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TWO EASTERN INFLUENCES ON MARGARET FULLER'S WRITINGS

1. *Identity of Opposites, a multi-faceted link: Margaret Fuller and Vedanta Philosophy*

Those who are acquainted with Margaret Fuller and her era, cannot deny that her belief in the concept of identity was mostly molded and steadily nurtured by two main currents of thought which contributed to the creation of American Transcendentalism: Neo-platonism and German philosophical idealism.

On the one hand, Thomas Taylor's assertion that the divine spirit streamed down into, and shone forth in all creatures below, provided Fuller with the Neoplatonic concept of matter as the symbol of spirit, i.e. every natural object had a meaning which transcended the transitory natural world and it was to shed light on the immortal permanence of spiritual reality¹.

¹ Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) was a self-taught Neo-platonist who was much admired in the United States. He first translated Plotinus into English and consequently he fostered the spreading of his ideas, such as the theory of Emanation, of the All-soul, and of the symbolic function of Nature. See *Emerson and Asia*, by F.I. Carpenter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930, pp. 40-42 and also *Beneath the American Renaissance: the Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, by S.D. Reynolds, New York: A. Knopf, 1988; *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, by M.H. Abrams, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971.

M. Fuller mentioned her reading of T. Taylor's translations in a letter dated November 23, 1844, to her brother Richard M. Fuller. According to R.N. Hudspeth, in *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984, vol. 3, p. 248, M. Fuller probably read his *Classical Tracts*, London, 1831, or *The Mystical Initiations; or Hymns of Orpheus*, London, 1787.

An exemplary poem by M. Fuller, conveying – among others – Neoplatonic influences, is *The One in All, in Life Without and Life Within; or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems*, ed. by A.B. Fuller, Boston: Brow Taggard & Chase, 1860, pp. 390-393.

On the other hand, the spokesmen of German idealism (Schiller, Goethe, Lessing, Tieck, Richter, Novalis) chiefly known through Coleridge's and Carlyle's works², instilled in Fuller the conviction of the primacy of practical reason (intuition) over understanding, as a way to trust man's own God-given inner voice and to apprehend that "The All is neutralized in the One only."³

There is however, a third compelling influence on Fuller's belief in the principle of identity which one should keep in mind: Vedanta philosophy.

Vedic literature and Vedantic philosophy reached America as early as the last decade of the 18th century⁴ and within half a century American interest in Vedic literature and ideas gradually intensified, culminating with R.W. Emerson's and H.D. Thoreau's publishing of selected translations of *The Heetopades of Veshnoo Sarma*⁵ and *The Laws of Manu*⁶, in *The Dial* of July 1842.

Thanks to a letter dated December 31, 1842⁷, which R.W. Emerson wrote to Fuller, we learn that she lent him the two above-mentioned Indian books⁸.

² "In the early 1830s it was all but impossible to buy a German book in an American bookstore. It was not until Coleridge's *Friend, Biographia Literaria* and *Aids to Reflection* had been published in America in 1829 and Carlyle's essay on Schiller, Goethe and Richter had appeared in the English periodicals, that Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke began to listen seriously to Hedge's encomiums on German literature and his repeated offers to put his library at their disposal." See *Margaret Fuller: from Transcendentalism to Revolution*, by P. Blanchard, ed. by M. Lawrence, Reading (Massachusetts), 1987, p. 66.

³ See M. Fuller's poem *The One in All*, cit..

⁴ *Early American Interest in Vedanta*, by J.P. Rao Rayapati, London: Asia Publishing House, 1973, p. 1.

⁵ *The Heetopades of Veshnoo Sarma in a Series of Connected Fables, Interspersed with Moral, Prudential and Political Maxims*, trans. by Charles Wilkins, Bath, 1787. See *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of R.W. Emerson (1819-1847)*, ed. by W.H. Gilman, A.R. Ferguson, H. Hayford, R.H. Orth, J.E. Parsons, A.W. Plumstead, Cambridge (Massachusetts): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, vol. 8, p. 14 and R.W. Emerson's *Uncollected Writings*, ed. by C.C. Bigelow, New York: The Lamb Publishing Company, 1912, pp. 65-70.

