



New Voices

SLEEPY HOLLOW IN CONCORD: MELVILLE'S GOTHIC PARODY OF TRANSCENDENTALIST SPIRIT IN "THE APPLE-TREE TABLE"

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ON September 29th, 1855, the town of Concord, Massachusetts, consecrated the grounds of a new cemetery—the curiously named “Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.” There, a crowd gathered on a hilly patch of land along the new road that would connect Concord to Bedford, about a mile from the site of the Old North Bridge and the Old Manse. The town prayed with Barzillai Frost, sang with Frank Sanborn, heard a poem by Ellery Channing, and listened to an address by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson had played a role in the creation of the cemetery, as had Henry David Thoreau who excavated the seventeen-acre woodlot-turned-terraced garden creating an artificial pond which is now the swamp on the northern edge of the property. Sleepy Hollow would serve as an historic landmark for generations of Concord families; and as the final resting place for the Emersons, Thoreaus, Alcotts, and Hawthornes, it would also become a shrine to the town’s literary genius. It seems rather disappointing, then, despite all this original, home-grown talent, that the best name which the planning committee could come up with was, of all things, a name taken from a Washington Irving tale. “*Sleepy Hollow Cemetery*”? In Tarrytown, sure, but in Concord? So much for self-reliance.

That same fall, Herman Melville completed “The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations,” a gothic parody inspired by

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the idea of a "Sleepy Hollow" in Concord.¹ Melville's story centers on a tormented narrator, a domesticated version of Ichabod Crane, residing in a home that bears a visual as well as a thematic resemblance to "The Old Manse." The narrator, his wife, and two daughters are frightened by what they believe are "spirits" haunting their antique table, though they soon discover that these so-called "spirits" are no more than just a couple of noisy insects entombed for generations in the table's ancient wood. Entombment is the master metaphor within the "cedar-parlor" of this fictional household. Just as recurrent as shouts of "Spirits! spirits!" are the story's wooden motifs, including what the narrator mistakenly refers to as "Cotton Mather's 'Magnolia.'"²

By the time it turns up in Melville's story, the apple-tree table already has quite a provenance as a New England folk legend. The "remarkable fact" of bug-infested furniture, initially reported in 1806, appears several times during the early part of the century.³ The first of these sources can be found in a chapter from Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New-England and New-York* (1821). When Dwight's narrator hears about the strange occurrence, he reasons that such bugs persist in a dormant state as part of their life cycle. He also takes this natural, entomological fact that insect species are not all born at once or they may otherwise cause famine and pestilence as a sign of God, asking, "Who can fail to admire the wisdom and goodness displayed in this conduct of Providence?" Chester Dewey offers a much different account in *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts* (1829). This later version gives these "facts" some historical significance by way of their connection to the life of "Maj. Gen. Putnam," who may have planted the original tree from which the table was made, but Dewey says little more of it, considering the incident as simply a baffling mystery.⁴

¹Melville most likely submitted "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations" to Harper and Brothers on October 8, 1855. Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 261.

²Herman Melville, "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations" *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, May 1856: 465-75. Further references hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

³For a gloss on the "original" of Melville's table, see Douglass Sackman, "The Original of Melville's The Apple-Tree Table" *American Literature* 11 (1940): 448-51.

⁴Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York* (New Haven, CT: T. Dwight, 1821), 2:400; David D. Field and Chester Dewey, *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts, in Two Parts: The First Being a General View of the County; the Second, an Account of the Several Towns* (Pittsfield, MA: S.W. Bush, 1829).

The legend of the apple-tree table is, like Irving's story of the headless horseman, a story about resurrection. Yet Melville's satire of the apple-tree table legend is a popular myth about spirit. While the idea of an immortal soul goes far back in ancient philosophy, the more ambiguous and romantic term "spirit"—which may refer either to the Neoplatonic soul or signify a vital force or essence—had great cultural and religious significance in the mid-nineteenth century. The generally accepted belief in a spiritual ascension upon death emanating from the many postmillennial religious movements of the day stood in contrast to the biblical doctrine of bodily resurrection. Liberal Christianity in the form of Unitarianism and, by extension Transcendentalism, embraced this more abstract notion of spirit. The construction of the cemetery thus represented an acceptance of spirit as it was also understood by spiritualists. Indeed, by the 1850s, Transcendentalism circulated alongside spiritualism in periodicals such as *The Una*, *The Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*, *The Spirit of the Age*, and *The Banner of Light*. On the surface spiritualism appeared to be the new Transcendentalism.

Meanwhile, Concord's sunny Transcendental spirit had been darkened by the gothic spirit of Nathaniel Hawthorne who, after honeymooning in the Old Manse with Sophia years ago in the vicinity of Sleepy Hollow, recently returned to Concord to live with his family on Lexington Road. Enter Herman Melville. Taking up the writings of both Thoreau and Hawthorne, Melville exposes the errors and the irony in beliefs about an afterlife that inspires such talk of spirits as well as the creation of a rural cemetery in Concord named after Washington Irving's most famous fictional place.

The "sad little hermit of a table" (466) in Melville's story had most recently turned up as a symbol of "resurrection and immortality" in the conclusion to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).⁵ There Thoreau recounts the story as a remarkable incident of natural history:

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

⁵Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 333.

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 woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the albumum 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!"⁶

The "faith in a resurrection and immortality" Thoreau expresses here is echoed by one of the daughters in Melville's story who puts the rhetorical question to her astonished family: "should there be no glorified resurrection for the spirit of man?" (475). Frank Davidson was the first to point out the similarities between Melville's account and Thoreau's image of the apple-tree table story. He argues that beneath the "good-natured satire directed at spiritualists," Melville's story "records its author's thoughts on religion at a critical time in his life," and that the "inconclusive ending" speaks to the author's "conflicting and unresolved views" on Christianity.⁷

Readings of this story that regard it as an ironic counterstatement to Thoreau or a send up of spiritualism tend to overlook the gothic surface of "The Apple-Tree Table" and thus the very subject of its parody.⁸ What emerges from "The Apple-Tree Table" is the humbug of spirit—one that had become a central tenant within religious liberalism. By the mid-nineteenth century, the romantic belief in an immortal, immaterial spirit had become popular faith, especially in New England. The liberal discourse of spirit also helped fuel the enthusiasm for rural cemeteries like the one in Concord. It is what the "learned professor" in the story dismisses as a "spiritual hypothesis" (475). Spiritualism was in fact a hypothesis put forward by some nineteenth-century scientists who theorized that immaterial spirits could exist with material nature. Melville, however, seems of the opinion that the nature-spirit dualism is redundant, a tautological error of natural philosophy. "The Apple-Tree Table," in its pointed satire,

⁶Thoreau, *Walden*, 333.

⁷Frank Davidson, "Melville, Thoreau, and 'The Apple-Tree Table,'" *Am. Lit.* 25 (1954): 479.

⁸One such reading is Carolyn L. Karcher's "The 'Spiritual Lesson' of Melville's 'The Apple-Tree Table,'" *American Quarterly* 34 (1971): 101-9. Karcher makes some tenuous connections between "The Apple-Tree Table" and Orestes Brownson's fictional autobiography *The Spirit-Rapper* (1854).

shows how a belief in resurrection or immortality is entangled in a kind of circular logic.

The parody of Thoreau is rather obvious. Less apparent is how Melville addresses his satirical short story to Nathaniel Hawthorne—the same Nathaniel Hawthorne who enjoyed “talking with Thoreau about pine-trees.”⁹ It was during those Old Manse years that Hawthorne and Thoreau began a personal and literary relationship that would continue throughout their lives. He may not have oscillated in Emerson’s rainbow either, but Hawthorne held Thoreau in high regard, as evidenced by the ways that Thoreau influenced the writing of *Mosses from an Old Manse*—a book that would be a touchstone in Melville’s life.¹⁰

Like Thoreau, Hawthorne speaks about man’s moral character in terms of spirit, but he is better known for stories of houses haunted by spirits. There is, for example, the haunted upper chamber of “Custom-House.” A spirit dwells in *The House of the Seven Gables*, too. And, of course, there is his sketch of “The Old Manse,” Hawthorne’s account of life amongst the Transcendentalists. After the Hawthornes returned to Concord in 1852, to live in the former home of the Alcotts, Hawthorne wrote his unfinished romance about “the elixir of life,” which was inspired by a story he had heard from Thoreau about his eighteenth-century “predecessor” in the home, a “man who was resolved never to die.”¹¹ The “hermit-like scholar with Indian blood in his veins” who haunted Hawthorne’s Wayside sounds a great deal like the Concord neighbor who would also be the inspiration for the title character of *The Marble Faun*.¹² Considering how much attention Hawthorne gave Thoreau over the years, one wonders if Melville felt a bit jealous. Or perhaps Melville feared that his

⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Vol. 1, The Scarlet Letter*, ed. William Charvat (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 25.

