

THE PHYSIOLOGY
OF
NEW YORK
BOARDING-HOUSES



THOMAS BUTLER GUNN

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
DAVID FAFLIK

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Like the city it surveys, this book has been a collaborative creation, and many years in the making. Its foundations trace to my time in graduate school at Chapel Hill. With the support of a Gilder Lehrman Dissertation Fellowship in the summer 2004, I first encountered Gunn's *Physiology* at the New York Public Library (NYPL); that institution's crumbling copy, so precariously preserved, at once captured my imagination, and aroused my concern for the fate of a text that begs to be read. Soon I would learn that *Physiology* has retained its admirers, among them the historians John F. Kasson and William J. Rorabaugh. Both scholars have encouraged my work from the start, and remain friends and mentors to this day. I thank them for their support and belief.

No less supportive have been the libraries and their respective staff who aided me in my research and editorial work. These include the Humanities and Social Sciences Library of the NYPL, both Special Collections and the Microforms Division at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library, and the Interlibrary Loan Office at the University of Washington's Suzzallo Library, in Seattle. The Missouri Historical Society, in St. Louis, has shared Gunn's insightful personal diary in true collegial spirit. And special mention belongs to Autumn L. Mather, senior library assistant in Reference Services at The Newberry Library. Her timely, generous intervention saved me months in preparing my final manuscript.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

In the early spring of 1842, a twenty-two-year-old New York journalist named Walt Whitman pronounced “the universal Yankee nation” a “boarding people.” Resorting to comic elaboration rather than sober explanation, the young newspaper editor would go on to amplify a point for readers that well may have needed none. He writes, “Married 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 Boardinghouses,” 22–23).¹

Whitman was right to assume that his contemporaries already were familiar with “boarding out,” as the domestic practice to which he refers then was known. An unprecedented urban turn during the middle decades of the nineteenth century had seen tens of thousands of Americans migrate to or toward the nearest metropolis in search of work and leisure. Meeting them there were an equal number of foreign immigrants arriving mostly from northern and western Europe. And attending them all were the rising real estate prices and severe housing shortages that constituted the commercial, communal logic behind boarding. Formerly a sporadic pastime practiced among sailors, settlers, and apprentices in both the colonial Old and New Worlds, boarding out had emerged in America in the 1830s and 1840s as a widespread ritual that saw masses of men and (to a lesser extent) women, in most instances strangers, come together under a common roof to partake of food, shelter, and upkeep for an agreed-upon weekly or monthly fee. Practically, those commodities otherwise would have been hard to find or afford under rapidly urbanizing circumstances, all the more so along the country’s crowded Atlantic seaboard. Symbolically, in the pitch from which Whitman writes, it thus should come as no surprise that he proposes boarding as a behavior by which U.S. citizens everywhere might be identified. From the vantage point

of the metropolitan West's unrivaled boardinghouse capital, New York, all America must have looked as if it had gone "to board."

Whitman was right in another sense as well. Given the frequent commentary that boarding had inspired in the sidewalks, streets, and parlors of an urbanizing United States, he correctly assumed that his observations on boarding were less than original; hence the poetic license he claims as he enlivens an otherwise mundane inventory of the city's boardinghouse population with a little playful alliteration. What Whitman might not have known, however, was just how accurately his words captured his country's overall cultural condition. It was not just New Yorkers who boarded. Americans of Whitman's day truly were a "boarding people" writ large. They were drawn to boardinghouses in ever-growing numbers, even among the scattered cities and towns of the nation's interior. And, perhaps more important, increasingly they had become conditioned to the itinerant lifestyle that awaited them back at their provisional homes. No doubt the vast majority of U.S. residents still favored the stand-alone dwelling, assuming they could secure one (Martin, 148).² Yet the author of America's first free-verse rhapsody, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), did not exaggerate boarding's broad implications when he later related a startling (if marginally inflated) demographic fact. As of 1856, he could write that fully three-quarters of Manhattan's adult population had lived or then were living in boardinghouses ("Wicked Architecture," 95).³ That number confirms recent estimates of the boardinghouse's central place in the United States before the Civil War; it likewise suggests the extent of a nationwide trend that saw cities across the country approximate without duplicating New York's leading example. Quite simply, if Whitman is wrong, then our picture of a not-too-distant national past is wrong. If Whitman is right, then it seems incumbent upon us, a former "boarding people," to ask what a boardinghouse is, or was, and how it became a habitual habitation for our antebellum ancestors.

