

MARGARET FULLER OSSOLI 1810-1850

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ONE hundred years ago, on 19 July, 1850, Margaret Fuller Countess Ossoli, her Italian husband, and small son were drowned off Fire Island, New York, in the wreck of the ship on which they were coming to America. The tragedy was a real one to many Americans; they knew Margaret Fuller as one of America's leading feminists and had read her books and critical articles; they knew how fervently she had championed the cause of Italian freedom and had read her despatches describing the siege of Rome in 1849. To Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists her death meant still more, for she had been the only woman prominent in the New England Transcendental movement and had been enthusiastic in her work and encouragement.

After her death the "Margaret myth" developed, and she was regarded as a noisy, intense and unattractive personality, a blue-stocking who wrote carelessly and who "went too far". Her writings were seldom read. To the twentieth century she was a minor figure in Van Wyck Brooks' *Flowering of New England*, curious and outlandish but not significant. Many people recall only Carlyle's sneering remark when he was told that Margaret Fuller had accepted the universe: "Gad! She'd better!" or are aware that, amid the adulation with which Longfellow's poetry was received, she alone had the temerity to criticize his work vigorously. During the last few years she has received a more balanced assessment. Her biography has been written several times, and in 1941 Mason Wade published a selection from her writings. Vernon Parrington did much to rehabilitate her in his *Main Currents of American Thought*. It is doubtful whether the hundredth anniversary of her death will provoke much attention, but it seems a suitable time for a note on her character and career.

Margaret Fuller's rebellious nature was not her own fault. In grandfather and father alike convention was not strong; the one was a clergyman deprived of his church for a lukewarm attitude towards the Revolution; the other was a Massachusetts congressman, who rejected the proper Federalism and early became a Jeffersonian Republican. A strict Puritan, he rigidly regimented his daughter's education and made it severe and

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intensely bookish when other girls, like herself not of Braintree stock, were being encouraged to cultivate the same gently as the daughters of Beacon Hill. Her early training was strictly classical and her first newspaper article, published in 1825, was "A Defence of Brutus." She went on early to modern languages and fell under the spell of the current German. To Goethe she was specially devoted; he was "an imperious genius" and her first book was a translation of the *Conversations with Eckermann*, published when she was twenty-nine years old. Among all the writings on Goethe that 1949 has produced it is not uninteresting to read Margaret Fuller's introduction to the work, for we can see clearly how Goethe affected contemporary America. Nor is she an uncritical worshipper; as she says of Eckermann, she was "ruled and modeled, but not blinded by Goethe." She sums up the objections raised in America against Goethe—he is not an idealist, he is not a Christian, he is not a democrat, he is not Schiller. One by one she discusses these objections and then goes on to indicate what to her Goethe really is. Here her writing is careful, strongly contrasted with much of her later criticism. She seems to show a balanced view and a sanity that, though always a thin thread, develops throughout her life and that, had she lived longer, might have given her an entirely different literary reputation.

Between 1825 and 1833 Margaret Fuller lived in Cambridge and came to know a number of Harvard students, some of whom, such as W. H. Channing, James Freeman Clarke and F. H. Hedge, later became fairly well known as philosophers and religious thinkers. In 1836 she first visited Emerson at Concord and during the next year she taught in Bronson Alcott's Temple School, at the same time reading German with William Ellery Channing. In 1838 she began her "Conversations" for ladies in Boston and Cambridge, choosing as her first theme Greek mythology because it is "playful as well as deep." Four conversations were devoted to the subject of Venus considered the type of Instinctive Womanhood. The conversations attracted some attention then, but they provoke only amusement now; the picture they give us is that of a group of ladies trying to be feminine, literary and philosophical, and at the same time a little daring.

So far Margaret Fuller's career had been rather severe and dull, with the superficial literary flavour of the educated New England woman. But she had been reading widely and had met the members of the new group labelled by outsiders the

"Transcendentalists". Their ideas perhaps appealed to her emotionally rather than intellectually, but she worked hard and was accepted by the group (though Emerson at first sight of her had said to himself, "We shall never get far") and from 1840 to 1842 she edited their journal, the *Dial*. For it she herself wrote many reviews and critical articles. In 1841 the Brook farm community was started, and while she showed some interest, it is significant that she built her own cottage a short distance away from the community buildings.

In 1842 her second translation was published, the correspondence of Fraulein Gunderode with Bettina von Arnim, and in the next year she made a journey to West (Illinois and Wisconsin) with her friends the Clarkes; it resulted in the publication a year later of *Summer on the Lakes*. Here is her first original work, in reality an expanded version of her travel journal. She has her first look at America and finds it good:

I think I had never felt so happy that I was born in America. Woe to all country folks that had never seen this spot; never swept an enraptured gaze over the prospect that stretched beneath. I do believe Rome and Florence are suburbs compared to this capital of Nature's art.

