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From Within Outwards

Self-Culture and Social Reform in *Woman in The Nineteenth Century*

Abstract

This article examines the use of self-culture in Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century *(1845) and sees it as inherently related to the calls for social reform that pervaded the works of American literary Romanticism from the 1830s to the start of the Civil War. Fuller's* Woman*, now considered a manifesto of American feminism, is a unique example of transcendentalist ideas applied to gender issues. By exploring Fuller's application of the concepts of self-culture and self-development, this essay wants to demonstrate that she uses this rather abstract notion to analyze and propose a solution to the condition of women in Antebellum America, thus advocating for a change that was meant to affect society and the nation as whole. I argue that her feminist self-culture is to be interpreted not as an end, but rather as a part of a circular process that aims at fostering social reform, thereby resolving the perceived opposition that seems to exist in Transcendentalism between individualist stances and communal reform efforts.*

Keywords: *American studies, Margaret Fuller, self-culture, social reform, Transcendentalism*

In an 1840 letter to William H. Channing, Margaret Fuller notes the existence of a "small minority" that, in New England, was seeking to establish alternatives to a "mode of culture" which had so far only encouraged superficiality and materialism (1983, 108). In this letter, her support for this group of "radicals" and "mystics" (1983, 108) who were trying to reform society is rather explicit. She not only praises their wisdom, but she also shares their belief in the necessity of reforming the individuals first to eventually reshape society as a whole. Fuller appears to believe that, in order to be effective, reform should move "from within outwards," rather than "from without inwards" (1983, 108). In this article, I show how Fuller—the most prominent female voice of Transcendentalism—did indeed build her feminist discourse around the concept of self-culture, an idea that, despite its success among the Transcendentalists, was interesting to Fuller for its intimate connection to one's subjectivity.

In her 1845 book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, considered a seminal text of American feminism, she puts this rather nebulous and abstract notion to use, and in doing so, I argue, she establishes a framework for societal development that, while originating from the individual (in women, in particular), is meant to thoroughly reform collectivity. According to Fuller, without self-culture, women cannot determine "what is for them the liberty of law" (1998, 5) and therefore, I contend that she envisions self-culture as the necessary first step towards a more just society.

The interplay between personal and collective orientations in the works of Transcendentalist thinkers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, has been extensively investigated by scholars, chief among them David M. Robinson. In his essay "Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos: *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*," Robinson analyzes Fuller's application of self-culture and, although he convincingly demonstrates how she uses "the central intellectual commitment of the transcendental movement, the belief in the possibility of 'self-culture'" (1982, 84) to address the woman question, I maintain that his interpretation of the ways in which the individual and social interact with each other in Fuller's work has to be reexamined. Particularly, I question Robinson's conviction that writing *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* made Fuller discover that "self-culture as an end required social reform as a means" (1982, 96). Instead of perpetuating a reading that imagines reform as progressing linearly, starting from social reform and resulting in a generalized spread of self-culture, I claim that Fuller envisions the individual and the social, the personal and the collective, to function in a circular progression in which one cannot exist without the other. Fuller does not use self-culture as an *end*—as Robinson asserts—but rather she conceives it as a *means* through which individuals can foster social reform.

In the fairly recently constituted US of Fuller's time, the term 'reform' had social, political and religious implications. 19th century America seemed pervaded by an extremely hopeful and productive reformist energy that, according to historians and literary critics, resulted from several factors (including the Second Great Awakening and culture of the Enlightenment era), all of which contributed to the establishment of an "empowering belief in the individual's ability—even duty as some argued—to agitate for social reform" (Petrulionis 2021, 163). In this historical context, in which several movements with different agendas were actively trying to reform the social fabric by embracing social justice causes such as anti-slavery, the rights of Native peoples, the state of prisons, the right to education, Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* emerges as an important text that contributes to the discourse of women's rights. I want to suggest that Fuller envisioned her project of self-culture to have a threefold impact:

going from the particular to the general, it was meant to alter the lives of the individual women who chose to adopt these views; it intended to have an effect on womankind and alter gender relations; it was conceived as a revolutionary force which had the potential to change the country as a whole.

The self-culture that Fuller wanted to teach women was supposed to have obvious repercussions on society, and Robinson is right when he affirms that *Woman* "presented the empowerment of women as a process that would rejuvenate society as a whole" (2013, 90). If other writers and reformers of her time concentrated their efforts on the question of slavery, or on other compelling reforms, Fuller adamantly worked to put forward the woman question, and she was among the many intellectuals who thought these reforms were necessary for "the young American nation to fulfill the *Declaration of Independence*'s promise of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' for all" (Petrulionis 2021, 164).

