

Margaret Fuller in Time

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When I began researching my biography of Margaret Fuller she had virtually vanished from history. Her works had been out of print for three-quarters of a century and her papers were hidden away in archives. She rarely if ever appeared in dissertations or monographs. Insofar as she figured into standard histories, she popped up as a minor figure among the Transcendentalists, embodying the most egotistical, eccentric, and ethereal caricatures of that movement. Probably the most quoted line, cited tediously by academic wits and after-dinner speakers, was Carlyle's to Henry James, Sr. When told by James that she had said to him that her philosophy of life came down to saying, "I accept the universe," Carlyle countered, "By God she better!"¹

What a difference a few decades make! Canonized in history and literature studies, she's now grouped with Emerson and Thoreau as the "big Transcendentalist three" in the review *American Literary Scholarship*, the focus every year of whole chapters in dozens of dissertations and monographs, and until 2009 the only female subject of a biography to win the Bancroft Prize for history. She has been the object of one of the most sustained bicentennial commemorations of an American author – with conferences, plays, and celebrations from New York City and Concord to Palm Beach, Florida and Reno, Nevada. Nor does the momentum appear to be slackening. Just this past year Megan Marshall won the Pulitzer Prize for her life of Fuller, and other book-length studies have been recently published or are in the works.²

Why this extraordinary resurrection? One reason, certainly, is Robert Hudspeth's six-volume collection of Fuller's letters that Cornell University Press began publishing in 1983, which made accessible the

critical mass of primary materials on which any serious biographical recovery depends.³ Another aid around this same time was the opening up of the American literature canon to heretofore marginalized or forgotten texts by women, African-Americans, and other ethnic minorities. More ideological was the “Second Wave” feminist movement, which starting in the 1970s gave countless educated women outside the academy a stake in discovering inspiring predecessors like Fuller. When I began writing in the 1980s, I found all these things immensely useful and highly motivating. But by themselves, it seemed to me, they were insufficient to reclaim Fuller as a major figure in American history. For that project I thought I needed something more conceptually fundamental: a compelling *idea* of Fuller *in her time* that would yet resonate with ours. Without past time, my Fuller would quickly fade with all the other constructed Fullers of the past – gone with the changing winds of time and fashion. But without some present resonance, my idea would fall on deaf ears, leaving Fuller where I began – in a foreign land whose language no one living now could speak or understand. From the beginning I knew my project would be a task in translation in time.

Before turning to how I handled that task, however, it’s worth remembering how past generations attempted to insert her in *their* time and what lessons we can learn from their successes and, more often, failures.

In her end was the beginning: Fuller’s death initiated a long generation of memory. The first three biographies – by Emerson, William Henry Channing, and James Freeman Clarke; by Julia Ward Howe; and by Thomas Wentworth Higginson – were all written by authors who knew Fuller, the first three intimately. They also were published at a time when Fuller was a living memory for countless numbers on both sides of the Atlantic who had conversed with her, worked with her, encountered her, read her books and articles, or imbibed the many rumors, legends, and myths that were already growing up around her even before her death. The dramatic circumstances of that

death, of course, also heightened the presence of this "Margaret-ghost" (as Henry James would call her): returning from a failed revolution in Italy, where she had risked her life as the only foreign correspondent in war-torn Rome; defending its republic to the Anglophone world against the calumnies of the conservative press in Europe and America; and drowning with her two-year-old child and Italian marquis husband, Giovanni Ossoli, whom many thought she had not married. When the wide-eyed seven-year-old Henry James, overhearing on a steamboat deck plying the Hudson, Washington Irving inform his father of Fuller's death, he was storing up a memory for future use in his novels of transatlantic "experience." But he was also having a real experience replicated by many thousands throughout the United States and Europe.⁴

The survival of Fuller's memory into history, however, required something more: the insertion of her life into the larger narratives of nations and movements that constitute the historian's river of time. Instead, these early memoirs offered up mainly truncated passages from Fuller's letters and journals and recorded memories of her friends. These last were far from worthless. Many displayed all the vividness and intimacy that only remembered firsthand experience allows. They also retained their potency for a surprisingly long time. Nathaniel Hawthorne's son Julian was to learn that with a vengeance when he published some vicious secondhand attacks on Fuller's character recorded in his father's posthumously published journal, igniting a firestorm of shocked readers and indignant critics, harming Nathaniel's reputation and almost destroying his ambitious mountebank son's (Hawthorne I:259-61). However, these memories and "memoirs" fell far short of lasting histories. For one thing, their authors were considerably inhibited. Sensitive to Fuller's family's feelings and fearful of encouraging the rumors about her supposed free-love "union" with Ossoli, they left their accounts of her personal life in New York and Europe purposefully hazy. They also often suppressed, censored, or rewrote any of her expressions that might make her seem, however remotely, a social outlaw. Yet another problem was of their own making:

