it dies the next day. “Embalmed in a silver vinaigrette” (397), it is put on the apple-tree table in the parlor, and the daughters are “happy to show the bug and the table,” the narrator says, to “whatever lady [who] doubts this story” (397).

In the concluding paragraphs, the narrator slips away to the background

of the story and makes as if to play the role of pure narrator. It is the daughters, not the narrator, who show the bug to the skeptical ladies. He takes a step aside or backward and observes his womenfolk and those doubting ladies at an ironic distance. With regard to the distance between the narrator and the narrated, it was mainly the narrator himself and his actions that were ridiculed in the earlier part of the story. Now, at its ending, the narrator is laughing at his daughters and the female readers of the story who take the trouble to visit his house out of skepticism or disguised curiosity. There are several details to suggest his ridicule of them. He draws our attention first to the "silver vinaigrette" the bug was put into. It had probably been used as a bottle to hold smelling salts; but how can the dead bug regain consciousness from smelling salts? The narrator then compares "the two holes made by the two bugs" to "the spots where the cannon balls struck Brattle Street Church" (397), which, during the Revolutionary War, was occupied by the British and was hit by the American batteries. This historical comparison is so far-fetched that we cannot take it as anything other than a sarcastic joke on the part of the narrator.

Yet is the narrator truly making fun of his daughters and his female readers? Or is he making fun of Thoreau's transcendental interpretation on the wondrous emergence of the insect? If we return to the beginning of the story and read carefully the following passage there, we can find that the narrator makes a peculiar gesture that corresponds to that of the bugs. The attic of his house has been closed for years; it is so dark and stifling that he seeks to open the scuttle slide, or garret window, for light and air. He finds the padlock to the slide "imbedded, like an oyster at the bottom of the sea, amid matted masses of weedy webs, chrysalides, and insectivorous eggs" (380):

With a crooked nail, I tried to pick the lock, when scores of small ants and flies, half-torpid, crawled forth from the key-hole, and, feeling the warmth of the sun in the pane, began frisking around me. Others appeared. Presently, I was overrun by them. As if incensed at this invasion of their retreat, countless bands darted up from below, beating about my head, like hornets. At last, with a sudden jerk, I burst open the scuttle. And ah! what a change. As from *the gloom of the grave* and the companionship of worms, man shall at last rapturously rise into the *living greenness and glory immortal*, so, from my cobwebbed old garret, *I thrust forth my head into the balmy air*, and found myself hailed by the verdant tops of great trees, growing in the little garden

below—trees whose leaves soared high above my topmost slate. (380; emphasis added)

This is the scene just before the narrator's discovery of the apple-tree table. When he "thrust[s] forth [his] head" from the gloomy garret like a "grave" into the open air, he pre-enacts or anticipates, without knowing it, the movements of the bugs gnawing their way out of the table. It is as if he has a latent desire for his own revival.

As in Julia's case, the narrator's wording here is very similar or exactly the same as the language in the above-cited passage of *Walden*. Thoreau celebrates the marvelous fact that the egg of the insect hatches after having been "buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dry life of society" and the imago "come[s] forth . . . to enjoy its perfect summer at last!" (223). If the narrator desires his own revival, is it not a rebirth from his "dry" domestic life? Every Saturday night, the narrator treats himself with "a tumbler of warm punch," a favorite custom of his that his wife, who does not drink any wine, has "long remonstrated; predicting that, unless [he] gave it up, [he] would die a miserable lot" (383). On one of those Saturday nights, when the narrator is drinking punch alone in the parlor, he hears ticking noises come from the table. He informs his wife of the event, but, as we have seen, she gives little heed but says that he must be out of his mind because of the alcohol:

"Don't exasperate me," I cried now, truly beside myself; "I will quit the house!"

"No, no! not in that state. Come to bed, my dear. I won't say another word." (384)

The wife does not take the husband's words seriously and gets him to go to sleep as if he were a fretting child. If the narrator is not happy with a life dominated by a strong wife, the "tick, tick" sounds from the table represent his desperate wish, throbbing in his innermost heart, to "quit the house." It is very suggestive that the strange noises start only after the sinister-looking table is domesticated—that is, after it is refinished and put into daily use and the eggs of the insects are stimulated by the heat of the pots placed on the tabletop.

