A Lovely but Unpredictable River

Frances Fuller Victor’s Early Life and Writing

ON DECEMBER 20, 1864, thirty-eight-year-old author Frances Fuller Victor boarded the Brother Jonathan in San Francisco for a six-day steamer voyage to Portland, Oregon. Leaving the “bay of the good St. Francis,” she delighted in “the light and graceful clouds of morning mist, gilded by the sun to a silvery sheen, [which] hung over the town and the islands of the bay.”

Four days out, the ship passed through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, dropping anchor at Esquimalt Harbor: “Small, land-locked, bounded by forests and hills, and set in a basin of most picturesque rocks covered with beautiful lichen of every shade of yellow, brown and green; it makes a lovely picture.”

Her travel essay, “A Winter Trip to Victoria and Portland,” appeared in the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin on January 20, 1865. It joined another essay, “Summer Wanderings,” and several of her poems, which the Bulletin had published during the previous eighteen months.¹

Victor’s lilting description of her journey evoked the poetic voice she brought to all her writing, whether travel accounts, prose essays, or fiction. As she endeavored to remember each detail of her departure from San Francisco — “in my mind’s hall of pictured memories” — Victor’s essay echoed what another newspaper had said about her poems, published as a young woman in Ohio:² That editor compared her imaginative compositions to the excitement of navigating a lovely but unpredictable river. “A sudden bend in the stream starts and astonishes you with the beauty of the prospect,” he enthused.³

When Victor moved to Oregon from California in 1864, she was already a successful poet and prose author whose impressive thematic range was
shaped by her particular Midwestern, gendered, and cultural experiences. She had lived through the explosion of transportation and communication revolutions, participated in the upheavals and possibilities of unprecedented westward expansion, and witnessed the chaos of the Civil War. Always accompanied by her pen, she crisscrossed the country — from Ohio to Michigan to Nebraska, zigzagging from the Midwest to New York, and voyaging by ship from New York to San Francisco. Writing with facility in multiple genres, Victor observed and critiqued American social inequalities, women’s need for economic justice, gender stereotypes and expectations, and myriad effects of the nation’s expansion. Victor’s work was innovative, witty, ironic, and poetic. In short, she was an intellectual.

Although she was an adept author in many genres, Victor is remembered primarily for her historical writing, to which she devoted her career after she arrived in Oregon. Shortly after her death on November 14, 1902, William A.
Morris presented her as a “careful, painstaking and conscientious” historian. In addition to numerous other works, she had researched and written the *History of Oregon* (volumes I and II), the *History of Washington, Idaho, and Montana*, and all but two chapters of the *History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming* for historian and entrepreneur Hubert Howe Bancroft’s western states history series. Hazel Mills noted in 1961 that “the press referred to her as the ‘Mother of Oregon History’ and the ‘Historian of the Northwest.’” Franklin Walker’s entry for *Notable American Women* (1971) agreed that her history writing “is carefully documented and clearly expressed, and remains basic to later studies in the fields which she covered.” By the time the first book-length biography appeared, Jim Martin’s *A Bit of A Blue* (1992), it seemed inevitable and correct that any “life and works” treatment of Victor would prominently feature her career as a historian.

Victor’s intellectual journey began with poetry, however, and later followed new paths to travel accounts, prose essays, fiction, and book-length histories. It was poetry in particular that enabled her to identify and explore western and national literary themes; to contemplate American social values and norms; to delve into wide-ranging emotions; and to examine thoughtfully ideas regarding the intellect, spirituality, and humanity. Poetry was the medium to which she returned for emotional and financial sustenance throughout her life, even as she developed a lyrical (and often humorous) voice in prose. Thus, analyzing Victor’s early poetry and prose in a broad context helps build an imaginative, intellectual bridge to her later volumes of Pacific Northwest history.

With the exception of her stories written during the 1870s, scholars generally have ignored Victor’s literary works or treated them with superficial disdain. Even though Walker recognized Victor’s capability as a historian, he offered the following disinterested perspective on her non-historical writing: “[Her] poems, conventionally romantic and didactic, today seem uninspired, with one or two exceptions. Her short stories, influenced by her friend Bret Harte, are successful principally in giving glimpses of the hard lot of women on the frontier.” Walker’s comments calcified the view that Victor’s literary contributions were tedious, derivative, and frivolous, especially when her subject matter dealt with women. But gender stereotypes and presentism have hindered the recovery of nineteenth-century women’s ideas, particularly when their writings focused on the sentimental or embraced Romanticism (a literary tradition that defined itself against Enlightenment rationalism; it welcomed introspective, imaginative discourse on death, the natural world, and the place of the “self” in society, for example). Literary scholar Cheryl Walker has noted that nineteenth-century women poets expressed themselves mainly in terms of “liberal Christianity, domestic piety, American nature romanticism, and
nationalist fervor” — themes that arose out of specific gendered, cultural, and historical milieus. This framework is missing from Franklin Walker’s lukewarm assessment and suggests the need for a reexamination. Victor’s contemporaries, furthermore, judged her poetry and prose as highly imaginative and compelling. Her life and work as a woman writer therefore must be thoroughly contextualized in order to understand what Cheryl Walker has called the “poetic paradigms” from which her ideas originated.

But the problem of taking Victor and other women writers seriously is deeper still. Scholar Hilda Smith has argued that too often, historians have failed to evaluate women’s works “as a whole,” assuming they “have not offered fundamental and lasting analyses of broad social, intellectual, and political phenomena.” Even when scholars have studied women’s public lives and accomplishments, they have not “view[ed] them as systematic or original thinkers.” We do not know the depths of nineteenth-century women’s “life of the mind,” therefore, because we have “turned women from the past into somewhat truncated beings, namely headless ones.” Discovering the connections between Victor the writer and Victor the historian helps sharpen our understanding of the intellectual history of women in the nineteenth century, and reexamining her insightful writing provides a lens through which to view American society during an era of significant social change.

