

Margaret Fuller

An American Romantic Life

THE PRIVATE YEARS



Charles Capper

MARGARET FULLER

An American Romantic Life

BY CHARLES CAPPER

Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life

VOLUME I

The Private Years

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The Public Years

MARGARET FULLER
AN AMERICAN
ROMANTIC LIFE

The Private Years

CHARLES CAPPER

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For Carole

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Preface

In 1970, as a fledgling teaching assistant at the University of California, Berkeley, I taught a course on what I portentously called “The American Avant-Garde between the World Wars.” This course underscored an interest that led me in a strange way eventually to Margaret Fuller. During the previous few years I had become fascinated with a seemingly ubiquitous, modern American intellectual figure—the conflicted, alienated, avant-garde thinker who, despite or because of his (and sometimes her) alienation, looked hopefully to popular, world-historical transformations. A few years later, searching for that type’s archetype, I found myself turning to the antebellum Romantic era, specifically its Transcendentalist intellectuals. Meanwhile, I became interested in the flowering of women’s history, which was then pushing to the center of the historical stage whole battalions of heretofore marginalized outsiders. But how and when, if ever, these two outsider-insider currents were linked remained a mystery to me. This mystery increased with the deepening post-1960s disillusionment with transcendent ideals and the simultaneous preoccupation of women’s historians with social-behaviorist paradigms over high-cultural ones. At this ambiguous moment at the end of the decade, I found Margaret Fuller and experienced a shock of recognition.¹

Before I quite knew what to do with this fact, I also began to discover other things about Margaret Fuller. One was that she was the most written-about woman in early American history. This did not surprise me. Fuller was not only the best-known American intellectual woman of her day, she was one of antebellum America’s leading Transcendentalist theoreticians, its most important literary critic, its most sophisticated women’s cultural leader, and one of its most widely read international journalists. But it soon became clear to me that Fuller’s importance as a historical figure went deeper than these achievements: she was nothing less than the first woman in America to establish herself as a dominant

figure in highbrow culture at large. In short, if there was one man or woman whose life might shed light on the early American connections among gender, intellectual culture, and the avant-garde, it was Margaret Fuller. Yet, when I turned to the dozen or so published biographies of her, I found very little of this illuminated. Except for the century-old life by her younger contemporary and family friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson, none is factually very reliable. And, apart from Higginson's book and the untrustworthy but fascinating *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* by her friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Freeman Clarke, and William Henry Channing, none is intellectually very interesting. Despite the often provocative discussions of aspects of Fuller, as a biographical subject, Fuller has remained elusive and enigmatic. Equally frustrating, her historical significance—how and why she achieved what she did *when* she did—has seemed a great puzzle.²

I have written this biography of Fuller, then, on one level as an act of historical recovery. To accomplish this I have gone back to the sources. These include not only her letters and journals, which have never been used before in any extensive or accurate way, but also the voluminous papers of her family, friends, and colleagues. My purpose has been three-fold. First, I have simply wanted to get the facts straight. This is no small matter. Most biographers of Fuller have freely reproduced “facts” based on legends, claims of previous biographers, and, in several cases, sentimentally imagined scenes. By contrast, all my factual assertions, unless otherwise indicated in a note, are derived from critically examined, first-hand sources. Second, I have tried to do justice to Fuller's complex personality. “What a Sphinx is that girl!” burst out one day in his journal James Freeman Clarke, who had known Fuller intimately and often encountered her daily for a decade, “who shall solve her?” I do not pretend to have solved her, but I have tried to understand her, especially the practical and hyperemotional sides to her character, which in virtually all Fuller biographies are selectively privileged. Third, I have used my sources to create a social biography. My text is filled, as Fuller's life was, with people, many famous, many obscure, but almost all interesting and all revealing of Fuller as she was—shifting, responsive, and ultimately comprehensible only in relation to the people with whom she interacted. The “real Margaret Fuller” is a phantom. What makes her live—and what my biography tries to provide—is Fuller thinking and acting with others. Yet, I should add, acting not just with other individuals. For Fuller's interactions were also with movements—from American Unitarianism to German Romanticism, from women's education to Italian republicanism. “Such a predetermination to *eat* this big universe as her oyster or her egg, and to be absolute empress of all height and glory in it that her heart could conceive, I have not before seen in any human soul,” wrote Thomas Carlyle, who was not exactly an abstemious soul himself. When properly read, her life presents an illuminating window on these oysters and eggs of her time.³

At its deepest level, though, my biography is about Fuller's life as an intellectual. This approach has been shaped by my interest in the American intellectual

as a cultural type, of course. But it also seems to me to be dictated by her life itself. Fuller spent most of her waking hours reading, thinking, and writing. Without knowing what she believed, what she argued for, what she conceptualized, what she made into symbols, we cannot possibly know Margaret Fuller. More important, ideas and fantasies of intellectual identity, both of herself and of her culture, were the ruling preoccupations of her life. This truth was no better revealed than in the great moral drama of her life, which the titles of my two volumes are meant to highlight. That was her sudden movement at the beginning of her thirties from a “private” life of family, study, Boston-Cambridge socializing, and anonymous magazine-writing, to the life of a “public” personage, speaking in a commanding, if often complex and ambiguous voice, defining for America the intellectual character of womanhood and, a little later, from the vantage point of New York and Europe, pronouncing on its literary works and on the international political movements of her age. In the space of a few short years, she became America’s female intellectual prophet in the mode of her difficult mentors Carlyle and Emerson.⁴

This first of two volumes narrates (to borrow Emerson’s admiring but somewhat puzzled characterization of Walt Whitman’s early life) the “long foreground” of this transformation. From one point of view, Fuller’s early years were part of a sea change in middle-class women’s culture. Many educated yet restricted antebellum women were in these years redefining what their culture liked to think of as women’s “private” activities—whether mothering, school teaching, or writing—in ways that allowed for their expansion into the public sphere. In that sense Fuller’s life was paradigmatic. Yet in eventually defining for herself a role as cultural arbiter and prophet and, partly as a consequence, challenging the whole “masculine”–“feminine” dichotomy on which the official gender culture was based, she went considerably beyond the positions of most female teachers, reformers, and writers of her era. What made for this difference? Readers may find in her early life many possibilities, but three psychologically resonant intellectual influences were certainly critical. One was her father’s encouragement of a grandiose yet domestic republican intellectuality. A second was her early embrace of a Romantic world view. Her Romanticism would vary throughout her life, but it would always include at least something of her early magical notion of it: that through self-consciousness one could expand that most private of all spheres—the subjective self—into the limitless possibilities of intellectual and spiritual endeavor. Yet a third influence was the New England Transcendentalists. This circle of American Romantics looms large in my biography, as it should. For at the heart of their movement was a paradox very much like the one that defined Fuller’s life—the ironic and surprising conversion of a subjectivist, alienated, elitist, and self-consciously “private” faith into an instrument of radically democratic cultural and (for some at least) social change. The Transcendentalists were also important because they benefited Fuller in two very practical ways: they provided her with her first flesh-and-blood constituency and, even more critically, her first opportunities for public action. This volume

thus closes with Fuller's emergence as a leader of "Conversations" for a circle of Transcendentially inclined women in Boston and as an organizer of the movement's journal, the *Dial*.⁵

To state things this way, though, makes Fuller's story sound a good deal more triumphant than it was. All her early "resolutions" were highly problematical—republicanism without politics, Romanticism without personal romance, Transcendentalism without religious transcendence, and (as she herself put it many times) "masculine" intellectual styles with "feminine" proclivities and circumstances. She would wrestle with these troubling paradoxes for most of her life. In these early years they encouraged her to think about intellectual womanhood as well as to exert herself in the broader intellectual discourse of her time. This dual engagement would be her lasting legacy. Also lasting would be the mental attitude that undergirded it in these years—"extraordinary generous seeking," to quote from a motto of her revered Goethe that she inscribed on the first page of a fancy bound blank book she gave to James Freeman Clarke at the end of their adolescence. In this minimalist era of diminished expectations, such Romantic extravagance is a bracing reminder of an America that once was and in some form may still be.⁶

Chapel Hill, N.C.
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C.C.

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An American Romantic Life

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CHAPTER ONE

A New England Inheritance

I

Although many of her contemporaries would have been slow to admit it, Margaret Fuller was in her habitat and ancestry a thorough new Englander. Her lineage was long, beginning with the first Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was compact, confining its offspring exclusively to eastern Massachusetts and mostly to small towns on or near the eastern outskirts of Middlesex and Norfolk counties surrounding the Boston county of Suffolk. And it was determining: Fuller herself lived for almost all but the last half-dozen years of her life in Boston or Cambridge under the roof of her immediate family. Yet Fuller would never have said, in answer to the question, "What are my advantages?"—as did her fellow cultural rebel Ralph Waldo Emerson—"The total New England." Fuller's inheritance was a very partial New England—more ethical than religious, more worldly than ethical, more idiosyncratic than either, and, above all, late-blooming. Yet perhaps *because* of its very partialness it cut deep. On the eve of publishing the first issue of the most self-consciously non-New England periodical in American literature, Fuller wrote to a close friend, "It is for dear New England that I wanted this review." Coming from someone who wrote more scornfully of New England culture than any New England intellectual of her generation, it was a remarkable tribute. For the primeval sources of both the scorn and the love—and therefore her identity itself—her ancestry suggests some clues.¹