1. To quicken the soul: Fuller as an educator

Fuller's aim in *Woman* is to urge women to start reflecting on themselves. From the very beginning of her book, where she writes that "the grain of creation consists always in the growth of individual minds, which live and aspire, as flowers bloom and birds sing, in the midst of morasses" (1998, 13), she appears to be convinced that the best way to make individual minds grow, even in the midst of "morasses," is to provide them with new methodological tools to independently develop critical thinking. Fuller's "commitment to growth" (Robinson 2013, 79) naturally resulted in her adoption of self-culture as the guiding principle of her own life and in her ambition to act as a vehicle of this very same idea.

Her redefinition of the concept of the "self" in gendered terms (Robinson 2013, 79) appears most prominently in *Woman*, but it has also been the less apparent goal of her years as an educator. In the very first few pages of *Woman*, she notes that the early 1840s had finally brought about radical social change and writes that

> No doubt, a new manifestation is at hand, a new hour in the day of man. We cannot expect to see any one sample of completed being, when the mass of men still lie engaged in the sod, or use the freedom of their limbs only with wolfish energy. The tree cannot come to flower till its root be free from the cankering worm, and its whole growth open to air and light. While any one is base, none can be entirely free and noble. Yet something new shall presently be shown of the life of man, for hearts crave, if minds do not know how to ask it. (1998, 10)

In the opening of her book, Fuller plainly states her purpose. She wants to give the minds the tools needed to express the heart's cravings. In short, she wants to educate them, a task that she first undertook many years before, when she taught both in formal and informal settings.

Early in her own life, Fuller understood the liberating effect education had on those who had the privilege to receive it. Although she writes that she had no "natural childhood," (1998, 146) she was well aware that the exceptional education her father (a lawyer and US representative) gave her was crucial in granting her the means to overcome the traditional educational difference that existed between the genders. Her father essentially taught Fuller everything that a boy would have learned. In the 1820s, when she started her formal education at the Port School in Cambridgeport and later at the Boston Lyceum for Young Ladies, she was already persuaded that women should not accept any kind of preconceived female inferiority and that the only factor that had to be used if one was to compare men and women had to be related to moral and cultural qualities without taking into consideration gender differences.

In 1835, when her father suddenly died, Fuller had to step in and take care of her family. To do so, she had to set aside her literary ambitions, but it was through her connections in the literary scene that she obtained her first job as a teacher. Her friend Ralph Waldo Emerson introduced her to Bronson Alcott, who invited her to teach in his Temple School in Boston. Fuller worked there for a year, but when Alcott's school started losing support from its patrons and when attendance dropped as a consequence of the publication of his *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, which was seen as an outrageous "practice that undermined rote learning and discipline" (Spahr 2022, 53), she left her post and began teaching at Hiram Fuller's Greene Street School in Providence. Fuller stayed in Providence from June 1837 until December 1838, and it was through her experiences at Alcott's Temple School first and then at Greene Street that she could see for herself what girls were learning in two of the most innovative schools of the country.

With the proliferation of "female seminaries," those years saw female secondary school education becoming more accessible to the middle-class. However, although many schools "trumpeted the opening up of the widest possible vistas of intellectual accomplishment […] [they] were intended to prepare young women for only two occupations: that of wife and mother" (Capper 1987, 510). In particular, female academies were still generally focused on teaching domestic practicality. Ornamental arts such as music, drawing, and painting were part of the schools' curricula, and women were expected to be proficient in needle work, cooking, and household economy. In this context, Fuller's style, "guided by the idea of a sympathetic, collective conversation" (Spahr 2022, 58), and her classes, centered around the idea of self-

culture and meant to teach women rhetorical abilities, represented a radical alternative that *had to* be offered outside traditional educational settings. As Annie Russell Marble notes, Temple and Greene Street School were both conceived with the intention to "emancipate education from traditional fetters,—to stimulate high and free thought in place of mere memorizing, to nourish the heart by cordial relations between teacher and pupil, and to educate the senses by surroundings of art and beauty" (1903, 339).