Cultural historians, no less than interested observers of American life and letters, might find ready answers to these and related questions in Thomas Butler Gunn's classic catalogue of all things boarding, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (1857). A minor commercial and critical success when it first appeared, Gunn's *Physiology* has suffered a fate not unlike its ostensible subject: marked changes in the country's residential landscape since the time of its writing have all but made his book as obscure in the present tense as boarding itself now would appear to be. That is not to suggest that *Physiology* lacks relevance today. On the contrary, and on the one hand, if "boarding out" in the strictest sense of that phrase has been all but forgotten, it nevertheless persists in modified form in a range of improvised living arrangements that continue to characterize the modern metropolis. The myriad compromises and curtailments in time, space, and shelter that define our lives—not least for the many millions of Americans who reside in or near some sizeable city—trace back in no small part to what remains the pressing necessity of collective domestication. Lease-makers,

overnight-stayers, and restaurant diners might testify that the basics of boarding out are with us still.

On the other hand, not only does boarding continue to exist as a social practice, albeit one that has been eclipsed by more self-evident housing situations; it also survives, even less obviously, as a *literary* phenomenon. For, if boarding out began as a way to domesticate under what must have seemed the inhospitable conditions of the big American city, then it quickly evolved an alternate capacity in its *verbal* functions as well—that is to say, as a vehicle through which city dwellers could express with words, *boardinghouse* words, whether and how they had adjusted to the special temporal, spatial, and cognitive demands of the metropolis. The boardinghouse, in short, formerly provided basic domestic shelter for many Americans. But it also, and simultaneously, yielded a unique fund of practical knowledge that in turn translated for not a few boarders into a conceptual, and rhetorical, means by which the first true generation of U.S. city-dwellers might register their urban experiences. Readers, writers, and talkers today may take for granted the by now-familiar renters' laments, tales of urban flight, and pleas of suburban ennui that at least in part provide articulate testimony to our postmodern existence. Preceding these by more than a century were an abundance of boardinghouse sketches, stories, poems, and plays—to list but several of boarding's storytelling *forms*—at whose narrative heart resides a restless urban American people whose interests, anxieties, and general discursive response to the city anticipate our own.

Physiology epitomizes the boardinghouse *as literature*. In it we receive a representative sampling of the kinds of finished literary products that were informed by boarding, and that regularly appeared in period broadsides, newspapers, magazines, and books, no less than as a popular spectacle on the dramatic stage. We find in *Physiology* as well a reliable template for the unique literary conventions and authorial strategies that developed in tandem with boarding out over the course of its mid-nineteenth-century career. There is, first, an emphatic first-person authority in this study that characterizes much of boarding *as a genre*. Literary boarding need not, and did not, restrict itself to the privileged point of view of an egotistical "I" reporter, necessarily. But, at a time when a writer for *Harper's Weekly* magazine could state that "every body," at least among New Yorkers, "has had, has, or will have" a close encounter with "one of the most striking institutions of this metropolitan city," the boardinghouse, it was essential that accounts such as Gunn's reward readers with a personal interpretive payoff that they might be unable to achieve on their own ("Wanted," 652).