Here is the provincial lady's Americanism, and yet remarks of this kind can often be found in Emerson and Thoreau. The reference to Rome seems ironic when we recall her last years in Italy. But in spite of the jerky, uneven style, the school exercise verses interspersed from time to time, the occasional raptures and the elevated Victorian style, the book is not without interest to-day. The plea for greater tolerance and freedom is already there; the pictures of Indians and Indian life and legend are vivid; she is specially interested in the position of women; indeed the feminist viewpoint is never far from any of her pages.

In the next year, 1845, her best known work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, appeared. It made her name at once, was widely read in America and in England, and became one of the textbooks of feminism. She has found her feet now and is familiar as a rebel against convention and taboo. Poe said of it "*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*" is a book which few women in the country would have written, and no woman in the country would have published, with the exception of Miss Fuller." When she visited London eighteen months later she found that her name and her books were well known.

Here again the writing is uneven and hasty. A connected theme is suddenly broken by a series of short apothegms, often totally disconnected from the main course, and then a unitary theme reappears. The language is sometimes high-flown to our modern ears; the boldness that shocked her contemporaries is but thin stuff now. Some of the extracts from her readings look suspiciously like padding, yet they break the monotony and link the world of Greece or of Germany with nineteenth-century America. The work is devoted to a demand for a greater place for women in the world along with a plea for tolerance and fairness in man's treatment of his brother man. Margaret Fuller summons America to a new moral "self-dependence" like that of Emerson, but also to a new conception of liberty, involving tolerance and genuine equality. Woman was not made for man but for herself; freedom is hers not merely as a concession but as a right. Indian and Egyptian mythology, Xenophon, Proclus, Latin writers, German legend, Goethe and Schiller, Manzoni, Ford and Massinger, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Wollstonecraft, the Howitts, Miss Edgeworth, John Adams, George Sand are all summoned to bear witness. She discusses women and authorship, woman and mysticism and appeals for a wider range of occupation for women—a theme that is still current today. Towards the end she strives for a peroration and the style becomes disconnected and exclamatory, but through it all there is the note of great earnestness. Here is a cause that was a very real one to Margaret Fuller. The vigour and intensity remind one of Carlyle, overflowing the medium and overwhelming the author's ability to express himself.

Margaret Fuller was now a prominent figure and the object of much discussion. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was her farewell to the little world of Boston and Cambridge; she had lost her provincialism and must go farther afield into the world. In 1844 she moved to New York and became literary critic of Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. In criticism probably lay her greatest ability, and by far the greater part of her writings deal with literary criticism. Her critical faculty is penetrating; her judgment certainly independent and always frank. She is not always facile in expressing her ideas; her writing still seems harsh and never rises above the style of competent journalism. She protests against the quick-first-impression type of criticism which is too often extreme and lacks balanced thinking. Her "Essay on Critics" is one of her best pieces:

Critics are poets cut down, some say by way of jeer; but, in truth they are men with the poetical temperament to apprehend, with the philosophical tendency to investigate. The maker is divine; the critic sees this divine, but brings it down to humanity by the analytic process. The critic is the historian who records the order of creation. In vain for the maker who knows without learning it, but not in vain for the mind of his race.

The critic is beneath the maker, but is his needed friend. What tongue could speak but to an intelligent ear, and every noble work demands its critic; the larger its scope the more comprehensive must be his power of scrutiny. The critic is not a base caviler, but the younger brother of genius. Next to invention is the power of interpreting invention; next to beauty the power of appreciating beauty.

In Goethe and Carlyle, she tends to look for "moral nature" beside "intellect"; she requires goodness and "virtue" in literature and "the spiritual man" in the writer. George Sand is, of course, deficient here and receives censure. Literary criticism has made great advances in the past century, and Margaret Fuller's type of criticism appears somewhat superficial today and may well be labelled "Victorian". But at that time criticism was a humbler handmaid of literature, her room being the transitory journals. Critical standards were more generally moral ones than is the case today and were based upon a standard of "nobility".

Nor in attempting to assign a hierarchy of worth to the nineteenth century writers would we place Eugene Sue or George Sand next to Balzac, as Margaret Fuller does. We would not give a place to Thomas Campbell or Crabbe or Thomas Moore ("And thou, Anacreon Moore, sweet warbler of Erin, what an ecstasy of sensation must thy poetic life have been!") beside Scott or Byron, still less beside Shelley, Coleridge or Wordsworth. But changing taste alone is probably responsible for the amusement with which a modern reads Margaret Fuller's remarks here, and she seems well aware that Coleridge and Wordsworth may have a more lasting place in literature than Byron. Her essay on American literature, especially when we read along with it her review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* and of Longfellow's poems, is still interesting as a survey of letters in the United States about 1846. Even Emerson's essays, despite her admiration for "the Sage of Concord" are not flattered fulsomely; her admiration does not overbalance her critical faculty:

We miss what we expect in the work of the great poet or the great philosopher, the liberal air of all the zones; the glow, uni-

form yet various in tint, which is given to a body by free circulation of the heart's blood from the hour of birth. Here is undoubtedly the man of ideas, but we want the ideal man also; want the heart and genius of human life to interpret it, and here our satisfaction is not so perfect. We doubt this friend raised himself too early to the perpendicular and did not lie along the ground long enough to hear the secret whispers of our parent life. We could wish he might be thrown by conflicts on the lap of mother earth to see if he might not rise again with added powers.