their earnest attempts to appropriate her for their own interests – Emerson and his colleagues for her as a transcendental “Friend,” Higginson for social activism, and Howe for women’s proper morals – often revealed more about themselves than about their subject. (Emerson’s section of the *Memoirs* probably revealed more of his own personality than anything he ever published.) Finally, these biographies suffered the fate of all memoirs: their authors and readers died (all by about the end of the century), and with their deaths the personal interest in Fuller that their memories evoked died with them.

Meanwhile, however, Fuller’s published works enjoyed a long afterlife. Riding the growing strength of the “First Wave” feminist movement, Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, her most widely read book, touted by feminist leaders like Paulina Davis and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the philosophical foundation of women’s rights in America, remained a steady seller through numerous editions down through the century. For this afterlife one can thank too Horace Greeley and Fuller’s family, who also brought out (albeit somewhat bowdlerized) editions of her other works, which remained in print for many decades. Then, suddenly, all these works disappeared, going out of print around 1900 and remaining so for another three quarters of a century. Why this happened has always seemed something of a mystery, especially since the women’s rights movement hardly disappeared in 1900 but rather continued to gather steam, winning its greatest legislative victory with the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution giving women the right to vote. Moreover, these years from the 1920s through the 1940s witnessed two developments in literary criticism that should have carried Fuller’s reputation into and through the next century. One was critics’ “discovery” of the very writers – Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe – that Fuller had been the first to identify as America’s greatest authors. In short, a century before Lewis Mumford’s *The Golden Day* and F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, Fuller had invented (minus Thoreau and Whitman, whose major writing post-dated Fuller’s death), the “American Renaissance” that these Modernist critics

proclaimed was the foundation of an internationally recognized American literature – an occurrence that Fuller had predicted would come just about that time.⁵

A second development that makes additionally strange Fuller's virtual eclipse was the rise of cultural Modernism. This movement, about whose relation to Fuller I'll have something more to say later, is like many intellectual movements notoriously difficult to define. But if its central ideas are, as scholars tell us, a "terrible honesty" in looking into the abyss and steadfast devotion to movement in art and life against all arbitrary traditions, boundaries, or fixities, then Fuller, every bit as much as and perhaps more than even Emerson, would seem to be a prime candidate as a major forerunner. Yet neither early twentieth-century feminists nor Modernist authors paid her homage, and by a perverse misreading they helped to bury her. To understand how that happened we need to keep in mind that both modern feminism and cultural Modernism were self-conscious revolts against Victorianism, which in an act of what Ann Douglas has called generational matricide, swept up with it the Victorians' Romantic predecessors. Moral earnestness, idealism, judicious criticism, and the ethical superiority of women – which both Victorians and contemporaneous women's rights advocates had played up – were now seen as woefully inadequate. Indeed, they seemed in *opposition* to the modern movement of "feminism" (a word only invented then), which stressed, like Modernism, freedom from decorum and conventions, the mixing of "high" and "low" cultures, and unrelenting attacks on genteel evasions of disturbing realities. In that light, despite Emerson's early Modernist canonization, most feminist intellectuals and Modernist critics associated Transcendentalism with all the other old-fashioned liberal movements of nineteenth-century Victorianism, as much at odds with the modern sensibility as bustles were with bobs.⁶

This is not to say that Fuller completely lacked attention in the early twentieth century. Although (or perhaps because) almost none of her writing was much available, biographies continued to be published about her, but they were almost entirely concerned with her personality and

contained little or nothing about her ideas and writings. All of their authors, moreover, took one of two lines in narrating her life. The first accepted the Modernist interpretation of nineteenth-century culture as moral, innocent, and genteel but regarded all this as a *good* thing. For these middlebrow counter-modernists – the popular reviewers in magazines like the *Saturday Review of Books*, the founders of book-of-the-month clubs, the organizers of small-town art shows – innocence, sentiment, and moral uplift were the stuff of a healthy culture as opposed to the diseased, cynical culture of the un-American Modernists. And popular mid-century biographers followed their lead: the titles of two notable books containing Fuller portraits tell it all: the radical-turned-genteel Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England*, and Faith Chipperfield's sentimental potboiler, *In Quest of Love*. Meanwhile, as the New Criticism, which eschewed quotidian biography and high-minded morality as extraneous to serious textual criticism, was coming to dominate the study of literature, these sorts of sentimental biographies practically guaranteed that Fuller would never be taken seriously in the academy – and that was quite apart from the New Critics' exclusion of virtually *all* female writers from its literary canon.⁷