Physiology's author was well-equipped for this task. A native of Banbury, England, Gunn began life on February 15, 1826, in a rural Oxfordshire town—far from boarding, but not far to the southeast of England's "Second City," Birmingham.⁴ It nevertheless was to Oxford, and then London, that a young Gunn moved with his family during his childhood to mark his initiation into

the transatlantic metropolis. At age fifteen he signed as draughtsman's apprentice to the noted architect Samuel Beazley, who maintained an office in central London's Soho Square. Here he developed a capacity for drawing that led him not into his expected profession, but into the emerging world of print periodicals. He illustrated for several English magazines, including the widely read journal *Punch*, before deciding in 1849 to try his hand, literally, in the thriving New York literary scene across the Atlantic. A skilled caricaturist, cartoonist, and observer of urban life, Gunn soon won a place in Manhattan's semi-underground of journalistic satire; steady work followed with an assortment of the city's typically short-lived periodicals, including the humorous *New York Picayune*, *Nick-nax*, *The Lantern*, and *Yankee Notions* (NYHSD, 280). By trying his hand at authorship as well, he combined pen with pencil to launch what would prove to be a rather successful, if low-paying, career among the growing ranks of literary men and women who earned their living piecemeal. Writing and drawing on demand for the metropolitan press, Gunn stood little chance of ensuring economic profit in the long term. What he and his associates had obtained was the chance to enjoy the urban intensity of their life's work—and an all but inevitable encounter with boarding.

In step with the rest of his peers in this proto-Bohemia, Gunn labored like he boarded, with vigor. He "settled"—for a spell, at any rate—upon his New York arrival in a boardinghouse at 132 Bleeker Street. Locals would have recognized this lower Manhattan address as fertile boarders' ground; single young male migrants, in particular, regularly looked to these precincts for housing that at once was affordable and within close proximity to the area's various employers. Among the latter were any number of surrounding mercantile establishments and retail stores, where the city's swelling army of clerks and Whitman's "counter-jumpers" dutifully spent daytime hours climbing their way into the more comfortable reaches of the middle classes. Less conspicuous were the artistic types like Gunn, members (or else would-be members) of a nascent culture industry that lacked the high profile of everyday trade, yet required an adequate supply of writers, painters, engravers, reporters, musicians, and stage performers in order to keep its alternative brand of production in motion. Thrice daily mealtimes recalled many of these downtown-dwellers to their respective boarding establishments nearby. Most likely also in attendance were a minority constituency of shop girls, female teachers, and seamstresses, who broke bread in common with the men; it was but one of boarding's democratic tendencies. Leisure hours sent boarders in different directions, depending on individual preferences. There were lyceum lectures and lending libraries for those seeking self-improvement. Theaters, museums, art galleries, and concert halls blended "high" and "low" entertainments. Saloons, oyster cellars, and brothels sold less innocent pleasures. And before and afterward were the boardinghouses, a metropolitan base from which work and pleasure both were within easy reach of occupants.

This was Gunn's boardinghouse world, the foundation for his *Physiology*. Fittingly for this milieu, he led a peripatetic existence during the early years of the 1850s. Journalistic assignments into the U.S. heartland—with visits to the Great Lakes region, New Orleans, and Kentucky, plus places in between—removed him on occasion from his chosen New York environs. A subsequent return trip to London, and then Paris, in 1854, additionally kept him in the Old World for upwards of a year. By 1855, however, he was back in Manhattan, still relatively unsettled in the customary boardinghouse fashion—"unwilling to pause," he later writes, "ever jostling onward" (*Physiology*, chapter I). Yet he found focus in a regular research routine, which he began conducting on behalf of a book that records for contemporaries and posterity alike the conditions faced by many a mid-nineteenth-century boarder.

Of course, by conventional standards, certain aspects of the boardinghouse life that followed next for Gunn *defied* convention, and so must be seen as emblematic of something other than a mass average. It was not your everyday boarder, for instance, who joined the "Bohemian Club" at Pfaff's Broadway tavern, where late-night eating, drinking, and smoking sessions brought together a select group of the city's *artistes*—Gunn among them—in self-conscious imitation of European-style creative talk. Not every boarder, like him, belonged to a literary circle that included celebrity author Fanny Fern, her biographer husband James Parton, newspaperman-poet Walt Whitman, and the nationally known editor Horace Greeley. Nor did the run-of-the-mill boardinghouse denizen spend mornings, as did Gunn, reading widely, writing rapidly, and drawing for fun or for dollars, while canvassing periodical offices and publishers come afternoons in search of the next paid engagement (Gunn, diaries).⁵ But, apart from a few eccentricities and an abiding English accent, *Physiology's* prospective author otherwise boarded out in the accepted fashion of a mainstream American bourgeoisie. His fellow magazinist, Thomas Dunn English, recalled him decades afterward as no Grub Street loafer, but as "a correct, upright, and decorous gentleman" who would have graced any workplace (English, 202). Worldly, well-groomed, and mild-mannered, Gunn by extension also would have qualified as an ideal messmate for the city's respectable middle classes. For it was not only New York's aspiring classes who boarded. Newlywed couples, cost-cutting families, bachelors, spinsters, and widows all boarded out with much of the rest of Manhattan, although they often opted for more genteel quarters farther uptown if the higher cost of finer accommodations was not prohibitive. His own straitened finances permitting, Gunn might have been but one of the boarders staring back at them from across their boardinghouse table.