Soon after she arrived in Oregon, Victor proclaimed to Governor Addison Gibbs that writing the region’s history was “just in my line.” Her many years of creative effort and sometimes heartbreaking life experiences in the Midwest were the prolegomenon to the Pacific Northwest histories of statesmen and pioneers, manifest destiny and expansion, and Cayuse and Yakima Indians that she undertook after 1865. Re-imagining Victor’s early
life history challenges us to re-evaluate her entire intellectual journey as she wrote her way across the landscapes of America. 

“I MIGHT HAVE BEEN TWELVE” years of age when I began to write original verses in albums; but not until fourteen did I venture to think of publishing,” Frances Fuller Victor reminisced in 1864. In later autobiographical fragments, she remembered that as a young girl, she lived in a dream world of her own creation. At age nine, she “wrote verses on her slate in school, and arranged plays from her imagination.” She was precocious, eager, and driven to write, like other young women poets such as Lucretia Davidson, Frances Watkins Harper, Frances Sargent Osgood, Emma Embury, and fellow Ohioans Alice and Phoebe Cary. 

Frances Auretta Fuller was born in Rome, New York on May 23, 1826.* She left few personal papers that might shed light on her childhood or family history and only scattered sentiments, in biographical sketches, about her parents. She once reported that her father was from “an old Colonial family, some of whom were among the founders of Plymouth.” Yet tying Adonigh Fuller to Massachusetts has proven elusive.

Except for the mention of her father’s “old Colonial family,” silence drops like a shroud over Adonigh Fuller. Frances Fuller’s feelings for her mother are only slightly better documented. Lucy Williams Fuller was “a passionate lover of the beautiful in nature and art,” Frances once wrote, but she rarely spoke of the woman she so admired. When she published her first book of poetry in 1851, Fuller dedicated it lovingly to her mother, but this would not have been an unusual gesture for an author then or now.10 Late in her life, however, Fuller honored her mother in a way that seems more revealing, detailing her mother’s genealogy within a biographical sketch. Expressing inordinate pride in her matrilineal heritage — “a long line of titled and distinguished ancestry” — Fuller traced her mother through grandmother Lucy Walworth Williams to “the William Walworth, Lord Mayor of London” (emphasis mine). The Walworths had married with the Williams families in Groton, Connecticut, during the eighteenth century; they were “the founders of liberty on this continent,” she enthused.

Maternal ties that had bound Lucy Williams Fuller to Oneida County, New York, frayed in 1830, when her husband decided to remove their family to Erie, Pennsylvania, from Rome (where the Erie Canal had originated). Adonigh Fuller was a hotel manager, and he must have believed, like so many Americans during the canal era, that he could improve his economic

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* Frances Fuller Victor was not known by this name until her marriage to Henry Victor in 1862; to signify her youth, I will refer to her as Frances or use her maiden name of Fuller.
prospects if he moved further west. Despite a building boom that nearly tripled the population over the next nine years, and without waiting to see the completion of the Conneaut Division of the Pennsylvania Canal, the Fullers left Erie in 1839 and headed to Wooster Township, Ohio.12

It is unclear what brought the Fullers to Wooster, but a steady stream of Pennsylvania migrants to the bustling town cultivated economic possibilities along with wheat, corn, hay, and oats. Wooster Township and the town itself (the county seat) were nestled in the heart of Wayne County’s agricultural region. By 1840, the population of Wooster and the surrounding area had grown to over 3,100 souls. Where the Apple and Killbuck creeks converged, farmers tilled rolling, fertile grassland. But Adonigh Fuller was not a planter; perhaps it was commerce that beckoned. Wooster boasted fourteen grocery and dry goods stores, two hardware stores, a few flour mills, numerous grain distilleries, several print shops, two bookstores, and promising traffic at its hotels — The Washingtonian, the United States Hall, and the American.13

Even more attractive to the Fullers may have been the cultural and educational opportunities in the town. They arrived at a fortuitous time for their children — Frances Auretta (b. 1826), Martha Rosetta (b. 1828), Metta Victoria (b. 1831), Celia Medora (b. 1833), and Julia Marian (b. 1835). Presbyterian minister Joseph McKee had recently become superintendent of Wooster Academy, a fully incorporated and capitalized coeducational institution with a board of trustees. McKee’s wife had attended Emma Willard’s respected Troy Female Seminary in New York, and in 1839, the couple opened the Wooster Female Seminary, where Fuller was educated. The perspective on the past that Mrs. McKee offered, as a prior student of Troy, may have been more valuable to Fuller than the reading, spelling, vocabulary, arithmetic, and geography available for three dollars per eleven-week quarter (an additional five dollars could secure instruction in philosophy, chemistry, geology, astronomy, botany, logic, rhetoric, algebra, and “moral science”) at Wooster.14

Willard’s History of the United States, first published in 1828, was a rousing narrative meant “to infuse patriotism into the breasts of the coming generation.” Troy’s headmistress recorded America’s glorious origins through its military exploits and founders’ biographies. This text “must have been a key source of historical knowledge for many thousands of Americans,” notes scholar Nina Baym. Wooster’s residents could purchase the volume, and Willard’s Universal History in Perspective, at J.W. Shuckers’ Book Store in the town. More importantly, Willard viewed herself as a historian, as had Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams in the years immediately following the American Revolution. Heirs to the Enlightenment concept that “the mind has no sex,” these Republican Mothers (patriotically and virtuously educating their sons for the new republic) saw themselves as equally well-
suited for the nursery and the classroom as they did for historical writing. They understood that men were the historical agent-actors and women the spectator-scribes; yet, Baym argues, these "parallel, distinct tasks" gave women authority as intellectual "witnesses" to the past.15