A second narrative line was taken in other biographies of Fuller by a few more “modern” critics. Most prominent were Katharine Anthony in her reductively Freudian 1920 *Margaret Fuller: A Psychological Biography*, and Vernon Louis Parrington in his biographical portrait of Fuller in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Main Currents of American Thought*. In both works Fuller was portrayed as a victim of either Victorian repression or ethereal Transcendentalism – or, what many critics then thought was the source of both, repressive New England Puritanism. The only major difference among mid-twentieth-century biographers lay in their interpretation of Fuller's end. For Mason Wade, whose 1940 biography *Margaret Fuller: Whetstone of Genius* relegated Fuller to the secondary role of inspiring muse of Emerson, Hawthorne, and other “great” writers, Fuller found her fulfillment only in Italy as a wife and mother. Perry Miller, the great intellectual historian, took matters a step

further. In his influential 1963 Fuller anthology, this tougher-than-thou Modernist – who resuscitated the Puritans as admirably un-American votaries of a tragic cosmos – saw her end as a romantic tragedy. Her drowning, which Miller suggested may have been a suicide, symbolized her *inability* to find fulfillment *either* in revolutionary Italy *or* in bourgeois America.⁸

So when and why did the tide turn toward a more realistic Fuller? I believe, as I suggested, Hudspeth's collection of Fuller's letters was the most important scholarly impetus. And the result was almost instantaneous. The *New York Times Book Review* gave over its front page to a lengthy review of Hudspeth's first volume by the Hawthorne biographer James Mellow, while shortly thereafter the *New York Review of Books* published an even more elaborate review of the first three volumes by its critical doyen Elizabeth Hardwick, which the magazine trumpeted with a front-page headline, "America's Top Woman Intellectual." But accessibility is only the beginning in constructing a life. For one thing, Fuller's letters, which I had started transcribing before Hudspeth's first volume appeared, were, however crucial, I knew, still only one major component of a full-scale life-and-times biography I thought necessary to restoring her historical importance. Furthermore, however extensive the primary materials either in Hudspeth's volumes or in the archives, they still don't make up a biography. That also requires some interpretive framework and idea of one's subject that links all this data together and shapes it into a narrative.

Here Second Wave feminism of the 1970s was immensely important. Scholars like Bell Chevigny, Ann Douglas, and others provided the first serious ideological engagements with Fuller's life and writings since her death. For the first time the conditions of her subordinate status as a woman were highlighted and made central to understanding Fuller's actions and thoughts. Moreover, these biographies and the studies they inspired brought Fuller within the fast-growing academic fields of women's history and women's studies. Suddenly Fuller seemed important to historical scholarship as well as

contemporary history. However, as often happens in righteous struggles for power, certain cultural areas got overlooked or effaced. Specifically, these included the two achievements that along with her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* established her intellectual reputation in her time: her literary criticism and her critical appropriation of modern European literature for a distinct American culture. Even psychological issues got a bit suppressed or distorted. In her penetrating forward to the revised edition of her pioneering biography-anthology *Margaret Fuller: The Woman and the Myth*, Bell Chevigny conceded that she had excluded from her book Fuller's darker "mystical" (and, she might have added, self-lacerating) moments and expressions. But from a biographer's point of view perhaps the biggest problem with these early feminist works was their hermeneutic: by making her largely into an object lesson in gender oppression, they, ironically, replicated the earlier 1920s Fuller-as-victim narrative – although now not of New England "Puritanism," but rather of a ubiquitous patriarchy, thus still leaving open, if not questionable, her own historical agency and achievements. Even Douglas and Chevigny, by far the most political and sophisticated of these feminist scholars, by embedding Fuller in teleological plots of "growing out of New England" and into, finally in Europe, an "implied" proto-Marxist understanding of "history," obscured her convoluted path, strewn with messy detours and dead-ends, to her final radical but rather muddled, and highly un-Marxian, social democratic liberalism.⁹

My own interpretive framework as it emerged from my reading in the sources beginning in the 1980s was very different. Conceptually, it was driven by two intellectual constructs: Fuller's Romanticism that scholars had forgotten and the Modernism that had helped bury her. While the first plunged me deep into the discourses and lived experiences of Fuller in her own time, the second exposed perhaps more of my own time and interests than I as a historian entirely realized – or, if I did, would have felt altogether comfortable admitting.