⁶ R.W. Emerson's *Journals* in 1836 abound with Manu's maxims, probably taken from *Institutes of Hindu Law: or the Ordinances of Menu*, in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, London, 1825.

⁷ *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1813-1881)*, by R.W. Emerson, ed. by R.L. Rusk, New York: Columbia University Press, 1939, vol. 2, p. 108.

⁸ M. Fuller's first reference to the East, blending bewilderment and wonder, curiosity and emotional response, dates back to a letter dated March 5, 1826, which she wrote to Susan Prescott as to her opinion of Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*. To her, the Oriental setting (Russia) became the proper stage for the dramatization of those passions (rape and war) whose common denominator

Moreover, we can infer that it is through these Indian writings that Fuller enlarged and widened her horizons, grasping the pivotal tenet around which Vedanta philosophy turns: the principle of Atman/Brahman identity.

According to this principle, Brahman – the Sanskrit word for the Absolute, the Ultimate Reality⁹ – is non-dual, but nevertheless, manifest in the ordinary world of multiplicity. As a passage in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* suggests, Brahman is both immanent and transcendent:

Thou art the fire
Thou art the sun
Thou art the air

appeared to be violence, savagery and lack of moral scruples. See *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, cit., vol. 1, p. 153; see also Fuller's enthusiastic critical essay entitled *Brockden Brown's Novels*, which appeared in *The Daily Tribune* of July 21, 1846, in *The Critical Essays of Margaret Fuller from the New York Tribune*, a published thesis in 2 vols. by W. Robb Ebbitt, Providence R.I.: Brown University, 1943, vol. 2, pp. 421-425.

On January 3, 1828, Fuller wrote again to Susan Prescott communicating her reading of Rammohun Roy's *The Precepts of Jesus; or the Guide to Peace and Happiness*.

R. Roy (1774-1833) was a brilliant Hindu reformer, and significantly he was one of the earliest Hindus to travel to the West. Although he advocated the principles of Vedanta philosophy, he was deeply attracted by Christian Unitarians, in that they professed the unity of the godhead (a warrant against the "metaphysical perversion" of polytheism) and the God-given moral sense, that was ultimately reliable as a guide to action in this world (metaphysics and speculative theology were thus subordinated to ethics). On the other hand, it seems that the Unitarian concern with Asiatic thought began with R. Roy: having ascertained that R. Roy's views were close to theirs, the Unitarians looked on him as a means of expansion of their beliefs in India.

In *The Precepts of Jesus; or the Guide to Peace and Happiness*, R. Roy carefully selected a large number of the moral precepts of the Savior from the Four Gospels and translated them into Sanskrit and Bengalese "in order to convince them (his countrymen)" of "the unity of God and absurdity of idolatry." In any event, the book, which was published in 1820, became an object of controversy between the Unitarians and the Baptists, as *The Christian Register* in 1821 and 1822 reported: see the issues dated Boston, April 20, 1821, n° 1; Boston, December 7, 1821, n° 17; Boston, June 7, 1822, n° 43; Boston, July 7, 1822, n° 43; Boston, July 12, 1822, n° 48; Boston, July 26, 1822, n° 50; Boston, August 2, 1822, n° 51; Boston, August 9, 1822, n° 52; Boston, August 16, 1822, n° 1; Boston, August 23, 1822, n° 2; Boston, August 30, 1822, n° 3.

⁹ "According to non-dualistic Vedanta, the Absolute is merely the Absolute. The Absolute is not God. The Vedantic Absolute is undefinable, whereas God in every religious system is definable. Confessional creeds are a good example of man's attempts at defining God. The Vedantic Absolute is without attributes." See *Early American Interest in Vedanta*, cit., p. 11.

Thou art the moon
Thou art the starry firmament
Thou art Brahman Supreme;
Thou art the waters – Thou
The *creator* of all
Thou art woman; Thou art man;
Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden
Thou art the old man tottering with his staff.
Thou facest everywhere.
Thou art the dark butterfly
Thou art the green parrot with red eyes,
Thou art the thunder-cloud, the season, the seas.
Without beginning art thou
*Beyond time, beyond space*¹⁰.