Willard’s histories not only provided a model of the woman philosopher-writer as historian, they also confirmed that the subject of history was the nation — its politics, wars, conquests, and statesmen. Just prior to her fifteenth birthday, in May 1841, Fuller wrote a surprisingly mature military poem, one demonstrating that she understood her role as interpreter of male exploits. The Wooster Democrat published “The Warrior Youth,” a cautionary ballad of an overconfident “chieftain” who pauses “yet a moment” before the battle to reflect (but not too deeply) on how many of his men may “sleep” that night “in a bloody grave.” He fights valiantly — “His soul is on fire, and his war-steed bears / Him on to the midst of the fight, /” — and his troops are victorious. As anticipated, many died, but in the "heaps" of dead, the body that cannot be found is the chieftain’s. In its ambiguity regarding time, space, and setting, the verses easily could reference any military conflict, from the gallantry of medieval knights to the French and Indian War in America. Here, Fuller echoes the omnipresence of war in Willard’s History of the United States — over half of her text was devoted collectively to the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the War of 1812. But in its recognition and critique of the costs of conflict, “The Warrior Youth” departs from Willard’s celebratory tone and eerily foreshadows the grimness of the Civil War. Death is not valorized; the chieftain’s arrogance and bravado led his “braves” to a courageous but ultimately senseless end.

Not a sound save the sigh of the wind’s soft breath,
Broke the silence that reigned around,
And none came to watch o’er the pillow of death;
But his bed was the dew-spangled ground.16

Perhaps the most interesting theme in the poem is the chieftain’s lonely demise on the battlefield. That Fuller would explore its meaning was hardly unusual. As a mournful sub-genre, elegiac verse had been common since the mid eighteenth century, made most famous in Robert Blair’s “The Grave” (1743). Yet, in the antebellum era, burgeoning migration and urbanization, thriving new markets, and rapid changes in one’s economic fortunes began tearing at the fabric of community; societal upheaval meant “the notion of a shared dead was less and less tenable.” How the individual experienced the isolation of death was a fascinating subject to poets, and the Romantic heirs to the “Graveyard” tradition continued to probe the relationship among the self, the soul, and the supernatural world.17
As a young woman, Fuller frequently quoted the Romantic poets, particularly William Cullen Bryant. His “Thanatopsis” imagined the “ineffable reality” of death. In Bryant’s poem, nature — the hills, the rivers, “the venerable woods,” and “Old Ocean” — as well as the immeasurable universe became the caretakers of the dead: “The golden sun, / The planets, all the infinite host of heaven, / Are shining on the sad abodes of death, / Through the still lapse of ages.” Fuller’s metaphors in “The Warrior Youth” suggest a similar thoughtful mood, one that is not grim or macabre.

Though none knew the place of the warrior’s rest,
Some lone star his night vigil keeps,
And the moon shakes her dew from her silver crest
Like gems round the couch where he sleeps.

There are no people here. As in Bryant’s poem, nature’s monuments — its “solemn decorations” — replace family and community. The moon and the stars brought light across the tombstones in Blair’s graveyard.\(^a\)

Fuller’s debut poem, with its military theme and elegiac overtones, struck a familiar note for antebellum audiences even as she invited readers to question the heroism of the warrior whose braves lay in “heaps o’er the plain.” Exhibiting intellectual energy and courage that would be hallmarks of her future work, Fuller established at a young age that she was willing to challenge accepted cultural and historical traditions. Her poetic voice and eagerness to critique cultural icons found new avenues for expression later in the nineteenth century, with prose travel essays and Pacific Northwest history; thus, her early writing is an important intellectual bridge to the perceptive analyses she wrote from the Far West in the 1870s and 1880s.

As the discussion of the fallen chieftain in the “The Warrior Youth” suggests, Fuller balked at simplistic celebrations of national patriotism or paeans to American founders. Her later Oregon histories rang with resounding criticism of pioneer Protestant missionaries, whose efforts to Christianize and civilize Native Americans, she believed, were misguided and ill-suited to a frontier environment. In the preface to History of Oregon (1886), Frances Fuller Victor claimed that her “gentle purpose” was not to recount “bloody conquests” but rather to investigate “commerce and agriculture, the fur company, [and] the missionaries of different sects.” With lyrical, engaging prose, she invited readers to admire Oregon’s climate, geography, and economic advantages. She wove together insightful, frequently captivating biographical sketches of British and American settlers and statesmen, then delivered a rigorous, ruthless analysis of missionaries-turned-colonizers. She scathingly criticized Methodist minister Jason Lee, who she believed had abandoned entirely his missionary purpose by 1838, and instead had begun...
The River of the West promised readers more than a biography of mountain man Joe Meek, as Victor analyzed commerce, agriculture, trade, and first settlers.
plotting to “appropriat[e] the valley of the Willamette for the Methodist church under the protection of the United States.”¹⁹

Similarly, she made a careful study of Presbyterian missionary Marcus Whitman as a legendary American hero, devoting years of research to dismantling the myth that he had “saved” the Oregon Country with a perilous journey east in October 1842 to negotiate with Secretary of State Daniel Webster regarding the United States’ claims to the region. Whitman’s supporters also claimed he singlehandedly brought the first significant overland migration of Americans to the Pacific Northwest when he returned in 1843. Victor concluded that his desire to save Waiilatpu Mission from closure — not the political interests of the region — drove Whitman to undertake his treacherous trek to Boston. Additionally, she argued that the missionary had aggressively promoted American settlement into Oregon from the moment of his arrival and was one of many individuals responsible for the large and successful migration of 1843. Simultaneously, then, she diminished his heroic pioneer role and made him an agent of manifest destiny rather than a selfless Protestant leader.²⁰

