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Margaret Fuller's Silences

ROBERT N. HUDSPETH

Silences are editors' bad luck: someone before us loses the evidence; our subject outsmarts us and refuses to say what we want most to hear from her; we ask questions she never even thought to answer. Let me make up some biographical conclusions from my reading of Margaret Fuller's letters: first, she had no interest in radical abolitionism or even in more moderate antislavery efforts in New England. Second, she almost never read and cared nothing for Charles Dickens, the most popular writer of his time. Third, she never rode the horse trolleys in New York City during her twenty-month stay there; and finally, she was a brave sexual rebel, for she never married Giovanni Angelo Ossoli, though they had a child and she introduced him as her husband.[1]

I must confess that none of her biographers make these claims, though they have read the same letters that I read. What I am doing is reading her silences. I am attributing substance to silence (which, by the way, I must note is a clever game played among our colleagues who embrace postmodern speculation). Because Fuller never once mentions William Lloyd Garrison by name I am fancifully assuming she ignored him; because she has only one mention of a Dickens novel and because she is silent about his triumphant visit to Boston in 1842, I leap to the conclusion that he meant nothing to her. In the same way, she never mentions public transportation in any city, nor does she describe her wedding to Ossoli. (It is only this last silence that has in fact drawn biographers into an endless speculation.)

These conclusions are admittedly fanciful, but the silences we find in editions of letters are far from make-believe. The very random nature of how we get our evidence lies at the heart of our problem. For us to edit letters someone must save them for a long time. The more people saving and the more careful their handling of fragile bits of paper, the better for us ever-acquisitive editors. But there is more than just this first, accidental silence caused by the inevitable loss of letters over time. I had to contend with a second sort of silence, that inflicted on Fuller's letters by my editorial predecessors. Third, there are the natural silences caused by Fuller because she had no reason to speak of facts of no interest to her recipients. She does not tell us about those horse trolleys because it never occurred to her that any of her correspondents would want to know about them. The things she and they took for granted vanish into silence, even though we now would like to know more of the mundane details.

Fourth, there are intentional silences, the times when Fuller deliberately fell quiet. We can see this quite markedly during the last five years of her life when twice she had romantic entanglements that she kept out of her general correspondence. She was adept at walling off parts of her life from individuals whom she loved and deeply cared for. She was so good at it that she may have successfully kept us at bay, too. Finally, there are the silences that probably do represent the way her mind worked, that we can read legitimately as silences that speak loudly. Let me pose five questions that can help us explore these silences.

1. Who are the unnamed ghosts living between the pages?

One day Charles Mann, the manuscript librarian at Penn State, called me to say he had just bought a Fuller letter written to William Channing Russel. I had two immediate reactions: I was delighted to get yet another letter, and I was completely taken aback. Who in the world was William Channing Russel? Well, no one knew. There was no mention of him in my database; none of the biographies mentioned him. He simply had not existed. There was no such man before Charlie bought the letter. Once it emerged, there Russel was, and once I began to call him back to life he wasn't all that obscure—he became provost and then acting president of Cornell later in his life. The oddity here was that Fuller had never mentioned him in any of the other surviving letters. I can name many people whom Fuller knew and to whom she undoubtedly wrote, but I'm intrigued by the ghosts: who are the other William Channing Russels out there whose very existence is unknown to us?

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2. How was it that Margaret Fuller was silenced?

Fuller was served badly by her friends who were her first editors. In 1852 James Freeman Clarke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Henry Channing published a two-volume *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli,* which was the conventional nineteenth-century life-and-letters memorial.[2] Close friends all, the three men owned dozens of letters from Fuller to them; they had access to hundreds more; they had journals and diaries. No one since has ever had such an array immediately before them. The story of the cuttings and pastings, the evasions and distortions, the muffling of her voice and the dumbing down of her mind has often been told in varying tones of exasperation, but let me rehearse some of it again: they omitted names of individuals; they suppressed such events in her life as her romantic attachment to a New York businessman; they altered her sentences and omitted what was unseemly to make her religious opinions more conventional; they mixed journal and letter fragments to make documents of their own; they published passages completely out of context so that what Fuller was saying had no relevance to the specific occasion, the time in her life, or the person receiving the letter. Some of the evidence survives in mutilated manuscripts, so I had to contend with letters with whole paragraphs buried under swatches of bright purple ink, visible signs of intentional post-mortem silences. These passages are now restored, but the destroyed manuscripts are gone forever.[3]