As any account of her lectures shows, Fuller enthusiastically adopted these educational practices because they allowed her to foster self-reliance in her pupils, a questioning attitude that she thought was necessary to spur social change. Her efforts towards the establishment of a "cordial relation" between instructor and pupils are especially evident in her choice to adopt an anti-hierarchical conversational method. As Christina Zwarg has argued, conversation was instrumental to Fuller's "feminist orientation, particularly [to her] revised theory of pedagogy" (2018, 3). In a nation that "valued oratory as the main vehicle for shaping collective values" (Gustafson 1995, 35), Fuller used the rhetorical power of dialogic pedagogy to help women in their process of finding self-reliance.

At Greene Street, she witnessed the scarce preparation of the class and tried to enhance their knowledge and foster their self-reliance. In this regard, Annette Kolodny cites an 1837 letter a 19-year-old student wrote to her parents. This remarkable passage well encapsulates Fuller's teaching style:

> One of the girls asked her if she should get the lesson by heart. 'No,' said [Fuller], 'I never wish a lesson learned by heart, as that phrase is commonly understood…I wish *you* to get your lessons by *mind*.' She said she wished no one to remain in the class unless she was willing to give her mind and soul to the study, unless she was willing to communicate what was in her mind…that we should let no false modesty restrain us. (1994, 362)

In her attempts to make the mind flourish, Fuller wanted her students to actively engage with the class, reflect on the concepts and stop learning notions without first considering the facts by themselves. The self-culture she advocates for in *Woman* is therefore obviously rooted in her own experiences as an educator, but it is also a consequence of her involvement with other Transcendentalists, as well as a vital component of the "Conversations" she started organizing in Boston in 1839.

These weekly meetings which took place every winter and spring for four years were used by Fuller to pursue her reformist efforts concerning women's education. These meetings were not, by any means, Fuller's "parlatorio," as Emerson defined them (Chevigny 1986, 183), but rather, as Capper writes, they were envisioned by Fuller not as a way to help women socialize, but as

an occasion "to educate them, essentially by changing their way of thinking" (1987, 513). Fuller aimed at cultivating their intellectual capability with the hope to teach them how to live at their fullest potential in a male-dominated society.

This group of about twenty-five women met for thirteen weeks at Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's bookshop in Boston at 13 West Street. It was Peabody who meticulously recorded the two-hour long conversations that happened every week, and it is through her records that we know of Fuller's dissatisfaction with the fact that "in what was called the improved education of the present day the boundaries had been enlarged but not filled up faithfully" (Simmons 1994, 203). In the very first meeting, Fuller famously lamented the limits of women's education:

> Women now are taught all that men are—Is it so? Or is it not that they run over superficially even *more* studies—without being really taught any thing. Thus when they come to the business of life & the application of knowledge they find they are *inferior*. […] Men are called on from a very early period to *reproduce* all learn—First their college exercises– their political duties—the exercises of professional study—the very first action of life in any direction calls upon them for *reproduction* of what they have learnt.—This is what is most neglected in the education of women—they learn without any attempt to reproduce—The little reproduction to which they are called seems mainly for the purposes of idle display. (Simmons 1994, 203)

Fuller's point about women learning just for display so that they can blindly perform what they have learned brings to mind those stereotypical scenes of period dramas in which one of the parents—of an upper-class family—asks their daughter to play the piano to entertain their guests with some music. For Fuller, this kind of womanhood had to be reimagined and she saw her "Conversations" as a viable instrument to do so.

Over the course of these meetings, she sought to find answers to questions such as "What were we born to do? How shall we do it? (Fuller 1983, 87) and while doing so, she wanted to show to those attending—highly educated women who came from culture-conscious families of Unitarian Boston—that women had to start relying on their own thoughts. In Fuller's opinion, more confidence in their intellectual capabilities would have given women the means to consciously question the subalternate position to which they were confined. As she confessed to one of the participants, she knew that, despite her best intentions and although she led the "Conversations" using the same dialogic method she adopted when teaching in schools, she had "immediate and invariable power" over her class. To teach women self-culture, Fuller knew she had to:

> [P]urify my own conscience when near them, to give clear views of the aims of this life, to show them where the magazines of knowledge lie, and to leave the rest to themselves and the spirit that must teach and help them to *self-impulse*. (Capper 1987, 515, emphasis added)

Significantly, Fuller had only planned to be the catalyst of the conversation, to initiate the discourse by showing them where "the magazine of knowledge lie" and to let their "self-impulse" do the rest. She too like Emerson, who never missed the opportunity to remind his auditors that with his lectures he just wanted to "persuade [them] to listen to their interior conviction" (1963, 374), adopted a "rhetoric of provocation" (Ray 1972, 223) aimed at rousing people, women in Fuller's case, into action.