"You cannot make poetry out of the Puritans," Margaret Fuller would write in her journal during her last years in New England; "there is too much daylight and reality about them." For such a harsh Romantic view, she had ample support in the records of her own Puritan ancestors. The first was a doughty English immigrant named Thomas Fuller, who at the age of twenty arrived in Cam-

bridge, Massachusetts, in 1638 for a one-year “tour of observation,” but soon decided to settle permanently. Although he attributed his change of plans to his conversion to Puritan doctrine, provoked by the “soul-ravishing” preaching of Anne Hutchinson’s eloquent censor, the Reverend Thomas Shepard, several of his descendants have insisted that a young woman who refused to return with him to England also influenced his decision. Similarly, family chronicles tell us, after soon marrying another New England woman, Elizabeth Tidd of Woburn, and living for twenty-five years in this new settlement north of Cambridge, he moved his family to New Salem (afterwards Middleton), where he remained untouched by the nearby witchcraft hysteria. This is plausible. Certainly the autobiographical doggerel that he left suggest he was more a man of plain good sense than enthusiastic religious habits. After the usual hackneyed account of the tremors of conversion, he ended with this stoutly confident un-Calvinist conclusion:

But surely God will save my soul!
And, though you trouble have,
My children dear, who fear the Lord,
Your soul at death, He’ll save.²

Thomas and Elizabeth had nine children, and the families that sprang from these children were for the most part equally large, in which sturdy biblical names like Ruth, Hannah, Jacob, and Joseph were well represented. Their characters also seem to have been sturdy; most lived into their seventies, and none, as far as one can tell, died a pauper. Yet none became very wealthy or prominent, either. “Lieut. Fuller,” as he signed his name on several records, was a farmer and blacksmith like his father, and virtually all of his male descendants continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on about the same social level—as artisans, small farmers, and minor officials in various positions of trust in local churches, governments, and militias. It was not until the fourth generation—when economic prospects, historians tell us, began to dim for many New England farming young men—that a Fuller appeared who was to reach, though somewhat awkwardly, beyond this heritage of Puritan yeomanry.³

Born in Middleton in 1739, Timothy Fuller, Margaret Fuller’s grandfather, was descended from a line of favored younger sons who, according to one family chronicle, had been noted for their intellectual strength. Confirming this inheritance, Timothy became the first Fuller of any branch and the only one of his family of ten children to graduate from college and assume a learned profession. Rising up the social and intellectual ladder, he married Sarah Williams, who connected him with her mother Anna Buckminster Williams’s prominent family of well-to-do, scholarly ministers; including, most notably, Anna’s grand-nephew and Sarah’s younger cousin, the celebrated Boston Unitarian minister Joseph Stevens Buckminster. The Williams connection also injected a healthy dose of post-Puritan righteousness into the Fuller blood. “I know I needed the rod or I should not had it,” Sarah’s mother wrote to her after the death of one of her grandchildren. Sarah’s father, Abraham Williams, the minister at Sandwich,

on Cape Cod, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, was rigorous even in death in imposing on his family the moral rod. In his will he directed the emancipation of his two slaves and required his ten children to contribute to their support, adding the caveat that should any refuse, they were to be deprived of their share of the estate and given instead "a new bible of the cheapest sort, hoping that by the blessing of God it may lead them to do justice & love mercy." Margaret Fuller's Grandmother Sarah was also given to robust assertions of her ethical claims. She appears affectionate in her letters to her children and grandchildren, but she was also said by one of her grandsons to have possessed "a vigorous understanding and an honorable ambition, which she strove to infuse into her children." Perhaps most telling of her liberal and Puritan sides was her "keen relish" for the satirical and somewhat bawdy novels of Henry Fielding, which she liked, she told one of her sons, because they "treated the world much as it deserves."⁴

Sarah's husband, Timothy, felt similarly about the world, but unfortunately the world sometimes felt the same way about him. His first fall occurred at Harvard, where he was demoted to the bottom of his class for throwing bricks and sticks into a classroom during a Hebrew recitation. After humbly confessing, he returned to his original rank, graduated in 1760, and even came back for a second degree, which he earned for a *Quaestio* defending the cagey proposition that "not all dissimulation is untruthfulness." A rather more major fall occurred in his ninth year as minister in his first permanent pulpit in the frontier town of Princeton, Massachusetts. The precipitating cause was the widely broadcast charge that he was a Tory sympathizer. On the face of it, the complaint seems incredible. Certainly it appeared so to Fuller, who in pamphlets and at meetings repeatedly protested his complete sympathy with the colonists' grievances, his scrupulous adherence to their various boycotts, his total rejection of British parliamentary domestic authority, and even his support for the recent armed resistance of the colonial army. Yet, other statements of his suggest that, if hardly disloyal, he was rather lukewarm in his patriotism. Even before the Revolution, he had publicly worried that taking militant action would lead to precipitous armed conflict, and once the war began, wondered aloud whether the Revolution, which he seems to have reluctantly supported, was worth all the bloodshed. In one sermon, only two years into the war, he spoke darkly about the future dangers from maneuvering and corrupt party men taking over the reins of government and becoming rich through "Slaughter and Blood." His brusque personality clearly exacerbated his difficulties. Generally undevotional in his habits as well as somewhat coarse and (in the words of one parishioner) contemptuously "Jockeying & Bantering" in the pulpit, Fuller in addition seems to have had a knack for making his points in perversely provocative ways. At the very peak of heated feelings engendered by the first bloody encounter with British troops at Lexington and Concord, he preached to a group of Minutemen from the text I Kings xx:11, "Let not him that girdeth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off." Not surprisingly, the sermon and other similar provocations caused great offence, and in the spring of 1776, the town dismissed him and sent a delegation of burly men to his church to bar him from entering.⁵

Following his dismissal, Fuller moved his family to the somewhat antiwar town of Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard, where he preached to the Congregational church until the end of the war. Meanwhile he studied law and obtained admission to the bar solely to pursue his suit against the town for the payment of his salary on the ground that a minister (as he claimed) "holds his office for life determinable upon misbehavior." Unfortunately for Fuller, the Supreme Court jury, unimpressed by Fuller's anachronistic idea of ministerial prerogative and apparently also prejudiced by the charges of Toryism, found for the town. Rather, though, than "crushing" him, as many townsmen had vindictively hoped, the verdict elicited the prudent and independent qualities that marked his whole life: he paid the large court costs in money he had carefully saved for the outcome and returned to re-establish his family in the town that had rejected him. For their part, the democratic-minded citizens of Princeton soon showed they liked Fuller better as a politician than they had as a minister by electing him over their leading townsman, the Federalist lieutenant governor Moses Gill, to represent them at the state convention called to ratify the federal Constitution. He repaid their confidence by casting a firm vote against ratification. Part of his objection, as he stated it in his "Reflections on the Constitution," was to the clauses that implicitly sanctioned the "indelible Stigma" of slavery. But his memorandum shows he also opposed the Constitution on a host of agrarian and democratic grounds, ranging from its insufficient representation to the absence of a freehold requirement for suffrage. Yet, whether antislavery or Antifederalist, that vote, as did his dissent from revolution in the first place, well illustrates the essential point—that Protestant rectitude and provincial caution were more important than great achievement to Margaret Fuller's first publicly notable Fuller ancestor.⁶

After the adverse verdict and the convention, Timothy Fuller, still in his forties, withdrew from public life entirely and returned to his ancestral vocation. In the coming years he successfully cultivated a large farm of 700 acres encompassing Mount Wachusett, that had been mostly given to him by the General Court to supplement his small salary. He also cultivated a healthy crop of ten children who seem to have proved infinitely more responsive to his patriarchal leadership than his parishioners had been. ("I am sixteen years old," the lively Elizabeth, Margaret Fuller's future aunt, wrote in her diary on her birthday, in the midst of accounts of occasional family hymn-singing and quilt-making and daily reports of planting, cropping, spinning, weaving, and sewing. "How many years have been past by me in thoughtlessness & vanity.") But the most important accomplishment of this little commonwealth was Timothy Fuller's education of his children, all ten of whom attended his family school exclusively. There was one palpable inequity in this academy, however, that certainly his granddaughter Margaret would not have appreciated. While he provided his five daughters with the usual elementary instruction given to country New England girls, he made all his sons know from early childhood that (as one of his grandsons put it) "the great object of his ambition" was to send them to Harvard College. Frustrated in his own post-Harvard career, their father until he died served as their sole college preparatory tutor.⁷

For his efforts Timothy Fuller was handsomely rewarded by his sons' achievements. Four graduated near the top of their class at Harvard. Also, all five—carefully avoiding their father's unhappy choice of profession—became lawyers, most with thriving practices. Ambitious, hardworking, combative, buoyant, and politically active, the brothers were among the most prominent members of the Boston bar of their day. Henry was four times elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Yet, despite their enviable successes and (except for Timothy and Abraham) impeccably conservative Whig politics, some Bostonians found them barely tolerable. Horace Mann, who knew them well when he was practicing law, told Higginson that if Margaret Fuller was unpopular, "it was not from any prejudice against her as a woman, but because she probably combined 'the disagreeableness of forty Fullers.'" Higginson, who also knew them, described them more judiciously as "men of great energy, pushing, successful, of immense and varied information, of great self-esteem, and without a particle of tact." Perhaps (as the well-established Higginson's portrait slightly betrays) their status as upstarts worked against them. In Henry's case, several of his colleagues thought his "reckless . . . shafts of raillery and sarcasm," although popular among jurors, caused some of his opponents to harbor lifelong grudges against him. But the personal trait that seems to have most often rankled—in spite of their properly busy Bostonian literary and antiquarian interests (Henry lectured for the Lyceum circuit on Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities)—was their crassness. "He lived wholly in the world," one friendly colleague admitted about even the scholarly Henry, "as one in which everything worth attaining or knowing must be found . . . in its capability of present or future application to the business of life."⁸