Of course these three men were just being responsible friends; their practice mirrored what commonly happened in life-and-letters volumes. That era had one notion of truth and evidence; we have another. To them, some silences were to be desired by the claims of friendship, morality, taste, and judgment. Looking back we find the unhappy fact that fear, self-interest, and narrow-mindedness were also motives.

3. What did Fuller have for dinner?

Who would think that everyday life would become interesting? Just as we have raised our consciousness of the private life, we have grown enthusiastic about how daily life was lived. Of course Fuller did not repeat menus to her friends in her letters (except for one comment about Italian salads that were abundant, cheap, and fresh).[4] Nor did she describe the sanitary conditions of urban life or public transportation or the details of her business transactions. But why do we get so few descriptions of many interesting people? Why don't we have descriptions of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, Fuller's friend and her intellectual equal? Why not more of Sophia Willard Dana Ripley, another close friend, who helped her husband, George, found Brook Farm? Why don't we have better Fuller portraits of Hawthorne and Thoreau, of Poe, of Theodore Parker? One answer might be that her most frequent correspondents knew these men and women, so Fuller had no occasion to write of them. Did Fuller lack an appropriate audience? It's hard to think so, for her correspondents were people of discriminating taste.

4. Letters as tabloids: just what was Fuller's sex life?

In the spring of 1845 Fuller became infatuated with a German-born businessman in New York City, one James Nathan. We would call it an "affair," but that has too strong a sexual connotation. But we can tell she was infatuated with him, for the fifty or so letters from her to him are among the longest and most intense that survive among all her letters. Yet, during this six-month span she never once mentions him in the other letters that have survived. We have after-the-fact evidence that her mother knew of Nathan, and Horace Greeley and his wife knew (probably because Fuller was working for Greeley and had lived in their home). But Fuller successfully walled off her passion from everyone else, including her closest women friends.

Then, from 1847 to 1849, she did it again: as far as we can tell, with one exception, she told no correspondent about her interest in, affair with, and marriage to Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. It is certain that, when she told her mother of her marriage and of her child, the family had no idea of Ossoli's existence. Her friends were equally in the dark. Even more than had she with Nathan, Fuller hid Ossoli by cultivating a rigorous silence.

5. Where was Fuller when Dickens came to town?

On the morning of 22 January 1842, Charles Dickens arrived in Boston harbor to begin a triumphant and energetic tour of the United States. Since they thought themselves the center of culture, the Boston elite embraced Dickens with an enthusiasm that was as noisy as it was heartfelt. They dined him, lionized him, and they all but grew giddy at his presence. The most famous novelist of their day came and went, but if you are relying on the *Letters of Margaret Fuller,* you would never know it. I must quickly say again, however, that the record is skimpy. We have no letters at all from the specific days Dickens was in Boston, and only one letter in the immediate aftermath, and it is a fragment. Fuller may well have commented at length to someone in letters that have not survived. But there are no subsequent references either. In fact, Dickens crops up only one time in the 1,111 surviving letters: when she was abroad, she used an image from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to describe herself.[5] That's it. One allusion. Bulwer and Scott weave in and out of her letters, but not Dickens. It is very hard to avoid the conclusion that he did not speak to her literary imagination, that, despite his almost universal appeal, she was indifferent to his art.

An even more stark silence began before Dickens came and then continued through his American tour. In October 1841 Thomas Wilson Dorr began an overt rebellion against the state government of Rhode Island, which had never written a modern constitution. For a time the state had two legislatures and two governors: one loyal to the old charter and one to the new but contested government. The affair culminated in an attack Dorr led in May 1842 against the state militia and in his subsequent arrest.