2. Seek and ye shall find: women's self-subsistence

Woman in the Nineteenth Century stemmed from the 1843 essay she published on *The Dial* with the telling title "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women." "The Great Lawsuit," as Phyllis Cole notes, is Fuller's first attempt at putting into words the striking clash that existed between the ideal truth concerning men and women and the reality of a "radically flawed social world" (2020, 74). As Cole has suggested, Fuller's "call for action is civic and legal as well as religious and imaginative, directly urging a 'lawsuit,' an active protest in the courts of property rights as well as an appeal to the higher law of ideal truth" (2020, 75). Fuller's poignant argument for active protest is complicated by the fact that it was meant to intersect and alter what Capper calls the "reality of American women's severely restricted sphere of activity" (1992, 295).

Antebellum American women were still fighting for the right of suffrage, married women had no property nor child custody rights and they were still demanding equal access to education and employment opportunities. As Charlene Avallone notes, women's subordinate condition was "maintained through law, the Protestant church, a nascent capitalist industrial economy, and ascendant middle-class mores" (2021, 337) and therefore Fuller's call to action was rightly perceived by many as a radical appeal to rethink the predominant ideologies of the "Republican Motherhood," "true woman" and "separate spheres" which at that time "defined the character and role of woman as domestic—uxorial and maternal" (Avallone 2021, 337).

In *Woman*, Fuller expands her argument about "Woman" in the ideal sense, suggesting that a development of women's awareness and character would generate the emancipation of humanity, all the while calling for a movement of "Exaltadas." Using the feminine form of the title of a Spanish political party, with this term Fuller describes "utopian womanhood" (Cole and Argersinger 2014, 5), namely women who, she prophesizes, will "save the country from this

disgrace" (Fuller 1998, 98). Her "Exaltadas" are imagined as reformers, as women who, having learned to productively put into action their spiritual and emotional intensity, went on to change themselves and the world, thus functioning as a powerful example that Fuller uses to remind her readers that "social change depends both on the transformation of insight and the reshaping of public feeling" (Steele 2014, 223).

I contend that it is precisely through self-culture that Fuller believes women can navigate this complex interaction of personal and collective transformations. In *Woman*, her argument for an intellectual and spiritual renovation is at its most powerful because it does not end in the individual. While being clearly focused on the condition of women, *Woman* also suggests an amended society, one in which men and women are not meant to live in two separate spheres—the public and the private one—but should be brought closely together in a reformed partnership that Fuller sees as constituting the basis for the establishment of a more egalitarian community where the two genders can equally prosper.

As Margaret Vanderhaar Allen shows, Fuller's intention is twofold, she wants to "show that women need and have the same right to freedom for their inner and outer development as men, and to set forth, as a goal for women's aspirations, an ideal womanhood fundamentally different from that imposed by the culture of the time" (1979, 236). In her book, Fuller calls into question the "separate sphere" ideology that limited women's aspirations, and she challenges the traditional conception that women internalized as a fact, namely that they were made *for* men. She also rejects the assumption that women are of weak physical constitution, and she then blames men for the existence of prostitution before criticizing them for allowing a double standard when it comes to sexual morals, and finally she famously suggests the revision of one of society's most important institutions, marriage. All of these views rest on one fundamental idea, that of self-culture.

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines self-culture as "the development of one's mind or capacities through one's own efforts," or, to put it more poetically using David Robinson's paraphrase of William Ellery Channing's words, self-culture is "a version of human perfectibility centered around a metaphor of the soul as a dynamic organism capable of cultivation to ever-increasing harmonious growth" (1982, 84). Fuller understood self-culture as a harmonious development of one's soul, as the perfect unfolding of the faculties which God granted humanity. When in *Woman* she introduces Miranda, her feminist alter ego, she defines her as characterized by "a dignified sense of self-dependence [that] she found […] a sure anchor" (1998, 21). What follows is a particularly significant conversation between the narrator and Miranda who affirms:

> 'Religion was early awakened in my soul,—a sense that what the soul is capable to ask it must attain, and that, though I might be aided and instructed by others, I must depend on myself as the only constant friend. This *self-dependence*, which was honored in me, is deprecated as a fault in most women. They are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within.
>
> This is the fault of man, who is still vain, and wishes to be more important to woman than, by right, he should be.'
>
> 'Men have not shown this disposition toward you,' I said.
>
> 'No! because the position I early was enabled to take was one of *self-reliance*. And were all women as sure of their wants as I was, the result would be the same. But they are so overloaded with precepts by guardians, who think that nothing is so much to be dreaded for a woman as originality of thought or character, that their minds are impeded by doubts till they lose their chance of fair free proportions. The difficulty is to get them to the point from which they shall naturally develop *self-respect*, and learn *self-help*.' (1998, 22) [emphasis added]

In this brief exchange Fuller, through Miranda, openly states her views on self-culture. This combination of self-dependence, self-respect, and self-help is what makes women independent from external influences and true to their own soul. Only by learning to practice self-culture will they be able to achieve self-reliance and will therefore acquire the power not only to improve themselves, but also to change society for the better.