Margaret's family also sometimes found, for all their "volubility" and family attentiveness, the brothers' crass and overbearing sides difficult to take. From family letters, Henry, "a slippery customer" (as Margaret once called him), seems to have bothered them the most. Ungrateful and "selfish" was how Margaret's ordinarily benevolent mother bitterly described him to her husband Timothy after Henry had bragged to her about the superiority of the furniture at the competing law office for which he had "unpropitious[ly]" abandoned his older brother's practice. But gruff Abraham, the second-oldest brother, was a close second. After years of trying to get him to marry one or another delicate, accomplished, and impecunious young lady, Margaret's father finally gave him up as "too much attached to *the world* . . . to be attracted by such virtues." Margaret's mother was more pointed. Reporting once on his manner toward her at a reception, she told her husband, "I thought he manifested something of the disposition of a wealthy Cit receiving the unavoidable greetings of country relations in the Douglass Hall." On the other hand—these genteel Bostonian judgments notwithstanding—it should be noted that all these Fuller brothers had to make their way in a world that had foiled their quirky and stubbornly idealistic father, and by their own lights they did it well. Even Margaret's crusty Uncle Abraham turned his (as she saw them) "vulgar" or (as he saw them) "prudent" traits to some account. The only Fuller brother not to graduate from college, the only lifelong bachelor, he was also the only Fuller to become very rich—most of his

money having come from careful investments made during the Jefferson Embargo, which ruined many well-to-do Federalist merchants, including, among others, Higginson's father. His fortune made, he finally died of a heart attack, precipitated, his family thought, by "the excitement" brought on by three postdinner games of chess. He was, in a word, a living testimony, as much as his father had been, to the difficulty of matching Fuller idealism with Fuller success. It was a Puritan combination their famous niece and granddaughter would also find elusive.⁹

II

The one Fuller brother who came closest to achieving this combination was Margaret Fuller's father, Timothy Fuller, Jr. He was born on July 11, 1778, in Chilmark. Although puny and sickly as a child, he eventually rallied to average strength, one of his sons tells us, by a regimen of spare diet, outdoor exercises, and other spartan routines that he kept up all his life. (His son recalled that he regularly each morning took an ice-water bath and at night slept with the window open, even in the dead of winter.) As the first son and his father's namesake, he was also the first to attend Harvard, which he entered (probably because of all the family disruptions caused by the Revolution) at the then comparatively late age of nineteen. While there he supported himself, like other Harvard boys from struggling families, by teaching at various nearby schools between terms. Such early experience of difficult circumstances well met undoubtedly helps explain, not only his intense industriousness ("your father often regretted that so much time was necessary to refresh the body," his wife would later tell one of his sons), but also his large self-confidence, which distinguished him even among his energetic brothers. In the only surviving portrait of him (Illus. 1)—with his florid complexion; golden-brown hair curled in small tendrils over his broad, fair forehead; blue, watching eyes; pursed lips; and slightly disdainful expression—one can detect something of these bright and hard qualities. But the clearest picture of them is contained in his diary, which he began at the age of seven and continued for most his life. From beginning to end it shows him to be unwearingly earnest, ordered, conscientious, ambitious, and, above all, extraordinarily self-assured. To be sure, occasionally in college and afterward he privately worried, usually about failure in competition or some minor habit he indulged in at the expense of his work. Yet in his diary he rarely dwelt on these things. Instead, where they did not lead him to fault for prejudice or stupidity his teachers or colleagues or (as he called one insufficiently appreciative commencement audience) "the rabble," they merely spurred him to self-reform and greater efforts.¹⁰

Fuller's studies at Harvard (which he assured his father were "very easy") evidently did little to ruffle this self-confidence. His college themes of these years—which invariably received the highest marks—reflected well the post-Calvinist, Arminian outlook and Common Sense curriculum then predominant at Harvard. Most of these essays eagerly and easily associate virtue and practical effort, reason and good taste. They are written in the highly stilted, Latinate style that

marred his public and, to a large extent, private, writing throughout his life. Slightly more challenging are a few themes that suggest a faint tendency toward religious skepticism and a zeal for science and intellectual progress that show the influence of Joseph Priestley, William Godwin, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, and other radical Enlightenment thinkers whom the young Fuller, like other undergraduates at the time, revered. But these influences were offset by his beloved Augustan Roman authors, whom he learned to admire for their balance, moderation, and literary ornamentalism. These were also qualities he found mirrored in his favorite Augustan English poetry and—despite their sometimes (as he thought) “blamably indelicate” cast—eighteenth-century English novels he also avidly read in college.¹¹

Bolder—or at any rate more revealing of Fuller’s passionate side at Harvard—were several of his student orations in which he adapted traditional republican ideology to very special purposes. Whereas for classical republicans ambition was the mother’s milk of tyrants, one to be resisted by virtue, in Fuller’s speeches it was also the nourishment of young patriots. Typically he opened with an invocation to the Revolutionary fathers, whom he associated with the students’ biological fathers. Then at some point he conjured up, as in one Hasty Pudding Club oration, a future scene of horror in which these fathers, “who have spent their fortunes and their lives in the service of their country,” were thrust aside by a selfish, slothful, tyranny-loving “race of monsters.” Finally, dissolving this nightmare, Fuller appealed to his student listeners to arise and imitate the ambitions and enthusiasm of the fathers and “by their talents & their love of glory & their country, cast a lustre over their own laurel.” Less melodramatically, but even more pointedly, in the one college theme on a comparable subject, Fuller began by rejecting the loathsome ambition of a Caesar or a Robespierre. Yet, very quickly, aspiration overshadowed virtue. Warming to his argument, he sharply condemned any “contemptible mortal” who checked his rising ambition and blasted his future glories. He considered it mortifying that no illustrious geniuses had arisen when there existed such innumerable opportunities throughout the world, but especially in America, where the gloom and despondency over the recent death of Washington required a new hero. He concluded by imagining a band of young heroes, patriots, and sages advancing “with emulous trepidation,” while posterity contemplated their future careers and they exclaimed, “‘Aut Washington, aut nullus!’”¹²

Fuller was not the only college student in these postwar years to have felt the anxious excitement of wanting to emulate the glories of one’s Revolutionary fathers, but he seems to have voiced the idea especially well. Perhaps his own nonrevolutionary father’s rejection added a personal dimension to the ambivalent appeals in his orations to ambition and fears about patricide. In any case, his student audiences seemed to have liked his speeches, for in his senior year he was catapulted to the leadership of a college-wide student rebellion against a new series of college government regulations. Wary as a freshmen of any sign of student disorderliness, by his senior year he “boil[ed] with indignation” at the administration’s “oppressive laws.” If not quite tyranny, the faculty did attempt

to enforce what seemed to the students petty and tyrannical regulations. (One ordinance, prohibiting students from sitting forward in their seats, drew from Fuller a sarcastic retort: "Admirable legislators. Such laws call for prompt opposition.") Unfortunately for the students, though, their petition—which a committee headed by Fuller wrote up and presented to the president—was (as he dryly noted in his diary) "very ungraciously, and ungracefully received," and the rules remained in effect. Worse yet, for his reward he was demoted from first to second honors at graduation. Even this defeat left him outwardly unshaken. "This is precisely my wish," he boasted to his Harvard-delinquent father after learning he might not get even a commencement part because of his role in the rebellion. "My fellow students all very well know the cause; this was a salvo necessary to my character."¹³

Fuller's rebelliousness continued after college. He practiced law and worked hard at it, but he found it a bit humdrum, even vulgar. ("The petty arts of obtaining petty clients & petty business & petty lucre," he sniffed a week after he opened his law office.) Also, Fuller defied his elders more fundamentally than in just the matter of a few college rules: soon after he graduated in 1801, he declared his allegiance to the Republican party and solidly Federalist Boston-Cambridge's nemesis, Thomas Jefferson ("the *greatest* man-brute in America," one partisan Harvard student visiting Washington blustered to his father). Fuller even publicly defended President Jefferson's policies of neutrality and embargo at a time when these were anathema throughout mercantile, pro-English New England. Yet this second rebellion should not be put in too radical a light. Although Timothy bragged of the "boldness" of his politics to his father, they were in fact considerably less quixotic than his father's had been. At Harvard he had been a John Adams man, and—like many rural Adams men after their leader's defeat in 1800—found his own antispeculation, anti-British views comported better with Jefferson's agrarian, old republican ideology than they did with the "visionary" pro-British, protariff politics of the Hamiltonian Federalists. Also, Republican politicians in Massachusetts were mostly ambitious, middle-class men outside the Federalist network of wealth and family connections—circumstances that fitted exactly Fuller's status and interests as a self-made lawyer and rising young politician. And rise he did. Using as his primary base of support the large numbers of Middlesex County farmers who surrounded Cambridge, Fuller ascended through various minor political posts, got elected to the Massachusetts Senate in 1813, and served four terms in Congress during the administration of James Monroe. With the eclipse of strong party organizations and the partial adoption of much of the Federalist program by Republican administrations, a moderate, independent-minded politician like Fuller was able to cut a fairly formidable figure in these years of Republican-dominated national politics. As chairman of the House Naval Committee, he successfully fended off radical Republican efforts to slash the defense budget; he helped lead the fiery and nearly successful House floor fight against the Missouri Compromise because it admitted a slave state; and, at countless caucuses, dinner parties, and "cozy & *frank* conversations," he found himself frequently consulted and

courted by President Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and numerous other Washington luminaries.¹⁴

