

*What follows is the introduction to Deshae E. Lott's dissertation (1999). On pages 6-9, the reader can locate paragraphs defining "mysticism" as Deshae uses that word.*

## **CHAPTER I**

### **FULLER AS AN AMERICAN MYSTIC: AN INTRODUCTION**

Open up any volume of Margaret Fuller's letters; read any text by Fuller at all; it won't be long—perhaps a few sentences—before you find religious references. Fuller left room for debate when she asserted that, though others had been purer, chaster, and kinder, none had been more religious than she. However, her assessment that her entire life was one of constant religious aspiration proves unquestionable.<sup>1</sup> Fuller explored various religions and religious institutions beyond the Christian sects Quakerism, Calvinism, Unitarianism, and Catholicism. For example, she acquainted herself with Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Rosicrucianism, and Spiritualism as well as with Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Persian, and Native American mythologies.<sup>2</sup> Though recent scholarship has begun addressing Fuller's use of female mythological figures, by far the most explored aspect of Fuller's religious expressions has been her participation in Transcendentalism, an intellectual movement whose members were influenced by German Bible criticism and European Romanticism. The Transcendentalist Club, the *Dial* magazine, and the informal conversations Fuller shared with other Transcendentalists influenced Fuller's spiritual development. However, her intellectual explorations of religion took place over a time much longer than the years she directly engaged in Transcendentalist activities (1840-1845): they began in her early childhood as she studied Greek mythology with her father and proved on-going until she drowned at sea in 1850 at the age of forty.

Fuller had already explored many religious philosophies by the time that she drafted her 1842 Credo, in which she asserted that she believed in Christ because she could do without him (qtd. in Braun 255). Despite her claimed independence from

Christian thought, her spiritual odyssey definitely occurred within a Christian context. As James Turner's *Without God, Without Creed* and Nathan O. Hatch's *The*

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This dissertation follows the style and format of the *MLA Handbook*.

*Democratization of American Christianity* show, during Fuller's lifetime (1810-1850) America remained a Christian nation, a nation void of the increasing unbelief that manifested itself in the 1865-1890 period. Fuller, in effect, joined antebellum Americans who were embracing religious skepticism and experimentation but relegating that skepticism and experimentation to defining the deity's and humanity's limitations and possibilities; they did not question the value of the very concept of a deity.<sup>3</sup> These religious investigations helped Fuller create what William James refers to in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* as a "personal religion": "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 32, 34); according to James, "personal religion" arises from and encompasses one's "total reaction upon life" (James 36-37). In *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Caroline Walker Bynum refers to "spirituality" in a similar way, defining it as "lived religion" or how a person expresses the interplay between organized and individualized religion (44).

Fuller's "personal religion" or "spirituality" both drew upon and helped shape antebellum religious culture. America's nineteenth-century cultural reformers—believing their era a *kairos*, a "moment in history marked by entry of the Kingdom of God into human affairs"—often created personalized cosmologies (Abzug 5). Robert H. Abzug's *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* shows how this renovating of religious systems helped bring about the fragmentation of antebellum Protestantism, especially Unitarianism and Congregationalism. Similarly, in *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas argues that the religious transformations of nineteenth-century America, which resulted in the

deterioration of a male-dominated theology, provided no clear vision of the religious structure that would replace it (168). Fuller embraced the transformative religious *zeitgeist*, contributing her own religious rhetoric to the times. In fact, Fuller provided a model that anticipated later moves in American religious culture away from organized religion and toward more syncretistic and subjective practices. Subjective religious practices, Fuller demonstrated, did not necessitate social disengagement. To reduce the limitations and potential stagnation imposed by others' theologies and ideologies, Fuller remained fairly disengaged from America's organized religious groups and religiously-inspired reform groups.<sup>4</sup> However, she did find ways to engage herself in communities and to help create antebellum religious culture. She explained that "The Swedenborgians say, 'that is *Correspondence*,' and the phrenologists, 'that is *Approbativeness*,' and so think they know all about it. It would not be so, if we could be like the birds, —make one method, and then desert it, and make a new one,—as they build their nests" (*Memoirs* I: 109). This desire for mobility and creativity relates to the Judeo-Christian tradition, where as Regina M. Schwartz shows in *Curse of Cain: the Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, "Everything was about the land" (48). American history, continuing this tradition, links landscape and redemptive history. Fuller participates in this history by using her geographical moves, which related to her career moves, to inspire new methods for presenting her beliefs. Specifically, Fuller used her teaching, journalism, and political activism to broadcast her personal religion.

Fitting James' model, Fuller's "feelings, acts, and experiences" in "solitude," particularly her mystical experiences, profoundly affected how she contextualized both her relationship to what she considered "the divine" and the relationships that she developed with herself and her world. Like Christian women mystics before and after her,<sup>5</sup> Fuller felt that her mysticism, which served as her link between the human and the divine, helped legitimate her spiritual (and, for the time, often radical) teachings by giving her the insight, courage, and authority to offer others spiritual guidance. In her 1840 journal, Fuller notes two mystical experiences that motivate her public

proclamations of faith: one during the fall of 1831 when she “was taken up into God” and one during the spring of 1832 when “the Holy Ghost descended like a dove” (“Self-Definitions” 12). While she writes, “I am astonished that I have not . . . be[en] taken back to God” (“Self-Definitions” 11),<sup>6</sup> she also states, “I grow more and more what they will call a mystic” (“Self-Definitions” 12). At this time, Fuller appropriates the label “mystic” and begins articulating to others the ways that she fits that role. On September 26, 1840, Fuller writes Caroline Sturgis that “All has been revealed, all foreshown yet I know it not. . . . I have no words, nor can I now perceive that I shall be able to paint for any one the scenery, nor place in order the history of these great events Yet I have no wish to exclude any one” (*Letters II*: 158). Fuller places herself in the mystical literary tradition by first noting how inadequately language conveys her mystical consciousness and then attempting to use language to convey that consciousness to a community.<sup>7</sup>