Brahman, that is, the Self-existent, is both the Supreme Creator and the created thing¹¹: in its higher transcendent reality, it is absolutely indescribable, whereas in its immanent manifestation it can be grasped only by overcoming its magic power MĀYĀ, the one setting in motion the unending stream of life, real only as a phenomenon, whose secret is “this identity of opposites. (...) Māyā is a simultaneous-and-successive manifestation of energies that are at variance with each other, processes contradicting and annihilating each other.”¹²

What MĀYĀ veils and hides from man is his true nature (Atman) and the realization of the identity between the true Self (Atman) and the Self of the world (Brahman)¹³. In other words, Atman is both the individual self and the Supreme Self that is identified with Brahman.

The individual's aim becomes thus the pursuit of the knowledge

¹⁰ Taken from the *Upanishads*, trans. by S. Prabhavananda and F. Manchester, in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, by W.T. Stace, Philadelphia – New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960, p. 209.

¹¹ “Then the sole self-existing power, himself undiscerned, but making this world discernible, with five elements and other principles of nature, appeared with undiminished glory, expanding his idea or dispelling the gloom.” See *Manava Dharma Sastra or the Institutes of Manu*, trans. by Sir W. Jones, ed. by G.C. Houghton, Madras: Law Bookseller & Publisher, 1863, chap. I, p. 2.

¹² Taken from *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, by H. Zimmer, ed. by J. Campbell, in *Early American Interest in Vedanta*, cit., p. 20.

¹³ “He whom the mind alone can perceive, whose essence eludes the external organs, who has no visible parts, who exists from eternity, even HE, the soul of all beings, whom no being can comprehend shone forth in person”; “Thus the man who perceives in his soul the supreme soul present in all creatures, acquires equanimity toward them all and shall be absorbed at last in the highest essence, even that of the Almighty himself.” See *Manava Dharma Sastra or the Institutes of Manu*, cit., chap. I, p. 2; chap. XII, p. 343.

of the Self¹⁴: the achievement of a self-consciousness that sets man free from the deceiving ultimacy of MĀYĀ, and consequently from the painful cycle of rebirths (SAMŚĀRA).

It is against this Vedantic concept of identity that we must measure the philosophy of identity in the writings of Margaret Fuller.

In her poem *The One in All*, Fuller's clear message is that the multiplicity of objects in the phenomenological world is only apparent, since it belongs to the transient sphere of matter, while the imperishable substance of each thing, the difference-abolishing Truth, is and will always be God:

There are who separate the eternal light
In forms of man and woman, day and night
They cannot bear that God be essence quite¹⁵.

To her, "Nothing can be, nothing has been, except the one Truth that creates the scene"¹⁶: God is then the First Spiritual Source and Root of everything¹⁷, "*The Presence*" who "all their fancies supersedes"¹⁸, the reconciliation of opposites, of paradoxes, for "In the one Truth, each separate fact is true."¹⁹

From the point of view of God (and from that of that man who recognizes his real self, his spiritual side – the soul – as being the divine mark of, and the belonging to God: "the symbol which you seek is found in you", "believe that human nature is the way"²⁰) "The All is neutralized in the One only"²¹, instead "whenever man

¹⁴ "Equally perceiving the supreme soul in all beings and all beings in the supreme soul, he sacrifices his own spirit by fixing it on the spirit of God, and approaches the nature of that sole divinity who shines by his own effulgence." See *ibidem*, chap. XII, p. 338.

¹⁵ Taken from *The One in All*, cit.; and again: "Were it recognized that disease, old age and death are circumstances which can never touch the eternal youth of the Spirit (...) then would he, who is pausing to despair, realize that a new choice can never be counted by the All-wise, and that though a moment's delay against conviction is of incalculable weight, the mistakes of forty years are but as dust or the balance held by an unerring hand, Despair is for time, hope for eternity." Taken from "Later Aspirations (letter to H -)", in *Life Without and Life Within; or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems*, cit., p. 349.

¹⁶ Taken from *The One in All*, cit..

¹⁷ "Let not the tree forget its root....In every inquire, unless sustained by a pure and reverent spirit, he gropes in the dark and falls headlong." See *At Home and Abroad, or Things and Thoughts in America and Europe*, by M. Fuller, ed. by A.B. Fuller, Boston: Crosby, Nichols & C., 1856, p. 156.