This criticism of Emerson, though differently expressed, many would still make—he is too rigorously intellectual and dogmatic; his realm is too far distant from ordinary life.

In 1846 Margaret Fuller accompanied her friends the Springs to Europe, and Horace Greeley commissioned her to write foreign correspondence for the *Tribune*. In her letters to this paper and in her private correspondence we can see revealed the remarkable development in her character that Europe gave her. The earlier letters might be those of any American tourist abroad. She travelled through Britain, France and Switzerland, but at last she arrived in Italy. "Italy", she writes, "receives me as a long-lost child and I feel myself at home here." She had learned much about Italy from the very beginning of her education, but once actually there she fell more completely under its spell than any other of the group of American writers and artists who visited it about this time. Rome and Florence had become the spiritual home of a number of such men and women, but when the Revolution came, most of them returned to America or tried to carry on their work among the difficulties of a country at war. Margaret Fuller had in a sense been searching all her life for a great cause to uphold, a freedom to fight for, such as she could not find in America. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the cause of Italian freedom, and her intellectual and emotional longings were fulfilled. The romantic element, always strong in her, also found its place, for in 1847 came her liaison with and marriage to the impoverished Marchese Ossoli, who was fighting in the Roman army; in September 1848 their son Angelo was born.

She is swept up in the war, becomes a zealous political propagandist and comes to know the entire background of the revolution better than any other English speaking person in Italy. Her correspondence loses its schoolgirlishness, and her literary style becomes professional, vigorous, almost inspired. She can see her fellow Americans with new insight, notes the servile American, the conceited American and wants to see above all

the thinking American" in Europe, where a new day is coming, day that for her own country seems far away. She writes to New York:

I find the cause of tyranny and wrong everywhere the same—and lo, my country the darkest offender because with the least excuse; foresworn to the high calling with which she was called; no champion of the rights of men, but a robber and a killer; the scourge hid behind her banner; her eyes fixed not on the stars, but on the possessions of other men.

She goes on to say that at home she could never endure the abolitionist leaders, their narrowness and the rabid, exaggerated one they adopted. To one actually in a revolution and fighting for liberty they appeared in a different light, possessed of high motive.

In another letter she pleads for a man of high principle as American ambassador to Italy:

Another century and I might ask to be made ambassador myself; . . . but women's day has not come yet. They hold their clubs in Paris, but even George Sand will not act with women as they are. They say she pleads they are too mean, too treacherous. She should not abandon them for that, which is not nature but misfortune. How much I shall have to say on that subject if I live, which I desire not, for I am very tired of the battle with giant wrongs and would like to have someone younger and stronger arise to say what ought to be said, still more what ought to be done.

She got to know Mazzini well, and the Brownings and Sandor said that no Italian had known him better. He became her hero. She ends her last (the thirty-third) letter to the *Tribune*.

Mazzini I know, the man and his acts, great, pure and constant—a man to whom only the next age can do justice as it reaps the harvest of the seed he has sown in this. Friends, countrymen, and lovers of virtue, lovers of freedom, lovers of truth! be on the alert, rest not supine in your easier lives, but remember

Mankind is one,
And beats with one great heart.

Here is the intensity that impressed and annoyed Emerson and other friends in New England. Her voice becomes shrill, and the air of a martyr is not entirely absent, but there would not be the slightest doubt of Margaret Fuller's sincerity, and her repouche to her countrymen has been made again and again since her time.

In February 1849 the Roman Republic was proclaimed and from April to July Rome was under siege by the French. Throughout it Margaret Fuller was director of a hospital and probably worked harder than she had ever worked before. In 1850 she was in Florence writing the history of the revolution, the manuscript of which perished with her. Then, after the failure of the revolution, in May she and her husband and child sailed for America. Her friends, she writes, will come to Ossoli; perhaps New York would be the best place for them, providing a literary opening for herself; there Ossoli would hear his native tongue and feel less of an exile. Then will come the future of their child, on whom she concentrates all her affection. Then came the shipwreck and the death of all three on the coast of America.

Margaret Fuller's story is not a long one, nor does it show much real accomplishment. Her conversation was better than her writing; if her aspirations were often vague their aims were worthy. Not so scholarly as Theodore Parker nor so artistic as Emerson, she had more enthusiasm than either. Her tragic life was, in Professor Parrington's words "an epitome of the great revolt of the New England mind against Puritan asceticism and Yankee materialism". On her, Europe worked a greater transformation than on any other American, tourist or emigré. Perhaps she was too much the victim of transient ideals and could be transformed rather too easily by a new scene and a new cause, but when one traces the steady development towards maturity in her career (though she was as much a rebel in 1850 as in her youth in Cambridge) it is hard to resist the conclusion that a greater cause than any hitherto was awaiting her return home. With the Abolition movement increasing in intensity and badly in need of leadership, the change of heart that she underwent in Italy might well have made her, had she survived, one of the greatest influences of nineteenth century America.