Despite Victor’s criticisms of the missionaries, she essentially followed the path of female historians who preceded her, penning masculinist, political chronicles extolling the accomplishments of prominent statesmen. With a distinctive regional voice, she highlighted the achievements of Oregon’s mountain men, fur traders, and political leaders while promoting the region’s economic and geographic advantages. Still, she believed her primary contribution was in bringing depth and truthfulness to the heroic narrative. “Eternal vigilance is the price of truth in history,” Victor wrote, and she thought that “truth” equaled rigorous attention to “facts” in history. She strove to recreate historical figures that were multidimensional but not mythical — often flawed but sometimes indeed valiant.²¹

In analyzing Whitman and other pioneers, she illuminated their complex motives and personalities, criticizing their faults but marveling at them as well. Of Whitman, she wrote: “But the missionary was no ordinary man. I do not know which to admire in him most, his coolness or his courage. His nerves were of steel; his patience was excelled only by his absolute fearlessness.” Her readers would remember these words when she vividly recounted the horror of the Whitman Massacre and deftly analyzed how Protestant missionaries’ actions contributed to the tragedy.²² In portraying the impetuous but courageous young Whitman, perhaps Victor recalled her earlier depiction of the chieftain from “The Warrior Youth.”

When young Frances Fuller submitted “The Warrior Youth” to the editor of her hometown newspaper in 1841, she asked “how much I was to pay him for publishing [it].” But the “obliging” editor was “very glad” to have
her poem and praised her writing. Delighted with the results, she “wrote a poem a day that summer.” Wryly, Fuller wrote later: “I could not stop writing the poetry, but that editor could have stopped printing it.” 23 Fellow Oregon author Eva Emery Dye described a similar experience receiving encouragement as a young writer in Illinois: “[It] was like manna in the wilderness, as water to a parched traveler in the desert.” 24

Although the Wooster Democrat published several of Fuller’s poems during the early 1840s, the majority of her poetry dates from 1848 and was published in northern newspapers and magazines such as The Daily Sanduskian, the Western Literary Messenger, and the Cleveland Herald. Publication outside Wayne County may suggest Fuller’s emerging regional prominence, but it also reveals the transitory nature of family life during the height of the transportation revolution. Adonigh Fuller moved his family twice more during the 1840s. Undoubtedly seeking opportunities where emerging markets, new canals, and east-west roads would deliver travelers to local inns, Fuller the hotelier ventured to the “Firelands” in 1847. This northwestern region of Ohio was a 500,000-acre tract of land set aside after the American Revolution to compensate Connecticut citizens burned out of their towns by the British in 1779. The Fullers settled first in the village of Milan, a few miles south of Lake Erie. By the following year, however, even the completion of the Milan Canal and the town’s subsequent success as a transportation and commercial hub could not keep Fuller’s wanderlust in check; he packed up his wife and daughters and headed eight miles southwest, to the frontier town of Monroeville. 25

In that tiny hamlet, framed on one side by intimidating forest and on the other by enveloping prairie, twenty-two-year-old Frances Fuller made sense of her life once more through poetry. Taking cues from the Romantic poets, particularly Bryant, who believed that good writing originated from what one personally observed, she penned a bit of whimsy, with a “post boy” as narrator. His “song” was a tribute to the stage coach drivers who delivered their freight and passengers even when

The night is dark and the way is long,  
And the clouds are flying fast,  
The night wind sings a dreary song,  
And the trees creak in the blast:  
The moon is down in the tossing sea  
And the stars shed not a ray,  
The lightning flashes frightfully,  
But I must [be] on my way.

Fuller likened the stage driver to a weaver’s shuttle, “thrown by the hand of
He bounced along through desolate terrain and terrible weather, “forward and back I go.” She cleverly utilized the weaving metaphor as the post boy brought his news: “bearing a thread to the desolate / To darken their web of woe; / And a brighter thread to the glad of heart, / And a mingled one to all.” Throughout the poem, a violent storm rages, and the driver complains: “The wayward wanderer from his home, / The sailor upon the sea. / Have prayers to bless them where they roam— / Who thinketh to pray for me?” The answer, of course, was the poet. Local historian G.T. Stewart commented: “Never before had the rough stage driver been sung into Parnassus.”

Fuller’s “The Post-Boy’s Song” was one of her most popular and oft-published poems. Its success rested perhaps in the two intersecting audiences she reached. The larger, and possibly more significant, was an eastern (national) readership via the New York Home Journal. Editors N.P. Willis and George Morris published her poem on September 30, 1848. With its cadenced anapestic meter and simple rhymes (similarly utilized in “The Warrior Youth”), the poem evoked the bouncing and swaying of the stage coach ride. The wild, stormy setting and the uncertainty of the post boy’s mission effectively communicated an anxiety with which many nineteenth-century Americans could identify. The post boy might indeed bring bad news to “startle the sleepers in their beds.” Because the place and time are unidentified, this could be anywhere in America, which probably added to the poem’s appeal.

Fuller’s ingenious rural metaphors and choice of the post boy as narrator also made it a favorite of westerners and marked her work as part of a regionalist tradition. (The poem was printed locally in the December 1848 issue of the Western Literary Messenger and in The Daily Sanduskian on June 20, 1849.) Scholars Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse note that the narrator in nineteenth-century regionalist fiction is not omniscient but rather a character who tells the story from within the local community. In an important divergence from “local color” writers such as Bret Harte and Mark Twain, regionalist women authors Sarah Orne Jewett, Alice Cary, and Mary Wilkins Freeman did not cast their narrators as “superior to” their fellow characters; they do not stand above or outside the community, mediating the tale for a curious, but incredulous, urban audience. Importantly, events are recounted in order to illuminate local customs and characters, not for the purpose of ridicule. Fuller demonstrated this regionalist perspective, with the narrator as sympathetic storyteller, not only in her poetry but also in her short stories written during the 1870s.