¹⁰Frank Davidson, “Thoreau’s Contribution to Hawthorne’s *Mosses*, *New England Quarterly* 20 (1947): 535-542; Buford Jones, “‘The Hall of Fantasy’ and the Early Hawthorne-Thoreau Relationship,” *PMLA* 83 (1968): 1429-38.

¹¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Vol. 13, The Elixir of Life Manuscripts*, ed. Edward H. Davidson et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 499. For a reading of the relationship Hawthorne has to his house, see Alex Shakespeare, “Reading Hawthorne’s ‘Failure’ at The Wayside: The Uncanny Architecture of Septimius Felton,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 35 (2009): 67-83.

¹²Hawthorne, *The Elixir of Life Manuscripts*, 6. Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 462-63.

friend might become a Transcendentalist and could use a “spiritual lesson” of his own?⁹

Beneath the surface of Melville’s domestic comedy looms a tragic consciousness—the existential pain that consumed Melville in the 1850s. Hawthorne knew this better than anyone. He noted Melville’s serious tone when he confided in him on a Southport beach on November 20, 1856: “Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated’; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief.”¹³ Melville’s preoccupation with resurrection during the 1850s confirms Hawthorne’s observation that his friend could not be content to dwell in cosmic ambiguity as well as he.¹⁴

An insistence on the immortal human spirit, as a form of supernatural agency that persists beyond death and can communicate with the living, is to Melville a naïve presumption. And who should know this better, Melville seems to ask, than Nathaniel Hawthorne, the writer of dark gothic romances so adept at using historical irony to undercut allegory in his own tales, and the moral historian of New England who had replaced Washington Irving as Melville’s literary hero.¹⁵ Cheerful allegories about spiritual rebirth are cut down by gothic parody, nothing ambiguous about it. Just as Hawthorne’s “The Old Manse” and Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” use the postmillennial culture of New England for their subtext, “The Apple-Tree Table” is a cipher for Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and a satire of Transcendentalist spirit—or spiritualism as it appears in 1856. Thus in “The Apple-Tree Table,” we find Melville’s interpretation of a Sleepy Hollow in Concord a story that is part Irvingesque gothic parody, part twice-told tale about an obsession with things “spiritual.”



¹³Herman Melville, *Journals. The Writings of Herman Melville. Northwestern-Newberry Edition*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 628.

¹⁴For another discussion of this preoccupation with immortality, see Gordon V. Boudreau, “Herman Melville, Immortality, St. Paul, and Resurrection: From ‘Rose-Bud’ to ‘Billy Budd,’” *Christianity and Literature* 52 (2003): 343–64.

¹⁵Michael J. Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne’s Early Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Before it was the site of the town cemetery, the Sleepy Hollow area of Concord had been known by that name since at least the mid-1830s.¹⁶ It had been a haunt for many of the town's citizens, including its literary luminaries. Nathaniel Hawthorne described it in his journal for July 27th, 1844, as "a shallow space scooped out among the woods, which surround it on all sides, it being pretty nearly circular, or oval, and two or three hundred yards—perhaps four or five hundred—in diameter," half filled with "Indian corn," and a pathway where "sunshine glimmers through shadow, and shadow effaces sunshine, imaging that pleasant mood of mind where gaiety and pensiveness intermingle."¹⁷ Sleepy Hollow was the place where Hawthorne was at his most Transcendental, however little that was.¹⁸ Years later, Emerson, in that same shady spot just north of town, would speak of immortality and the future beauty of a "grove of trees."¹⁹ "When these acorns, that are falling at our feet, are oaks over-shadowing our children in a remote century," Emerson said, "this mute green bank will be full of history: the good, the wise and great will have left their names and virtues on the trees."²⁰

¹⁶According to the autobiography of John Shepard Keyes, the Sleepy Hollow area of Concord was "just beginning to have that name" (39) about the time of Concord's bicentennial in 1835, when it was the property of Deacon Reuben Brown. See John Shepard Keyes, *Autobiography*, transcribed from ms. in John Shepard Keyes Papers, William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts. If Keyes is correct, then the place got its name after the publication of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (New York: C. S. Van Winkle, 1819–20), and may be credited to Irving who first mentions the village in *A History of New-York* (New York: Inskeep & Bradford, 1809).

¹⁷Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Volume 8, The American Notebooks* ed. Claude Mitchell Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 245.

¹⁸According to Leo Marx, Hawthorne's description of Sleepy Hollow is "reminiscent of the painstaking literary exercises of his neighbor, Henry Thoreau." *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 16.

¹⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow," *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871, Volume 2: 1855–1871*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 32.

²⁰Emerson, "Address at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow," 33. The ceremony included an original ode by F. B. Sanborn and the poem "Sleepy Hollow" by Ellery Channing, both of which were included in Emerson's *Parnassus* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1875). F. B. Sanborn recalls the event in "The Sleepy Hollow Cemetery—Old Graves," first published in the *Concord Minute Man*, November 24, 1915, and reprinted in *Sixty Years of Concord*, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1987), 14–15.

Henry David Thoreau, who appropriately enough had helped construct Sleepy Hollow's ornamental pond, was also known to make an occasional excursion through the sylvan sanctuary. While he would later enjoy sauntering about the place to admire its red oaks in October, Thoreau skipped the September dedication ceremony, leaving town that day to visit his friend Daniel Ricketson in New Bedford. All the "committee-works and gregariousness" over the new cemetery was too much for him. And although in his journal he promises to "buy no lot in the cemetery which my townsmen have just *consecrated* with a poem and an auction," Thoreau would eventually be laid to rest in the family plot on the famous "Authors Ridge" section of Sleepy Hollow.²¹

By 1855 the old-fashioned idea of a graveyard as a place where the bodies of the deceased remained until the Day of Judgment had ceded to a more romantic vision of an arboretum where trees would stand as living metaphors of eternal life.²² Such a sacred place Emerson had envisioned in his unpublished "Woods: A Prose Sonnet": "Ever the needles of the pine grow & fall, the acorns on the oak, the maples redden in autumn, & all times of the year the ground pine & the pyrola bud & root under foot. What is called fortune & what is called Time by men—ye know them not. Men have not language to describe one moment of your eternal life."²³ With the help of landscape architects Robert Morris Copeland and Horace William Shaler Cleveland, Emerson, as chair of the cemetery committee, and the other committee members made their vision of a sacred wood a reality.²⁴

²¹Henry D. Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau, Volume 2: 1849-1856*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 163, 162. Thoreau did not buy a lot in the new cemetery and was buried at Concord's New Hill burial ground. According to Walter Harding, Thoreau's family reinterred his body at "Authors Ridge" some ten years later. Harding also says that Thoreau was responsible for surveying and excavating the site of the pond at Concord's new cemetery. See Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 474, 358.

²²For an account of this trend in American history, see David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

²³Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1994), 366.

²⁴Daniel Joseph Nadenicek elaborates on Emerson's involvement with the design of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in "Nature in the City: Horace Cleveland's Aesthetic," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 26 (1993): 5-15, and "Sleepy Hollow Cemetery: Transcendental Garden and Community Park," *Journal of the New England Garden History Society* 3 (1993): 8-14.

The people of Concord made for themselves a fitting emblem of the afterlife in their new arboretum-style cemetery—an eternal “life in the woods,” you might say. But the name? Emerson provides the best account, explaining simply that “this spot for twenty years has borne the name of Sleepy Hollow,” and that “in all the multitudes of woodlands and hillsides,” he had “not known one so fitly named.”²⁵ Sleepy Hollow is an appropriate name for an American rural cemetery when one considers how Washington Irving promoted English cemeteries. In his sketch of “Rural Funerals,” Irving reasons that “The natural effect of sorrow over the dead is to refine and elevate the mind,” as evidenced in “the purity of sentiment and the unaffected elegance of thought” in funeral rituals which include “sweet-scented evergreens and flowers.” Irving adds that “The intention seems to have been to soften the horrors of the tomb, to beguile the mind from brooding over the disgraces of perishing mortality, and to associate the memory of the deceased with the most delicate and beautiful objects in nature.”²⁶ Irving imports a romantic English sentiment for melancholy that would be embraced by Americans who yearned for a sense of past rooted in place, and whose increasingly liberal view idealized death and immortality.