Still, there were obvious limits to Fuller's career as a politician. Of course, given the lingering Federalist hold on New England, any Massachusetts Republican would have had difficulty rising much beyond Congress in these years. But Fuller was further handicapped—despite his acknowledged erudition, especially on international questions—by a political ideology that was increasingly archaic in the new world of American democratic politics. Although personally benevolent (“In all cases with laborers I rather incline to favor their pretensions,” he once advised his wife when she was hiring a handyman), politically he was anti-septic on social issues. Neither a government favor-seeking Whig, a class-conscious Jacksonian democrat, nor an evangelical humanitarian, he rested his democratic beliefs on a cosmopolitan, ideal faith in economic and intellectual progress and the solid virtues of the rational and autonomous but public-spirited citizen. (In a typical pronouncement, after sympathetically describing all the ragged children begging in the streets of Washington one winter, he told his wife, “The want of education in rational religion & industry is the greatest source of vice, want, & misery.”) These eighteenth-century enlightened republican maxims still had power in American life. But Fuller seemed only able to express these beliefs in his speeches and writings in stock, antiquated rhetoric unconnected with any concrete, contemporary national experience. For example, though he was a fervent supporter and sometimes shrewd presidential campaign advisor for John Quincy Adams (with whom he had much in common both psychologically and intellectually), Fuller never really understood Adams's enlightened nationalism. Instead, he seemed most genuine when he was most New England, as in his campaign attack on Adams's opponent Henry Clay for spending “*his nights at the gaming table, or in the revels of a brothel*,” or, more impressively, in his closely reasoned and widely noticed House speech in favor of the censure of General Jackson's “sanguinary” and unconstitutional invasion of Spanish Florida. Eventually political realities caught up with him. His speech against Jackson and his efforts against the Missouri Compromise, although praised by many of his New England Federalist colleagues, were extremely unpopular with some of his Republican constituents, and in 1824 he declined to stand for re-election. During the next few years, he served once as Speaker of the Massachusetts House and one “stupifying” term (as he put it) as a member of the governor's executive council. Finally, in 1832, he ran for lieutenant governor as the candidate of that antiparty graveyard of old republicans, the Anti-Masonic party. Like the party, he was soundly defeated. With the continued rise of Jackson—and, with him, of a new generation of just those kinds of “disciplined” and “younger and more active classes” of ambitious demagogues, subversive of virtue, he had warned against in his last campaign—Fuller's political career was finished.¹⁵

Politics, though, was not the only preoccupation of Fuller after college. He also pursued almost as vigorously various intellectual interests that had been stimulated at Harvard. In religion he sloughed off the lingering moderate Calvinism of his father and adopted his alma mater's scholastic Unitarian faith. On

Sundays he loved to cultivate religious feeling, sometimes by singing the old hymns of his childhood. He also studied after college the standard texts of liberal Christian apologetics popular at Harvard. But it was clearly—as it was for most Harvard Unitarians—the judicious and practical aspects of Unitarianism that most attracted him. Abhorring equally the Calvinist belief in divine determination and the evangelical faith in sudden religious conversions, he liked to argue, as he did in one diary entry refuting an orthodox tract he had read, “God will not reward the slothful with the harvest of eternal glory; for he has promised it only to those ‘who work, while the day lasts.’” And in his “Washington Bible” that he always carried with him when Congress was in session, he singled out for marking the last verse in the Forty-ninth Psalm, “‘He that is in honor and understandeth not is like the beasts that perish.’” In fact, it was this rationalistic aspect of religion that most raised his ardor—and his spleen. He scoffed at the “vogue” of “falling together on their knees on the carpet,” emitting “almost a groan,” and other displays of religious piety he sometimes observed in private religious meetings in Washington in the 1820s, even “among some of the first & most fashionable classes of society, especially the ladies.” Even more vexing to him were the evangelical “camppreachers & whining ignorant pretenders to religion” who, he grumbled in his diary, only produced in his Southern and Western colleagues who knew no other kind of religion, infidelity and impiety. Likewise, reporting in 1820 on “the most common place exhortation” by the Methodist chaplain of the Senate, he wrote, “He appears to me to be one of those self taught mendicants, who abound in these regions, & who will soon be the spiritual guides of our own Massachusetts, if the Convention should abolish the excellent provision in the Constitution to support religious instruction.” Needless to say, like most Massachusetts Unitarians at the time, he heartily favored—without giving much thought to how it would advance rational Christianity—a pluralistic version of the old Puritan idea of “supporting publick worship by law.”¹⁶

Consistent with his Unitarian intellectualism, Fuller spent much of his spare time from law and politics in what he called his “scientific reading.” His Washington diary is filled with references to a host of ancient and modern authors whom he studied for purposes that ranged from understanding history and keeping up on the contemporary European political scene to practicing his Greek and improving his diary style. The literary lawyer-politician was a familiar figure in the early Republic. Still, Fuller’s intellectual pursuits had a distinctive edge to them. First, there was his difficulty simply in finding time for them in his busy schedule. In his diary he confessed he often had to lock himself in his office or rooms so he could “shut out” clients and colleagues and keep them from “encroach[ing] on my evening studies.” Also, if his diary accounts are any guide, he pursued these studies in virtual isolation. Here we come to the central tragedy in Timothy Fuller’s life. On one hand, in his later years most of his Federalist, Enlightenment-minded college friends drifted away from him. (“The negligence of friends or their indifference is quite provoking,” he complained bitterly to his wife. “I sometimes determine to take no thought about any of them except when chance brings us together.”) At the same time he knew, despite his polite social-

izing with many of them, that his well-connected Washington Federalist colleagues and their wives never really considered him one of them. (In a telling admission to his wife, he apologized for being delayed returning from Washington because he had to make a call on Mrs. Daniel Webster and her friends, since they obviously did “not . . . care a fig for me.”) On the other hand, Fuller often bemoaned the “intellectual laziness” and “sneer[ing]” philistinism of his Republican colleagues. “I verily believe that of our whole mess, seven in number,” he complained to his wife, “three or four have hardly read a duodecimo *in all* during the session except newspapers, or possibly novels.” And in his diary, after lamenting the cultural indifference of his “indolent & consequently uninformed” colleagues, he grumbled: “The disinclination to exertion & to *reading* appears to me as most general. They affect to think me unsociable & recluse—I know them to be unpardonably idle, & . . . doomed to a feeble state of intellectual acquirement.” Like his mentor Adams, Fuller nurtured a cultural sensibility that had more in common with the Boston-Cambridge Federalism that rejected him than it did with the Massachusetts Republicanism that he reluctantly embraced. The emerging American split between democratic politics and intellectual cultivation Timothy Fuller felt in a very personal way.¹⁷

These mixed or modest results ought not detract from the fact that Fuller’s public and private life was centered in a core of ideals that gave his personality (as he might have said) exactly what he wished for—decided strengths of character. These included a vigorous self-reliance, an enormous passion and capacity for work, a disinterested love of knowledge in a variety of departments, and a confident association of all these qualities with individual and social advancement, moral enthusiasm, and public service. These values represented an eighteenth-century secularization of the New England Puritanism of his forefathers—or an Americanization of the Roman republican virtues so admired by the men and women of Timothy Fuller’s youth. They were values his daughter Margaret—despite their conflicts over his implementation of them in her life—honored and, in her own way, tried to reproduce. They were also ideals Timothy Fuller attempted to realize in his social and marital life. If here, again, he did not entirely succeed, it was not for want of effort.

For Fuller the greatest obstacle to social success was undoubtedly his own difficult personality. Proud and competitive, he could also sound painfully moralistic about his friendships. “The most respectable characters in the class,” he described his college “Coffee Club” circle of friends, “not *fishers* for popularity, but such as will act on liberal principles, uninfluenced by a love of temporary applause or disapprobation.” Some of this, of course, was stock republican rhetoric. Yet one finds set pieces like this so often in his diary and correspondence that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the priggishness it suggests he often displayed. Still, his papers suggest he evinced little of the gratuitous rudeness of his fathers and brothers. At least whenever he saw these traits in them or in others, he quickly condemned them. In virtually his only criticism of John Quincy Adams he ever recorded, he cuttingly contrasted the “polished & conciliatory manners” of European diplomats with (as he put it in another letter) the “coarse

& harsh” ones of the Secretary of State. Indeed, unlike Adams, he tried hard throughout his life to acquire at least the appearance of these gallant manners himself. One youthful incident is characteristic. A few weeks after his graduation, he took a stagecoach trip, during which he paid, according to his diary account, numerous attention to a young woman and her little girl, who had become sick from traveling. “This behavior,” he noted with pleasure, “turned favorable & partial eyes upon me; & as far as I could judge, I have reason to think, I appeared, what I have, so long wished, *amiable*.” It was clearly never easy.¹⁸

Besides his social awkwardness, this stagecoach incident suggests something else—that Fuller liked to think of himself as a lady’s man. In one of his college orations, he had warned against his youthful audience’s attraction to the “ornaments of our species” and the rewards for “our unwearied pursuit of science & virtue,” degenerating into “that base passion for the sex,” which is inspired, he had noted darkly, only by “the most sordid appetite.” His flurry of flirtations at Leicester Academy, where he taught for a year while gathering funds for his law studies, showed he had a pretty ample appetite himself. In his diary he recorded his numerous “*delicious hour[s]*” and “repeated contact of souls *through our lips!*” with a half-dozen adolescent female students he pursued during the term, quieting his conscience with the observation that “I have . . . long since perceived myself capable of *plurality* of loves.” His students, however, disproved this easily enough. One day in class just before the end of the term, after he sympathetically suggested his most recent favorite, who had been coughing, go outside, several girls “expressed their malignant feelings by coughing in mimicry & loud giggling.” Exasperated, Fuller reprimanded them, “& I believe they read my anger in my looks, for they seemed to shrink with shame & some have since exculpated themselves.” The following day, on dismissing the class, he added some remarks “on the line of behavior a lady should adopt, to obtain the character of being judicious, well informed, delicate, & amiable. I cautioned them,” he assured his diary, “with all the feeling in my constitution against envy, advising them instead of envying to imitate those ladies, who attracted esteem and affection.” Even in defeat Fuller kept his righteous banner waving.¹⁹