The “Song’s” rural simplicity is probably what had caught Willis’s attention in 1848. As a poet and essayist of notable wit, he was known in New York for “import[ing] a rural air into the city, watch[ing] how April greened the
grass in the public squares and June spread the leaves in Trinity churchyard.” When Fuller’s poem appeared in the Home Journal, the paper pronounced it “one of the most truthful, touching, and simply graceful poems that we have ever read.” That review opened a new literary world for her.29

FOR THE TWO YEARS after “The Post-Boy’s Song” debuted in the Home Journal, Fuller poured her heart into writing and publishing numerous poems — “A Letter,” “Spring,” “Keats,” “Presentiment,” “My Thought,” “The Old Man’s Favorite,” and “To Edith May,” to name only a few. Her efforts appeared regularly in the poet’s corner of The Daily Sanduskian, the Cleveland Herald, the Home Journal, the Lady’s Western Magazine and Garland of the Valley, and Wellman’s Literary Miscellany, alongside the poetry of Lydia Sigourney, Alice and Phoebe Cary, and Frances Sargent Osgood. It was The Daily Sanduskian that noted the delightful, unpredictable nature of Frances’s verse: “a sudden bend in the stream starts and astonishes you with the beauty of the prospect.”30

Her constant companion in these literary endeavors was her sister Metta, five years younger and a precocious writer. Their evolution as successful poet-writers mirrored one another. Known as the “Singing Sybil,” Metta, too, penned popular verses and short stories for the Home Journal and The Daily Sanduskian, and she garnered as much attention and success as her sister. When Frances was much older, the one childhood story she consistently told featured Metta in a romantic portrait of their entwined spirits: “The sisters were twin souls,” she wrote, “and very happy together, ‘making out,’ as Charlotte Brontë says, the plan of a story or poem by their own bright fireside in winter, or under the delicious moonlight of a summer evening in Ohio.”31 It was a cheerful rendition of their Midwestern past, one that illuminated the girls’ close relationship while emphasizing their literary aspirations.

It is significant that Fuller chose Charlotte Brontë as a literary model. By 1890, when she wrote this reminiscence, Brontë’s Jane Eyre was an international best-seller, and her poetry was widely known. In 1857, Elizabeth Gaskell published The Life of Charlotte Brontë, in which she discussed the fascinating process of Brontë’s “making out” stories. Alone in their room at the parsonage in Haworth and again while they were at school, the Brontë children (Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell) became impassioned, swept into a heightened, almost feverish state while envisioning the characters for their “Angria” tales. Fuller’s poetry indicates that she and Metta also lived in a highly imaginative fantasy world — “Where visions bright, and pensive dreams, / And smiles and tears the world saw not, / Glanced through its inner world like beams / At day-dawn shed, at eve forgot.” Charlotte Brontë’s childhood creative experiences must have reverberated with Fuller’s awakening as a writer.32
Fuller’s affectionate bond with Metta nurtured both sisters’ hopes, provided stability in a life of mobility, and sparked inspiration for their literary ambitions. Despite the five-year difference between them, the girls were inseparable. “O, sister mine! no more, no more, / With hand in hand, and heart on lip, / Our dearest secrets telling o’er, / Shall we behold the soft hours trip— / The bright hours, with their winged feet,” mourned Frances when she was separated from her “beloved.” Living in a household with her mother and four sisters, it is not surprising that Fuller developed such a loving connection with at least one of her siblings, and her devotion to Metta was not unique among nineteenth-century American women. Historians have noted that widespread societal changes encouraged these strong, same-sex bonds between women, what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has termed “the female world of love and ritual.”

Fuller’s life bears witness to the importance of female friendships within the context of a swiftly changing socioeconomic environment. She came of age amid the development of a commercial market economy and concomitant transformations in transportation and industry that helped differentiate public space from the private sphere. Her father the hotel manager never worked in agriculture and presumably participated in financial exchanges with fellow bankers, clerks, insurance agents, and storekeepers; his daily activities would have separated him from the private world of home and women. Well underway by the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the transactions of men’s and women’s daily lives, and the economic transformations sweeping the country, helped delineate sex roles among middle-class urban men and women. At the same time, in many small towns and in larger urban areas, the availability of education, particularly in female academies, differentiated women’s sphere from men’s, encouraging long-lasting same-sex bonds. Fuller’s attendance at Wooster Female Seminary offered a model of female education and mentoring that supported intellectual and emotional connections among women. Finally, Fuller’s literary interests, both the Romantic works she read and the poetry she penned, shaped her image of friendship and the discourse used to communicate it. As Catherine Kelly explains, it was not unusual for young women to share written expressions of their love or appreciation for one another, whether in letters or poetry. Indeed, to convey one’s affection in this way was a sign of middle-class refinement.

With her sisterly bond to Metta as a model, and her literary prominence within the region and the nation rising, Fuller reached out to other women writers whose work inspired her own. On March 31, 1849, the Home Journal published her tribute to popular Pennsylvania poet Anna Drinker, who wrote under the pen name “Edith May.” Born in Philadelphia in 1827, Drinker grew
up in rural Montrose, and like Fuller, she wrote in a dramatic, Romantic style. The pair’s verses began appearing in the *Journal* at the same time, and Fuller honored the young poetess:

I have not seen thee, Edith May; they say thy face is fair —
But I know thy soul that is not seen, and know it high and rare;
And I love thee, by a sign that’s given to every poet soul,
That spirit-linking sympathy beyond our own control.

In five lyrical stanzas replete with musical, sensual metaphors, Fuller’s poem expresses her awakening as a poet-writer. She described her soul’s stirring as a “frail lyre,” claiming it was “a plaintive, low-voiced, murmuring thing.” Yet her humble instrument still had a melody to sing, one that was “softly glad and wildly sad” and that had “wak[en] to the breath of unseen things.” The intensity she felt and her deep desire to form a bond with her “muse” would not have seemed peculiar to nineteenth-century audiences, particularly to women steeped in same-sex cultural norms. As Catherine Kelly notes, a young woman’s ability to initiate or sustain a female friendship through poetry was an acceptable way to exhibit “true” loving friendship within a middle-class environment.35

Once Fuller’s “lyre” conveyed how genuinely Edith May’s “spirit voice” had touched her soul, she then wished to introduce her to Metta.