Now this silence interests me because Fuller had taught and lived in Providence from June 1837 to January 1839, so she had a variety of friends and correspondents in Rhode Island. She could hardly have been indifferent to the Dorr rebellion, yet all we have is one sanitized fragment from the *Memoirs*.[6] Because we do have this one source, we might suspect that the editorial trio censored her political views, and they may well have done just that, but again we have no subsequent comment about Dorr or the political sequence.

But when we review her letters we find little political commentary before she went to Europe, and the subsequent intense, wide-ranging and perceptive commentary she wrote publicly and privately from Italy makes us wonder. *Was* she so politically indifferent before 1848? Her father had been an anti-Federalist congressman from Middlesex County, so political talk was part of her life when she was young. And yet there is a deafening silence about such events as the imposition of the gag rule to silence John Q. Adams in the House, or of the murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Illinois by a pro-slave mob. The forced removal of the Cherokees from Georgia to the Southwest goes unremarked, and, save for one comment, and that one strangely oblique, there is no reaction to the day when William Lloyd Garrison was almost lynched in Boston.

That silence bears some scrutiny. In late summer 1835 prominent Bostonians began a campaign against Garrison and the radical abolitionists. They held a rally at Faneuil Hall in August and passed resolutions denouncing abolition. On 21 October a mob disrupted a meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, captured Garrison, and would have hanged him had not the sheriff finally rescued him. The only comment Fuller makes was in a December letter to her brother Eugene, who was a private tutor to a family in Virginia. Margaret asks what his employer thinks of it all. She offers no comment of her own, just curiosity at the Southern reaction.[7]

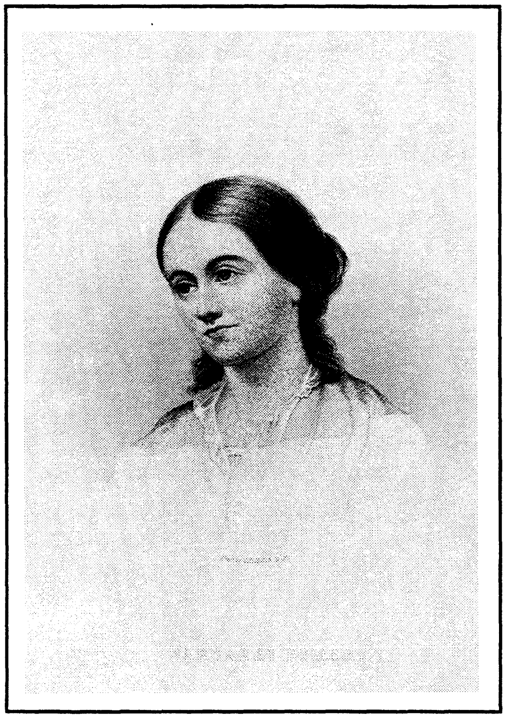
Her one overt comment on the question of slavery and abolition came in December 1840, when she replied to a query from Maria Weston Chapman, Garrison's counterpart in the women's abolition movement. While Fuller begins "the Abolition cause commands my respect as do all efforts to relieve and raise suffering human nature," she goes on to admit that "my own path leads a different course and often leaves me quite ignorant what you are doing." The whole letter is devoted to the question of antislavery, but this is the single instance that we have when the topic called Fuller out.[8]

There are, of course, contingencies that cause silences, including some of the ones I describe. When she wrote to her brother about the Boston riot, she was still grieving for her father, who had died a scant two months earlier. Similarly, when Dickens was in town, Emerson's son, Waldo, died, and that death weighed heavily on Fuller's spirit for weeks. Time, circumstance, and chance all deepen silences, so that only the wary ascribe meaning to them.

Letters are mutually reciprocal acts: it takes a writer and a recipient; we editors are eavesdroppers. We must keep in mind that our point of view comes long after the fact. What is "interesting" or "meaningful" to us was not necessarily so in 1840. The questions we ask are conditioned by a world far different from theirs. Our attitudes toward black slaves, toward women, toward the Irish workers, and toward economic distribution are not theirs.