Then again, Sleepy Hollow was the name of the place where Ichabod Crane was reading Cotton Mather when he hears the legend of a resurrected headless horseman and lets his post-Puritan supernaturalism get the best of him. Yet for Concord’s citizens, Sleepy Hollow was synonymous with their beloved trees, symbols of life and oracles of their new cemetery. In fact, on the anniversary of the Battles of Concord and Lexington, April 19, 1856, a “tree bee” was held during which one hundred trees were planted in the cemetery by town citizens, “each one of whom thus brought his own memorial.”²⁷ What was once a place where wood was harvested for fuel and lumber became one where trees transcended their material value to be admired for their newer spiritual value. And to have such an event take place on what would become known as Patriot’s Day—Concord and Lexington’s sacred holiday—connected the premillennialist, late

²⁵Emerson, “Address at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow,” 33.

²⁶Irving, *The Sketch Book*, 1:257.

²⁷*Reports of the Selectmen and Other Officers, of the Town of Concord, from March 2, 1857 to March 1, 1858* (Concord, MA: Benjamin Tolman, 1858), 16–17; George Bradford Bartlett, *The Concord Guide Book*, 2nd rev. ed. (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1880), 18.

eighteenth-century apocalyptic rhetoric of the Revolution to the millennial movements that characterized religious liberalism in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

The idea of a “Sleepy Hollow” in Concord is taken to its logical and literal conclusion, satirizing the Transcendentalist idea of spirit in gothic parody. As a form, the gothic parody emerged from the Enlightenment, disenchanting beliefs in the supernatural by a “dismantling of the oracles.”²⁸ In this case, the oracles are trees—those that grow in Concord’s arboretum cemetery as symbols of the spirit. Yet those same trees are dismantled to make all kinds of homes and furnishings, including bug-ticking tables. All this is to say that the name “Sleepy Hollow” evokes a gothic literary tradition that is ironically out of place in proud Concord, birthplace of the Revolution and the home of its own great writers who were obsessed with the spirit. The recent transformation of this woodlot into a garden cemetery was just too tempting a target for Melville to pass up.²⁹



The satire of “The Apple-Tree Table” encompasses a wide range of subjects—supernaturalism, rationalism, sensationalism, empiricism, Puritanism, millennialism, Transcendentalism, and, most of all, spiritualism, which saw a popular resurgence in the mid-nineteenth century. As a form of communication with the deceased, it most infamously manifested itself between the years 1848 and 1853 in the mediumship of the Fox sisters of New York.³⁰ It also attracted the

²⁸Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 137.

²⁹There is no outside evidence to suggest that Melville was aware of Concord’s new cemetery; however, the Sleepy Hollow dedication ceremony took place just a few weeks before December 1855 when Melville asked *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* about the status of “The Apple-Tree Table” which he had sent them “some time ago.” The manuscript was subsequently returned to Melville. He then sent it to *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, which eventually published it anonymously in the May 1856 edition. Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 2:271.

³⁰In 1848, the two younger Fox sisters, with the assistance of the third, and eldest sister, were able to convince many people that they could communicate with the dead. By 1853, their “psychomancy” was debunked and their “spirit-rappings and table tippings” exposed by Dr. Charles Grafton Page, a former client who had attended many of the Foxes’ séances. See his *Psychomancy: Spirit-Rappings and Table-Tippings Exposed* (New York: D. Appleton, 1853). For a more complete account of the Fox sisters, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in*

attention—or made contact with—some well-known transcendentalists.³¹ At an 1850 seance held by the “Rochester ladies,” one attended by a number of American literary celebrities including James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant, the former Brook Farmer George Ripley reported that Henry T. Tuckerman allegedly contacted the departed spirit of the transcendentalists’ favorite Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing. In 1852, an associate of the Fox Sisters, Isaac Post, claimed to have contacted the recently deceased Margaret Fuller.³² And it was during the spirit-rapping heyday that Elizabeth Palmer Peabody once recommended that her niece Una Hawthorne pursue a career as a medium—an idea that her father strongly opposed.³³ By the mid-1850s, spiritualism had become a liberal religious movement. A petition was even presented to Congress in 1854 for the “appointment of a scientific commission” to study the phenomena of spirits and fund research into telegraph-like technology that would allow communication with the spirit world.³⁴ This “memorial” contained almost 12,000 signatures, including forty-three from Concord. Nevertheless, the narrator of “The Apple-Tree Table” assures the reader that the subject of his tale is, “an incident, be it remembered, which, like every other in this narration, happened long before the time of the ‘Fox Girls’” (467); it is not simply satire of spiritualism or spirit rapping.

In the story, the narrator and his family become obsessed with the possibility of spirits inhabiting an antique table; yet for all the talk of

Nineteenth-Century America, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and Ernest Isaacs, “The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism,” in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). Examples of more recent scholarship on spiritualism include: Bridget Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹Albert J. von Frank and Phyllis Cole discuss “the permeability of Transcendental and Spiritualist conviction and practice” in the context of Margaret Fuller’s afterlife as a subject of spirit communication. See “Margaret Fuller: How She Haunts,” *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 64 (2018): 66-131.

³²George Ripley, “An Evening with ‘The Spirits.’” *New York Tribune*, June 8, 1850, 4. Isaac Post, *Voices from the Spirit World: Being Communications from Many Spirits, by the Hand of Isaac Post, Medium* (Rochester, NY: Charles H. McDonell, 1852), 210-11.

³³Elizabeth Palmer Peabody to Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, March 23, 1851, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

³⁴Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism* (New York: Emma Hardinge, 1899), 130. (Thanks to Robert Gross for bringing this to my attention.)

spirits, the story is not so much a parody of the spiritualism trend as it is about how liberal religion conceives of an afterlife as immaterial spirit. As its subtitle suggests, the story is primarily concerned with the attachment of said table to ideas about spirit, that is “manifestations” of a spiritual or non-material essence in the physical world. The word “manifestations” was often associated with the phenomena, as it appears in the title of Dr. Robert Hare’s 1855 study on the phenomenon, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations*.³⁵ But what was sometimes distinguished as “spiritism” was the cultural manifestation of a philosophical spiritualism that conceives of a spiritual order in the universe. Earlier in the century, Unitarian minister James Walker preached a series of sermons on the evidences of a “spiritual world.”³⁶ Two years later we find Emerson, who dismissed spiritualists and embraced a similar metaphysics in his 1836 *Nature* upon a theory that “Nature is the symbol of spirit.”³⁷ Arguably influenced by the same Neoplatonic and Swedenborgian ideas about the existence of an immaterial world of spirit, Transcendentalism was one of the ways that this more abstract cosmology of spiritualism manifested itself. When the spiritualist craze was at its zenith, William Henry Channing published *The Spirit of the Age* (1849–1850) catering to a readership which shared affinity for both transcendentalist and spiritualist subjects. In addition, the short-lived periodical endorsed Fourierist millennialism and a vitalist philosophy, describing itself as a “medium for life” in the present.³⁸ According to Howard Kerr, “Melville ingeniously juxtaposed several current responses to

³⁵Hare’s full title of his book indicates his commitment to spiritualism. Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations, Demonstrating the Existence of Spirits and Their Communion with Mortals. Doctrine of the Spirit World Respecting Heaven, Hell, Morality, and God. Also, the Influence of Scripture on the Morals of Christians* (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1855).

³⁶James Walker, “The Philosophy of Man’s Spiritual Nature in regard to the Foundations of Faith,” in *Reason, Faith, and Duty: Sermons Preached Chiefly in the College Chapel* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1877). Daniel Walker Howe notes that “Walker’s address has sometimes been considered a proto-Transcendentalist utterance, but it is basically an inspired elaboration of (Scottish Common Sense philosopher Thomas) Reid.” It is ironic that the same Common Sense philosophy that influenced the spiritualism of Harvard moral philosophy also inspired parodies of gothic literature. *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970, 1988), 99.

³⁷Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume I: Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 17.

³⁸*The Spirit of the Age, Vol. 1–2*, ed. William Henry Channing (New York: Folwers and Wells, 1849–1850).

spiritualism"; to wit, "The faith of respectable and intelligent people in spirit communication, the fear of others that it was satanic in origin, and the suspicion of people like [George Templeton] Strong that it was a new form of old superstition—formed the immediate topical background of 'The Apple-Tree Table.'"³⁹

The kind of spirit Melville concerns himself with most is that which he associates with the Transcendentalism of Henry David Thoreau although Thoreau was no spiritualist. In a letter dated July 13, 1852, to his sister, Sophia, he wrote: "Concord is just as idiotic as ever in relation to the spirits and their knockings." "If I could be brought to believe in the things which they believe," Thoreau says, "I should make haste to get rid of my certificate of stock in this and in the next world's enterprises, and buy a share in the first Immediate Annihilation Company that offered." Spiritualism did not interest Thoreau in the least. He finds more inspiration in life than in death: "Consider the dawn and the sunrise;—the rainbow and the evening,—the words of Christ and the aspirations of all the saints! Hear music! see, smell, taste, feel,—anything,—and then hear these idiots, inspired by the cracking of a restless board, humbly asking, 'Please, Spirit, if you cannot answer by knocks, answer by tips of the table.' !!!!!!"⁴⁰

Despite his opposition to a spiritualism that was, to some extent, popular in his hometown, Thoreau describes the apple-tree table incident as a kind of rebirth of one's consciousness, professing his "faith" in a rhetorical crescendo that emerges from that negative capability which insists life goes on despite the facts of the physical, material world. While, according to Gavin Jones, such "contradictions and inconsistencies of *Walden* can be read as correlatives of Thoreau's negative capability, as effects of his moody revision of the manuscript, as part of the deconstructive quality of the text, or as signs of Thoreau's ideological confusions," there is still a "definite pattern" to be explored in its paradoxical constructions.⁴¹

Thoreau thus challenges his reader by asking "who does not feel" this way, who is not so inspired by natural phenomena that seem to confirm the truth of the soul? It is Melville who responds to the moral

³⁹Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals: Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 44-45.