I have a sister, Edith May, a sister pure and young,
With a holy heart and gifted mind, and sweetly eloquent tongue;
And to her I bear a feeling which can have no earthly name,
But our souls are linked, our hearts are joined and our loves are aye the same;
And a glorious world of dreams have we, a rare poetic world,
Where Fancy’s restless golden wings are glittering unfurled,
Where Love sits like a household form, a dear familiar thing,
And countless changing visions float, forever on the wing;
And here amid the whispered strains of spirit minstrelsy
I listen with my dreaming soul for one wild note from thee.

Fuller’s emotionally laden verses do not simply express gratitude to Edith May and Metta for reaching out to her spiritually. They also demonstrate the meaningful relationships she established with women and her care and concern for them. “And I would breathe a prayer to God to bless thy heart’s young dream,” she wrote in concluding her poem to Edith May, hoping she would not live her life “in vain” waiting to hear from her. It was one of many poems that articulated a commitment to women.36

“To Edith May” reveals Fuller’s emotional coming of age, particularly the complexity of her emergence into young womanhood. The poem also
suggests that her literary journey was an intellectual one, for she thanked Edith May profusely for awakening her mind. The muse stirred visions in Fuller of the distant past. And it was history that called to her:

All old time scenes of war and pomp, of love and minstrelsy,
Of kingly sport and courtly dames, and knightly rivalry;—
All by-gone themes once wont to stir the blood of princely men
Swell my dreaming heart with lofty pride, and the dead past lives again.

It was “high romance,” Fuller wrote, that brought the “dead past” to life, and the poet’s task was to recover and interpret this “rich inheritance.” In an 1850 article for Wellman’s Literary Miscellany, she further articulated her views. Quoting Bryant, she wrote:

I would not always reason. The straight path
Wearies us with its never-varying lines,
And we grow melancholy. I would make
Reason my guide, but she should sometimes sit
Patiently by the wayside, while I traced
The Mazes of the pleasant wilderness
Around me.

From the Romantic perspective, imagination held the key to the mind and the soul. It was linked to romance, which Fuller defined as “the Eden spirit within us, — a love for beauty and truth and tenderness and piety, — and a dread of worldliness and vice and deception.” She saw history, romance, and poetry as inextricably connected, arguing that society needed “‘well told tales’ of gentle and generous and holy principles.” This is a somewhat ironic position for Fuller to have taken, given that many years later, she would castigate Eva Emery Dye for her Romantic perspective on pioneer heroes in the West. But Fuller was young in 1850, and hers was a youthful vision, still hopeful and idealistic, which she fully acknowledged: “The young are naturally romantic, because the world has not yet brushed the dews of Eden from their souls.” It would be her idealism that would suffer most in the years that followed.

EARLY IN 1849, the mercurial, cantankerous, opinionated, one-time Graham’s Magazine editor and poet Rufus Griswold published The Female Poets of America, a comprehensive volume that featured selections from ninety-five women poets. The Fuller sisters’ New York connections with the Home Journal, particularly with Nathaniel Willis, probably brought them to Griswold’s attention. Likewise, the anthology featured the work of fellow Ohio natives Alice and Phoebe Cary, who had grown up on the outskirts of Cincinnati, on a farm near Mount Healthy. While their father supported their literary
pursuits, the girls’ stepmother did not. Precocious like the Fuller sisters, the Carys were largely self educated. Alice successfully published her poetry at age eighteen, in regional and eastern newspapers such as the *Home Journal*. Their poems and stories, particularly Alice’s later *Clovernook: or Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West* (1852), featured rural Midwestern settings and community life. The four young writers’ reputation and their New York sponsors, Griswold and Willis, helped them achieve publication of their own poetry anthologies, *The Poems of Alice and Phoebe Cary* (1850) and the Fullers’ *Poems of Sentiment and Imagination* (1851). As she had with other women poets, Frances reached out to Alice, striking up a correspondence with her the same year that Griswold’s collection appeared.

Fuller’s “The Post-Boy’s Song,” “A Revery,” and “The Old Man’s Favorite” (a gothic piece featuring a young child who drowns in the river after chasing her dead mother’s spirit across a rickety bridge), made their appearance in the anthology as did three of Metta’s poems. Undoubtedly looking for a favorable critique to help sell the volume, Griswold asked his colleague Edgar Allan Poe to review it. Poe seemed to struggle with the overwhelming weight of four hundred pages and what the *Democratic Review* deemed “much talent” mixed with much “mediocrity.” He chose to rank them by “actual merit — that is to say of actual accomplishment.” In Fuller’s case, his enthusiastic analysis of her efforts must have been thrilling. He pronounced her poetry among the finest in the anthology, ranking it “among the first dozen” along with Frances Sargent Osgood, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, “the Misses Carey” [sic], and Elizabeth Ellet. Fuller’s poems, he wrote, were also some of the most “imaginative.”

A literary life in New York City appeared to be in the offing. After Griswold’s anthology was published, the Fuller sisters left Monroeville to follow their dreams. The Carys also departed from the Midwest, never to return; eventually, they bought a home on East Twentieth Street in New York City, welcoming the literati to their “salon” every Sunday evening for the next fifteen years. John Greenleaf Whittier, William Lloyd Garrison, and Horace Greeley were frequent visitors to the Carys’ home. Fuller wrote later that while in New York, she and Metta also met the poet Anne C. Lynch, who was well known for her salons. Griswold said of Lynch in *The Female Poets of America*, “I have sometimes attended [her] agreeable parties, and have met at them probably the larger number of the living poets whose works are reviewed in this volume.” Fuller noted that evenings at Lynch’s home included Griswold, Grace Greenwood, Bayard Taylor, and Frances Osgood. The short time the Fuller sisters spent in New York must have been exhilarating indeed.