Fuller makes the mystic’s traditional move from exclusivity to inclusivity, from internal experience to outward expression. Indeed, by late October 1840, after Fuller’s stay with the Ralph Waldo Emerson family and at the start of the spiritual “crisis” critics link to the marriage of Anna Barker and Samuel Ward (Capper *Margaret Fuller* 282; Rose 59, 182; Steele Introduction xv),<sup>8</sup> Fuller writes William Henry Channing that “Undervaluing the intellect” makes us “slaves of a sect, instead of organs of the Spirit. . . . [T]he time seems now to have come for reinterpreting old dogmas. I would now preach . . . mysticism” (*Letters II*: 172-173). At first glance, it may appear contradictory for Fuller to write of a by-gone experience as “still . . . sweetly near” and as increasingly a part of her orientation to herself and to the world (“Self-Definitions” 12, 8). But Fuller differentiates between having a mystical experience (an immersion into or a penetration from light that initiates new insights) and *living* as a mystic (applying those new insights as she learns to understand them). As Bell Gale Chevigny notes in *The Woman and the Myth*, Fuller comes to see her conversion experiences initiating not a single turning point but rather a receptivity to a lifetime of turning points (149): what Fuller referred to in her 1844 journal as the

continual process of spiritual resurrection and regeneration (*Memoirs* I: 148; Berg and Perry 105).

Though Fuller's mystical consciousness abided in each of her careers, her self-expressions differed depending on her recent experiences and her audiences. She continually exhorted herself to share her mystical consciousness with others, believing that "We are not merely one another's priests or gods, but ministering angels, exercising in part the same function as the Great Soul in the whole of seeing the perfect through the imperfect nay, making it come there" (*Letters* II: 214). She understood that it was "impossible to enjoy this . . . mutual visionary life" with everyone, that "through ages if not for ever promises & beckons the life of reception, of renunciation" (Berg and Perry 105). Others would receive and renounce her attempts to be an instrument for "the Great Soul." Nonetheless, she kept her communal vision and sought ways in which each person benefited a larger group in its eschatological goal of "incorruption" (Berg and Perry 105; qtd. in Braun 248).

Renunciation itself, Fuller saw "as one part of a purifying process by which obstructions to the divine life were burned away, allowing the 'true' or divinized self to shine forth," reinforcing her belief that "[i]nstead of dependence on others . . . the goal was self-reliance coupled with personal authenticity" (Ash 249). Because she believed in spiritual interdependency and interconnectedness, however, this self-reliance and personal authenticity necessitated communal engagement. Thus, Fuller relied upon her mystical consciousness to attach to life deeply and to appropriate her role as an "organ[] of the Spirit". Transgressing both gender boundaries by preaching and institutional boundaries by doing so in a social context rather than through a religious institution, Fuller reinterpreted old dogmas, cared for others' welfare, and invited her audiences to do the same. With her mystical model, Fuller demonstrated her ideas for America's forthcoming religious culture, one which she hoped would approach a "mutual visionary life."

## Definitions of Mysticism

The truth claims that Fuller adopted comprised her theology, which shaped her spiritual life and, consequently, her entire life. As this study situates Fuller's mysticism at the center of her theology, it is important to understand how terms such as *mystic*, *mysticism*, *mystical experience*, *mystical consciousness*, *mystical sensibility*, and *mystical performance* will and will not be used herein.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *mysticism*, defined as “an extraordinary religious experience,” first entered the English language in 1736. The ambiguities associated with the words *extraordinary*, *religious*, and *experience* provide an immediate sense of the problems that can emerge in foregrounding mysticism as a topic. Attempts at greater specificity often deem *mystical experience* an “unmediated” experience with a “God” or “Ground of Being,” further complicating the issue. In contrast to William James, some scholars assert that mystical experiences differ from “paramystical phenomena” such as fasting, magic, stigmata, levitations, trances, visions, and voices (Bridges 6-7; Bynum 60). In addition, mystical theorists debate whether to use an essentialist/perennial or an empiricist/constructivist approach to mystical experience.<sup>9</sup> What makes an experience inherently mystical? And is the mystical experience transhistorical? Is it cross-cultural? On the one hand, theorists like Aldous Huxley argue that historical sensitivity leads to cultural ideas of scarcity and, thus, to enactments of violence foreign to the transhistorical and communal nature of mysticism (11, 20, 44-45, 52, 94); from this perspective, historicity defines boundaries and highlights limitations whereas universalizing removes insignificant distinctions and favors unity. On the other hand, more recent scholars such as Schwartz throughout *Curse of Cain* completely reverse Huxley's position, asserting that historical sensitivity promotes consciousness-raising and, thus, a more constructive spiritual community. When stories are forgotten and rewritten, one group replaces another, each with similar motives: seeking power and believing in the scarcity of resources and the group's right to whatever it can attain and retain through

violence. Thus, a different kind of value arises from comparing different stories, different cultural realities, individual renderings of “truth.” Along these lines, “typological” approaches to mysticism like Joseph Campbell’s might be read as one person’s imposition of a set of beliefs upon multiple religious practices and individual spiritual expressions.<sup>10</sup>

Bernard McGinn, noting the many different ways that people use the term *mystical experience*, chooses instead to use the term *mystical consciousness* his general introduction to the five-volume series *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, which appears in the first volume *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*; for McGinn, *mystical consciousness* relates to an entire life, not a single moment: “the mystical element in Christianity,” he writes, “is part of its belief and practices that concern the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (xvii-xix). This study of Fuller’s spiritual life appropriates McGinn’s term *mystical consciousness*. Moreover, by looking at a single person’s articulations of her mystical consciousness, it leans toward the empiricist/constructivist approaches to mysticism. Most important to this investigation, then, is Margaret Fuller’s understanding of *mysticism*: the personal and cultural experiences shaping her depiction of herself as a mystic—or, as a person having had mystical experiences (as she defines them) and, thenceforth, living with a mystical consciousness or mystical sensibility that transforms her life into one of mystical performances. Accordingly, this study addresses the influence of paramystical phenomena and practices on Fuller’s mystical consciousness but, following Fuller, distinguishes them from mysticism.