First, Romanticism. Like other labels for collective ideas in history, this one often strikes materialist-minded scholars as just another abstract

ism in the toolkit of intellectual historians. But in fact, I believe, it's an historical "sign" (to borrow from Emerson) of a life of experience and spirit – or at least that's how I try to use it in my biography of Fuller. Certainly Fuller's habits of mind and feeling were "Romantic" in the sense of infinitely expansive. For one thing, as with many Romantics, the line between thought and action was often blurry, a fact that made her life exciting to narrate. As her rival Edgar Allan Poe famously pronounced (and every great biographical subject should have a great enemy!), "Her acts are bookish, and her books are less thoughts than acts." Emerson put it more generously: "She excels other intellectual persons in this, that her sentiments are more blended with her life; so the expression of them has greater steadiness & greater character." Yet, as Emerson well knew, that steadiness was not easy for her to acquire. Trying to carve out for herself a female intellectual identity that was not just erudite but also heroically prophetic in the mold of Emerson, Carlyle, and her other would-be Romantic male mentors required a great deal of creative self-fashioning. And she recognized this herself. "In an environment like mine," she once wrote to her close friend William Henry Channing, who had taken her to task for her "determined exaggeration" and "arrogance" in talking about herself, "what may have seemed too lofty or ambitious in my character was absolutely needed to keep the heart from breaking and enthusiasm from extinction." I should add that for an intellectual historian bent on highlighting ideas as "discourse," it helps to have traipsing around one's hero Romantic intellectuals like the Transcendentalists, who wrote copiously to each other, in the largest outpouring of personally and philosophically self-conscious papers in American history.¹⁰

Fuller's Romanticism was also deeply colored by Transcendentalist versions of the values of antebellum democracy: not the conventional ones of possessive individualism and majority rule but of universally equal individual rights and purposive self-fashioning. In fact, this ethos of democratic individuality infected many educated liberal young people around her and her Transcendentalist circle who were desperately

seeking some ethical and aesthetic work that they found utterly lacking in the public-spirited but socially élitist and conformist-minded learned professions like the law and ministry that they had been bred to enter. Nor was the situation of these disaffected and willfully déclassé young rebels quite as hopeless as depicted in Emerson's ironically sympathetic portrait of them in "The Transcendentalist." Contemporaneously a potpourri of newly created or transformed popular forums like lyceums, newspapers, magazines, publishers, and other media were sprouting that were highly receptive to ideas and intellectuals, even those of Fuller's outré circles. And many of these media also opened their pages and platforms to women excluded from the professions that their young male friends were fleeing. To put the process more positively, intellectuals like Fuller and her Transcendentalist friends were becoming simultaneously "alienated" and "democratized."¹¹

Fuller's transcendental Romanticism was also a faith. Certainly her and her colleagues' Romantic assumption that in going down, as Emerson wrote, into the depths of one's private soul one can get in intimate touch with all souls, is less a philosophy than a faith – in this case, in the existence of an undetermined but organically connected ideal universe. (In fact, William James – a sort of proto-Romantic Modernist himself – quoted in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* the line of Fuller's [evidently a family legend] about accepting the universe that had provoked Carlyle's sneer, as a perfect expression of a philosophy of the "healthy-minded" [W. James 41].) Even more critical than idealist philosophy for understanding Fuller, though, was the Romantic *language* both she and her interlocutors used to express and communicate their thoughts. Indeed, a major reason Fuller's personality comes off in denigrating studies as "romantic" – in the negative sense of hyperbolic or hysterical – is that biographers fail both to situate her Romantic talk socially but also, more crucial, to *translate* it for modern ears. I'll give a couple of examples.