¹⁸ Taken from *The One in All*, cit..

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

remains embedded in nature, whether from sensuality or because he is not yet awakened to consciousness, the purpose of the whole remains unfulfilled, hence our displeasure when man is not in a sense, *above* nature.”²²

Therefore, from the point of view of the ignorant man (who lacks the knowledge of the Self) “each symbol is a mask”²³, turning into an unsolvable, sphinx-like riddle; “the life of love (...) a mysterious task”²⁴, blinding instead of bathing him in the clear, dazzling light of Truth; briefly put, that man is bound to remain unaware that “light is dark, hard soft and cold (...) warm.”²⁵

Fuller thus agrees with the Vedantic idea of God as Emanation, the all-encompassing energy, the Ultimate Reality reconciling both its Personal (īshvara) and Impersonal manifestation (Brahman)²⁶; as a consequence, Nature becomes the visible proof of God, his most eloquent metaphorical language, the mediator between heaven and earth.

In any event, she believes not only in a pantheism which maintains both the personal and impersonal manifestation of the Divinity²⁷, but she also relies on the basic tenet of Christian religion, Christ's Incarnation:

²² Taken from M. Fuller's “Credo”, in *Margaret Fuller and Goethe*, by F.A. Braun, New York: Henry Holt & C., 1910, pp. 248-253.

²³ Taken from *The One in All*, cit..

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ As to the fundamental role of the relativity of the point of view, Shankara himself (788-820) – a Vedanta philosopher – wittily exemplified it through the well-known illustration of the rope: “A man may in the dark mistake a piece of rope for a snake and run from it frightened and trembling. Thereupon another man may tell him – be not afraid, it is only a rope, not a snake – and he may then dismiss the fear caused by the imagined snake and stop running. But all the while the presence and subsequent absence of his erroneous notion as to the rope being a snake make no difference to the rope itself.” Taken from *The Vedanta according to Shankara and Ramanuja*, by S. Radhakrishnan, in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, by A. Christy, New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1963, p. 89.

²⁶ “The One Absolute, Impersonal existence (...) appears as the Divine Lord, the Personal God, endowed with manifold glories.” Taken from the *Upanishads*, trans. by S. Prabhavananda & F. Manchester, in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, cit., p. 265.

²⁷ As a Personal God, Fuller identified him with the Father, the Creator, detached from his creatures (dualistic interpretation: every form of mystical union between the soul and the godhead would never so much attain to the level of identity as to that of similarity). As an Impersonal God, Fuller identified him with Nature (pantheistic paradox: the identity God/Nature complied with two statements: 1) the world is identical with God; 2) the world is distinct from, that is to say, *not* identical with God). It was this pantheistic paradox which allowed Fuller to accept both the personal and impersonal quality of God, reconciling the Vedantic

The heart and the mind, the wisdom and the will
 The man and woman, must be severed still
 And Christ must reconcile the good and ill ²⁸.

The coming of Christ, marking the reconciliation between matter and spirit, immanence and transcendence, in that he was both the Son of God (Divine Nature) and the son of Man (human nature), provides Fuller with a meaning for, and an answer to the mystery of Incarnation.

If Incarnation transfigures history because Time is made to *be*, which means that it ceases to become (change = not-being), it transfigures itself into eternity, thus time becomes a value, insofar as God manifests Himself through it, filling it with a trans-historical meaning and a soteriological intention ²⁹.

As a matter of fact, Fuller from the very first lines of the poem, highlights the unshattering value of life when saying: "existence is as deep a verity" ³⁰; the truth which it discloses is that of Love, i.e. the

monism or non-duality (Shankara), with Christian dualism. (As to Christian dualism and Vedantic monism, see *ibidem*).

In her poem *The One in All*, cit., Fuller significantly conveys the Personal and Impersonal manifestation of the godhead: "In the one Truth, each separate fact is true / Eternally in one I may view / And destinies through destinies pursue. / This is my tendency; but can I say / That this my thought leads the true only way? / I only know it constant leads, and I obey. / I know one prayer: Give me the truth (...) / Let me not by vain wishes bar my claim / Nor soothe my hunger by an empty name (...) / One presence fills and floods the whole serene (...) / The All is neutralized in the One only."