If the narrator feels dissatisfied with domestic life, his criticism of Julia (and Thoreau) should be taken to be only pretense; he is, in reality, embracing the transcendental interpretation of the revival of the bug more earnestly

than anybody else. Viewed in this light, "The Apple-Tree Table" is a story about the narrator's latent craving to escape from a domestic prison. He may be trying to hide this truth; if so, his despair at family life and the self-ridicule about it turn out to be very serious. This story looks merely to be an entertaining light comedy, but it contains, in its recesses, a vein of dark pessimism about domestic life in mid-nineteenth-century America.<sup>5</sup>

#### ESCAPE FROM THE DOMESTIC FICTION

The narrator's pessimism of this kind should not be found in domestic fiction, for, according to Nina Baym, the genre celebrates "home as haven" and makes repeated references to "calm, quiet, the unpretending" (204). In domestic novels, the family may become troubled and split in the course of the story, yet it must be restored finally to peace and harmony.

Let us look at two examples of domestic stories written about a decade before and after "The Apple-Tree Table." In Sarah Hale's novel, *Boarding Out: A Tale of Domestic Life* (1846), the wife, weary and ill from the vexations of housekeeping, insists on moving from their elegant suburban residence to a boardinghouse in the city. The husband tries to persuade her against it by listing the merits of their house that an urban boardinghouse could not provide her with:

"And so you feel no reluctance, wife, to giving up this convenient house, with its finely-warmed apartments; the bathing apparatus; the library, with its shelves so laden with books to amuse, to instruct, and divert you; the conveniences of good closet-room, and those spare chambers, where your friends are so well accommodated; the commodious yard, the fine prospect of the surrounding country, and all the many advantages which this residence possesses, and which you were so anxious I should procure?"

"No," said Mrs. Barclay, "not any." (13)

Mrs. Barclay's strong will, or obstinate determination, to board has something similar to that of the wife in "I and My Chimney" who wishes to renovate her house. The Barclays' moving to the city, however, does not make the wife and the family happier but leads to a series of misfortunes. One of the daughters, while wishing to go back to the former house, dies of whooping cough, and the husband, who is a commission merchant, fails in

a business venture and speculation and goes bankrupt. At the end of the story, though, he has got a new job as overseer of a cotton mill, and the whole family moves again to a residence in the country, where “[t]emperance, order, and ‘domestic peace’ seemed to have made their abode in this dwelling” (128) and “if ever a murmur is heard in the family, it is instantly checked, as Mrs. Barclay is reminded of ‘Boarding Out!’” (128–29). Thus, the complaints of the wife are subdued, and the home becomes stable again.

In “The Ravages of a Carpet,” a story contained in Harriet Beecher Stow’s *House and Home Papers* (1865), Crowfield, the narrator and husband, expresses his love of old things, just like the narrator of “I and My Chimney,” and keeps guard against the women’s desire to bring something new into the domicile: “of all radicals on earth, none are to be compared to females that have once in hand a course of domestic innovation and reform” (13). The daughters insist on replacing the old carpet in the parlor with a new one, and the wife finds a bargain and buys it. With the installation of the carpet, the wife reforms the parlor by introducing a new sofa and chairs and removing whatever looks unfashionable. After all the fuss and exertion, however, the parlor becomes a room where it is difficult to get the guests to sit comfortably and have a good time:

In fact, nobody wanted to stay in our parlor now. It was a cold, correct, accomplished fact; the household fairies had left it,—and when the fairies leave a room, nobody ever feels at home in it. No pictures, curtains, no wealth of mirrors, no elegance of lounges, can in the least make up for their absence. (22)

The parlor is made better as a room in the “house” but worse as part of a “home”; but, paradoxically enough, through this failure, emerges the ideal of domestic life. The story finally strengthens the traditional value of home as “haven.”

There is another important difference between the two stories and “The Apple-Tree Table,” and it is related to the consistency of the narration in these works. Though *Boarding Out* deals with the opposition of values between the husband and the wife and the tragic events that arise thereof, the divided house plot resolves itself, as Milette Shamir argues, into “a smooth, unified narrative”(21), and the fundamental stability of the home is restored at the end of the novel. As for “Ravages of a Carpet,” the story is steadily narrated through the husband’s calm voice with gentle humor in it. In these stories, the sober and well-balanced narration itself guarantees the

security and immutability of the home. Compared with these stories, the narration of "The Apple-Tree Table" is quite irregular. It is true that the narrator's voice is skillfully controlled to vary from scene to scene, but, to express it negatively, his narration is not constant but wavering and even sometimes unreliable. This unstableness is not appropriate for a domestic story if it seeks to prove the ultimate security of the home. "The Apple-Tree Table" thus contains an antithesis to the generic stability of contemporary domestic tales.