His escapades at Leicester, his diary shows, were the last time he let his social passions run away with him. As a congressman in Washington, like most prominent politicians, he regularly attended each month a large assortment of balls, levees, and dinner parties. Although he complained about their pressing on his business and study time (“I [am] almost always . . . among the first to separate,” he claimed to his wife), he seems to have appreciated them both for their political and occasional intellectual conversation as well as for the opportunity they afforded for tête-à-têtes with “the ladies.” When home he also amicably socialized with his Cambridge friends and neighbors. But in a lifetime of correspondence and diary-keeping, one finds few hints that he enjoyed much casual intimacy in any of these affairs and none at all that they tapped in him any deep feeling. His collegiate opinion (as he stated it to one friend) that such infatuations are “quite improper between men” he seems to have acted out with both men

and women. Indeed, even when circumstances would seem to have required some expression of feelings, he preferred reticence, as in his rather frigid diary account of a distant relative whose wife had recently died. The husband, he approvingly noted, was “a man of sense & moderation” who knew his loss but “spent little time in useless or ostentatious grief.” This stoical grimace would remain one of Fuller’s favored masks throughout his life.²⁰

In sharp contrast to his restrained relationships with colleagues and friends, Fuller’s relations with his immediate family after college remained warm, constant, and demonstrative. “Though I have at the moment of writing this been absent from them several days,” he wrote typically in his diary after a visit home, “I am melted in tenderness and affection at the recollection.” But after his father died in 1805, Fuller became the legal guardian for his younger brothers, and this seems to have strained relations for a while. After several clashes he wrote to his mother to complain of his brothers’ and sisters’ “censures, & coldness, & distrust.” The love between siblings ought to be at least somewhat like, he plaintively suggested, “the mutual affection between virtuous Parents & virtuous Children,” which, he declared, “is nearest of any thing conceivable, to the pure love which unites God to his saints & his saints to each other.” This was no small requirement, and certainly not one likely to be realized by a family that was on the verge of breaking up. Fortunately an alternative soon presented itself. One day in church in Cambridge, Timothy Fuller saw a pretty young woman, who he learned was from Canton, Massachusetts. After a few months of “*accidental* walks” on the West Boston Bridge and other acts of courtship, Timothy Fuller, when he was nearly thirty-one and she barely twenty, took as his wife Margaret Crane of Canton. They were married May 28, 1809, and the opportunity to try out Timothy Fuller’s version of the saintly family was soon at hand.²¹

III

In biographies of Margaret Fuller, Margaret Crane Fuller (as she spelled her name) is usually almost a nonentity. Where she appears, it is generally as an alien, saccharine figure, dutifully hovering around the distant horizons of her strong-willed husband and daughter. Like most caricatures, this one has some semblance of truth. But—also like most caricatures—what it leaves out makes all the difference. Certainly her hundreds of surviving letters show her to be a woman of significant character. And this record shows that character etched clearly, if subtly, into the life of young Margaret and her family. If in the end Margaret Fuller took a different path than that of her mother, the road not taken is also revealing. Like many rejected historical roads, it had a way of reappearing in surprising places.

Margaret Fuller’s mother’s different way began with her ancestry. Born on February 15, 1789, Margaret Crane, like her husband, descended from a family of first-generation Puritan immigrants. If anything, her mostly farmer-and-artisan ancestors had planted themselves even more firmly in New England soil than had her husband’s. The first Cranes migrated from Dorchester, England, to

Dorchester, New England, and most of their descendants, including all of Margaret Crane's direct ancestors, remained in the same area, later called Canton, for the next four generations. On the other hand, Puritan blood ran a bit thinner in the Cranes than in the Fullers. Margaret Crane's paternal grandfather, Henry, was a warden of the town's Anglican Church, while his son, Peter, Margaret's father, although a nominal member of the First Unitarian parish, belonged to no church and, according to one of his grandsons, entertained "rather crude views of his own in religious things." The Cranes' status was also humbler than that of the Fuller family. Peter Crane was a gunsmith. Family chronicles suggest that he was independent-minded and intellectually curious but untutored. Judging by the few books his daughter Margaret once reported finding in their house, one suspects he also was not much of a reader. Still, the Cranes were an offshoot of the largest clan in Canton. Also, Peter Crane—a Republican in this mostly Unitarian, Republican town—had his share of local influence. He served as a major and a temporary chaplain in the Massachusetts Twenty-fourth Regiment during the Revolution, a prover of firearms for the county of Norfolk, and a member of several town committees. His wife, Elizabeth, Margaret's mother, was of a similar cast. Pipe-smoking, affectionate, and, according to her grandson, "very pious," she was an ardent hymn singer and a faithful follower of Richard Baxter and his school of devotional, moderate Calvinism. Baxter's *Saint's Everlasting Rest* and similar works by Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge, he attested—along with her "ever-diligently conned and well-worn Bible"—constituted virtually all her literary reading. Margaret Fuller, her granddaughter—who was a grateful recipient of her attentions as a child—affectionately described her, after she died at the age of ninety, as "bright to the last, . . . with her bowed, trembling figure, and her emphatic nods, and her sweet blue eyes, . . . a picture of primitive piety."²²

Growing up, Margaret Crane seems to have been happy and well adjusted. One of her sons reported that both as a child and a young girl she was noted for her "almost irrepressible gayety and buoyancy of temper." In addition, she had been very attached to both her parents as well as to her two sisters, Elizabeth and Abigail. The one family cloud was Margaret's beloved older and only brother, Peter Jr., who had left home when they were adolescents and, ashamed of his failures, cut himself off from the family and died alone and poor in middle age. This was a serious blow to the Cranes, and naturally they saw in the marriage of their Margaret, according to their granddaughter Margaret, an immense "piece of good fortune." (They were apparently right: "During his life-time," Margaret noted, "my father upheld the house and supplied the place of the wandering son.") Margaret Crane's only major experience outside of her family before her marriage was teaching while still a teen-ager in the local district school. There she showed, not only her buoyancy, but also something of her mettle by (in the words of her son) "ferrul[ing] . . . soundly"—as her mother had occasionally done to her—a large boy who had taken advantage of her playfulness by misbehaving in class.²³

It is not difficult to see why Timothy Fuller was attracted to this lively country girl. To begin with, Fuller was, as he so often said in his diary, an "admirer of

pretty Girls,” and by all accounts she was strikingly pretty: slender, tall, even statuesque—at five feet ten she was a head taller than her husband, who, like his brothers, was rather small. Her attractive features most remarked on by family and friends were her clear blue eyes, smooth, milky white skin, high, peach-blooming cheeks, and, above all, a perennially youthful appearance. (“I could hardly believe it possible, she appeared so young,” a student of her daughter Margaret’s would write in her diary after meeting her when she was fifty.) Then there was what Higginson, who knew her well in later years, called her “timid-friendly” demeanor. One Cambridge tradeswoman thought, a friend told her, she was too “*dignified* . . . to ‘talk & carry on’ before.” But her friends and neighbors, by all accounts, found her sweet, awkward manner charming.²⁴

Timothy Fuller’s letters and diary show him highly pleased with these outward characteristics of his wife. He repeatedly urged his “*too* frugal” wife (who herself liked pretty clothes, but was also careful about money) to “equip” herself with “elegant” bonnets, shawls, dresses, and other fancy furnishings. “The improvement of your *beauty* and *shape* are always pleasing to an amateur like me.” He was also pleased with her enjoyment of parties, balls, the theater, and other “polite and rational” events, which (as he once confessed in his diary) he only really enjoyed when “my Margaret is by my side.” Above all, he was proud of her “easy talent” for letter writing during what he liked to call his “long & tedious banishment” in Washington. (After showing several of her letters to two colleagues, he beamed to her, “They both commended them very much, & *discerned* that they felt how much *inferior* their own dear spouses sent them.”) For these and other qualities, Timothy Fuller loved his wife passionately and single-mindedly, and he told her so in courtly and sentimental letters he continued to write until the end of his life. “I played more foolish capers in kissing [your] letter, &—almost—shedding tears, than I am willing any body—but you,—should know,” he wrote in their ninth year of marriage, and, six years later, when she was six months’ pregnant with their sixth child: “I will now make a lover’s appointment with you—On Saturday 14th. inst. the moon full, & at 9 O’clock I will meet your eye upon the center of her bright dish for an hour’s confidence—you at your parlor window nearest the entry door & I at my window at Mrs. Arguelles’. Do you accept my invitation. I know your heart says yes.” Indeed, these letters, which he wrote almost daily when he was in Washington—by turns tender, protective, demanding, scolding, teasing, sarcastic, flirtatious, even occasionally confessional of weaknesses like “egregious vanity” and fears of failing, and, as always, piously self-righteous—are more revealing of his whole personality than anything he ever wrote.²⁵

On her side, Margaret Crane was also captivated. Her letters show her charmed by her husband’s sentimental effusions and, of course, grateful for his economic support and guidance. “I never forget to bless God,” she wrote typically in one letter, “for your dear presence, and protection.” She was also very proud of his political achievements. Although she sometimes chafed and occasionally broke down over his long absences in Washington, she still felt (as she confessed in one letter) “throbs of ambition” every time she read or heard of his

legislative speeches and exploits. In return she gave him in her letters sober “exhortations” to achieve “*Fame*,” tender concern about his health and diet, and, what he liked best of all, after her “*family picture[s]*” and “*little dialogue[s]*,” abundant displays of heartfelt sentiment. “How can I express the joy the delight the thankfulness I felt when I received your letters to day,” she wrote immediately after receiving his first package of letters from the Capitol. “I have hardly recovered sufficient composure to write. I have seldom felt such an overflowing of joy. . . . I was obliged to run up stairs to hide my tears as I thought my Father would expect a Matron of 28 would have more command of her feelings.” And at the start of the second session the following year: “Dear Timothy I dreamed of seeing you reposing in our chamber last night and sitting down by your bed and listening to you in a kind of extacy that I cannot describe.” It is hard to imagine a couple who better exemplified the era’s companionate marital ideal than Timothy and Margaret Fuller.²⁶