Almost immediately after Fuller met in Paris, in the winter of 1847, the great Polish poet and messianic revolutionary Adam Mickiewicz, he

addressed her in a letter thus: "You have acquired the right to know and the exigencies of virginity. For you the first step of your deliverance and the deliverance of your sex (of a certain class) is to know, whether you are permitted to remain a virgin. Thou shouldst bring to the new world fruit matured by centuries, exciting fruits. Thou shouldst manifest thy spirit by thy glances, by thy gestures, by thy action." By comparison with this strangely effusive injunction, Fuller's at least manifest response was veritably down-to-earth: in a letter to a friend she happily acknowledged Mickiewicz's idea of her transnational mission but passed silently over his references to her as a tragic virgin and, elsewhere in his letter, "messenger of God" – even though the latter was a standard Transcendentalist trope and the former was then very much on her mind. Without appreciating and translating the Romantic code, spoken in varying degrees by all in her circles, Fuller can sound to a twentieth-first-century ear as though she's speaking bizarre hyperboles in an endless echo chamber, and, as a result, the genuine comedy and tragedy of her life is lost.¹²

A more psychologically resonating illustration of what I try to do in my biography with Fuller's Romantic language and contexts is my exploration of her creative but vexed relationship with Emerson, her by far most important conversation partner. The usual portrayals fall into one of two camps depending on the author's hero. In most Emerson biographies, Fuller appears as a high-strung and half-hysterical bluestocking unhappily foisting herself on the bemused sage – as well as the (implicitly) normally adjusted reader. On the other hand, in Fuller biographies, Emerson mostly appears as, if not the stereotypically denigrating male (which their letters thoroughly refute), then as a cold transcendental fish unable to expose himself personally to an emotionally and intellectually formidable woman. Neither of these victim-take-all interpretations is entirely wrong but they are at best one-sided caricatures. Of course, there were frustrating aspects on both sides about their friendship, which came out in their prolonged epistolary arguments about it. There was also something, if not ludicrous, certainly comical about the picture of the two writing to each other at night from separate

rooms in Emerson's house with the sage's five-year-old Waldo Jr. acting as transcendental mailman! But there was also much psychological and philosophical thought filtered through these exchanges. For Emerson these arguments brought a deeper awareness of both his psychic isolation and its intellectual compensations, which would accelerate his increasingly ironic stance toward transcendental "experience." For Fuller they produced an even more dramatic realization: while not helping her "recognize" her "true self," they made her sort out the gains and losses of Emerson's influence on her as an active "thinker" rather than as a thinking actor. His God, she wrote in her journal after one exchange with him, was "truth" while hers was "love."¹³

If I use Romanticism as a historical language illuminating the psycho-sociology of Fuller's identity, I also use it to illuminate her theoretical ideas. A case in point is Fuller's feminism. The key text, of course, is *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845, just after she had left Boston to move to New York. When I started writing my biography of Fuller, this philosophico-political literary text was, remarkably, little written about. Partly, I think, this was because literature scholars, who then (as still now) dominated the field of Transcendentalist studies, were not much concerned with the Western philosophical traditions Fuller drew from. Partly this surprising elision was also due, I think, to the state of women's history at that time (the late 1970s-early 1980s), which was overwhelmingly influenced by social rather than intellectual history. The rise of cultural history a bit later was a little more helpful, but its emphasis on "women's culture" as an essentialist category made Fuller's androgynous gender perspective and mixed-gender social life hard to fit in. Insofar as women's historians appropriated intellectual history, they tended to focus on types like Mary Wollstonecraft, whose Enlightenment rationalism mixed more comfortably with post-1960s feminism than did Fuller's prophetically subjectivist Romanticism. Indeed, understanding the specific Romantic influences and languages that Fuller used allowed me to unpack the meanings of her complex *public* speech acts. Rather, for example, than

seeing her trumpeting of "intuition" and the "electrical" in women's psychology as fitting into the purely "feminine" side of the "two-spheres" gender dichotomy of the era – as did most scholars who wrote about her feminism – it's clear that for *her* "intuition" was active and was therefore counterposed, not to rationality (which she actually urged on women), but to moral and intellectual *passivity* – or (as she put it) taking social rules solely from "without" (FW, 91-93, 102-6). In a word, she made available key Romantic and Transcendentalist concepts to a feminist intellectual tradition.

Now a word about Fuller and Modernism. Certainly no Modernist would accept Fuller's Romantic faith in striving after organic individual and collective wholeness, predicated, as it was, on the assumption of an ideally connected universe. For Modernists, this would be precisely the kind of nineteenth-century evasion of experience that they wanted expunged from American culture. At the same time, although she sometimes entertained tragedy, there's nothing in Fuller's writing to suggest she could even imagine, must less articulate, the notion that some Modernists entertained of a world without any but arbitrary meaning. (Among antebellum authors, Melville came the closest to doing so.) Yet, if there was a single American Transcendentalist who anticipated a Modernist awareness more broadly, it was Fuller. One element of this Modernist sensibility is the idea of an avant-garde – or an "advanced guard" in sharp opposition to the conventional middle-class cultural pieties that blocked forward movement. Fuller, among all the Transcendentalists, although not always politically radical, was quintessentially avant-garde. Partly, I think, this was because she was principally a critic rather than a poet, reformer, or minister, and so the tone of her writing often has a certain polemical, at times sarcastic, cast. She also applied Emerson's central idea of self-trust to an entire subordinated class – women – who were assumed by official culture to passively absorb society's external norms. But most of all, I think, she was one of the most protomodern intellectuals in nineteenth-century America, not only because so many of her books and public acts were

“firsts,” but for a more basic reason: she demonstrated an extraordinary willingness to risk her reputation and even her life on behalf of the “party of movement” where the outcome was unknown.