²⁸ Taken from *The One in All*, cit..

²⁹ *Images and Symbols*, by M. Eliade, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961, pp. 168-169.

³⁰ Although aware that "nothing can be, nothing has ever been except the one truth that creates the scene", Fuller advocates and cherishes the value of life, of "seeming" ("but say that love and life eternal seem and if eternal ties be but a dream, what is the meaning of that self-same seem?"), because she believes that man's salvation after this earthly existence depends on man's virtuous behaviour, on his re-enactment of Christ's message and life (love).

Her plunging into, and appreciation of life however, clashes with the Vedantic negative vision of this world steeped in sorrow, pain, ignorance and endless rebirth, because time and space (MĀYĀ's outcome) blur man's awareness of what is *only* real and true, his Self (Atman) which is identical with the Ultimate Reality (Brahman): "Time is trouble, and the author of destruction; he seizeth even from afar" (see *The Hitopadesa, Fables and Proverbs from the Sanskrit*, trans. and ed. by C. Wilkins, London: George Routledge and Sons, 1885, p. 44). When Fuller addresses God asking for the acquisition of truth ("the Truth Thou art") since "peace is the soul's desire", she does not want to transcend the categories of time and space to annihilate her individual self through absorption into the Ultimate Reality (MOKSHA). She yearns, instead, for a full-fledged absorption into this existence,

principle of synthesis between heaven and earth, the power which integrates microcosm and macrocosm, the embodiment of which is Christ's life:

Yet to me, a being social and sympathetic by natural impulse, though recluse and contemplative by training and philosophy, the character and life of Jesus have spoken more forcibly than any fact recorded in human history. This story of *incarnated love* has given me the key to all mysteries and showed me what path should be taken in returning to the Fountain of Spirit³¹.

Accepting the basic foundations of Christianity – the mysteries of Incarnation, Trinity³², Resurrection and Salvation through Divine Grace³³ – molding her life according to Jesus' example of love and

since "The Author of all has intended to confine our knowledge within certain boundaries, has given us a short span of time for a certain *probation*, for which our faculties our adapted"; "For one like me, it would be vain / From glittering heights the eyes to strain / I the truth can only know / *Tested* by life's most fiery glow / Seeds of thought will never thrive / Till dews of love shall bid them live." See *At Home and Abroad, or Things and Thoughts in America and Europe*, cit., p. 72, p. 74. And again: "Life is full and nature fair / How canst thou dream of dull despair? / Life is full and nature fair / A dull fancy is despair / But thy heart lies still and tame / For want of what it may not claim." Taken from *Sadness*, a poem by M. Fuller, in *Life Without and Life Within; or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems*, cit., p. 414.

³¹ *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), ed. by R.W. Emerson, W.H. Channing, J.F. Clarke, New York: Burt Franklin, 1972, vol. 1, p. 171.

³² Fuller boldly criticized Unitarianism in 1841, because during a Sunday sermon, the minister "straightaway uprose (...) to deny mysteries, to deny the second birth, to deny influx and to renounce the sovereign gift of insight, for the sake of what he deemed a rational exercise of will. As he spoke, I could not choose but deny him all through (...)." Again referring to the Unitarians she says: "(they spoke) of the One rather than Three, though that number, if they would let it reproduce itself simply, is of highest significance... Yet the time seems now to have come for reinterpreting the old dogmas. For one, I would now preach the Holy Ghost as zealously as they have been preaching Man and faith instead of the understanding and mysticism instead of & C..... But why go on? It certainly is by no means useless to preach. In my experience of the divine gifts of solitude I had forgotten what might be done in this other way. That crowd of upturned faces, with their look of unintelligent complacency!!." See *ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

³³ "I believe in the genesis of the patriarchs, as given in the Old Testament. I believe in the prophets – that they foreknew not only what their nation longed for, but what the development of Universal Man requires – a Redeemer, an Atoner, a Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world. I have nothing to say in denial of the story of his birth; whatever the actual circumstances were, he was born of a Virgin and the tale expresses a truth of the soul. I have no objection to the miracles, except where they do not happen to please one's feelings... Why should not a spirit, so consecrate and intent develop new laws and make matter plastic? I can imagine