⁴⁰Henry David Thoreau to Sophia Elizabeth Thoreau, July 13, 1852, *Thoreau Correspondence*, 2:113.

⁴¹Gavin Jones, *Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 67.

sentiment of Thoreau's interpretation of the apple-tree table fable by way of a naïvely optimistic question asked by his narrator's young daughter: "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?" (475). While most readers of American literature will recognize the not-so-subtle allusion to *Walden*, the distinction introduces to the apple-tree table legend the word "spirit." By adding spirit to the legend, Melville makes this satire less an ironic counterstatement to Thoreau himself and directs it more generally to his fellow Transcendentalists and other mystics who would, in a sentimental way, look for confirmation of a life beyond the physical world.

Not unlike a nineteenth-century version of Sir Thomas Browne, who seeks to correct vulgar and common errors, so here Melville questions the belief in a spiritual, non-material soul. To be sure, the nature of the soul is a question that had preoccupied the moral philosophy and theology in New England for centuries. A previous generation of Harvard moralists had read the work of Scottish Common Sense philosopher Dugald Stewart who, in his *Outlines of Moral Philosophy*, questions whether man's "future state" depends upon the "soul's immateriality." Stewart equates the soul with mind and concedes that not enough about it had been discovered to know whether it exists as separate from the body or was known if death destroys it, though to him, mind does appear to be immaterial. Compare this Enlightenment view to an 1834 Unitarian sermon by William Ellery Channing. In speaking of *The Future Life*, Channing claims "We have more evidence that we have souls or spirits, than that we have bodies." He promises that "Reason is not left to struggle alone with the horrors of the tomb," and that "This skepticism as to things spiritual and celestial, is as irrational and unphilosophical as it is degrading." Finding assurance in Christ's resurrection is not just good faith, says Channing, but also a source of earthly happiness.⁴² Dawn Coleman has recently shown that Channing's *Works* provide a "rich, provocative potential source for Melville," who "engaged with Unitarianism not

⁴²Dugald Stewart, *Outlines of Moral Philosophy, for the Use of Students in the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1793), 209. William Ellery Channing, Channing, William Ellery. *The Future Life: A Sermon Preached on Easter Sunday, 1834, in the Federal Street Church, Boston, The Works of William E. Channing, DD. Eighth Complete Edition, with an Introduction* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1848), 4:218, 219.

only experimentally, but also intellectually.”⁴³ In so doing, Coleman has given scholars a new way of understanding Melville’s relationship with Unitarianism—one that appears less antagonistic and more sympathetic. Channing’s views about the “spiritual world” were of particular interest to the Melvilles, especially Herman’s wife Elizabeth, who criticized Channing’s theories as “Vain vain speculations!” Elizabeth’s husband, who recorded his commentary on Channing’s “Evidences of Revealed Religion,” may have sympathized with her dissenting opinions.⁴⁴

Thoreau’s idea of spirit was somewhat different; it was not simply analogous to the soul but instead influenced by a new generation of Harvard professors like Jacob Bigelow, Arnold Guyot, and Edward Tuckerman who speculated about life as a force which circulates within animate and inanimate matter, vegetal and animal. This includes John Ware who (re)wrote the textbook Thoreau used in his natural history course at Harvard. Ware’s edition of William Smellie’s *Philosophy of Natural Philosophy* contains an introduction written by Ware who theorizes about “natural objects” which are “possessed of life.” Trees, for example, have the capacity to reinvigorate tissue that had been dispossessed of life, according to Ware. The object of Thoreau’s faith in resurrection, inspired by the story of the apple-tree table, is not so much metaphorical as it is, in the light of vitalist science, a physical phenomenon. Branka Arsić understands this as “a different kind of materialism,” a vital materialism in which “Thoreau’s notion of life is formulated in complete opposition to idealistic vitalism.”⁴⁵ This is what Thoreau’s contemporaries (including his friend and editor of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, George Curtis) would have associated with pantheism. Melville, however, is more willing to challenge Thoreau on his materialist grounds.

A doctrine of spirit in which the physical, material world is but a mere “effulgence” (475) is a light that is as blinding as it is beautiful

⁴³Dawn Coleman, “Melville and the Unitarian Conscience,” *Visionary of the Word: Melville and Religion*, ed. Jonathan A. Cook and Brian Yothers (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 131, 130.

⁴⁴Herman and Elizabeth Melville, “Herman and Elizabeth Melville’s Marginalia in *The Works of William E. Channing*,” *Melville’s Marginalia Online* ed. Steven Olsen-Smith et al. 4:228, <http://melvillemarginalia.org> (accessed October 30, 2017).

⁴⁵William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History: Introduction and Various Additions and Alterations by John Ware* (Boston: William J. Reynolds, 1851), 2. Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 122; for a discussion of Thoreau’s vitalism in the context of Harvard natural philosophy in the 1830s and 1840s, see 117–42.

according to Melville. As an intuitive faith in immortality expressed in the discourses of Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and spiritualism, spirit serves, to borrow a term from Lauren Berlant, as a kind of affective attachment. According to Berlant, these kinds of impossibly optimistic attachments are necessarily cruel; that one's sense of intuition is "a mode of lived immanence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons people are not Bartleby, do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it."⁴⁶ The key word here is "immanence," a belief in the divine in the mundane, or the spiritual in the material. The affective attachment to the idea of spirit enables those without recourse to an orthodox religious doctrine a way to express their optimism and whose moral sentiment rejects any other, pessimistic possibilities. For these same reasons Melville's narrator enjoys ice cream outings, diverting games of whist, and even the occasional cup of punch—to pass the time and take the edge off the immiseration that is death-in-life. It is the active denial of the inimical fact of death, like the maddening "Tick! tick!" emanating from the table, that ever threatens to put a damper on living.

While such a feeling for spirit prevails in the optative, transcendental moods of Thoreau's *Walden*, it is also found—albeit much more subdued, more Puritanically gloomy—in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne's three romances, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) speak at length about "spirit" and "the spiritual world." But it is in his sketch of "The Old Manse" where Hawthorne evokes spirit in its most gothic sense, reflecting on his residence at the historic Concord abode as a kind of reverie of "glimmering shadows" which acted as a "kind of spiritual medium" for a place "which had not quite the aspect of belonging to the material world."⁴⁷ The world of the *Mosses* is, as Michael J. Colacurcio puts it, "the world of Transcendental illusion," and Hawthorne, finding himself in that sunny world of

⁴⁶Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 28.

⁴⁷Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Volume 10, Mosses from an Old Manse*, ed. Thomas Woodson and William Charvat (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), 3.

Concord idealism, cannot help but see not so much spirit as he does its shadow.⁴⁸

Like Thoreau, Hawthorne speaks about man's moral character in terms of spirit. Symbolically turning away from the Puritan tradition that had exerted so much influence over him, Hawthorne's "unlettered soul" explores the affective depths of the Concord River and does his very best to embrace his transcendental neighborhood. To be sure, Hawthorne is no Transcendentalist. He colors the world of his friends Emerson and Thoreau in his own gothic mood. "We will not, then, malign our river as gross and impure while it can glorify itself with so adequate a picture of the heaven that broods above it," he says, "or, if we remember its tawny hue and the muddiness of its bed, let it be a symbol that the earthiest human soul has an infinite spiritual capacity and may contain the better world within its depths. But, indeed, the same lesson might be drawn out of any mud-puddle in the streets of a city; and, being taught us everywhere, it must be true."⁴⁹ Melville would go on to praise "Hawthorne and His Mosses" by emphasizing Hawthorne's "power of blackness," his negative or opposite view of the world, one not predisposed to indulge the optimistic fantasies of the spiritually inclined.⁵⁰ It is not, however, pessimism. In the words of Henry James, Hawthorne is "no more a pessimist than an optimist, though he is certainly not much of either," especially in "The Old Manse," where "the cry of metaphysical despair is not even faintly sounded."⁵¹ As we shall see, Melville situates the apple-tree table story in Hawthorne's Old Manse while subjecting it to the common-sense irony of a gothic parody, appealing to a sense of New England's Puritan past that, with a Melvillean materialism, ironically undercuts a faith in a spiritual resurrection and immortality.