As we have seen, the narrator of "Bartleby" works as a kind of mouthpiece for Melville, but Bartleby could be taken as another authorial persona if we regard his repeated "I would prefer not to" as Melville's own reluctance to write for magazines. "Bartleby" has a subtext about Melville's attitude toward magazine writing. Richard Brodhead once addressed the friction between the authorial visions of Hawthorne and Melville and the conventions of the genre they chose to "work in":

Their careers as novelists are made up of repeated efforts to stabilize this tension, to discipline their imaginations, on the one hand, and on the other to modify and reconstruct the constitutive conventions of their genre in such a way as to make it a more fit vehicle for their peculiar visions. This tension is as central to their best work as it is to their worst, and it is the secret link between the new formal possibilities that they created for the novel and the dead ends that they encountered.

(4)

"The Apple-Tree Table" is free from neither Melville's friction with nor his ambivalence toward the literary mode he adopted for the tale. Like "Bartleby," "The Apple-Tree Table" is a story with a dual nature: Melville composes it within the framework of domestic fiction, but, at the same time, is undoing the generic conventions from within. Such manipulation of the narrative distance and the multiple-layered structure of comedy as we have discussed with "The Apple-Tree Table" is still further refined and complicated, and reaches an artistic apogee, in the novel *The Confidence-Man* published in the following year. In this sense, the narrator of "The Apple-Tree Table," who thrusts his head out of the garret window, is expressing Melville's wish not to be "domesticated" in magazine writing but to escape into a new genre of fiction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In November 1851, Harper and Brothers sent Melville an account showing that 1,535 copies of *Moby-Dick* had been sold (Parker 30); and in March 1853, they sent an account to say that they had sold 283 copies of *Pierre* (Parker 150).

<sup>2</sup> *Harper's* started in 1850 and had "a circulation surpassing one hundred thousand by 1860," while *Putnum's* audience "ranged from two thousand to twenty thousand subscribers, averaging around sixteen thousand readers monthly" (Post-Lauria 167, 177).

<sup>3</sup> A "diptych" is a story consisting of two separate but corresponding pieces—a form Melville made the most of in such tales as "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855).

<sup>4</sup> The same characters also appear in "Jimmy Rose" (1855). They move from the country to the city and live in a very old house that seems identical to that in "The Apple-Tree Table." William Charvat surmises that "Melville intended to link city and country stories in one collection" (258).

<sup>5</sup> The narrator's situation might in some ways be a reflection of Melville's in the mid-1850s. The biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant notes that Melville "began drinking heavily" at this time to lessen "physical and mental stresses" from his economic predicament, the farm work, and strenuous writing for hours (29). In addition, his marriage is said to have been strained. Robertson-Lorant also refers to Melville's "volatile personality, given to mood swings" and continues, "He could be kind and considerate one minute, cold and cruel the next" (29). These traits of Melville's might be related to the narrator's fluctuating attitudes and his mixed mode of narration.

## WORKS CITED

- Baym, Nina. *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984.
- Berthoff, Warner. Preface. *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
- Brodhead, Richard H. *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976.
- Charvat, William. *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The Papers of William Charvat*. Ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1968.
- Fogle, Richard Harter. *Melville's Shorter Tales*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1960.
- Hale, Sarah Josepha Buell. *Boarding Out: A Tale of Domestic Life*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1846.
- Melville, Herman. "The Apple-Tree Table: Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations." *The*



- Piazza Tales*. 378–97.
- . “Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street.” *The Piazza Tales*. 13–45.
- . “I and My Chimney.” *The Piazza Tales*. 352–77.
- . *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*. Ed. Harrison Heyford, Alma A. MacDougall, and Thomas G. Tanselle. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987.
- Noma, Shoji. *Yomi no kairaku: Melville no zen-tanpen wo yomu* [*The pleasures of reading Melville's short stories*]. Tokyo: Kokusho-kanko-kai, 1999.
- Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, 1851–1891*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.
- Post-Lauria, Sheila. *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996.
- Robertson-Lorant, Laurie. “Melville and the Women in His Life.” *Melville and Women*. Ed. Elizabeth Shultz and Haskell Springer. Kent: Kent State UP, 2006. 15–37.
- Sealts, Merton M., Jr. *Melville's Reading*. Rev. and enl. ed. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1988.
- Shamir, Milette. *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. “The Ravages of a Carpet.” *House and Home Papers*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865. 1–22.
- Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996.