Fuller believes that self-reliance, or the lack thereof, can really have a tangible effect on gender and power dynamics. Throughout the book, she suggests time and again that self-culture is the first lesson women should internalize to then start learning what to demand and how to make their demands heard. It is worth noting, however, that this does not mean that women (or any subjugated person)—albeit conscious of their own value and self-reliant as they may be—can be expected to overcome forms of subjugation that rely on systemic power imbalances simply through altering their mindset and changing their behavior. In Fuller's America, though, self-culture was certainly an appealing concept that could rouse minds from a perceived apathy and stir them into action.

To drive her point home, Fuller describes the lives of remarkable women who were able to make a difference in the world to incite her readers to follow in their footsteps, recognizing that around her there are "many incarcerated souls, that might be freed, could the idea of religious self-dependence be established in them, could the weakening habit of dependence on others be broken up" (1998, 70). Just like Emerson insisted on his "imitation is suicide" rhetoric, Fuller

keeps on warning her readers about the dangers of a repressed individuality. Two thirds into her book, she states:

> If any individual live too much in relations, so that he becomes a stranger to the resources of his own nature, he falls, after a while, into a distraction, or imbecility, from which he can only be cured by a time of isolation, which gives the renovating fountains time to rise up. With a society it is the same. Many minds, deprived of the traditionary or instinctive means of passing a cheerful existence, must find help in self-impulse, or perish. (1998, 70)

Those who "take their rule from without" as Fuller writes at the beginning of her book (1998, 22) are the ones who, by not making use of their own resources, descend into "imbecility." The only remedy is isolation, for only there—in a secluded context free of external influences—one can "retire within [his or herself]" (1998, 72) to find the self-culture or self-impulse necessary to navigate society without being engulfed by it.

By analyzing women as individuals and as potentially active members of contemporary society, in *Woman* Fuller puts forward a harsh critique of traditional gender relations. She describes the condition of American women in her time to then put this characterization in relation to what they could be, were they free to let their soul flourish, were they able to decide for themselves, were they allowed to be financially and legally independent. In doing so, she measures women against the ideal of womanhood which society too often makes unrealizable not to present them with an impossible standard, but to show them that if they were able to learn the lesson of self-culture, new possibilities could be opened to them. In this sense, *Woman* exemplifies Fuller's interpretation of transcendental idealism. As Robinson notes, the transcendentalists regarded idealism not as "a philosophy of detachment or escapism […] [but rather as] a means of theorizing about the possible" (2006, 279). For Fuller, and for the Transcendentalists in general, idealism was synonymous with hope, and it implied a reform of the social system, a reform that was only possible if more individuals—specifically, more women—mastered the art of self-culture.

As she states near the end of the book, Fuller believes the time was ripe for women to learn self-subsistence:

> I have urged upon the sex self-subsistence in its two forms of self-reliance and self-impulse, because I believe them to be the needed means of the present juncture. I have urged on woman independence of man, not that I do not think the sexes mutually needed by one another, but because in woman this fact has led to an excessive devotion, which has cooled love, degraded marriage, and prevented either sex from being what it should be to itself or the other. (Fuller 1998, 103)

By describing self-subsistence as a combination of self-impulse and self-reliance, I believe that Fuller is indicating a clear path for women to follow. Her use of the term "self-impulse" overlaps with the meaning of self-culture, a process of cultural and spiritual amelioration that works within the individual but is only truly meaningful when it results in social development. As Cole points out, in Fuller's work "individualism is affirmed, but as a strategic step toward possibilities beyond it, whether in marriage or in wider social bonding" (2020, 75).