Melville knew both sources of the apple-tree table legend. He read about the table in Timothy Dwight's *Travels*, the same Dwight to

⁴⁸Colacurcio, *The Province of Piety*, 516.

⁴⁹Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," 18, 19.

⁵⁰Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860, The Writings of Herman Melville. Northwestern-Newberry Edition*. ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 243.

⁵¹Henry James, *Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1879), 59, 103.

whom Melville's pseudonymous "Virginian Spending July in Vermont" said "good-bye" in his review of "Hawthorne and His Mosses."⁵² And he most certainly read—and noted—the account of the table in his copy of *A History of the County of Berkshire*.⁵³ These original sources for the apple-tree table legend were probably of interest to Melville because of the way these two accounts interpreted natural facts in some version of New England history. Dwight's narrator, in his attempt at a rational explanation for the bugs, falls back on the old typological mode of reading signs of God in the wilderness. These original accounts of the apple-tree table story, which fall within an approximately twenty-year period, are in effect epistemes of an earlier premillennial era and a later postmillennial era. So it is that "The Apple-Tree Table," as a tale in the tradition of the American gothic, considers how the religious and political histories of New England are embedded in the original folktale that, when resurrected by Thoreau, takes on a new life and a new meaning altogether.

In contradistinction to Thoreau's apocalyptic revelation, Melville finds the story of the apple-tree table undermines any such belief in immortality. When Thoreau recycles the tale "of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of an old table of apple-tree wood," the cosmic yankee was looking for Transcendental inspiration in the bug's "beautiful and winged life."⁵⁴ Melville satirizes this interpretation of the legend at the end of the story when the enthusiastic sentiment for spirits takes the form of a young girl who goes from being afraid of spirits to celebrating them: "'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.'" What had once been interpreted as just an interesting episode in the natural history of Massachusetts becomes a symbol of rebirth into life everlasting. And some life that is, Melville would have us think. Where Thoreau is genuinely inspired by the folktale, Melville casts a naively optimistic child in his place, one who so eloquently asks, "shall there be no glorified resurrection for the spirit of man?" Probably not—for despite the "delight" that the little girl feels when "the mere insect comes forth at last into light, itself an effulgence." Melville's narrator quashes this joyous expectation and relays that the bug "did not long

⁵²Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 240.

⁵³Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 1:378.

⁵⁴Thoreau, *Walden*, 333.

enjoy its radiant life; it expired the next day.” Then as a reminder of the miraculous rebirth, the girls keep the bug “embalmed in a silver vinaigrette” (475)—making it a cheap decoration for all eternity. This is where Melville’s gothic parody of resurrection and immortality reaches its climax. For all its effulgence, the prospect of an after-life seems rather pointless, or is at best a rather onerous way to go about eternity, by existing first as something material only to have to become an immaterial essence that presumably already existed. Put another way, Melville tells Thoreau, and anyone else who professes a faith in spirit, one can have faith in either resurrection *or* immortality, but not both.

Ultimately it is the optimism inherent in beliefs about spirit, resurrection, and immortality that Melville is intent on deflating in “The Apple-Tree Table.” Melville does this by emphasizing the natural history of the apple-tree table—as a material object that once lived—to expose, by way of gothic irony, an inclination toward the supernaturalism expressed by Transcendentalists and spiritualists alike. Furthermore, as represented by young girls, both Transcendentalism and spiritualism were considered by many to be something of interest primarily to women, if not women’s movements themselves.

To understand “The Apple-Tree Table” in its entirety, it helps to see how Melville associates Thoreau’s version of the apple-tree table legend with the gothic traditions of both Irving and Hawthorne. Melville offers clues right from the start that suggest he is deliberately satirizing Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery with allusions to the town. The story begins with a curious Ichabod-like narrator, trembling with fear, discovering the antique apple-tree table in the garret of his house. “In order to convey a better idea of it,” the narrator says, “some account may as well be given of the place it came from . . . a very old garret of a very old house in an old-fashioned quarter of one of the oldest towns in America” (465), not unlike the Old Manse. Melville’s garrett contains furniture and other items like those described in Hawthorne’s sketch that suggests it was used to house the Harvard faculty during the siege of Boston, another link to be sure that resonates with the political and religious history of Concord.⁵⁵

⁵⁵During the British occupation of Boston, nine Concord homes housed the property and the faculty of Harvard College. In this way, “The Apple-Tree Table” makes a subtle reference to its location as does its companion piece, “I and My Chimney,” published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, March 1856. This earlier story may also be

To unlock this mysterious garret, the narrator finds “a large and curious key, very old and rusty,” he says, in “a corner of our glen-like, old, terraced garden.” The “key” is in the description, which is identical to the glen-like terraced garden cemetery surveyed by Thoreau. “Wishing to shed a clearer light through the place,” the narrator reveals more about this “haunted ground” in which he encounters “funereal accumulations” of “matted masses of weedy webs, chrysalides and insectivorous eggs” and “scores of small ants and flies” (465–66). Then, out of this bug-infested chamber, like “a rainbowed tunnel clear across the darkness of the garret,” illuminating “millions of butterfly moles” and “thousands of insects clustered in a golden mob,” the narrator has a revelation:

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 above my topmost state (466).

The narrator describes his ecstasy as a physical, bodily resurrection into “the living greenness and glory immortal” and all because of the inspirational power of trees. As they are for the arboretum cemetery, trees become the most powerful symbols of eternal life. Meanwhile, the entire place is crawling with insects. Unlike the bug at the end of the story, whose beauty is as venerable as that of the trees outside, the lower-life forms within the garret do little to inspire one with a feeling of immanence but instead are reminder of one’s creaturely fate.

The contrasting views of nature from this garret are similar to that seen from the garret of “The Old Manse.” There, Hawthorne expresses his own reverence for trees. First he pays respect to the “latest inhabitant” of the manse, the late Ezra Ripley, who is imagined to have “paced to and fro along the avenue, attuning his meditations to the sighs and gentle murmurs and deep and solemn peals of the wind among the lofty tops of the trees!” Then, observing the property’s orchard, Hawthorne writes, “The trees possess a domestic

set in Concord as it alludes to “grape-vines” and “Deacon White,” the town’s Congregationalist minister from 1784 to 1827. Both stories feature aspects of Melville’s own “Arrowhead.” They also stylistically enshrine Hawthorne. John Allison, “Conservative Architecture: Hawthorne in Melville’s ‘I and My Chimney,’” *South Central Review* 13 (1996): 17–25.

character; they have lost the wild nature of their forest kindred, and have grown humanized by receiving the care of man as well as by contributing to his wants." He adds that "They offer their fruit to every wayfarer,—apples that are bitter sweet with the moral of Time's vicissitude."⁵⁶ Trees are valued for their "domestic character" and practical use rather than for any ideal of life they represent; at the same time, the moral to be observed in nature is one of loss and decay.

In this "venerable garret" Hawthorne also mused upon the after-life, both spiritual and literary. He mentions some friendly "spirits" haunting the place, though he says matter-of-factly that "houses of any antiquity in New England are so invariably possessed with spirits that the matter seems hardly worth alluding to." Yet if any spirit is haunting Hawthorne in the garret of the Old Manse, it is the spirit of Emerson. Looking through a library old books, pamphlets, and papers, "from the days of the mighty Puritan divines" up until the present day—a pile of "dreary trash," "There appeared no hope of either mounting to the better world on a Gothic staircase of ancient folios or of flying thither on the wings of a modern tract," as Emerson aspired to in *Nature*. Hawthorne tries in vain to find a "living thought" among the them but "all was dead alike." "[T]he works of man's intellect decay like those of his hands," he says. "Thought grows mouldy. What was good and nourishing food for the spirits of one generation affords no sustenance for the next."⁵⁷ There is something familiar about the way Hawthorne resists building "sepulchres of the fathers," though retrospective he most certainly is.⁵⁸ Rather than allow *Nature* to command the narrative, Hawthorne finds in the history of the parsonage another, alternative narrative to one illuminated by Emerson's optimism, one that sees the truth in nature's shadow. As Larry J. Reynolds points out, "Though Hawthorne re-experienced intimacy with nature in Concord, he struggled to free himself from the Emersonian idealism which imbued and constrained it."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," 4, 12.

⁵⁷Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," 18, 17, 20.