To present *mysticism* as a viable “-ism”, however, this study must acknowledge some similarities among individual experiences that elicit such a label. As McGinn notes, “If mysticism needs to be understood contextually, and if the mystical text and its place in the tradition—not mystical experience (whatever it may be)—are the primary objects of study, we must still ask what mysticism is” (xv). With

this in mind, I offer a few definitions that inform this investigation. Mysticism arises from a particular kind of experience or process. John Dewey offers a broad working definition of the mystical orientation when he locates the commonality of mystical experiences themselves in “acute esthetic surrender.” His description neither requires nor disallows a deity, but it does attempt to explain why “religionists” consider such experiences forms of “ecstatic communion”:

I do not see any way of accounting for the multiplicity of experiences of this kind (something of the same quality of being found in every spontaneous and uncoerced esthetic response), except on the basis that there are stirred into activity resonances of dispositions acquired in primitive relationships of the living being to its surroundings, and irrecoverable in distinct or intellectual consciousness. . . . There is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves—that is in the abstract—would be designated “ideal” and “spiritual.” (35-36)

Fuller’s mysticism emerged during the period referred to as the American Renaissance (approximately 1825 to 1865), a Christian context heavily imbued with Romanticism’s idealism and eclecticism. Thus, while Fuller participated in the spiritual syncretism of her community, her “esthetic surrender” was to a God, and she conceived her mystical experiences as “uncoerced esthetic response[s]” to that God. Fuller’s mystical experiences themselves, however, do not entirely comprise her mysticism. Rather, our understanding of Fuller’s mysticism depends upon her mystical consciousness, which manifests itself as her personal religion or her spirituality.

Whether one argues that mysticism is independent of or dependent upon one’s historicity, conceptualizing it as a process allows for mediation from the mystic and the mystic’s culture by the time that the mystical experience is translated into words. Approaches like Evelyn Underhill’s, Gerda Lerner’s, and Bernard McGinn’s prove helpful because they describe *mysticism* as a life process in which the mystical experience itself (or “acute esthetic surrender” or “ecstatic communion” or

“illumination”) is only one part. Throughout *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, for example, Underhill shows that mysticism entails the Neoplatonic stages of preparing for the mystical experience (purgation), undergoing the mystical experience (illumination), and living as a mystic by outwardly applying and articulating one’s new insights (unification). Similarly, Gerda Lerner writes that mysticism results from “a way of life, of inspiration and sudden revelatory insight”; as a result of the mystical experience, the mystic sees “human beings, the world and the universe in a state of relatedness, open to understanding by intuitive and immediate perception” (*Creation of the Feminist Consciousness* 66).<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the best statement on this topic, however, is McGinn’s:

it is important to remember that mysticism is always a process or a way of life. Although the essential note—or, better, goal—of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense. Isolation of the goal from the process and the effect has led to much misunderstanding of the nature of mysticism. (xvi)

For McGinn, a person involved in the mystical process functions from and expresses a mystical consciousness. This study operates on the premise that mysticism is a way of life, not a single or a ritualized event. The mystical experience makes an individual aware of her mystical consciousness or mystical sensibility, and this is an abiding awareness. However, social context affects the self-descriptive label and the roles the individual consequently appropriates (whether she will deem herself a mystic, for instance) and the metaphors or forms the mystic uses to re-construct her mystical experience(s) and to convey the insights contained in her mystical consciousness.

As literary scholarship, this dissertation necessarily focuses on Fuller’s mystical language, or her public performances of her mystical consciousness. The

focus on Fuller's mystical language does not ignore the argument that a mystical experience itself consists of "pure consciousness," which is nonlinguistic (Forman 7, 22-23, 42), or the fact that most mystics, at least for a while, consider the mystical experience ineffable (James 302). However, it applies theories asserting that language contributes a great deal to the creation of the mystical experience.<sup>12</sup> Language, such theories argue, both facilitates the transformation of consciousness (mantras, koans, chants) and expresses the new consciousness. Accordingly, claims of ineffability and accompanying silences often reflect the multiple power negotiations the mystic faces. First, the mystic has to assert power over the inner ineffable experience. The mystic herself might question the legitimacy of her experience, but others will certainly question how to know and who determines whether the inspiration is divine or demonic (King "Prophetic Power" 29). Depending on the cultural context, a mystic also might be negotiating power relationships between God and humanity, between a religious institution's established creeds and the mystic's insights, and between the female mystic's authoritative role and male religious and cultural leaders (King "Prophetic Power" 24). Indeed, if the mystic is female, often the mystical experience is valued but no support emerges for the mystic's public leadership through which she might express her insights (King "Prophetic Power" 27; "Afterword" 336). Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* that the mystic's alternative, creative discourse emerges in response to external restraints that have led to intense oppression or to apathy, to confrontations with the reality of death (9, 15, 45, 127). Others join Kristeva in conceiving of such mystical discourse as a celebration of creative powers, processes, and products (Bynum 18, 26, 60-61, 133; Katz "Mystical" 33).

Whether the mystical experience itself emerges from language creations, results in language creations, or does both, mystical discourse provides a space for transformative power on personal, social, political, spiritual, and cultural levels. As Michael Lieb argues, mystical discourse either will be heretical or will create new cultural myths (8-9). Focusing on Fuller's mystical discourse, her developing

understanding of her mystical consciousness, and her various public performances of that consciousness, we can increase our knowledge of the power she assumed and the cultural transformations she facilitated—not to mention understanding something more of how a mystical consciousness might work in the world.