In addition to a love of sentimental expressions, Margaret Fuller also shared with her husband, on the other hand, many traditional, tough-minded, middle-class, Enlightenment-republican New England values. Hired servants she liked to think of (as she once told her daughter Margaret) as “beings placed under us” who should be treated “with consideration & kindness,” but never with excessive friendliness. (“It is injurious to them & degrading to you.”) The South, which she saw a little of years later when she visited one of her sons who was a businessman in New Orleans, she looked on with a jaundiced eye. While praising its “*picturesque*” people and plantings, she decried its lower-class “disorganizers,” its upper-class nabobs who shamelessly flouted the Sabbath, and, above all, although her son employed several slaves, its peculiar institution. “I never look upon them without sorrow for the injustice that is heaped upon them,” she would write to Margaret with enlightened Puritanical indignation, “by those who ought to lead them to the fountains of knowledge, and virtue, and not to the bitter waters of sin and death.” But the shared New England Enlightenment sentiment she most honored was learning. “The *first* wish of my heart is to make you happy,” she wrote to her husband in an early letter, “and the second to cultivate my mind.” Some of this intellectual homage, of course, may have simply reflected her sense of what was required, as she once jokingly intimated, as “Lady F. at the head of the Right Hon T Fuller’s establishment.” Still, there remains something singular—not to mention poignant—about a young woman with only an elementary schooling, without a husband for half the year and preoccupied with the sundry chores of a large, still partly preindustrial household, assiduously studying a Harvard logic text or, out of embarrassment, “retreat[ing] to a private corner” away from the view of the children to review the elements of arithmetic.²⁷

In fact, her letters show that her everyday reading was rather ample for a New England woman of her class and background. The books she mentions in her letters include a fair amount of eighteenth-century English literature as well as a good many of the popular, moderately highbrow novels and histories that her husband enjoyed reading. Her literary opinions, as she expressed them in her

letters, also did justice to both the style and point of view of “the Right Hon T Fuller.” Her critique of Madame de Staël’s recently published pro-English *Considerations on the French Revolution* was indicative: “She indulges herself in the grossest invective against Napoleon, and records every little silly anecdote that she overheard to his prejudice; and dwells upon the sapient Louis 18th with as much delight, as she does upon the excellences of the great Alexander of Russia, which convince me that [she] has not the discrimination, or magnanimity that I have given her credit for.” Her later letter appraising James Fenimore Cooper’s recent American Revolutionary romance, *The Pilot*—a critique that so impressed Timothy that he showed it off to several of his colleagues—shows that Margaret Fuller could also on occasion match her husband’s lofty but measured cultural patriotism. Taking issue with one of his fellow boarder’s effusive praise of the novel, which Cooper had written in imitation of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate*, she opined: “I think there is more distinctness of character, more of nature in the colouring & interest sustained thro’ the whole than any other of the author’s productions. I do not think it can compare with many of [Scott’s] ‘Waverly novels.’ . . . No these will survive the frosts of many winters, but I am predisposed to think favorably of American geniuses, and I should mark the ‘Pilot’ among the first of American novels.”²⁸

Margaret Fuller’s intellectual efforts were like her husband’s in another sense: they were driven by the same rationalistic Unitarian faith. Like many Unitarians, she shied away from difficult theological questions, which seemed to her (as she told her more theologically interested husband) “unprofitable . . . to write or meditate upon.” At the same time, just like her husband, as well as all Unitarians, she loved to invoke her faith in “the first Cause” (as she often referred to God) as productive of learning and morality. “I never lay my head on my pillow,” she would later tell one of her sons, “without praying fervently that God would preserve my dear children from all sin, quicken them in their diligence to acquire knowledge, and to enable them to improve in every good word and work.” She was even sufficiently enamored of religious reasonableness to see the merits of infidelity. “Perhaps we can get at the ecclesiastical history of England better from an infidel like Hume than a sectarian historian,” she once wrote to her son after reading David Hume’s *History of Great Britain*. “It is often amusing to me how he treats the collisions among christians. He can see very clearly where the worldly motive assumes the sanction of christian duty.” On the other hand, like her husband and other Puritan-minded Unitarians, her religious rationalism made her detest not only orthodox “sectarian[s],” but also “ignorant enthusiasts” and radical freethinkers. She could sometimes even sound as pompously judicious about her Unitarian dislikes as her husband. In a letter to him she recounted overhearing on a stage ride a freethinking member of the General Court discourse “very learnedly of the extreme wickedness of connecting civil with ecclesiastical institutions.” He declared brazenly, she said, “if every one was left to worship God in his own way we should be as free & happy as the savages who are accepted by their Maker without subscribing to any of the doctrines of men. I was disgusted with the fool.”²⁹

Still, despite their common liberal dogmas, there were sides of each of the Fullers that did not touch. One was the style and tone of their Christian faith. Although both delighted in sacred music and family prayers to Christ the mediator, one has to search hard to find expressions of contribution or dependency on Providence in Timothy's diary and letters, whereas in Margaret's letters they are abundant. "I am sensible that pride is my easily besetting sin," she wrote in one letter to her husband—who was not exactly unbeset by this sin himself—"& I have often implored the Divine assistance with tears to overcome this enemy to peace & holiness." And in another, but very typical, sigh so different from anything one finds in her husband's papers, she wrote in later years to one of her sons, "What unutterable happiness to lie passive in our weakness in the arms of Almighty love." She also knew these feelings marked a difference between them. "Let us be carefull dearest," she implored, after admonishing him to retire sometimes to his chambers to pray, "while we attend less to the *forms* of religion than some sects, not to lose the spirit of habitual devotion. I say this to *you* because I feel the danger of being too much confirmed to this world, and one would think your temptations much greater than mine."³⁰

As she obliquely hinted to him here, Margaret Fuller was different from her husband, not only in her spiritual, but also in her social, good will. "I am very much grieved for" is almost a refrain in her letters. Nor was this just rhetoric. Letters about her from family friends are filled with praises of her "sweet & gentle spirit" and "tender understanding sympathy," as well as rhapsodies about her "nursing talents"—which, by all accounts, she freely lavished on in-laws, neighbors, servants, children of friends, and even strangers she encountered when she was traveling. (Her unmarried younger sister, Abigail, half-enviously reported that whenever Margaret went on trips, "she always finds agreeable companions.") It is true her letters show she could sometimes be pretty sharp-tongued about lazy servants and even, occasionally, some of her insensitive brothers-in-law. But this was a side she never displayed in her letters to her children—nor, apparently, in person. "We sometimes made up the faults of others merely to notice the ingenuity with which she would seek for excuse, or strive to throw the veil of charity over them," her son Richard affectionately remembered. Of course, except for her parish charity work when she went to live with her son Arthur after he became a Unitarian minister, most of her benignity she directed at her children. "Our sisters complain of my recluse behavior," this gay, sociable young matron once wrote indignantly to her husband. "*You* and my children are *my* work and I need not go from home for amusement." After her husband died, for twenty-five years she shuttled among her seven children's homes, organizing their households, nursing their children, encouraging their careers, and indulging their foibles. The one object of her nurturing talents other than family and friends was her large flower gardens, which, family letters show, she not only toiled over with religious zeal, but managed to transplant largely intact to each of the nine homes she occupied over the course of her adult life. Explaining her zeal for this second extended family to her daughter Margaret, she would later write: "One must have grown up with flowers, and found joy and sweetness in

them, amidst disagreeable occupations, to take delight in their whole existence as I do. They have long had power," she added (echoing countless antebellum writers on the garden's maternally spiritual character) "to bring me into harmony with the Creator, and to soothe almost any irritation." If Timothy Fuller represented Puritanism republicanized, Margaret Crane Fuller embodied the same ethos (to borrow Margaret's favorite adjective for her mother) "domesticated."³¹

Was Margaret Fuller's mother, though—modern readers want to know—also "domesticated" in the less honorific sense of the term? Certainly she was not unaware of the intellectual compromises her domestic role entailed. "I have long thought," she wrote to her husband after her fifth child was born, "that the constant care of children narrowed the mind, or disqualifies me for a brilliant display of my faculties." Nor was she unaware of the intellectual disabilities forced on her sex by its exclusion from politics, as she showed in her clever defense to her husband of Louisa Adams for complimenting their husbands' foe, Andrew Jackson. "Ladies are not allowed by the lordly sex to express so nice discrimination as *the men* so *you* may allow them to admire the brave in war—without *discerning* the defects of judgment in the *Politician* in times of peace." But there is nothing in her writings that suggests she deeply resented this exclusion. Apart from keeping informed about Washington party maneuvers and her husband's career, and occasionally echoing her husband's views, she showed little interest in political questions. As to the related question of whether Margaret Fuller's mother's sense of herself as a woman in her own sphere gave her, as historians tell us it gave many middle-class New England women in these years, a sense of female solidarity that carried over into woman-conscious public views apart from politics, the answer seems to have been generally no. Until her husband died and her children grew up, she was not active in organized women's benevolent work. Only once in a lifetime of correspondence did she register a gender-based dissent from her husband—on the gossip about the sudden second marriage of their Unitarian minister and friend, Thomas Brattle Gannett. Timothy saw the attacks on Gannett, in liberal and paternalistic terms, as an "intolerable" attempt by a zealous evangelical Cambridgeport neighbor and "a very few females who follow [him] & lead their husbands" to "dictate the doctrines of our parlor." She, on the other hand, like many of her female Unitarian friends, saw Gannett's quick marriage as an insult to the memory of their dead friend Mrs. Gannett and an "example of the instability of affection given to the world." But she soon became a good friend of the Gannetts, and, in any case, the rarity of the incident only underlines the point—that her public world view deviated very little from her husband's.³²