⁵⁸Emerson, "Nature," 7.

⁵⁹Larry J. Reynolds, "Hawthorne and Emerson in 'The Old Manse,'" *Studies in the Novel, Hawthorne in the Nineties* 23 (1991): 63. Emerson's figurative haunting of Hawthorne is dramatized in an entry from the *American Notebooks*. Hawthorne describes how Emerson intrudes upon him and Margaret Fuller, interrupting their solitude and conversation in, of all places, Sleepy Hollow. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Volume 8, The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 343.

When Hawthorne discovers the relics of both Puritan and liberal religion discarded in the garret of "The Old Manse," he reinterprets the history of Transcendentalist Concord, giving it his own gothic treatment. But what if among all the "mouldy" books he might have found Thoreau's apple-tree table? This is the question posed by Melville. His fictional answer makes a the same Hawthornean connection between the Transcendentalists and their Puritan forbearers, wherein the naïve spiritual beliefs being satirized neglect the ecclesiastical history of New England and also the glaring facts of natural history that the narrator stumbles over, blinded by his romantic optimism.

"Refreshed by this outlook," this graveyard-poet-turned-romantic-solitaire, "turned inward to behold the garret, now unwontedly lit up." What he finds there is something like a museum, littered with "obsolete furniture," "mildewed old documents," and scientific instruments. Then, "in the least lighted corner of all," is the apple-tree table itself. The "satanic-looking little old table" shaped like a "circle and tripod" suggests an association with an alchemist for "it seemed just such a necromantic little old table as might have belonged to Friar Bacon." The table is also described as "a slab" having a "plain" style on top, sitting on "three crooked legs, terminating in three cloven feet" (465-66). These two different styles—Puritan plain and the demonic—represent the combination of elements in the variety of spirit that had become a part of New England's literary culture, from Bryant to Longfellow, Emerson and Thoreau, and, yes, even Hawthorne. Melville's description of the table is also a fitting parody of Thoreau's version, which itself resembles a kind of necromancy in its conjuring of the possibility for a figurative resurrection and immortality.

In addition to the discovery of the table, Melville's narrator finds in this garret a "mouldy old book" (466). The author of the book, the reader is told, is Cotton Mather. This allusion to Mather is significant for several reasons, not the least of which is Hawthorne and Thoreau's shared interest in him, as *The House of the Seven Gables* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) both contain references to Mather. There is also Mather's place in the gothic tradition of American literature as the author of *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693). Importantly, Mather is the source of Ichabod Crane's superstition in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Irving describes Crane as "a perfect master of Cotton Mather's history of New England witchcraft, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently

believed.”⁶⁰ As Dorothy Z. Baker explains, “the eerier tales of Cotton Mather are countered and conquered by a gothic account of a purportedly historical event,” à la Brom Bones.⁶¹

Mather was also among the old divines represented in the collection of religious works that Hawthorne finds in his Concord garret. Mather preached an orthodox, Calvinist faith with bodily resurrection as the fulfillment of God’s glorious and providential work in America. Yet despite the prevailing doctrine, New England gradually rejected the possibility of bodily resurrection and replaced it with a belief in another kind of afterlife. How ironic is it, as Melville would have us think, that the Sleepy Hollow of Concord possesses a similar legend that in effect chases away the orthodoxy of the Mathers and replaces it with a Neoplatonic belief in the immortality of the soul. So it is that with its own Ichabod-like narrator, Melville’s story brings together Sleepy Hollow and Concord.

But while most critics may understand the reference to Mather, they have often misunderstood the significance of Melville’s pun—that the book is referred to not as the *Magnalia* but “Magnolia” (466, 467).⁶² When some of Melville’s shorter works were reprinted in 1922, a substantive error in “The Apple-Tree Table” deprived readers of this small but significant pun. The error, later standardized in the Northwestern-Newberry Edition, occurs where “*Magnalia*” is substituted for what is clearly “Magnolia” in the original copy-text in the May 1856 edition of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*. The fact that “Magnolia” appears twice would give more credence to the originally published text. William B. Dillingham thinks that “Magnolia” appears to be, “[the] narrator’s comic mistake rather than a misprint.”⁶³ As Dillingham points out, human error is a recurrent motif in the story. The reference to a tree, meanwhile, is itself part of a running gag.

The printing of “Magnolia” in the original was no mistake. Given that this particular issue of *Putnam’s Monthly* contained another piece

⁶⁰Irving, *The Sketch Book*, 2:292.

⁶¹Dorothy Z. Baker, *America’s Gothic Fiction: The Legacy of Magnalia Christi Americana* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 9.

⁶²Cf., Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New-England: From Its First Planting in the Year 1620. Unto the Year of Our Lord, 1698. in Seven Books* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702).

⁶³William B. Dillingham, *Melville’s Short Fiction, 1853–56* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 352.

about Cotton Mather, the evidence indicates that the editor, George Curtis, ought to have been familiar enough with Mather's works not to have made such an error in the first place. Curtis was also familiar with Thoreau as well since he was one of the few people who helped Thoreau erect his cabin at Walden Pond. Curtis, by the way, angered his old friend by bowdlerizing his "Excursion to Canada" published in the first three issues of *Putnam's Monthly* before the series was cut short because of Thoreau's disagreement over Curtis's editorial practices.⁶⁴ That said, Curtis may have approved Melville poking fun at his old friend.

Nevertheless, it is the narrator of the story then who confuses the name of a book with a tree. The original text, which reads, "Cotton Mather's 'Magnolia,'" draws attention to the fact that the "ghostly, dismantled old quarto" on the table was once a living tree itself. For example, family members are tormented by what they believe are spirits found not in the "wainscot" of their home but inside an antique table—one made not of "ordinary mahogany" but of "apple-tree wood" darkened to a shade of "walnut"—which is placed within a "cedar-parlor" after it had been saved from the "chip-bin" in the "wood-house" (465, 468, 466, 469). With or without the pun, the story repeatedly draws attention to the fact that living trees become, in death, the substance of books and tables. And in this story, book and table are a matching set, not for their associations with the supernatural so much as for their natural origins.

That Mather's *Magnolia* gets mistakenly referred to as a "Magnolia" is no small pun. The presence of the *Magnolia* imbues the story with the frightening influence of Puritan supernaturalism. That the word is actually "Magnolia" suggests that the citizens of Concord prefer the romantic veneration of trees as comically portrayed in the beginning of the story over "mouldy," old history books. And yet those "Magnolias" persist as specters haunting their romantic imaginations. Melville recognizes this relationship, one which writers such as Thoreau and Hawthorne had with the Puritan tradition of New England. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, Thoreau "bypassed the natural supernaturalism of his European contemporaries for that of his Puritan New England predecessors (including Cotton Mather)."⁶⁵ Hawthorne, meanwhile,

⁶⁴Walls, *Thoreau: A Life*, 188, 302.

⁶⁵Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 162.

made a career for himself as the writer of tales that complicate the otherwise allegorical history of Puritan New England. So here is the student teaching the master and his favorite Transcendentalist how it is done.

It makes sense, insofar as Melville parodies Thoreau, to start his story with tree worship. While Thoreau's more intense tree veneration in "Chesuncook" would come later, "Ktaadn and the Maine Woods," which had already been serialized in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in 1848, professes Thoreau's characteristic admiration for trees. Melville's comic observation is that Thoreau, who sees living trees as symbols of eternal life, contradicts himself by making symbols out of the living insects that emerge out of dead pieces of wood. Melville was interested in the economy of trees. In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," for example, Graham Thompson argues that facts concerning the products of trees such as paper "collectively shape the interplay between the story's imaginative and material domains to the extent that paper becomes the story's subject."⁶⁶ So too in "The Apple-Tree Table," the natural history of wood has a story to tell.

The mystery that baffles everyone in "The Apple-Tree Table" is how a bug can lay dormant and become reanimated after well over one hundred and fifty years. At least one member of the family thinks it ought to be taken as a symbol of immortality, but that is not how the story of the table is understood by the narrator. Apocalyptic images and symbols, such as "a general's marquee" and a "Gothic pulpit-stairway" in the garret point toward the mythical and mystical associations made in the apple-tree table legend's earliest incarnations just after the Revolutionary War (465). Melville hints that the shifting significance of the apple-tree over several generations reflects the shift between the premillennialism of the orthodox theocracy in provincial New England and the postmillennialism of the liberal Christianity in the early-nineteenth century. So, too, is there a shift at this time from the belief in a bodily resurrection and some spiritual transfiguration at death. Yet the meaning in these symbols is solely satirical, not eschatological for Melville who is saying that this

⁶⁶Graham Thompson, *Herman Melville: Among the Magazines* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 46. Thompson's paratextual analysis of "The Apple-Tree Table" and an article on "Spiritual Materialism" in the earlier August 1854 issue of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* is also worth noting (148–55).

sort of typological reading of human history in the world is a misunderstanding of the significance of the natural world.⁶⁷



If by the end of *Walden* Thoreau forgets that trees, like the ones used to make apple-tree tables, are living things themselves and not just metaphors, “The Apple-Tree Table” points out the irony of this environmental blindness by way of a comic overstatement of the many types of wood that construct the dwelling place of its fictional family. Likewise, it is an emphasis on the natural history of household objects and a relentless shouting about “Spirits! spirits!” that “The Apple-Tree Table” announces its satirical subject, the subtext for which is a historically significant place where, in the shade of an arboretum, life is ironically sentimentalized under the name of a famous gothic parody.