Their literary adventure did not last long. Adonigh Fuller died, and Lucy Fuller needed her daughters to return to Monroeville. The writing they had
done for their own pleasure and occasional remuneration now must support themselves and their female relatives, none of whom had a source of income. This prospect was an almost insurmountable obstacle for young women, even those with a stamp of literary approval from Nathaniel Willis and Rufus Griswold. In frustration and desperation, Fuller poured her emotions into poetry. Her thoughts spilled forth in “Ah Me!”:

I say to my heart, “Be still!
Beat not against my breast
With all this fierce unrest;
I am ill, I am ill,—
Fainting, sinking in the fire
Of a passionate desire
That consumes my thought and will.”

I say to my soul, “In vain
You beat your restless wings
’Gainst the cruel bars of things
That imprison and restrain;
Turn your eyes away, be strong,
Captive shall you be not long,
But your prison rent in twain.”

That life should be, ah me!
Longing, and never joy;
Paltry pleasures that cloy,
And writhings to be free;
Faintings, cryings to the sky,
“My God, O let me die,”
When it should sweetest be.
Ah me!

While it is certainly possible that the poem is not autobiographical, “Ah Me!” seems to refer to an emotional struggle Fuller experienced during this time. What was the “prison” that held her “captive?” Her palpable grief is striking and atypical of her other work. Fuller’s poetry, as we have seen, generally can be categorized as tribute verse to other female writers and also to Keats and Poe; too, she penned regional poems honoring her Midwestern roots, as well as nature poetry in the Wordsworthian tradition, such as her “Autumn” and “Spring.” The provocative imagery in these stanzas, the pulsating heart against her breast, the beating of “restless wings” is archetypal in women’s poetry of this period, according to scholar Cheryl Walker. These depictions are called “free bird” metaphors, which many women poets used
to elucidate feelings of entrapment; it was an acceptable veil through which to voice anger, frustration, or desire. Certainly the unfolding events of 1849 demonstrated both the possibilities and precariousness of a young, middle-class woman’s life in nineteenth-century America. Filled with excitement and enthusiasm when she left Monroeville, Fuller returned hastily a short time later to bewildering uncertainty. One can imagine the anguish she must have felt over losing a father and seemingly her future in one fell swoop.40

After returning from the East Coast, Frances and Metta moved to the vicinity of Detroit, Michigan. What brought the sisters to Michigan is unknown. By June 1850, they were assistant editors for John Ingersoll’s *The Monthly Hesperian, and Odd Fellows’ Literary Magazine*, work that definitely did not provide financial independence. The answer, it seemed, was marriage. In early December 1850, Metta wed Richard E. Morse of Ypsilanti, a physician, legislator, and one-time postmaster for the town. Mysteriously, the marriage appears to have failed. In 1856, she married a second time, to editor and writer Orville Victor of Sandusky. At that point, she left Ohio permanently for New Jersey and enjoyed a long career as a successful dime novelist. In an interesting coincidence, Frances’s marital history mirrored her sister’s. She married Jackson Barritt in June 1853, and they moved to a homestead near Omaha, Nebraska Territory. But her husband apparently had a drinking problem, and he abandoned her. She divorced him in 1862, citing desertion as the reason. Later that year, she wed Henry C. Victor, Orville’s brother, a naval engineer whose career and financial interests led the couple first to San Francisco and then to Portland. Henry Victor died in a shipwreck near Cape Flattery in November 1875.42

At first glance, Frances Fuller certainly seems to have experienced 1849 and 1850 as a time of “fierce unrest.” Patriarch Fuller’s death, the hasty departures from New York and Monroeville, the need to be financially independent, and Metta’s marriage forced the twenty-four-year-old Fuller to leave innocence behind, to ascend abruptly into womanhood. Her poetry bears witness to the loneliness she experienced. When Metta left for her new, although brief, life in Ypsilanti with Morse, Frances ached for her sister-friend, whom she mourned in several poems: “Thou has gone forth; alone I stay, / And try to feel as once I felt, / But the glad thoughts have passed away, / And dreams in heavy tear-drops melt, / All thought is cold and hateful now . . . ” And if we compare the quantity of her poetry with what is produced after 1850, the paucity of poems is striking. It is as if anxiety severed Fuller’s emotions from her poetry.43

But she did not stop writing. Instead, she used her new, albeit painful, experiences to experiment with dime novels, essays, and travel writing, broadening her narrative reach. She honed her skills as a western writer,
proud of the “strength, wealth, enterprise and refinement in the west” and determined to educate “eastern people concerning us.” Fuller believed that while all the places she had long called home enjoyed the refinements of the East, including regular travel, newspapers, fashion, and “New York and Philadelphia ‘books’ upon our tables,” easterners were woefully uneducated regarding the West. And for this deficiency, she chastised, westerners only had themselves to blame. Instead of cultivating their own version of Godey’s Lady’s Book or Graham’s Magazine — a “home [literary] enterprise” — westerners had become too attached to eastern opinions and tastes. Thus, the need for “well told tales” and a “just pride” in “our own resources.”