It is by keeping this latter concept in mind that I question Robinson's claim that Fuller saw "self-culture as an end [which] required social reform as a means" (1982, 96). Robinson has later characterized *Woman* as Fuller's attempt at embodying and "mak[ing] practical ideals and aspirations that seem at odds with the established conditions of experience and social practice" (2006, 278), thereby noting that social reform was inherent in Fuller's use of self-culture. Even more recently, he wrote that her "argument was a clear directive to both men and institutions to respond to women's needs" (2021, 589). However, he seems to overlook Fuller's tendency to use individualism only as a step in a process that is not meant to end with self-culture, but rather uses it as *means* through which the individuals could foster social reform.

Throughout *Woman*, societal change is Fuller's ultimate concern. She asks for new possibilities and new forms of employment for women, she proposes changes to the institution of marriage—she famously reminds women that "we must have units before we can have unions" (1998, 60)—she calls for a reformed education, and even for revised sexual morals. While this list of Fuller's wishes for a renewed society could continue, it should be evident that for humanity to reach its fullest potential, self-culture has to be established as the necessary first step. To have the moral and intellectual powers needed to subvert the social order, one has to be sure, at first, of his or her own doing. Only when the individual has found the strength to fight the habit of dependence on others, he or she will be able to conceive new ideas on which to build a new societal order. Thus, self-culture functions as a starting point, as a means through which it is possible for the individual to find "from within" what it takes to rethink and reshape society.

It is crucial to look at Fuller's own words to understand this point. Midway through her *Woman*, while writing about French Romantic writer George Sand—a woman "whose existence better proved the need of some new interpretation of woman's rights than anything she wrote" (1998, 44) —Fuller goes on to note that Sand was aware that

> The only efficient remedy must come from individual character. These bad institutions, indeed, it may always be replied, prevent individuals from forming good character, therefore we must remove them. Agreed, yet keep steadily the higher aim in view. Could you clear away all the bad forms of society, it is vain, unless the individual begin[s] to be ready for better. There must be a parallel movement in these two branches of life. (1998, 45)

The "higher aim" for Fuller is indeed to foster self-reliance on the individual level, because without it she argues that no real social progress can be made. However, she envisions a problem that, interestingly enough, is the same that also underlies Robinson's 1982 essay. Just as Fuller imagines someone mentioning those "bad institutions prevent[ing] individuals from forming good character," Robinson too writes that women had been denied "the opportunity for development" (1982, 86). Fuller's imaginary interlocutor further affirms the necessary removal of those bad institutions, just as Robinson states that, in order to pursue that opportunity which has been denied to women, they were now supposed to "eliminate the social sources of the denial" (1982, 86). To all those who, like Robinson, seem to understand self-culture as an insular process that ends within the individual, Fuller would reply by stressing that "the higher aim" should instead be the development of the individual *as well as* clearing away flawed societal institutions. The kind of self-culture for which Fuller advocates exists beyond society's formal institutions, and yet it cannot fully transcend them. It is a mode of being that, although grounded within the individual, has obvious repercussions on society, as every self-reliant individual will necessarily feel the impulse to work as a catalyst for social reform.

Fuller describes this complex interaction that exists between these two "branches" as a "parallel movement." This image is particularly interesting especially if compared with Robinson's interpretation of her use of self-culture. When he defines self-culture as an end and social reform as a means, the reader visualizes a linear process that starts, develops, and ends in different places. Following his reading, what we tend to imagine is a single line, and not two parallel ones (as Fuller instead suggests), since in Robinson's analysis the two "branches"—self-culture and social reform—seem to eventually blend into one. Here, I propose to envision these forces as working in a circular trajectory, one that brings together and bends those two parallel lines that Fuller mentions. It is certainly true that a conflict exists between these two "branches," but self-culture and the reform of those "bad institutions" that Fuller writes about, can also be both part of the same process. I argue that for Fuller, one could exist next to the other in a circular motion that brings them closer together, without attempting to dissolve one into the other.

3. Self-culture and social reform: individualism and communal efforts

But how exactly is it possible to reconcile individualistic stances such as Fuller's notion of self-culture with more communal efforts meant to reform society and its institutions? In order to imagine the two forces working harmoniously in a circular movement, one has to move away from the apparent dichotomy between individual and communal forms of resistance and should be open to the idea that these two approaches, however different, are not irreconcilable. If, in

fact, acts of mere individualistic defiance cannot do enough to subvert the social order, can communal defiance even take place without them? And does acting communally for change not also entail that each and every one of the individuals who take part in this collective fight had to find the necessary force to start performing individual acts of defiance first?