### **Fuller as a Mystic: Former Scholarship**

Steven T. Katz begins his book *Mysticism and Language* (1992) with the comment that “Texts ranging from the autobiographical and poetic to the dogmatic and theological do not tell us everything about mystical experiences, but they do tell us a good deal. And they certainly reveal far more than a simplistic reading of claims of ineffability would suggest.” Katz asserts the importance of studying mysticism as it interacts with language “to bring into the open the subterranean principles and unspoken premises of mystical discourse” (“Editor’s Introduction” v). Later in the text, Katz writes that “the main legacy we have of the great mystics is their *writings* and related *linguistic* creations. We have no access to their special experience independently of these texts” (“Mystical” 4). While this subjectivity of course holds true of the mystical experience as such, in the case of nineteenth-century American mystics it is very often *not* the case that we only know of their legacy through *their* linguistic creations (writings, speeches, lectures, conversations, or other mystical performances); instead, many others’ linguistic records complement such mystics’ records of their lives. Thus, whereas biographical information on fourteenth-century Julian of Norwich or the fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* proves scarce, biographical information on Margaret Fuller, comparatively, abounds.<sup>13</sup> However, it may very well be these prevailing ideas of the inaccessibility of the mystic’s revelatory experience and of the mystic’s life (Again, this latter stance proves inapplicable ideas in terms of many nineteenth-century mystics in America and elsewhere and twentieth-century mystics, wherever they are, because of advances in print technology and literacy.) that curtail explorations such as this study. This

dissertation seeks to acknowledge the wealth of information documenting Fuller's mysticism by using her and others' linguistic creations to demonstrate the development of Fuller's mysticism and the far-reaching ways that it affected her career and antebellum American society. It re-examines Fuller's body of work: her well-known texts such as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as well as her journals, letters, and newspaper articles, and her students' transcriptions and descriptions of her presentations at the Greene Street School in Providence and the Conversations in Boston.

Another plausible reason for the exclusion of mysticism in Fuller scholarship is a confusion over the idea of mysticism itself. Although texts on mysticism and texts on American religion abound,<sup>14</sup> only a few studies attempt to explore the role of mysticism in America directly (Bridges, Bucke, Clymer and Morey); moreover, those that do display questionable universalizing and mythologizing tendencies. Recent endeavors to explore American mystical literature through the lens of Buddhism approximate this study's analysis of an author's presentations of her mystical sensibilities (Buell "Transcendentalist Movement" 22, 31); however, while the use of Buddhism can provide philosophical coherence, it also sometimes can impose a Buddhist framework on texts lacking direct Buddhist influences, thereby both oversimplifying Buddhism and transhistoricizing American mysticism. American mysticism in some ways proves hard to define because it is syncretic, emerging independent from any one particular church system and any one particular religious or reform movement. Investigations of American mystics on an individual level, however, can demonstrate the way that personal religions are shaped by and help transform both American religious culture and American culture in general. Fuller's life offers an excellent example of the value of such scholarship.

Fuller's biographers—though increasingly attentive to Fuller's cultural influence and stature, especially as they relate to women's rights—have given little attention to one of the most important aspects of her life: its mystical center, from which her writings, teachings, and actions radiated. Shortly after her death, Ralph

Waldo Emerson observed that Fuller's mysticism proved too pervasive and obvious to merit critical attention (*Memoirs* I: 361); and later biographers, who, unlike Emerson, did not know Fuller personally, gradually lost sight of the obviousness and the pervasiveness of this aspect of her life. Most critical discourse on Fuller's life as a mystic appears as one-sentence references. For instance, without an accompanying discussion, Charles Capper writes that Fuller's life was, "perhaps at its deepest level, semimystical" ("Margaret Fuller" 515). Thus, the importance of Fuller's mysticism is acknowledged, but in a cursory way. Likewise, after Chevigny in "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography" (1983) asserts her earlier failures to acknowledge Fuller's mysticism, she does not then explore Fuller as a mystic (97). Fuller studies, then, often emphasize the intellectual and political Fuller and de-emphasize the mystical Fuller.

Although explorations of Fuller's intellect and political activism create a rich body of Fuller scholarship, the tendency to eschew her religious orientations warrants reconsideration. As Patricia B. Ash argues about Fuller in her dissertation *The Quest for Harmony: Religion in the Origin of the Antebellum Woman's Rights Movement*, "Although she later gained greater appreciation of the need for political action, Fuller never deviated from this initial religious emphasis" (269). Harold Bloom asserts that "American Religion is pervasive and overwhelming, however it is masked" (22). Fuller's lifelong participation in American religion has been masked in various ways by herself but in even more ways by her biographers. In "Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies" (1995), Jenny Franchot notes the absence of religiously-centered literary scholarship in a nation imbued with religious inclinations and expressions. While calling for religiously-centered studies of American literature, Franchot also addresses the sometimes warranted biases and anxieties that relegate to the private domain religious topics as religious topics. A number of factors contribute to the need for this study, which helps restore the loss of scholarship on the religious aspects of Margaret Fuller.

The tendency to link the mystical with the irrational and the heretical certainly motivates critical distinctions between Fuller's mysticism and her intellect and political activism. Such protective presentations of Fuller's mysticism abound. For example, Fuller's brother Arthur Buckminster Fuller, aware that many of the Americans who distrusted marginal perspectives could benefit from his sister's insights, spends over a quarter of his prefatory comments to posthumous editions of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* demonstrating that his sister was a Christian. Arthur Fuller eschews Fuller's spiritual deviance, whether mystical or occult, and highlights her Christian sensibilities. In order to broadcast her mystical consciousness, Fuller herself at times understated and decorated it, imbuing existing forms with her own spiritual vitality. Following his sister's model, Arthur Fuller responded to audience needs and contextualized Fuller's beliefs accordingly. The mystical and the marginal, he stressed, were not necessarily occult or un-Christian. Comments such as early biographer Margaret Bell's that "had she [Fuller] disembarked at Salem in 1638 with her forbear Thomas Fuller, she doubtless would have been burned as a witch, for she believed in signs and omens, in the magic of certain precious stones, in charms and talismans" lend a pejorative reading to Fuller's mystical and occult inclinations (17). Countering the mass public's stereotypical renderings of the "occult" can be a daunting task, easier obscured or overlooked than addressed.