He had seen many such tables by the time his *Physiology* reached bookstores in 1857. True to boardinghouse form, Gunn adopts the first-person "I" from the start of his work when he dedicates it "To All Inmates of Metropolitan Boarding-Houses, . . . By an Ex-Member of the Fraternity." The author in other words opens with an assurance that he has composed by a process that depends upon

something other than mere imagination. He himself has boarded, rather. And, despite now having exchanged Manhattan boarding for home-ownership in the more affordable borough of Brooklyn, across the East River, he has returned with a fresh perspective on a topic that many readers might have thought exhausted. Yet *Physiology* is full of surprises, informed as it is by a wealth of engaging anecdotes acquired firsthand “By an Ex-Member of the Fraternity.” The author’s housing history had been as varied as his potential audience’s, whose habitats comprised all the different domiciles on offer in Manhattan. Boarding was the language that author and audience spoke in common, and in Gunn readers met a man who has mastered the idiom. He imparts his wisdom, as it were, with his volume, and so fulfills a traditional purpose of all literatures, instruction. Thus on one level, his work reads as a wholesale compilation of boardinghouse options for a people who might have deemed any such statement redundant. On another level, his comments were colorful enough to warrant public attention: *Physiology*’s first edition sold out less than one month after it had been printed.⁶

One suspects it was not the matter but the manner of *Physiology* that attracted readers initially. Friend Fanny Fern wrote a glowing review of the book for the *New York Ledger* story paper (Bonner, 4; Fern, “A Social Nuisance”).⁷ Local actor Edwin Forrest, a favorite with working-class crowds from the city’s Bowery district, likewise owned a copy.⁸ At the opposite end of the class spectrum, meanwhile, and some blocks farther uptown, the prosperous Manhattan attorney George Templeton Strong also bought and read the book, praising it highly in his diary as “a very clever and funny treatise” (Strong, II, 349). Indeed, so thorough is Gunn’s examination of urban America’s domestic predicament that the work in its final form possesses certain encyclopedic qualities that Strong is right to recognize. “Exceedingly comprehensive” is how a columnist for the *Democratic Review* described *Physiology*’s overall effect (“Our Book Table,” 192). But Gunn, like other boardinghouse authors of the age (as we will see, there were scores of such writers), did not rest content with straightforward reportage. He indulges, rather, an aesthetic of overwhelm that transcends the mechanical accumulation of housing data, and imparts to his writing a tone at once elevated and elevating. If he was not given to bombast—and *Physiology*’s author communicates with civility, courtesy, subtlety, and charm throughout his book—he does write with all of his senses attuned to extremes. As a result, much of *Physiology* reads in the superlative degree. Gunn repeatedly hunts and finds the biggest, smallest, best, and worst of boarding; having found them, he gleefully shares these specimen examples with readers, the rules of conversational propriety notwithstanding. He writes *what* he wants, *how* he wants, and in the process achieves with words the literary equivalent of graphic caricature, at which he excelled. More to the point, he would have us read his various boardinghouse rarities as anything but—which is to say that Gunn, in the timeless tradition of satire, locates representativeness in the anomalous, and asks that we do the same. What might strike some readers as silly distortions are in truth for him something else: the odd, the

unusual, the exotic, the over-elaborate figure in *Physiology* as richly suggestive *types* of the peoples, places, and faces that one was likely to find in Manhattan. Gunn's assumption is that the metropolis itself is something extraordinary, and its boardinghouses both a cause and an effect, a magnet and a maker, of an urban American version of the strange. Judging from *Physiology's* impressive early sales figures, many a New York reader agreed.