Of course, both the Romantic 1830s-40s and the Modernist early twentieth century are quite over. So I want to end with a few thoughts about why I think Fuller has arrived (to borrow from Cole Porter) “just in time” in *our* time. Three areas seem to me beckoning Fuller’s spirit.

One is a humanistic theory of gender relations. There has been much talk in recent years in the academy and opinion press about “postfeminism” – or the notion that especially younger women have either wisely or ungratefully proclaimed themselves past an earlier era of strident feminism. Some of this generational rejection goes right back to the Transcendentalists. (“Our age [...] builds the sepulchres of the fathers,” Emerson lamented, announcing the new philosophy in *Nature*. “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”) But leaving aside the issue of gratitude – a quality rarely evident in American history – what this postfeminist claim misses, of course, is there have been many feminisms since the nineteenth century. What’s perhaps different today is a greater recognition by especially postmodernist feminists that this pluralism is salutary. They also increasingly recognize that there’s a necessary tension but also unity between two categories many feminists had previously set in conflict: woman’s identity and women’s equality with men. Without some idea of identity how could one even name the problem of gender inequality or galvanize a constituency from the ranks of those who suffer from it? Without equality, what would be the common bond of women with the rest of humanity? More than any other feminist intellectual before the twentieth century, Margaret Fuller provided a philosophical justification for both. She did so by claiming gender as both a fluid and a chosen category. When Emerson challenged Fuller while she was writing *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* to dispense with talk of women’s rights in light of (in his new view then) the fatal ebb and flow of each man’s and woman’s reincarnation in the other’s gender, she answered:

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That makes no difference. It is not woman, but the law of right, apple as apple, woman as woman. Without adopting your theory I know that I, a daughter, live through the life of man; but what concerns me now, is that my life be beautiful, powerful, in a word, a complete life in its kind. Had I but one more moment to live, I must wish the same.

Fuller believed that all attempts to trap gender, or any deeply human quality, in fixed boxes will fail to hold the fluid waters of human identity. Moreover, only the *individual* woman can define for herself in what combination and direction those "masculine" or "feminine" waters should flow to open *her* way to self-realization. Individual freedom is existential identity – a fact that Emerson had affirmed in "Self-Reliance" but four years afterward somehow forgot. Fuller would never let women or men forget it.¹⁴

A second contemporary arena of discourse in which Fuller's example is badly needed, I think, is that surrounding the "public intellectual." Since the antimodernist backlash sparked by the anti-Semitic Dreyfus affair in France in the 1890s, the term "intellectual" has often referred – initially pejoratively but then positively – to a person of learning and ideas who makes judgments about politics and culture against or at least outside established institutions of power. More recently (and more anemically), "public intellectual" has come to refer to a specialized academic adding his or her voice to the wider debates of a public culture. Fuller was not an academic: as a woman she was excluded from the profession – and as a Transcendentalist she would have considered it, then probably rightly, a decided fall from intellectual grace. Yet she was certainly an intellectual "expert," in her case in literary criticism, from which she fashioned two public roles. One was as a kind of literary truth-teller who interrogated the political fatuities of her time – whether proslavery land grabs or antifeminist screeds – by listening to the sound of their rhetoric. She instinctively knew, as the post-World War II Modernist critic Dwight Macdonald would put it, that

if it doesn't sound right – expressive, authentic, fresh, and open to various realities – it probably isn't right. The other public role was that of a critic who acts, not as a cultural policeman or a cultural salesman, but as a provocateur of her readers' and listeners' higher ethical and aesthetic sensibility.¹⁵