Whereas Arthur Fuller wanted to assure readers that his sister was not heretical, other critics have wanted to stress Fuller's intellectual aptitude and civic responsibility. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's biography *Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1884), for instance, argues that since Fuller's "especial creed" is "the best part of intellect is action" (6), Fuller "was not framed by nature for a mystic, a dreamer, . . . a book-worm" or any other role "too much in the clouds" (4-5). The same year, Oliver Wendell Holmes's biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson makes a similar assertion regarding his subject (390, 396). Such distinctions emerge in more recent scholarship, too. As Chevigny discusses Fuller's increasing political engagement between 1839 and 1844, she also asserts that during this time period Fuller's "mysticism and pain

were replaced by a more direct expression of passion or pride” (“Growing Out” 85).<sup>15</sup> And in *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*, David M. Robinson notes that while Emerson’s visionary life does not disappear, a shift to pragmatism definitely appears. Such scholarship accords with Laurence Buell’s assertion that Transcendentalists in general talked about the mystical more than they actually underwent a “true mystical experience, that is, a transfiguration from within” (*Literary Transcendentalism* 59-60). Though mystical experiences indeed were infrequent and fleeting and though authors often criticize their inability to accurately depict them, the effect of such experiences was less isolated than such scholarship suggests.

A similar type of dichotomization between the mystical and the worldly occurs in studies that address Fuller’s mystical consciousness without connecting it to Fuller’s social and political engagement. For example, Jeffrey Steele’s study “Freeing the ‘Prisoned Queen’” discusses some of the mystical ideas in Fuller’s largely unpublished 1835-1844 poems that served as her auxiliary “diary” (137). And Carolyn Hlus explores in a mystical context how Fuller develops Swedenborg’s theory of correspondence in the essays “The Magnolia of Lake Pontchartrain” (January 1841), “Leila” (April 1841), and “Yuca Filamentosa” (January 1842). Though these articles help illuminate the mystical nature of Fuller’s expressions, they do not address Fuller’s mystical expressions beyond her poetry and early, abstract essays.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographers, then, subordinate the mystical and visionary to the intellectual and pragmatic or separate the mystical from the pragmatic, suggesting that the two do not support one another. Such arguments often erase spiritual agency. We naturally would want to avoid using a label that suggests Fuller’s withdrawal from her socio-historical landscape, for such a rendering of Fuller’s life as well as many American mystics’ lives would be inaccurate. What I aim to show is the intricate relationship between Fuller’s personal religion and the way she experienced the world. This study positions personal religion and worldly involvement not so much as competing values where one dominates at any given time

but rather as interrelated components, and it explores the ways that Fuller used culturally available forms to express her philosophy.

Ideally for Fuller, the life of contemplation merged with the life of action, the mystical with the practical. In her 1842 Credo, Fuller articulates “the necessary harmony of the two lives”; she argues that internal faith and insights complement external experiences and deeds (qtd. in Braun 249). Underhill shows that this idea emerges throughout the Christian tradition where “ambassadors to the Absolute” apply their spiritual knowledge for social “good”:<sup>16</sup>

It is the peculiarity of the Unitive Life that it is often lived, in its highest and most perfect forms, in the world; and exhibits its works before the eyes of men. As the law of our bodies is “earth to earth” so, strangely enough, is the law of our souls. The spirit of man having at last come to full consciousness of reality, completes the circle of Being; and returns to fertilize those levels of existence from which it sprang. Hence, the enemies of mysticism, who have easily drawn a congenial moral from the “morbid and solitary” lives of contemplatives in the earlier and educative stages of the Mystic Way, are here confronted very often by the disagreeable spectacle of the mystic as a pioneer of humanity, a sharply intuitive and painfully practical person: an artist, a discoverer, a religious or social reformer, a national hero, a “great active” amongst the saints. (414)<sup>17</sup>

Though Underhill primarily (though not exclusively) uses Catholic examples to prove her point, in American religious culture, the Puritan journal keeping and Messianic vision and the Quaker inner light played out in pacificism also demonstrate Protestants integrating personal revelations or religious beliefs with their social system. Fuller’s desire to merge her personal religion and her outward expressions accords with a variety of religious expressions. The concept of a unified life also appears among Eastern philosophies such as the various manifestations of Buddhism, where the end goal of the monastic retreat or the intense study of an art form becomes the ability to

live in the world while applying and embodying spiritual principles (Kapleau 17). Thus, Fuller's commitment to merging her personal religion and her actions arises from her intellectual studies of various religions as well as from antebellum society, whose religious culture and free enterprise system promoted the basic human attitudes of finding spiritual and pragmatic benefits in any given situation. As Abzug argues, American culture encourages the American mystic to participate in and influence politics, society, and the economy (4).

Familiarity with the mystical traditions and American religious culture necessarily informs a study on Fuller's religious thought; without taking such an interdisciplinary approach to Fuller's life, we can easily under-represent or misrepresent her mysticism. Likewise, confusion arises from mentioning Fuller's mystical consciousness without adequately developing its relationship to the main argument(s). For example, it has been argued that Fuller, because she was a woman, found herself silenced as a mystic or forced to speak with a masculine voice;<sup>18</sup> however, while many male theologians have deemed women's unmediated mystical experiences "heretical" (Borchert 220),<sup>19</sup> as the lives of St. John of the Cross, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman prove, even male mystics have been deemed heretical and have created texts that underwent extensive censorship and thus have had their voices silenced. True, the model of Virgin Mary as it is presented in Scriptures (written in another patriarchal society) suggests that Woman speaks through the physical bearing of her male child, through her reproductive role alone. And Fuller's October 22, 1840, letter to Caroline Sturgis proves that Fuller was aware of such renderings of the spiritual woman's role (*Letters* II: 167). However, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller allows the holy Mother metaphor to represent how women's labor will engender a new, purer race; and, of course, the word *race* implies that women themselves as well as men will be transformed (60). Moreover, the historical mother of Jesus of Nazareth could have differed greatly from the ways that males authored her in their writings.