We see, for example, how Melville’s story frames itself as a version of *Sleepy Hollow* in Concord when the narrator recounts his first “incident” with the table one December evening. Like Ichabod Crane in Irving’s tale, the writings of Mather had got the best of him:

The truth was that, though, in my previous night-readings, Cotton Mather had but amused me, upon this particular night he terrified me. A thousand times I had laughed at such stories. Old wives’ fables, I thought, however entertaining. But now, how different. They began to put on the aspect of reality. Now, for the first time it struck me that this was no romantic Mrs. Radcliffe who had written the “Magnolia,” but a practical, hardworking, earnest, upright man, a learned doctor, too, as well as a good Christian and orthodox clergyman. What possible motive could such a man have to deceive? His style had all the plainness and unpoetic boldness of truth. In the most straightforward way, he laid before me detailed accounts of New England witchcraft, each important item corroborated by respectable townsmen, and of which not a few of the most surprising he himself had been eyewitness. Cotton Mather testified whereof he had seen. But, is it possible, I asked myself. Then I remembered that Dr. Johnson, the matter-of-fact compiler of a dictionary, had been a believer in ghosts, besides many other sound, worthy men (467).

Mather, and not Radcliffe, is the source of New England’s gothic imagination. Because he is not “romantic” but speaks with “the plainness and unpoetic boldness of truth” (467), he is to be considered more of an authority on the subject of the supernatural rather than

⁶⁷Jonathan A. Cook, “The Typological Design of ‘The Apple-Tree Table,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 40 (1998): 121–41.

an Old World gothicist. Johnson, on the other hand, was much more open to the possibility of ghosts.⁶⁸

Melville's narrator conflates two accounts of the supernatural, mistaking Mather's reports of witchcraft as confirmation of his belief in the afterlife. When he first begins to hear the "tick! tick!" in the table, he asks himself: "Could Cotton Mather speak true? Were there spirits? And would spirits haunt a tea-table? Would the Evil One dare show his cloven foot in the bosom of an innocent family?" For Mather, spirit is synonymous with the vital essence of a living person, a life breathed into a person by the divine Holy Spirit. The more accurate word here should be "specter," which denotes an evil creation of devilish deception. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, it was much more fashionable to believe in the friendly-ghost variety of spirits than in demonic entities. Nevertheless, like the troubled narrator who "oscillated between [Johnson's] Democritus and Cotton Mather" (470, 473), Melville observes the same kind of oscillation between Transcendentalism and spiritualism regarding spiritual beliefs.

The story, it should be noted, is not without a self-conscious admission of its own derivation of gothic convention. Allusions to Edgar Allan Poe haunt the house as a specter of both the gothic and critical traditions and indicate his opinions about Hawthorne. The ticking of the bug torments the story's protagonist and evokes Poe's "Tell-tale Heart," mocking the historical imagination of Hawthorne in his "Old Manse." Poe never quite understood Hawthorne and his penchant for history, though he did recognize his allegorical style. "One thing is clear," he says in his review of Hawthorne, "that if allegory ever establishes a fact, it is by dint of overturning a fiction." This is precisely the method of Hawthorne's style and what Melville found so powerful. Poe also felt that Hawthorne was spending too much time among the Transcendentalists. "Indeed," he says, "*his* spirit of 'metaphor

⁶⁸Mather's concern with the Salem Witch Trials and Johnson's, with the Cock Lane Ghost, illustrate their common concern for the supernatural. On February 1, 1762, Johnson attended a séance to investigate claims of a spirit haunting a home on Cock Lane in London. Bringing up Johnson in the same context as Mather, Melville is alluding to a contemporary study of the supernatural by Charles Wyllis Elliott, who had made the same connections in his book *Mysteries, or, Glimpses of the Supernatural: Containing Accounts of the Salem Witchcraft, the Cock-Lane Ghost, the Rochester Rappings, the Stratford Mysteries, Oracles, Astrology, Dreams, Demons, Ghosts, Spectres, &c., &c.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852). The Cock-Lane Ghost is also mentioned in *Moby-Dick*. See *Moby-Dick, The Writings of Herman Melville. Northwestern-Newberry Edition*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 308.

run-mad' is clearly imbibed from the phalanx and phalanstery atmosphere in which he has been so long struggling for breath," and recommending that he "come out from the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of 'The Dial.'"⁶⁹ Melville will ultimately make a clear distinction between Hawthorne and the rest of Concord, by using his gothic allegorical style to overturn the Transcendentalist metaphor of spirit.

When the narrator hears the sounds of a "spirit," like the ticking of his heart, beneath the surface of a wooden table, he "gently oscillated between" the rational mind of Democritus and the supernatural imagination of Mather. This process creates a good deal of comic suffering on the part of the narrator, who resolves to "put Cotton Mather permanently aside," and declare himself a "Democritus forever" (473, 468, 474). After the table has been domesticated—that is, varnished and repurposed as both a "tea table" and a game table for the family—the narrator plays a few rubbers of whist with his family before once again considering the question about the existence of spirits:

To evince my hardihood the more signally, when tea was dismissed, and the three rubbers of whist had been played, and no ticking had been heard—which the more encouraged me—I took my pipe and, saying that bedtime had arrived for the rest, drew my chair towards the fire, and, removing my slippers, placed my feet on the fender, looking as calm and composed as old Democritus in the tombs of Abdera, when one midnight the mischievous little boys of the town tried to frighten that sturdy philosopher with spurious ghosts (470).

On this night the first bug emerges from the table. It is no longer a matter of spirits for the narrator. It becomes instead a question about the possibilities for life emerging from death. "Could I believe my senses?" he asks, "A live bug come out of a dead table?" The bug, looking "like a fiery opal," is nothing short of a marvel, albeit a natural one (471, 474). "Supernatural coruscation as it appeared," he says, "I strove to look at the strange object in a purely scientific way." To prove this creature is a natural phenomenon, the narrator places the bug under a tumbler to show his family. But then come morning, Biddy the maid tosses the bug into the fire. The lack of physical evidence frustrates the narrator, but before his rational explanation can

⁶⁹Edgar Allan Poe, "Tale-Writing: A Review," *Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1847 in "Hawthorne," *Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 582, 588.

quell the cries of his daughters, the ticking resumes and his children once again refer to it as the work of "Spirits! spirits!" Meanwhile, the narrator becomes concerned about his wife's lack of superstition, eagerly "expecting some mystical proposition" out of her that never comes. Instead, the skeptical wife has poor Bidy rub some of the "celebrated roach powder" on the table. Despite knowing the truth about the source of the ticking, the narrator holds onto the idea that a spirit could be in the table (471, 472).

What is of importance to the narrator is a supernatural belief that originates from an idea about nature. A naturalist, not a spiritualist, is the first to comment on the significance of the apple-tree table incident in the story, and the empirical observations of a naturalist prompt a second spiritual interpretation. Julia, the daughter with a spiritualist inclination, recommends the services of "Madam Pazzi, the conjurers," but the older generation instead calls upon "Professor Johnson, the naturalist" for his expert opinion on the natural facts of the case. "The learned professor looked hard at the table" and offered an explanation not much different from the rational observations in the earliest sources of the legend. Then, when the parents ask their daughter, "where are your spirits?" the professor remarks, "with a sneer," "Why, now, she did not really associate this purely natural phenomenon with any crude spiritual hypothesis did she?" Unaffected by the skeptical, perhaps cynical view of the professor, the daughter replies, "say what you will, if this beauteous creature be not a spirit, it yet teaches a spiritual lesson." The lesson here, in Melville's presentation, is one of cosmic irony, for the "beauteous creature" (474-75) hardly survives a day into immortality.

