Margaret Fuller’s Early Feminist Pragmatic Method

Feminists regard Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) a foundational text in the women’s rights movement, American literature scholars credit her significant influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson, but Fuller is rarely considered a forerunner of American Pragmatism and a precursor of William James. My paper argues that Fuller’s rightful place in American and Transatlantic intellectual history is as a proponent of early feminist pragmatic praxis. Fuller’s feminine self is transpersonal, as Dorri Beam notes, it “can be felt within the body, but it does not originate there; it is a transpersonal force existing beyond the confines of the person” (63). Femininity is not rooted in the body, nor fixed for Fuller; rather, to her it was a force that could be shared with others, linking the one and the many through a notion of spirit. Applying this pragmatically, given her view of women as “the potential redeemers of society” (Matteson 37), Fuller viewed herself as women’s legal counsel (Cole 13), or as a medium for spiritual and mental awakening that would restore to society and humanity its feminine half. I will first discuss Fuller’s philosophical writing and then turn to her infamous Conversation gatherings to argue that Fuller was a metaphysician developing her own feminist pragmatic method: she was an early Pragmatist, and a precursor to William James. Participants in her Conversations had to be willing to communicate what was on their minds (Marshall 133-4), and in turn Fuller model empirical and rational thinking for her audience, turning mythology and mind topsy-turvy with a feminist spin to find conclusions that made a difference to women. The Bible and mythology were building blocks for everyday reasoning, and she sought after different readings to challenge common reasons for male dominance. In her pragmatic praxis, she urged the intellectual development of her women attendees and all women, not only through education, but also through “a remaking of the mind itself” (Cole 17).

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