Fuller also has precedents among female (and male) mystics for not conceiving of her God in masculine or even gendered terms. For example, long before Fuller, Julian of Norwich speaks of the Spirit as both masculine and feminine, calling the deity both Father and Mother and connoting a sense of androgyny or genderlessness (279, 285, 293). Similarly, Hildegard of Bingen's visions have been described as a picture of the universe—the mind of God—as a vagina (Borchert 206-207), but the pronouns that she uses for her deity are masculine.<sup>20</sup> So, the rhetoric used to present the ideas of the deity are not straightforward (read “masculine”) in “the conventional female mystic’s language.” Moreover, when, as Sandra Gustafson writes, Fuller “avoids identifying her deity in gendered terms” (57), she follows the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius: the deity is defined and then negated in terms of abstractions such as “good,” “light,” “beautiful,” “love,” “ecstasy,” and “zeal” (71); God is neither male nor female; God is beyond all definitions. Historically, female and male mystics have both used and challenged traditional forms of expression as they shared their revelations. Fuller joins such efforts with a vast array of renderings of the deity. Throughout her life, Fuller depicts divinity as male, female, androgynous, and genderless. The point of this study is that, wherever Fuller is and whatever she articulates, her rhetoric reflects her personal religion, which is largely based on her mystical consciousness.

While cursory references to Fuller as a mystic prove commonplace, Jeffrey Steele’s “Margaret Fuller’s Rhetoric of Transformation” and Patricia B. Ash’s dissertation chapter on Fuller delve deeper into the manifestations of Fuller’s mysticism. In particular, these two very recent studies convey how Fuller’s mysticism relates to gender issues that she addressed between 1840 and 1845. Though Steele complies with the dominant culture’s distinction between the mystical and the pragmatic when he asserts that Fuller used “a mystical language of female being that countered the pragmatic tones of her male-dominated society” (282), he goes on to show Fuller’s mystically-inspired rhetoric making powerful and practical arguments that challenged antebellum women’s social place. Ash treats Fuller’s mysticism to an

even greater extent. She mentions the influence of Swedenborg, Novalis, and German Romantic literature in general on Fuller's mysticism (221-234); however—using models proposed by Carol Christ, Stephen Crites, Cynthia Eller, and Anne Mellor—she ultimately defines Fuller's mystical experiences as a woman's experience: a move from nothingness to an awakening that inspires a new-naming process (71-80, 221-230, 404-406).<sup>21</sup> Ash particularly discusses the gendered religious rhetoric that she observes in Fuller's *Dial* essays (255-261), *Summer on the Lakes* (261-267), and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (267-281) and argues that Fuller's advocacy of women's rights in these texts—especially in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which Ash defines as the woman's movement's "sacred history" (81)—was motivated by Fuller's religious vision of equality for all. Providing important contributions to Fuller scholarship, Steele's and Ash's recent studies tie Fuller's spirituality to her political engagement on the topic of women's roles.

This dissertation contributes to the critical examinations of the influences upon and the expressions of Fuller's mystical philosophy. Like Gustafson, Steele, and Ash, it recognizes gender as an important facet of Fuller's mystical consciousness.<sup>22</sup> However, it also reexamines texts from the 1835-1845 period as well as texts before and after that time that have not yet been explored for their mystical elements; and it presents significant social and political issues in addition to gender that Fuller's mysticism motivates her to address as she attempts to lead others toward her mystical vision, enticing them to share her mystical way of life.

### **Taking Mysticism from the Cloister to the Community, A Preview**

This study will not subordinate the religious but rather examine how Fuller dramatizes her mystical vision in forming, transforming, and performing her spirituality. In the process of presenting facets of Fuller's religious life, I establish Margaret Fuller as an American mystic responding to both broad and particular cultural productions, trace the rhetoric of Fuller's different mystical performances, and

show how Fuller uses language to engage Americans in her mystical vision. In exploring Fuller's "mystical model," this study uses the word "model" somewhat literally. I contextualize my chapters as spaces that Fuller inhabits, moves through, with her roles as student, teacher, journalist, and political activist. Chapter two focuses on previously unpublished marginalia that Fuller wrote in her 1826 Eyre and Strahan Bible and relates this marginalia to Fuller's religious development. It shows that Fuller made these annotations shortly after her two most profound mystical experiences and relates study of her religious heritage to her recent spiritual awakening. The placement of these annotations parallels Fuller's own position (as a mystic) to her society. Tracking Fuller's movements between marginal and interlinear positions, a movement typical in many mystical traditions and central to American expressions of mysticism, the chapter reveals Fuller's early private responses to her religious culture and shows the general progression in Fuller's understanding and articulation of her mystical consciousness. The second chapter, then, reflects in part Fuller's entombment or monastic stage, her cloistering. At this time, Fuller undergoes a spiritual marriage (mystical experiences) and takes private, personal oaths to develop her wisdom (the ability to apply these mystical experiences) in ways that accord with her understanding of those mystical experiences and her emerging mystical consciousness.

The next three chapters detail Fuller's public performances of her mystical consciousness in her roles as teacher, journalist, and political activist. That is, like many Zen Buddhist monks and even American monks like Thomas Merton, Fuller moves from an isolated monastic life to social engagement. In different locations she then performs her visions and provides a model for others to engage them in "this mutual visionary life." Contemporary social phenomena such as spiritualism, mesmerism, anti-Catholicism, transcendentalism, women's rights, educational reform, and the rise of the newspaper affected how Fuller formed, transformed, and performed her spirituality. Each role that Fuller assumed presented different limitations and possibilities in terms of economic, professional, and spiritual prestige. Fuller's

experimentations reveal how different geographical locations—Providence, Boston, New York City, Rome—affected her fluctuations between a receptivity to and a renunciation of specific religious beliefs. Moreover, they help elucidate the flexibilities and inflexibilities in the cultural landscape of antebellum America.