The very talk of “higher,” of course, in our faux populist times, carries a certain Victorian or (as the word is too easily bandied about) “élitist” air. But I think not and I like to think Fuller would have agreed. The Lincoln-Douglas debates are often pointed to as models of an alternative lost world of democratic discourse, when politicians actually addressed, not sound bites and factitious outrage, but first principles and ethical dilemmas of public policy for hours on end and day after day. I like to recall, as a worthy counterpart, Margaret Fuller, her fingers stained with ink from poring over the proofs of her article urging her readers to read Dante, not by stuffing their minds with “facts” about the poet but by plumbing their own intellectual depths. Or another image: her article dismissing the latest decorously bookish Longfellow poem in favor of some “husky” voice of a crude but sincere young poet. And both these articles printed, as all her pieces, on the *New-York Tribune's* front page, along with the umpteenth installment of an ongoing debate about Fourierism and the latest vote on an ongoing battle over the abolition of capital punishment – all read by tens of thousands of farmers and mechanics throughout the North. In this age of the internet, when the technology of diffusion is fast overwhelming the capacity for discernment much less critical thinking, Fuller's assumption that ordinary people are capable of “higher” thoughts would be no mean contribution to the current cultural moment.¹⁶

Finally, there's the discourse about human rights. To borrow a distinction from her comrade Giuseppe Mazzini, Fuller was not a nationalist but she *was* a patriot. For her, America's founding ideals of inherent individual freedom and equality were American because they belonged to humankind and not the reverse. Her jeremiads against

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American slavery, like those of her initially disdained abolitionist contemporaries, were in fact rooted in the deepest kind of patriotism – a profound disappointment in one’s own country forsaking its ideals and therefore its reason for being. Indeed, had she lived, I have no doubt that she would have considered William Lloyd Garrison’s public burning of the U.S. Constitution at a Framingham antislavery meeting in 1854 an act of the highest patriotism. On the other hand, she recognized – even trumpeted the fact – that the eagle of liberty sometimes flies east and, leaving its abandoned parent, settles on the staff of movements of foreign nations. In Fuller’s day that meant the revolutionary democratic movements sweeping through Europe in the 1840s. She knew the difficulties that this sort of transference involved. It could heighten rather than resolve tragic dilemmas – like the violent resistance of the young soldiers of the Roman Republic that sowed the memories of “manly” (her word) dignity needed to fight another day but which in the meantime only brought death and destruction in its wake. Or, to take another rude awakening for Fuller, that Italian peasants were not Jefferson’s yeoman farmers and yet too deserved to hope for a better life, however difficult to realize. Most of all she understood that, along with cosmopolitan human rights, every people had, to a greater or lesser extent, their own culture. “Would you speak to a man,” she exclaimed in a *Tribune* article on Commander Charles Wilkes’ account of the United States exploring expedition to the South Sea Islands, “first learn his language! Would you have the tree grow, learn the nature of the soil and climate in which you plant it!” Needless to say, intervention in defense of human rights necessarily must be an affair of public ideas or self-defense but rarely invading armies. Whether our time is better or worse than Fuller’s, I could never say. But certainly the possibilities for any “party of hope” are enhanced, not diminished, as Emerson would have it, by memory – in this case the memory of Margaret Fuller.¹⁷

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Notes

A shorter version of this essay was given as the Keynote Address, "Concord Celebrates 200: Margaret Fuller Bicentennial," Concord Free Public Library and Concord First Parish, Concord, MA, May 21-23, 2010, and portions were published in the *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, 34 (2011), 26-32.

¹ Versions of the Carlyle riposte abound, but for the most original, which makes plain the various contexts and voices, see Parke Godwin quoted in Evert A. Duyckinck to George L. Duyckinck, 28 January 1848, Duyckinck Family Papers, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

² In 1994 *American Literary Scholarship*, published by Duke University Press, started adding Fuller to the names of Emerson and Thoreau in the title for its annual review of Transcendentalism scholarship. The first volume of my biography won the Bancroft Prize in 1993 (*Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, Vol. 1: *The Private Years*). Information about the year-long series of bicentennial celebrations of Fuller may be found on the Margaret Fuller Bicentennial website: <http://www.margaretfuller.org>. In addition to Marshall's *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, two substantial Fuller volumes also appeared in 2013: Matteson, *The Lives of Margaret Fuller: A Biography*, and Bailey, Viens, and Wright, eds., *Margaret Fuller and Her Circles*. David Robinson is now working on a critical study of Fuller's life and writings.

³ Fuller, *Letters* (hereafter *FL*).

⁴ See Emerson, Channing, and Clarke's *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*; Howe's *Margaret Fuller (Marchesa Fuller)*; Higginson's *Margaret Fuller Ossoli*; H. James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, I:127; idem, *A Small Boy and Others*, 61.