Over the years, the doctrine of self-reliance has been used (and misused) to put forward different positions concerning the individual and its role within society. Although Emersonian self-reliance has been at times "dismissed as merely a rugged individualist's sneer to 'do it yourself'" (Holzwarth 2011, 331), for the Transcendentalists self-reliance was not egotism, and it was never intended to be used to escape from society. Rather, they envisioned it as a tool to live without losing sight of one's individuality, and therefore saw it as a way to thrive within a larger community. Self-reliant people are an asset and not a threat to communal life for, as Tiffany K. Wayne suggests, society is "made up of individuals, and so is only ever as good as those individuals make it" (2010, x-xi).

The interaction between the individual and society—this synthesis of two opposites—is precisely what Wayne defines as "the paradox of Transcendentalism." Reflecting on this aspect, she notes what a particular phenomenon Transcendentalism was considering its ability to translate a "belief in the power of the *individual* […] into a *social* movement" (2010, x). She further points out that

> The fundamental belief in the right to self-development, in the integrity of the individual mind, had application to questions of equality and justice that dominated 19th century political culture, from the right to vote to the right to an education, from labor reform to women's rights, from Indian removal to the atrocities of American slavery. (2010, x)

There is no doubt that the Transcendentalists were convinced that the achievements of the mind had to have an impact on the world where the subject moved. When analyzing Emerson's writings, Kerry Larson affirms that in his essays, "getting people to change their opinion about themselves is often bound up with getting them to change their views on what it means to interpret the world around them" (2001, 994). To cite but one example of this very common Transcendentalist trait, it will suffice to read Emerson's opening of "Man the Reformer," an 1841 lecture read before the Mechanics' Apprentices Library Association in Boston. The piece starts with Emerson confessing to his audience his hopes that "each person whom I address has felt his own call to cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer, a benefactor" (1971, 145). He then exhorts his listeners to "revise the whole of our social structure, the State, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature [...] What is a man born for but to be a Re-

former, a Re-maker of what man has made […]?" (1971, 156). This kind of language is rather easy to find in the Emersonian corpus, as Emerson remained convinced, throughout his career, that a maturation of the individual mind had to go hand in hand with a general improvement of society, which he saw as nothing more than the stage in which self-reliant individuals perform their actions.

This active doctrine of self-reliance aimed at fostering social change, which springs from the Emersonian conviction that "progress is not for society. Progress belongs to the Individual" (1964, 176), is precisely what seems to be behind Fuller's application of self-culture to the condition of women. She wants them to be self-reliant because only self-centered women can "never be absorbed by any relation" (Fuller 1998, 103). In *Woman*, she urges her women readers to tend towards reform, but perhaps more severely than Emerson, she feels she has to remind them that "those who would reform the world must show that they do not speak in the heat of wild impulse; their lives must be unstained by passionate error; they must be severe lawgivers to themselves" (1998, 45). Women's actions must pass the overzealous scrutiny society will pass on them, and as C. Michael Hurst observes, Fuller "recognizes, in ways that Emerson does not, that the very possibility of achieving self-reliance can be utterly quashed by the oppressive pressure generated by unequal social relations" (2010, 8). When women manage to break away from the traditional state of gender relations that too often prevent them from achieving a significant role in society, when they succeed in having a platform from which they can make their voice heard, they must be "unstained by passionate error." Surely, the process of affirmation of women was—and still is—a difficult one, but it is crucial to understand the extent to which training individual women in the art of self-reliance could benefit others. In a process of continuous amelioration, a mother aware of the benefit of self-culture could raise a daughter teaching her the same self-reliant attitude she had also internalized. This means that self-culture affects not only individual lives but can also have an impact on womankind as a social group.

Fuller makes an implicit reference to the spread of self-culture at the very beginning of her book, where she writes that the "improvement in the daughters will best aid in the reformation of the sons of this age" (1998, 12). She thus stresses the fact that self-reliant women could be instrumental in improving *woman*kind as well as *man*kind. In this scenario, daughters would help in the "reformation" of their brothers, and it could also be argued that if these daughters, if they become mothers, would raise a new generation of self-reliant American men. Therefore, it becomes clear that Fuller's own kind of self-culture seems to have a clear social significance,

and what is most interesting is that it not only has the potential to alter gender relations, but it can also help to reshape the nation as a whole.