On the more personal question of power in the Fuller marriage, the answer is a bit more complicated. "*Margarett always speak out*," Timothy urged her in one letter, and she often did. One subject about which she certainly did was her husband's ostentatious fondness while in Washington for the company of "the ladies." But it was not Timothy's sexual gallantry—which Margarett rather seems to have liked—but his penchant for (in her words) "*enlarg[ing]*" in his

letters on all the “handsome ladies” he encountered at Washington parties that clearly annoyed her. Occasionally she wrote indignant letters about it, but usually she preferred the weapon of satire. In one typical letter she elaborately parodied his detailed accounts of the characteristics of certain Washington “fashionable Belles” by minutely describing the physical attributes of “a very polite young man” she had recently met at a Cambridge party, ending with the domestic news that their three-year-old son “wishes me to tell you that he can spell buxomness & jeopardy & Fuller.”³³

A more serious issue was the subject of her letters. Timothy loved his wife’s chatty and witty letters about family and neighbors, which she dutifully wrote while he was in Washington—as he implored her to do—every other day. At the same time he could not forbear trying to get them to conform to his idea of a proper epistolary exchange. For months he even tried to get her to attend with her children a handwriting school, a suggestion that—much to his bewilderment—she pointedly ignored. But what clearly most irritated her—even more than his lists of her “orthographical inadvertances”—were his criticisms of the contents of her letters. “You say I acknowledge letters that I *have not* received & omit those that have been,” she wrote with some exasperation in one letter. “That you wish I would sometime ‘allude to some topicks of your letters;’ that you advise me when no treason is intended to write the names of the persons just hinted about in full or at *least intelligibly*’ &c &c &c. My first resolution on reading this *encouraging* epistle was to write no more until you would for the children’s sake say that you would excuse my deficiencies, overlook faults & accept just such letters as I could write in the midst of a noisy group of little ones that are enough half the time to distract the intellect of wiser & stronger Mothers than I am.” But mostly in the face of Timothy’s obsessive criticisms, she showed, as in her letters about the Washington ladies, humor rather than resentment, as in one sprightly letter where she turned the tables on his “high Mightiness” by lightly satirizing one of *his* letters as sounding as if it had been written “by a literary member of Congress to his wife and the very seat of Science, and intended as a sort of Circular for the edification of the whole family!!” Adding a bit of unsolicited advice, she requested he “write only what your affection and your sense suggest to you—introducing Mr Adams, gossip, the ladies &c only when you are interested in bringing them forward—making your own dear self the theme.”³⁴

Still—Margaret’s spunkiness notwithstanding—Timothy Fuller *was* the authoritative figure in the family. And if he was not tyrannical in exercising his authority, he was certainly intrusive enough. “We are *debating* the subject [of the name for a new baby] a little,” she once wrote to Margaret when she was an adolescent, “so you see your father allows me a voice in the matter as he is the *fourth son*.” Yet her laughter here—like her toughly humorous defenses of her sexual dignity and her letters—showed a woman looking, when necessary, for a way around her dominating husband. In her attempts she sometimes had to admit that her own sentimental personality often got in the way. In one letter after lamenting some recent “harsh expressions that wounded my feelings,” she

suddenly burst out, "Dear Timothy my heart overflows with tenderness and gratitude toward you who have been the *instrument* in the hand of God of much happiness to me." She then confessed—in a flash of Puritan self-consciousness—"I love to look up to God as the Author of all our happiness but I am too apt to look upon you as the dearest object that engrosses my affections without those sentiments of devout thankfulness to the giver of every good & perfect gift that ought to rise spontaneous in the heart." Although Margaret Fuller's language would be very different, she would also find the task of establishing spiritual independence from paternal divinities a difficult project. In that project her mother's identity would never be far from her mind.³⁵

Of course, however rationalistic or sentimental their marriage, from the beginning neither of Margaret's parents intended to create a marriage without children. In ringing New England tribal phrases ("a glimpse of the promised land" and children "to support [our] hopes . . . & bind [us] to [our] country & to posterity"), Margaret and Timothy Fuller fondly described to each other their idea of their future progeny. And in this holy civic enterprise, both could expect to assume major responsibilities. Happily then, on May 23, 1810, less than a year after moving into their new house in Cambridgeport, Margaret gave birth to a baby girl, whom they decided to name Sarah Margaret, after the two most important women in Timothy's life.³⁶

CHAPTER TWO

Childhood Enlightenment

(1810–1821)

I

“Old Cambridge,” as Victorian Cantabrigians liked to call it, still bore a striking resemblance to the compact English-style hamlets the Puritans had carved out of the wilderness two centuries before. The town’s hundred or so clapboard wood-frame houses and the few dark, dingy seventeenth-century dwellings that had been made into stores were still mostly confined to the original circle of settlement—an area of unpaved roads about a mile around the village center at Harvard College. The college itself was in 1810 essentially four sturdy, unadorned Georgian brick buildings, dating mostly from the early and mid-eighteenth century. The dozen professors’ houses, soon to be clustered mostly around “Professors’ Row” (later Kirkland Street)—each with its well-kept lawn and garden, gravel walk, white picket fence, and stately elm trees—added a touch of elegance, as did the several spacious mansions along Brattle Street, then called “Tory Row” after the wealthy royalist families from whom the houses had been confiscated. But otherwise the greater part of the town remained the same pristine, uninhabited woods, marshes, and open fields seen by the first settlers. One could still see women washing clothes in the town spring, or cows pasturing in the Common, or a light scattering of pigs, chickens, and other domestic animals grazing among many of the houses. It is true, of course, that Boston, with its rich history and culture, was only about three miles to the east across the Charles River. Yet Boston was still a preindustrial, unincorporated city of fewer than forty thousand inhabitants, and for a child not always easily accessible. The only public transportation was the town’s single stagecoach that departed twice daily and lumbered along for nearly an hour before arriving in Boston. For those who wished to attend meetings or lectures at night, there was only the densely dark, lonely walk on dirt roads through the town and across the recently opened West Boston Bridge. The world beyond Boston was still more remote. Before the

beginnings of railroad construction in the 1830s, a visit to a nearby state was a rare occasion.¹

Old Cambridge society was almost as simple and cohesive as its physiography. To be sure, the town had its elite, which mimicked and overlapped with Boston's. Overwhelmingly Harvard-educated and Federalist in politics; professional or mercantile in status; refined and dignified in manner; clannish and interconnected through frequent intermarriage; and with a strong, post-Puritan commitment to public service and a healthy respect for the good sense and republican rights of their New England country inferiors—both Bostonians and Cantabrigians unquestionably believed in the value of class distinctions. Yet compared to the circumstances of Boston's elite, those of the Cambridge branch were fairly modest. The most prominent Cantabrigians, the college's professors, earned salaries significantly lower than those paid to Boston ministers. Even those who came from well-to-do families, like the Lowells, Danas, and Higginsons, found their family fortunes in these years dwindling. Nor were any of them as inclined toward the lavish balls and dinner parties that, since the late eighteenth century, had become customary among many of their Boston cousins. Nor, finally, except for house servants, some artisans who worked mainly in Boston, and a few laborers, was there much of a lower class in Cambridge. What there was, Higginson recalled, academic families liked to think of (patronizingly but appreciatively) as "a rather picked class."²

Even more than by relative economic homogeneity, though, Cambridge was drawn together by its close culture. Partly this closeness was a function of the town's small size. Numbering in 1810 just over two thousand, townspeople not only knew nearly everyone personally, but they also knew, as one professor's son later said, "much of everybody's tradition, connections, and mode of life." If what they knew they also generally approved of, it was no doubt because they were so much alike. First of all, in the 1810s nearly all Cantabrigians were Congregationalists and, like their Boston brethren, mostly inclined toward Unitarianism. Even the orthodox minority who followed the Reverend Abiel Holmes were temperate about asserting their moderate Calvinism; when they finally seceded from the parish church the following decade, they did so with contention but with a minimum of rancor. Also, as the large Irish immigration to the Northeast was still several decades away, the town was ethnically almost completely homogeneous. Nearly everyone was a native New Englander, usually descended from the first English Puritans, and more than half were native Cantabrigians. Not surprisingly in such a town, the range of popular ethical values was fairly narrow. Everyone, except for a few tolerated, colorful cranks and loafers, contemporaries recalled, accepted some version of the classic middle-class Puritan ethic of sobriety, thriftiness, and hard work.³

Besides comparatively plain living, Margaret Fuller's Cambridge also embodied, if not the high thinking that the Puritans also enjoined, at least a good deal of bookishness. Nearby Boston to some extent facilitated this, as did the town's highly cultured Unitarianism. But nothing helped as much as its own Harvard College. Cantabrigians were immensely proud of having in their midst Ameri-

ca's first and foremost college. Also "Cambridge" (as Harvard was usually called) overwhelmingly dominated the tiny town's social and cultural life. Academic exhibitions, which were held several times a year, were great community festivals, drawing as observers and revelers a sizeable portion of the general population. In such an atmosphere intellectual matters naturally had an appeal that went far beyond the classroom. Virtually every Old Cambridge memoirist fondly recorded recollections like those of the town's lone Irish laborer leaning on his spade and quizzing schoolboys on their Horace and Virgil; or of a contingent of farmers earnestly leading the applause for the first Latin quotation at a commencement; or of a group of children playing in the churchyard cemetery, continually fascinated by the long-winded Latin inscriptions on the tombstones, which always seemed to them to testify as much to the dignity of knowledge as to that of virtue, and almost never to that of wealth. The result of this inheritance has often been disputed. On one hand, later avant-garde critics would charge that it was precisely the provincial bookishness of popular Cambridge authors like Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and others, that made them worthless as standard-bearers of a vibrant American literature. They, on the other hand, thought their inherited Old Cambridge traditions of popular intellectuality were just what America needed. But however one evaluates the contribution of the Cambridge literati, one thing is certain: early nineteenth-century Cambridge had its benefits for a literary child. "No child is old enough to be a citizen of the world," Higginson argued plausibly in his autobiography. "You do not call a nest provincial." And Holmes, who wore his provinciality as a badge of superiority, never tired of asking,