⁵ See Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (hereafter *FW*); Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, I:217; Mumford, *The Golden Day*; Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*; Fuller, "American Literature." For a valuable discussion of Fuller's influence on

later American women's rights leaders, see Cole. A treasure trove of information on Fuller's posthumous reputation may be found in Myerson's bibliographies. The best study of the early twentieth-century "discovery" of the antebellum "American Renaissance" remains Ruland's *The Rediscovery of American Literature*. For the protomodernist part Fuller and the Transcendentalists played in this process of discovery and rediscovery, see Capper, "'A Little Beyond': The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History," in Capper and Wright, eds., *Transient and Permanent* (12-20); and Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, Vol. 2: *The Public Years*, Chapter 7.

⁶ The classic study of the American Victorian mindset and the pre-World War I young cultural radicals who rebelled against it is May's *The End of American Innocence*. The literature on Modernism is vast but for an excellent introduction, see Calinescu. Contrasting interpretations of the intersections between Modernism and feminism may be found in Cott, Stansell, and Douglas (*Terrible Honesty*). For an emblematic statement by a prominent cultural radical invidiously conflating Transcendentalism with Victorianism, see Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*. But for a seminal lecture published two years earlier that sharply distinguishes the protomodernist Emerson from his "bad" system-making Transcendentalist colleagues, see George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy."

⁷ See Brooks (235-42, 377-79, 428-30) and Chipperfield. A seminal takedown of "middlebrow" culture may be found in Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult & Midcult," in Macdonald's *Against the American Grain* (3-75). For a more sympathetic scholarly study, see Rubin.

⁸ See Anthony; Parrington, II: 426-34; Wade; Miller, in Fuller, *Margaret Fuller: American Romantic* (xxviii).

⁹ Cheigny, *The Woman and the Myth*, Revised Edition (xxii); *idem.*, "Growing Out of New England"; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (259-88). For a thinner and much less nuanced version of this Fuller-as-gender-victim narrative, see Blanchard.

¹⁰ Poe, "The Literati of New York City," in *Complete Works*, XV, 82; Emerson, 23 March 1843, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, VIII, 368; [n.d.], *FL*, VI, 99, 100. The best historical treatment of European Romanticism remains Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*. As yet there is no comparable work on American Romanticism, but for an illuminating discussion of its contours, see May, "After the Enlightenment: A Prospectus," in May's *The Divided Heart* (179-96). The relation between American Transcendentalism and European Romanticism remains a vexed question. A now somewhat dated but still thought-provoking treatment may be found in Miller, "New England's Transcendentalism." My biography's subtitle is meant to flag my view that Fuller's affinities with transnational Romanticism, which were in depth and variety unsurpassed in the Transcendentalist circle, provide the critical entry points to her psychology and worldview. See my *Margaret Fuller*, II; and "Getting from Here to There: Margaret Fuller's American Transnational Odyssey," in Capper and Giorcelli, eds., *Margaret Fuller: Transatlantic Crossings in a Revolutionary Age* (xi-xviii, 3-26). For an influential essay on "discursive" or "contextualist" intellectual history as applied to American themes and texts, see Hollinger, "Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals," in Hollinger's *In the American Province* (130-51, 210-13).

¹¹ Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *The Collected Works I*: 201-16 [hereafter *ECW*]. For a more hopeful take on the Transcendentalists' young followers and the individualistic democratic society they inhabited, see Emerson's "The Editors to the Reader." No satisfactory study of antebellum intellectual democracy has been published, but for valuable examinations of some of its elements and phases, see Hatch, Cmiel, Reynolds, Lasch, Perry, and Gustafson.

¹² Alexander Chodźko, Diary [late February 1847], quoted in Wellisz (12-13); to James Freeman Clarke, 19 January 1849, *FL*, V:175.

¹³ 19 August 1842, in Myerson, "Margaret Fuller's 1842 Journal" (324). For egregious examples of this pairing but with the chosen victim reversed, see the portraits of Emerson and Fuller in, respectively, Warren and Baker.

¹⁴ *Nature*, in *ECW*, I:7; *FW* (162-63).

¹⁵ For differing recent appraisals of the past and present character and social role of the "public intellectual," see Jacoby, Posner, and Collini.

¹⁶ "Italy," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 18 November 1845, 1; Review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poems*, 3rd Edition, *ibid.*, 10 December 1845. For a fine discussion of the democratic cultural politics of Greeley's *New-York Tribune*, see Tuchinsky, especially Chapter 2.

¹⁷ "United States Exploring Expedition," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 28 June 1845, 1.

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