Of course the very notion of "silence" implies a value judgment. We notice a silence only because we do not hear something we expect, something to which we attach a value. That which is of no value to us does not even occur to us to miss. We all too often assume that our editorial subject shares our sense of worth. Fuller's letters, however, make us see Boston as she saw it in 1840; we are at the mercy of what she thought important enough to put into a letter; she reminds us that her act of seeing and recording had its own logic. When we read letters from the past we read answers that were written a century before we ask the question. Little wonder that Fuller's answers and my questions sometimes do not mesh.

In saying this, though, I cannot resist my own list of silences about which she and I share an interest. How did she learn of Goethe's death and what was her reaction? What did Fuller earn for her magazine articles in the *American Monthly Magazine?* Did she read Keats, and if so, what did she think? She once said she was writing a series of tales based on Hebrew Scripture. What were they? When did she first read Emerson's *Nature* and what did she think of it? To whom did she offer her now-lost history of the Italian revolutions and how did she describe it in that letter? These questions are of a piece; they concern her intellectual and professional life, which is why I find her fascinating. No doubt another reader will have a different list.



Sarah Margaret Fuller. Engraved by Henry Bryan Hall, Jr. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

So what are we editors to do in the face of silence? Well, a few things look obvious enough: first, in the case of letters, publish the whole record. The first, and I have always thought most important, decision I made was to publish every Fuller letter I could find. Given the predations of the *Memoirs* and the breadth of her interests, she seemed to me to be fairly presented only in the entire body of her letters. I now have some regrets that I was not able to edit and publish the correspondence, both sides of the conversations, but it was enough of a stretch for Cornell to do six volumes, let alone nine or ten. So the economics we face bear on the silence. The less the market will bear, the greater the silence. It may be that electronic publishing will actually help us, for in that way we can edit and publish as complete a record as physically remains to us, even with authors whose corpus is daunting.

Second, we need to be as thorough as humanly possible to ransack the letters, the diaries, and journals not only of our subject but of her friends, for we may find a correspondent writing to yet a third party, "I received today a letter from Margaret in which she said. . . ." Even secondhand summary ends the silences.

In a small way our annotations can be a corrective. Fuller was fond of quoting without attribution or of paraphrasing the books she read. An annotation identifying an aphorism or idea helps restore the presence of the original writer and clarifies Fuller's relationship to him or her. If I pass it by, I allow the reader to infer that the idea is original with Fuller, or I let the connection with Fuller remain obscure. Our annotations create contexts that themselves help defeat the historical silence. I aimed to have Fuller take a more defined place within her social and intellectual world.

Beyond that we begin to show our helplessness. I think we ought in introductions to acknowledge the fragmentary nature of the record, to give overt examples of what is not there, so that readers are reminded to read the record with some reservation. I do not have to solve the biographical puzzles Fuller's silences create, but I need to help biographers understand what they are looking at in the edition.

I find that I must conclude that the very nature of our material defeats us: letters are a form of autobiography, and that literary genre is notorious for what it fails to tell us. Writing of one's self is as much a process of leaving out as of putting in, and letters no less than autobiographies demonstrate the truism.

Notes

1. My comments are based on *The Letters of Margaret Fuller,* ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983–1994).

2. *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli,* 2 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1852).

3. For discussions of the damage done by the *Memoirs,* see *The Letters of Margaret Fuller,* 1:59–65, and Bell Gale Chevigny, "To the Edges of Ideology: Margaret Fuller's Centrifugal Evolution," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 173–201.

4. To Richard F. Fuller, 16 August 1848, *Letters,* 5:104.

5. "I often think of Dicken's marchioness playing whist in the kitchen. So I play whist every where" (*Letters,* 5:210). "Marchioness" is a title Dick Swiveller gives to his "small servant."

6. "I came into the very midst of the fuss, and, tedious as it was at the time, I am glad to have seen it. I shall in future be able to believe real what I have read with a dim disbelief of such times and tendencies" (*Letters,* 3:72–74).

7. *Letters,* 1:240.

8. *Letters,* 2:197.