As with Whitman's whimsical alliterativeness, and like the poet's slight statistical inflation, Gunn pushes hard facts toward embellished fiction in tacit acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of his literary field. Because there were few who knew nothing of boarding, domestic exaggeration had developed into a discursive norm for authors who would add value, or at least interest, to material that otherwise was so pedestrian as to obviate further remark. Too obvious for understatement, the boardinghouse in literature invited rhetorical flourish instead. *Physiology* follows suit, and a reader for the *Democratic Review* regretted the net result by saying the text "strained a little," calling it "flippant . . . and rather staggery in some of its more pretentious passages" ("Our Book Table," 191). But a reviewer for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* had the exact opposite reaction, one that seems to have been shared across the city. Endorsing what his *Democratic* counterpart deplors, this particular writer extends his praise in words at least as hyperbolic as Gunn's. He has read the work in question "with infinite amusement." "It will meet with an unprecedented sale," as "tens of thousands feel a keen and undying interest in the subject." Not only that, but the book's "power" resides in the author's ability to record "the poisonous truth" of urban domestication generally, and New York specifically—to wit, that city-residence breeds "peculiar idiosyncrasies" in the men and women who endure it, insofar as modern metropolitan residence itself was an exceptional cultural condition. Conclusion: "*The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* is undoubtedly one of the striking books of the season" (*Frank Leslie's*, 95). What proved most "striking" for this reader, as for many more besides, was the apparent realization that the volume's word-drawings were so recognizably real not despite being exaggerated, but *because* they were exaggerated.

The very title of the work suggests in part the nature of its excesses. This book is a "Physiology" for sure, inasmuch as the sweeping comprehensiveness of Gunn's survey becomes, through the simple act of sustained narration, a veritable *anatomy* of residential Manhattan that promises in these pages revelations for even seasoned urban Americans. The author duly delivers an exhaustive taxonomy of type after type of boardinghouse. Individual chapters bring us such mainstays as the "'Hand-to-Mouth' Boarding-House," the "Cheap Boarding-House on a Large Scale," and the "Fashionable Boarding-House Where You Don't Get Enough to Eat." More specialized offerings include the "Artists' Boarding-House," the "Theatrical Boarding-House," the "Medical Students' Boarding-House," and the "'Serious' Boarding-House." There is even a "Vegetarian Boarding-House" for those with a taste for food reform, and a "Boarding-House

Where the Landlady Drinks” for those craving tragicomedy. The list goes on and on. Gunn has seen them all, in accordance with the first-person demands of the boardinghouse genre. But, in seeming contradiction of those demands, he likewise employs the patented gratuitous gestures than won for boarding in its literary guise so many eager readers. More is not just more here. Total inclusion is not simply a numbers game won at the expense of discriminating exclusion; it is also the principle upon which the author tells his tale, in the belief that by stretching and “straining” the images on which his text rests, he might achieve more accurate mimetic effects. If the *Physiology* is no novel, then, if it does not quite qualify as an extended, fanciful prose narrative, it doubtless does manage to say something new. Its sheer staggering multiplicity, in tandem with its mock-serious celebration of strangeness, achieves for *Physiology* a specific kind of novelty, one that recalls the dynamic, historical urban context from which it was raised.