No person or group led Fuller through processes conducive to mystical states, but she lived within a religious culture that stressed combining the moral with the practical; moreover, some religious leaders like William Ellery Channing the Elder stressed believing that the creator's self-evident truths were available to everyone. The practical value of a religious education, in fact a belief that every thing ultimately related to the spiritual, was a belief propagated by Fuller's father and the makers of American culture at large. Fuller, acting as a creator of antebellum culture, adopted these premises, which thereby helped her to acquire an audience and to subvert the encompassing system. In effect, by joining the Transcendentalists in re-figuring what it meant that ultimately everything related to the spiritual, by integrating flexibility and fluidity into what was deemed religious, Fuller could convey her radical beliefs in socially acceptable forms.

Two things contribute to the value of Fuller's religious rhetoric aside from her mystical experiences and her basic orientations that sensed unity in diversity, created beauty in the face of ugliness. First, she was ever-creative, continually finding new cultural means for expressing her vision. This lack of stasis shows that she was not simply imitating someone else; she possessed an internal drive to create new forms of harmony while she challenged current situations and called for their transformation. Second, she was able to practice the lifestyle that she advocated, to speak from behavioral and not just intellectual experiences. If we can find flaws in her belief system, we cannot fault her in terms of integrity. She describes her brand of integrity and her hope for others' integrity as follows:

Is it not the object of all philosophy, as well as of religion and poetry, to prevent its [materialism's] prevalence? Must not those who see most truly be ever making statements of the truth to combat this

sluggishness, or worldliness? What else are sages, poets, preachers, born to do? Men go an undulating course, —sometimes on the hill, sometimes in the valley. But he only is in the right who in the valley forgets not the hill-prospect, and knows in the darkness that the sun will rise again. That is the real life which is subordinated to, not merged in, the ideal; he is only wise who can bring the lowest act of his life into sympathy with its highest thought. And this I take to be the one only aim of our pilgrimage here. I agree with those who think that no true philosophy will try to ignore or annihilate the material part of man, but will rather seek to put it in its place, as servant and minister to the soul. (*Memoirs* II: 30-31)

Fuller links private spirituality to public performance, contemplation to action. Thus, Fuller found or developed roles that allowed her to express her mystical vision—to lead others in the process that, among life’s chaos, allowed for her a sense of truth, goodness, beauty, and peace. Indeed, fundamentally, Fuller stressed integrity, teaching others the value of both self-integration (which, for Fuller, also entailed unification with the deity) and social integration. Fuller thus exemplifies what Karen L. King notes as a commonality among women religious leaders: that despite the emphasis on individualist ethics that emerged with the concept of Self Reliance, these women typically have a vision of a spiritual community and strive to provide models that advocate such a community by linking their spirituality, public preaching, and political consciousness (“Afterword” 341-342).<sup>23</sup>

Fuller, like many American mystics and now modern mystics around the globe (McGinn xvi), takes her spiritual vows and conducts her spiritual practices outside of a particular religion and group (she breaks from Transcendentalism and eschews utopic groups.). She places much importance on spatial mobility in terms of the spirit, an importance that can be related to the American fascination with the landscape and mobility of all kinds. Indeed, in America at this time, people were not trying to go back to something as much as trying to move forward, or so many of the cultural

creators thought. A sense of eschatology continued to pervade the culture. Fuller, by conflating individual, social, and cosmic commitments, set a pattern for the American mystic's alternation between marginal and interlinear social positions. While her beliefs and patterns of behavior fall within the larger American religious culture, they often reflect hybridity, proving intertextual and non-denominational. Indeed, Fuller was a pluralist, if not a moral relativist; she rejected exclusivity except in terms of basic moral premises.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, her mystical orientation, despite its obvious limitations (she had to appropriate the language, the metaphors of her space/place/culture/historical moment), exudes vitality. Though this dissertation does not perfectly capture that vitality, it does attempt to restore it to its central place in Fuller's life and thought.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I paraphrase here from Jeffrey Steele's quotations from Fuller's journal fragments in the 1844 *Commonplace Book* (Introduction xxxi).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Myerson 337; Letters I: 155-6; Letters III: 240, 248; Berg 115; Hoffman 50; Dall 25, 145; *Summer on the Lakes*.

<sup>3</sup> In March 1840, for instance, participants at a convention at the Masonic Temple in Boston discussed "the credibility and authority of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" ("Chardon Street" 102).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Lowman Wessinger argues in "Going Beyond Retaining Charisma: Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions" that American women wanting to share their personal religions either find their experiences "co-opted and contained by the structures of the patriarchal religion" or find themselves creating a religion "necessarily marginal to the mainstream patriarchal religion and culture" (2). In "Widening the Banks of the Mainstream: Women Constructing Theologies," Mary Farrell Bednarowski makes a similar argument regarding American women who lived before the latter part of the twentieth-century (212). Fuller deviates from these generalities by being a nineteenth-century American woman who presents and represents her marginal religious beliefs within the dominant culture, challenging its boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence for this appears in primary texts by women prophets and preachers as well as in scholarly works such as *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two*

*Millennia of Christianity*; see, for example, King's "Prophetic Power and the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene)" (21-23). Also see Lerner's *Creation of the Feminist Consciousness* (72, 82-83, 88, 115); Sellers' *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1845* (205).

<sup>6</sup> Fuller's words here negate Patricia Ash's argument that Fuller had a mystical experience in December 1835 (238). Ash conflates visionary experiences and mystical experiences. While at times the two closely resemble one another, Fuller distinguishes between them. This study does likewise.

<sup>7</sup> For some discussions on mystics' comments on the inadequacy of language to convey meaning, see James 321, 332; Katz "Mystical" 3-25, 33; Huxley 129, 131; Lerner *Creation of the Feminist Consciousness* 69-72, 92; Lieb 7-8; Schwartz *Curse of Cain* 160-161.

<sup>8</sup> At this time, Fuller in some ways feels abandoned by her closest friends. In her emotional solitude, she further explores the ways that her life experiences place her in the mystical tradition, and she announces to friends her desire to fully enact the mystic's role.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Carmody and Carmody (6-7), Forman (10-42), Huxley (128-131).