Know old Cambridge? Hope you do.—
Born there? Don't say so! I was too. . . .
A kind of harbor it seems to be,
Facing the flow of a boundless sea.⁴

If Margaret Fuller—who all her life carried with her a good deal of Cambridge culture—nonetheless later came to see more "narrowness" than coziness in Cambridge, one subliminal reason might have been that for her the town's harbor was no mere metaphor. For she was born and lived most of her youth in a house, not in Old Cambridge proper—or "the Village" surrounding the college—but in the town's new development, "Cambridge Port," about a mile to the southeast along the shore of the Charles River. Her father had originally chosen to live in "New Cambridge"—as Cambridgeport and the even newer East Cambridge were called—largely because he thought its new commercial activity, made possible by the opening of the West Boston Bridge and the recent declaration of Cambridge as a port of entry, "might introduce business to me." Others had had the same idea. In the decade before Margaret's parents moved into their new house, wharves had been built, canals dug, and rows of brick houses erected to absorb the expected rush of settlers—all financed by speculators who had confidently planned to make out of what had been for over a century and a half little

more than tangled woodlands, a great emporium of trade that would one day rival the Boston port. But sadly this “American Venice” (as its promoters unhappily styled it) never came about. First came Jefferson’s Embargo, and then the War of 1812, and within a decade most of the original investors lost their investments or were ruined. And while—dotted among some stores and taverns—the several dozen original houses of mostly tradesmen’s and artisan’s families remained, property values plummeted and development ground to a resounding halt, reviving only with the building of local railroads a half-century later. Meanwhile, with its decaying wharves, blocks of unsold, empty houses, and vast stretches of undrained marshes and overgrown huckleberry patches, Cambridgeport looked altogether, James Russell Lowell recalled, as if it “had been struck by *malaria*.”⁵

Margaret Fuller’s house in Cambridgeport, although not exactly malaria-struck, did share the utilitarian cast of the neighborhood. It was a big, square, three-story, Federal-style wood-frame building with a two-story ell on its left, standing on a deep but narrow lot on the newly laid out Cherry Street. Its placement was not fortunate. Barely twenty feet back from the road, its primary view was of an “unsavory” soap factory. Other unappealing aspects of the place included the nearby saltwater channels in which her younger brothers sometimes drenched themselves and, still more inconvenient, the floods of two-foot-deep marsh water that occasionally poured into the kitchen, forcing family members to scurry to their “strong hold” in adjoining rooms. Margaret Fuller’s recollections of the house were fairly scathing. “Though comfortable,” she recalled glumly, it “was very ugly.” The only aspects of it she remembered liking were the three tall, graceful elm trees in front that her father planted on the day she was born, and her mother’s extensive garden of flowers and fruit trees in the back—“much injured in my ambitious eyes,” she recalled feeling, “by the presence of the pump and the tool-house.” She was even more scathing about Cambridgeport itself, which she remembered only as “a vulgar neighborhood which I detested.” Years later she would claim to one of her brothers that her experience growing up in the pinched environment of Cambridgeport was one source of her later feeling that “merely gentle and winning scenes are not enough for me.” As a child, she recalled, “I used to long and pine for beautiful places such as I read of. There was not one walk for me, except over the bridge. I liked that very much, the river, and the city glittering in sunset, and the undulating line all round, and the light smokes, seen in some weathers.”⁶

As an infant, of course, Margaret’s chief interest was not aesthetic, but physical and emotional. Most of her comforts naturally came from her mother. Like most middle-class women in the early Republic, Margaret breastfed her children well into their third year. She also, her letters show, constantly hugged Margaret, kissed her, slept with her, and played with her. The fact also that for most of her first five years Margaret was her only child meant, as she later noted, Margaret “occupied more of my thoughts, and observations than among subsequent years.” But Margaret’s father was evidently also important for the infant Margaret. His letters show him often enraptured by his children when they were very

young. He often dreamed about them, begged letters from his wife about them, and wrote sentimental letters about them that occasionally rivaled some he wrote about her. His young children even brought out a rarely disclosed playful side in him. "If you bring Mama to Washington," he chuckled in a letter to his two-and-a-half-year-old son, "take care not to let her fall out of your waggon." Predictably, he also worried a good deal about their welfare. Even if this advice in his letters from Washington about clothing, airing, feeding sometimes sounded more anxious than useful, most of it was sensibly aimed, as he told his wife, at protecting them from "dangers" while giving them all "a *fair chance* to excel." In any case, myriad such attentions from both of her parents obviously served Margaret well enough, for her mother thought (and other family letters confirm) she was "remarkably good natured in infancy" and displayed (as her mother had in childhood) "buoyant spirits, and extreme activity."⁷

The first event to disturb this apparent lightheartedness was the death of her one-year-old sister Julia Adelaide on October 5, 1813. She had been thought by many, her father wrote sadly in his diary, to have been an "unusually forward, pretty, & engaging" child, and her death for months cast a pall over the Fuller family. It was also Margaret's earliest memory, which she vividly recorded in her fictionalized autobiographical sketch.

I remember coming home and meeting our nursery-maid, her face streaming with tears. That strange sight of tears made an indelible impression. . . .

She took me by the hand and let me into a still and dark chamber—then drew aside the curtain and showed me my sister. I see yet that beauty of death! The highest achievements of sculpture are only the reminder of its severe sweetness.

In the rest of her account, she grimly described in dreamlike detail the family mourning: her "still and dark" house, the "dreary faces," "the newly-made coffin" scent, and the slow procession to the grave. As the Fullers were Unitarians, one can be sure there was no mention—as there was at Calvinist children's funerals—of the possible eternal damnation of the deceased. Still, she added, "I have no remembrance of what I have since been told I did,—insisting, with loud cries, that they should not put the body in the ground." She did not mention what her feelings were at the time. Yet the circumstances of the event—its occurrence at a period when sibling rivalries over the mother are often intense—her curious association of the beauty of her sister and her death, and, in this context, her wild, almost remorseful grief at the end, all suggest an experience that was more than ordinarily sad, even if one takes into account (as one always must with her sketch) a good deal of retrojection and literary embellishment. "Thus my first experience of life was one of death," she wrote, touching on a paradox that would fascinate and trouble her all her life. Julia Adelaide's death was ill-timed for another reason: within a little over a year, Timothy began his tutoring of Margaret. Although Julia Adelaide would probably not have made the "vast difference" in "temper[ing]" her later character that she claimed in her sketch, her presence might at least have tempered the father-daughter bond that for some crucial years enveloped it.⁸

II

Many have wondered about Timothy Fuller's motives in educating Margaret at home rather than at school. But the primary reason was quite simple: he thought she would attain (as he told his wife) "much greater proficiency." In this thinking he was not alone. Since John Locke, numerous Enlightenment intellectuals had strongly argued that only home instruction instilled young minds with "Ver-tue." Nor were ethics the only consideration. Even in schools-conscious Boston and Cambridge, a fair number of professional families preferred instructing their children at home, at least in the beginning. This was better than handing them over to the men and women "of a very low type" (as one partly home-educated Boston newspaper editor's son recalled) who often taught in the lower-grade schools. As to the fact that it was Margaret's father who did most of the instructing, this, too, was an old tradition in New England that lingered on, in both rural and even some urban professional families, despite the growing preference in middle-class child-rearing literature for the mother as the family's moral and intellectual pedagogue. But more than traditions and pedagogy, Timothy Fuller's own experiences probably spurred him to want to tutor his daughter. One experience was teaching. He had, after all, been taught by *his* father; he had tutored several of his younger brothers; and, his wife claimed, he had "great[ly]" enjoyed his teaching at Leicester. Yet another likely stimulus was his frustration over his cherished "literary pursuits." Indeed, as Margaret Fuller would later perceive, this last factor—his need for an intellectual "companion" or "heir" that neither his colleagues nor, for that matter, his wife, could provide him—was probably the crucial one in making him want, even crave, to teach Margaret. "Sometimes I try the memory & judgment of my daughter by questions in chronology, history, Latin &c," he once wrote wistfully to his wife from Washington. "It is rather an effeminate & idle life I lead when in my room alone in the evening."⁹

Timothy Fuller's desire for an intellectual companion probably in part explains an even more controverted question about his tutoring in biographies of Margaret Fuller—why, when he instructed her, he made no reservation on account of her sex. Of course her birth order may have been a factor; she was (as he himself had been) the eldest and for some years only educable child in the family. Yet if this was all that guided him, it is highly unlikely that he would have been quite as free as he was in disregarding the conventions of his day. For although, inspired by post-Revolutionary reformers like Benjamin Rush, private school opportunities for girls had been growing since the Revolution, the prodomestic evangelical reaction of recent years had dampened some of the ideological enthusiasm for them. Many Americans continued to regard the whole concept of providing instruction for young women beyond the bare rudiments or (for the well-to-do) polite graces as inimical to their daughters' feminine nature and future domestic role. Several influences probably stimulated Timothy Fuller's very different views. In intellectual-minded Unitarian Boston and Cambridge, a fair number of learned professional men saw to it that their