The comment that "The Apple-Tree Table" makes on the "spiritual hypothesis" is more sentimental than scientific or even religious for that matter. When the little girl concludes by saying, "I still believe in spirits, only now I believe in them with delight, when before I but thought of them with terror" (475), her concept of spirit undergoes a change similar to that of New England supernaturalism from Mather to Melville. During that 150-year history, the bug-spirit of the apple-tree table is estimated, albeit erroneously, to have lived half its life, from the end of the seventeenth century to the American Revolution, in a living tree; and the second half of its life, inside a dead piece of wood crafted into a table. By the calculation of the "eminent naturalist" the first eighty years and the second span of ninety years adds up to—150 years? If even the rational mind of an eminent naturalist can have its weaknesses (i.e., math), then maybe one should approach

the spiritual hypothesis with an even greater skepticism. Either way, Melville shows more sympathy for the naivety of the little girl than he does the arrogance of the scientist. In his analysis of *Clarel*, Andrew Delbanco sums up Melville's problem with science: "Science, so full of promise for its insights into the processes of nature, could [in Melville's view] do nothing to satisfy what William James would soon call 'the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is.'" ⁷⁰

Finally, Melville brings his gothic parody back to its historical moment, what has made garden cemeteries possible. He does this by reconciling the natural history of the apple-tree table with New England's political and religious history, for which the Revolution was nothing short of apocalyptic. The family stays up all night and the clock counts the hours until sunrise. Then, with some "terrific, portentous rapping" (474), the bug finally makes its miraculous revelation. Stunning the family, the narrator imagines an even more absurd appearance for it seems to defy any further typological interpretation. That is to say, before the bug's appearance, it portends the apocalypse. Afterward, life goes on as much as it did before the terror of the ticking. That the bug is imagined holding a "Chaldee manuscript" suggests that Melville is playing a joke on the reader who took his religious references too seriously. There is also the epistemic tension between an age that would have recognized in the "Tick! tick!" of the bug a certain mechanistic, clock-like lifeform, and another that insists on the vital force of disembodied "Spirits! spirits!" ⁷¹

The irony that Melville finds in the metaphorical interpretation of the second apple-tree table event is the same irony he sees in the belief of a so-called spiritual afterlife which, like the apple-tree table itself, becomes a romantic fiction representing eternal life after death. That the family is left only with an ornament and a monument of the deceased speaks to Melville's comment on the very heart of the rural cemetery movement in America. This cultural phenomenon was made possible by the same sentimentalized view of the afterlife that

⁷⁰Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 282; William James quoted in Delbanco, cited as "The Will to Believe" (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 40.

⁷¹In an earlier, Enlightenment episteme, the watchmaker analogy was the paradigm for explaining the mysteries of creation, whereas the later paradigm seems to be one of "spirits." See William Paley's *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (London: R. Faulder, 1802).

is satirized here: a shift in New England's eschatological vision in the gradual abandonment of the doctrine of bodily resurrection in favor of the gradual acceptance of a kind of transfiguration of one's soul upon death. Conclusive evidence of the afterlife nowhere to be found, the family settles for mere symbols.

Melville's mockery would do nothing to dissuade Thoreau. His second essay about the Maine woods, published in the July 1858 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, reaffirms Thoreau's vitalist faith:

Strange that so few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light,—to see its perfect success; but most are content to behold it in the shape of many broad boards brought to market, and deem that its true success. But the pine is no more lumber than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure. There is a higher law affecting our relation to pines as well as to men.⁷²

Adding that, "A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man," Thoreau addresses a certain skeptic—Melville?—when he asks, "Can he who has discovered only some of the values of whalebone and whale oil be said to have discovered the true use of the whale?" "It is the poet," Thoreau declares, "who makes the truest use of the pine,—who does not fondle it with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane." In what reads as a direct response to Melville's satire of him, an unapologetic Thoreau contrasts the lumberyard, carpenter's shop, tannery, and other uses of pine with the ability of the poet to see the highest use of the pine: "not its spirit of turpentine" but the "living spirit of the tree." He concludes this passage with an additional sentence that James Russell Lowell infamously cut out of the "Chesuncook" essay: "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still."⁷³ Thoreau recognizes trees as living things on equal footing with man. To him, they are more than just symbols of immortality but rather possess a "living spirit."

In the end, "The Apple-Tree Table" would deny no one their sentiments, but natural facts about the soul or the spirit may be too hard to come by, if at all. The insect is, of course, an "effulgence" of

⁷²Henry D. Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 121.

⁷³Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 121–22. See also Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Textual Introduction," *The Maine Woods*, 361–63.

life-giving spirit. Melville's ironic commentary puts forward that in the natural history of an apple-tree table, the former dignity of spiritual man is reduced to that of a bug, a small, unlettered, and unknowing living organism that, truth be told, feasts upon our dead bodies at the table of our graves.



“The Apple-Tree Table” ends with an odd reference, an image of “the two sealing-wax drops designating the exact place of the two holes made by the two bugs, something in the same way in which are marked the spots where the cannon balls struck the Brattle street church” (475). Unlike so many of the monuments Americans erected during the nineteenth century, this one gracing the façade of the Brattle Street Church was a relic of the Revolution, empirical evidence of an almost miraculous event in American history. The reference to the “cannon balls” in the former Manifesto Church, as it was called, the first of Puritan Boston's liberal churches—the church Melville's father attended—is a metaphor for the table's memorialization of the lives of two bugs; however, the statement is factually wrong, as only one cannonball struck the church when the British army occupied Boston. How easily, Melville seems to say, is nature and history interpreted—or misinterpreted—to enable our fictions of life. The confusion of historical memory in the double image of the cannonball mirrors the confusion in the double image of apple-tree table. Whereas the cannonball might be understood as a pre-millennialist, then postmillennialist symbol of the religious significance of the Revolution, so was the apple-tree table interpreted to have both pre- and postmillennialist meanings.⁷⁴

By showing how the apple-tree table legend is associated with millennialism and revolutionary history, Melville's ironic punchline departs from the common sense of Irving's gothic parody and embraces the twisted allegories of Hawthorne's twice-told tales. Just as *Moby-Dick* was dedicated to the “genius” of Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Apple-Tree Table” pays homage to Melville's literary hero by complicating New England religious liberalism's moralizing allegory for

⁷⁴John Hays has shown “Melville's appreciation for the process of monumentalization” (195) as well as his association of Irving with literary fame. See “Broken Hearths: Melville's Israel Potter and the Bunker Hill Monument,” *The New England Quarterly* 89 (2016): 192–221.

itself just as Hawthorne did in his early provincial tales.⁷⁵ But rather than subject it to an epic, Ahab-like crisis precipitated by an unwilling, fatalistic Calvinism as in *Moby-Dick*, Melville shows more sympathy for “faith in a resurrection and immortality” by exposing the cosmic irony of a postmillennial spiritualism and Transcendentalism that is ultimately, like the image of the Brattle Street Church itself, a manifestation of New England’s premillennial Puritan past. And why should not Hawthorne have something to say about Concord building a “Sleepy Hollow Cemetery”? He is, after all, their hometown gothic story teller. Melville thus did him the favor.

The gothic parody of Transcendental spirit in “The Apple-Tree Table,” both a literal parody of Irving’s gothic parody and a more ironic one of the gothic styles of Concord’s Thoreau and Hawthorne, is a riddle suggested by the very idea of a Sleepy Hollow in Concord. Melville would go on to create a similar kind of riddle on a larger scale with the publication of *The Confidence Man* the following year in 1857. He mocks Thoreau again as Egbert, the “practical disciple” of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Winsome.⁷⁶ Hawthorne shows up there, too, as Charlie Noble. But the satire of “The Apple-Tree Table” is not one of caricature but of style—the gothic parody, resurrected by Melville to tell a truth obscured by the effulgence of spirit in Concord.

The act of memorializing ourselves, if not out of a sacred duty to the departed, is motivated by our collective desire for immortality, a reflection of our hope that our lives be remembered in some beautiful, permanent way. Literature has that power, the power to ensure that the writer lives on. Posthumous literary fame haunts “The Apple-Tree Table” as much as any ticking bug—in “the spirit of Democritus” and the “doleful, ghostly, ghostly Cotton Mather” (473, 467). Melville is of the opinion that if a writer wants to be remembered, they should not concern themselves so much with the business of cemeteries, which is as effective as turning a dead bug into decorative art. Their spirit will live—not in the metaphor of a stone, a tree, or a cannonball—but in their writing. A writer’s style is their spirit; and if one’s spirit is not necessarily the same thing as one’s soul but rather just a parody of their essence then that may have to do. When “The Apple-Tree Table” was published in May 1856, Irving was still

⁷⁵Melville, *Moby-Dick*, vii.

⁷⁶Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, The Writings of Herman Melville. Northwestern-Newberry Edition*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 197.

alive, as were Hawthorne and Thoreau. But they would soon be gone, though not yet forgotten. Posthumous fame gave them all a literary afterlife, as it did for the ironic, gothic spirit of Herman Melville.

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