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz, for example, attacks typology (*Curse of Cain* 167). Joseph Campbell explains that the combination of the self's awareness of its immanent and transcendent environments and the self's associating such awareness with wonder and bliss signifies an individual's mystical alignment (*The Power of Myth* 38, 148; *Hero* 51). Though exceptions must certainly exist, Fuller's mysticism does manifest itself through her efforts to apply her spirituality (transcendence) to her environment (immanence); moreover, her desire to remain attached to life, if not particularly to cultivate bliss, motivates her efforts both to explore and to express her spirituality. That Fuller deviates on the point of bliss warrants at least some regard for positions like Schwartz' and some suspicion of universalizing definitions of mysticism in general.

<sup>11</sup> Lerner provides a good, succinct overview of Western mysticism and the mystical stages or process (*Creation of the Feminist Consciousness* 67-70).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Bridges (4-5), Forman (12), Huxley (132, 133), Katz (“Mystical” 8), Lerner (*Creation of the Feminist Consciousness* 68), Lieb (4-7), and McGinn (xx).

<sup>13</sup> I understand that this argument cannot be completely comprehensive. For example, abundant information exists on the life of Margery Kempe, whom many have labeled a mystic.

<sup>14</sup> See Patricia B. Ash’s dissertation for a particularly good and lengthy overview of the existing scholarship on women, religion, and reform in antebellum America.

<sup>15</sup> Mystics do speak of transformations in their understanding and expressions of mysticism (like Peter Matthiessen who turns from the Christian to the New Age to the Zen versions of it; in a slightly different way, Julian of Norwich records her visions once and then later revises that record, showing that the experience continues to linger in her consciousness; in both of these cases we see the duration of the mystical consciousness despite personal and external transformations), but I cannot think of an example where the mysticism itself is given up. Rather, mystics’ writings suggest that throughout their lifetime they can recall their most intense mystical moments. These recollections evoke inspiration and despair. Indeed, even during periods of doubt (of a deity, of themselves and what they have experienced, of self-worth), mystics recognize the existence of a mystical consciousness that accompanies a mystical experience and lingers after it. Nonetheless, a tradition exists for asserting that “analytical thought” is “fatal” to mysticism (Huxley 19) and that mysticism eschews everyday activities (Weber 168, 171, 176).

<sup>16</sup> Excellent primary discussions of the mystic living in the world include Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life* and the section in *The Cloud of Unknowing* addressing the story and roles of Mary and Martha.

<sup>17</sup> For a similar depiction of the social aspects of the mystic’s life, see Bynum

66-70.

<sup>18</sup> Confusion arises from mentioning Fuller's mystical consciousness without adequately developing its relationship to the main argument(s). For instance, in an article addressing how Fuller "broke open conventional masculine forms . . . in both oral and textual media" and became a model for other women's discourse (58), Sandra M. Gustafson mentions that "at moments . . . Fuller speaks the conventional female mystic's language" but does little with the "mystical" components of this model (57). Gustafson's entire sentence reads, "At moments, then, Fuller speaks the conventional female mystic's language, though even here she avoids identifying her deity in gendered terms" (57). One other passing reference to mysticism appears in her article; she writes "Fuller had come to question the terms in which female mystics traditionally claimed spiritual power" (51). Gustafson does not explain what she means by the woman mystic's traditional terms of power, but the context suggests that she means a voiceless position because she shortly thereafter writes that "since the 'holy Mother' has no words of her own she speaks only with her child's masculine voice" (51).

<sup>19</sup> King, for instance, traces Christian tradition of ostracizing women who assumed leadership roles, especially those roles connoting special divine favor ("Prophetic Power" 21-42; "Afterword" 335-343). Bynum makes similar observations (16-18, 48-49).

<sup>20</sup> In note 139 on page 259 of her dissertation, Ash gives an account of writers in the Christian and American context who refer to a deity with masculine and feminine pronouns. Bynum provides examples as well (93, 96-97, 101, 153, 157).

<sup>21</sup> Though such approaches interest me and reveal certain degrees of validity, I am uncomfortable gendering mystical experience itself. The more we explore Fuller's life and the lives of other male and female mystics, the more clearly we can observe exceptions to the models proposed by gendered approaches to mysticism. Thus, while on the one hand such approaches help show how the mystic being discussed exploded particular boundaries, on the other hand they can impose new boundaries on the mystic

and her mystical expressions. This study treats the interrelationships between Fuller's gender and her mysticism, but it also strives to show a broad range of personal and cultural influences on Fuller's mystical rhetoric.

<sup>22</sup> I often dislike discussions of mystical language that associate it with the feminine, especially the disempowered feminine. Pointing out that women mystics redefine God as male and female and rely on powerful female symbols and perform feminist readings of scripture is certainly acceptable and helpful (See, for example, Lerner *Creation of the Patriarchy* 141-160.). Similarly constructive, multiple studies show how women and men who want to communicate religious ideas negotiate an empowering role for themselves within a feminized space (See, for example, Ann Douglas 36, 41, 43-45, 77-79, 93, 109-110, 115; Gilian Brown 20, 37; David S. Reynolds 339, 351, 363; Eve Kornfeld 7, 17.). Though this study draws upon the importance of the mystical-feminine cultural connections, it attempts to avoid limiting mysticism by a feminist, Neoplatonic, or Jungian lens. Feeling that one of the safest ways to do this is to explore in depth the mystical performance, the linguistic creations of a particular individual, this study stresses the interplay of biographical (family, friends, and personal life experiences) and larger cultural and historical (including but not limited to gender) elements in Fuller's life.

<sup>23</sup> Bynum proves helpful here as well, for she argues that women's mysticism tends to be "historical and incarnational" (66-70).

<sup>24</sup> Buell notes that the Transcendentalists were "egalitarians of the spirit" (*Literary Transcendentalism* 80, 267).