Indeed, Fuller writes about America and its supposedly grandiose destiny in several passages of her book. Despite *Woman*'s innovativeness, Fuller certainly does not distance herself from what will eventually come to be known as American Exceptionalism. Fuller, as other radical thinkers of the time, even when denouncing the evils of her country, seems in fact convinced that the US was "destined to elucidate a great moral law" (1998, 13). She believes that it was "not in vain, that the verbal statement has been made, 'All men are born free and equal'" (1998, 13), and although she criticizes the condition of women and the horrors of slavery, she does not lose her faith in the American political and social project. Even though she affirms that the world at large is ready to let "woman learn and manifest the capacities of her nature," she ends this very same sentence by adding that "here is a less encumbered field and freer air than anywhere else" (1998, 64). To her, America was still in some sense the promised land of her forebears, although the historical context was forcing her to see how far the reality was from the ideal she held dear. At times, she is skeptical about the future, as when she dreads at the possibility—soon to be a reality—of the Annexation of Texas:

> If this should take place, who will dare again to feel the throb of heavenly hope, as to the destiny of this country? The noble thought that gave unity to all our knowledge, harmony to all our designs,—the thought that the progress of history had brought on the era, the tissue of prophecies pointed out the spot, where humanity was, at last, to have a fair chance to know itself, and all men be born free and equal for the eagle's flight,—flutters as if about to leave the breast, which, deprived of it, will have no more a nation, no more a home on earth. (1998, 97)

Fuller is well aware that racial and gender fractures were dividing the country, and that no nation could affirm its liberty when so many of its citizens were in metaphorical, or actual, chains.

It has to be noted that Fuller's position on antislavery reform had been sympathetic but never as radical and committed as her devotion to the enfranchisement of women. Although the Annexation of Texas and the Italian 1848 revolutions eventually contributed to radicalize her stance towards abolitionism, it cannot be denied that her perspective was skewed by her relatively privileged condition. However, even though she was never truly active within the antislavery movement, and granted the fact that—as a white woman from Boston—she obviously had certain privileges that others were lacking, Fuller also showed a genuine interest in the reality of other marginalized groups (she visited the women's division of Sing Sing Prison

in Ossining, NY and wrote about the condition of Native Americans in *Summer on the Lakes*) and advocated for changes that would make her country closer to that idea that so far only existed on paper.

At the beginning of *Woman*, while discussing the shortcomings of the US of her time, she affirms that "if men are deaf, the angels hear" (1998, 14), thus seemingly implying that if Americans do not care to correct their errors, God, Providence or the angels will eventually make their country more just. Such a passive statement is somewhat striking, especially coming from a thinker who has generally been described as a social reformer, and it is therefore reassuring to see Fuller adding, as if to rephrase her own thought, that

> Men cannot be deaf. It is inevitable that an external freedom, an independence of the encroachments of other men, such as has been achieved for the nation, should be so also for every member of it. That which has once been clearly conceived in the intelligence cannot fail, sooner or later, to be acted out. (1998, 14)

As these few lines show, Fuller ultimately supports taking action against the current state of affairs and, having enduring faith in her compatriots, she argues that this is not a problem God is meant to solve, but should instead be addressed by America's men and women.

To do so however, self-culture is necessary. According to Fuller, a nation made up of self-reliant citizens could not condone slavery, nor accept the marginalization of women. If every single individual strove to be his or her possible best self, if all proceeded to let their soul flourish, if they all resorted to action, then they would have the power to alter American society. If the racial and gender questions were addressed and finally solved, America could have truly been called "the land of the free." In this sense, Fuller's self-culture was also, at least theoretically, a powerful tool to envision a way to overcome the evident discrepancy that existed between the real America she could not help but criticize and the ideal nation she was convinced would one day exist.

4. Conclusion

As Emerson writes in "Reforms," what animates society is our striving for a "fairer possibility of life and manner" (1972, 259) and when reflecting on reform in 19th-century America, one cannot but think about the works of Margaret Fuller. Her life was completely devoted to reform. At home or abroad, by pen or through her actions, she tried to bring about radical changes in society, and the one constant in her multifaceted efforts was the importance she reserved to self-culture. As she affirms in *Woman*, this was for her "the higher aim" (1998, 45). The years she

spent teaching, the ones she devoted to her "Conversations" and to her feminist manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, as well as the time she lived in Europe writing for the *New-York Daily Tribune*, all account for her *quest for* and *spread of* self-culture. As her experience in Italy demonstrates, Fuller privileged actions over contemplation, and it is only fitting for her character as a woman and as a scholar to advocate for a kind of self-culture that she envisioned as a way to foster actual social reform and as a concept whose application had repercussions on the lives of individuals, on gender dynamics, and on the (American) nation as whole.

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