Gunn thereby ensures that *Physiology* both instructs *and* diverts. Regardless how they rated his book, readers from the late 1850s agreed in classifying it as a work of humor. *Physiology* was fun—fun to read, and fun to look at as well. The author’s proclivity for lists, to begin, functions as a repeated punch line upon reading, or, rather, as a punch line whose comedic intent inheres in the very act of repetition. Gunn runs readers in circles, and we cannot help but laugh in visiting boardinghouse establishments which, if markedly different, yet somehow feel the same. No less funny is the crazy content of what gets repeated. Whether one encounters them in quick succession, or else at intervals of intervening chapters, boardinghouses such as those “Where There Are Marriageable Daughters,” “Where You’re Expected to Make Love to the Landlady,” or “Whose Landlady Likes to Be Ill-Used” induce in us smiling assent to the comically familiar and a knowing nod at the preposterous. It is not the houses we are laughing at in these instances; it is what scholars call the “emerging metropolitan manners” that boarders’ behavior typifies. Coupled with the author’s self-deprecating, deadpan delivery, the cumulative effect of this lengthy behavioral record is “a comic typology” no less readable for being risible (Day and Haggerty, 15). Then there is what historian Wendy Gamber aptly has termed “boarder’s beef” (Gamber, 79). The chronic complaints voiced by boarders about everything from dining room fare to household cleanliness (or a lack thereof) comprise a recurring source of humor for the genre as a whole. Gunn has his share of grievances, as do the boarders who enter into his account. And what they all hold in common is a nineteenth-century tendency toward what David S. Reynolds names “the grotesque posture”—a subversive willingness to sport with words, to push language to its outer limits (Reynolds, 441–483). Among boarders, such sportiveness often involved self-conscious contests to bemoan the most their individually experienced domestic shortcomings, but that was but one of the forms that verbal play might take. As Gunn suggests, tall tales and improbable puns, no less than immoderate “boasts,” “over-quoted drollery,” and “burlesque phrases

applied to aught that may be supposed serious” reinforced literary boarding’s version of verisimilitude (*Physiology*, chapter XII); already a forum for exaggeration, the boardinghouse in literature imagined a wild reality commensurate with the heady excitement of a city that the author ultimately defines as “an indiscriminately-got-together community” (298). Both the collective domicile and the metropolis it figured in miniature are for him an arbitrarily assembled site of “multifarious” urban pluralism (16), whether on a small or large scale. Thus out of the mouths of his boarders pour words that make a mockery of quiet modesty, his own included.

Complementing *Physiology*’s verbal antics are an entire portfolio’s worth of cartoon-like *visual* images, which, in the aggregate, transform our conception of the city according to their creators’ illustrative wit. Gunn the artist was reared, we will remember, in the English satirical tradition of the London journal *Punch*, to which periodical he contributed before sailing for the United States at the close of the 1840s. In *Punch* readers on both sides of the Atlantic encountered a savvy response to urban society; its tongue-in-cheek commentary on municipal politics, class privilege, and the curbside transactions of street life captured the bemused attitude that many contemporaries had taken to the cities in their midst. In *Punch* Gunn likewise entered into a related tradition of urban caricature whose impact it would be difficult to overstate—that of the great English author Charles Dickens, whose work he invokes repeatedly in his text. The printers and publishers involved with *Punch* for a time brought out after 1842 a number of Dickens’s novels, following their serialization in both English and American magazines. Dickens all but perfected in these volumes the rendering of urban “types” that Gunn with so many others incorporate into their own work.⁹ More telling with respect to Dickens’s influence on our author is the Cruikshank connection, as in George Cruikshank. It was Cruikshank who, as Dickens’s artistic collaborator, set the standard for caricature illustration during the years of Gunn’s apprenticeship. Cruikshank’s drawings gave Victorian readers a visual corollary for the Dickensian narrative, which in effect consisted of overlapping pedestrian traffic in interconnected peoples. Like many of the era’s illustrators, *Physiology*’s author followed the Cruikshank model; unlike others, he emulates without imitating Cruikshank’s high aesthetic standards. Conceived and sketched in the city, his drawings retain a striking sign of the urban about them, and so impart to his artwork a graphic metropolitanism that arguably is its signature trait. Whether flustered, funny, and quirky, cosmopolitan and composed, or simply going about their business, his caricatured city-dwellers possess an air that suggests they would be out of place amid any setting other than that of the metropolis (figure 1). We often see Gunn’s images and laugh, but we just as well may respond by thinking “cities.”

He did not draw alone. Helping him illustrate his *Physiology* were three of his countrymen, also itinerant artists, who like him were living and working in Bohemian New York exile from England. One of these men was famous. Born in