The “well told tales” she created gave voice to the importance of her poetry and the influence of her Midwestern roots. While all of the genres in which she wrote cannot be discussed in detail here, the bridge between her early writing and later works can be suggested. Like many women writers, for example, Fuller eagerly delved into travel writing. The genre allowed writers to observe spontaneously and critique cultural events, people, and
Baym has argued that given the social and cultural restrictions of the nineteenth century, middle-class British and American women experienced travel as an adventure, “precipitating them into a much larger world than they had known before, stimulating their imaginations, and filling their memories.” Having bounced around the Midwest throughout her life, Fuller developed an eye for describing the landscape. On a brief vacation from the Odd Fellows Magazine in 1851, she crafted a travel letter to John Ingersoll that expressed her deep attachment to place and region. As in “The Post-Boy’s Song,” her vivid, lyrical writing portrayed the adventure and unpredictability of Midwestern journeys. Riding the Mansfield and Sandusky Railroad on the way to Ashland, Ohio, she wittily told her readers “I started for the interior.” The wonders and aggravations of early railroad travel came to life as the “snorting monster” of a locomotive “ran away from us.” Underway once more, her joy in the journey never flagged as she gazed out the window of the train, perhaps imagining her future. “Lend me your eyes for a view from the top of this hill! Enchanting! Were the wheat-fields ever of so lovely a green?”

Fuller never left travel writing behind or relinquished the freedom it offered for self-expression; she utilized it later to promote the cultural advantages of the Far West. After her arrival in Oregon, she embarked on several lengthy tours of the Pacific Northwest by steamboat, stagecoach, and train. Writing up her observations, she made her claim for the relevance of the Far West to the nation, just as she had defended a Midwestern literary tradition in 1850. In the preface to All Over Oregon and Washington (1872), she argued: “The great dearth of information concerning [Oregon and Washington in the Atlantic States], suggested to me the need of books which should faithfully and familiarly treat of them, their natural features and resources, together with their business and social condition.” Reviewers regarded her “little handbook of Oregon” as “especially valuable to the intending immigrant.” In the twenty-first century, historian Eugene Moehring enthusiastically called Frances Fuller Victor’s guidebook “perceptive” and “illuminating” in its assessments of early Pacific Northwest urban networks and economic development.

During the 1860s, she united her insights on nineteenth-century Americans and local customs with her appreciation of western landscapes — so well expressed in her travel accounts — and penned fiction focusing on “woman’s plight.” Victor’s interest in writing about women was obvious from her youthful poems such as “To Edith May”; it was then solidified in several painful life experiences during the 1850s, most notably her disastrous first marriage to Jackson Barritt. The two dime novels she subsequently crafted featured Midwestern heroines whose class position and lack of education made them vulnerable to unscrupulous men. She centered her later short
stories around pioneer themes in the Far West and female protagonists who triumphed over economic, educational, and legal barriers in order to secure self-hood. “Judith Miles” and “How Jack Hastings Sold His Mine,” for example, appeared for Oregon readers in Abigail Scott Duniway’s The New Northwest during the 1870s. At the same time as she was writing fiction and delving into Oregon’s history, Victor regularly contributed essays and editorials on “The Woman Question” for the state’s nascent suffrage movement. Having first explored her relationships with women in poetic form, Victor’s later fiction and essays conveyed an evolving, deeply held commitment to women’s equal rights and social justice.47

Frances Fuller Victor’s growth as a writer and her evolution into a Pacific Northwest historian cannot be separated from her early life as a poet. She envisioned the West and her place within it first through verse, becoming a provocative western regionalist. When Victor arrived in Oregon, she immediately saw the potential for promoting the history and geography of the region. In an 1895 autobiographical sketch, she reminisced about her fascination with the Pacific Northwest. According to her account, she had a geographical epiphany while traveling aboard the Brother Jonathan. The captain told her that Portland was situated on the Willamette River. “And then I had to confess that I never had heard of the Wallamet, and had always believed Portland was on the Columbia. It was put down so when I studied geography, I said, and all Eastern people thought as I did.” It was this “natural blunder,” she reported, and her desire to correct easterners’ misinformation about the region, that sparked her interest in the Pacific Northwest’s history, geography, and culture.48 Already skilled as a writer, Victor the historian emerged as the ship docked. This kind of research and analysis, she insisted, would be “just in my line.” But first, she wrote a poem. “Sunset at the Mouth of the Columbia” venerated the ancient and “mighty stream.” Yet, in the closing lines, Victor seemed to ponder not only the majesty of the unpredictable river’s “swelling tide” and “hungry breakers” but also what the future held for her as an interpreter of the region’s history and promoter of its potential:

A noble scene! all breadth, deep tone and power,
Suggesting glorious themes;
Shaming the idler who would fill the hour
With unsubstantial dreams.
Be mine the dreams prophetic, shadowing forth
The things that yet shall be,
As through this gate the treasures of the North
Flow outward to the sea.49

— Astoria, Or., 1865

Browne, Frances Fuller Victor’s Early Life and Writing
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8. Florence Fane [Frances Fuller Victor], “Florence Fane in San Francisco, [San Francisco] The Golden Era, October 9, 1864, [microform] courtesy of the California State Library. See also the biographical sketch of Victor in Frances Willard and Mary Livermore, eds., Women of the Century: Fourteen Hundred Seventy biographical Sketches Accompanied by Portraits of Leading American Women in All Walks of Life (Buffalo, N.Y.: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893); and Walker’s discussion of these authors in American Women Poets.


11. Willard and Livermore, Women of the Century. Victor seems to have written her own entry; the style reads like her correspondence and the detailed footnotes in her histories. It also is likely that she wrote the childhood sketch linking herself and Metta to Charlotte Bronté (see note 31).


14. Incorporation of Wooster Academy, Acts of a Local Nature Passed at the First Session of the General Assembly of the State of Ohio, vol. 34 (Columbus, 1836), 386–88; for Mrs. McKee at Troy, see “Mr. Editor,” Wooster Democrat, October 3, 1844; tuition rates for Wooster Female Seminary advertised in Ibid., October 1, 1842, and October 11, 1844; Frances Fuller Victor’s attendance at the Seminary: undated clipping found inside All Over Oregon and Washington (San Francisco: John H. Carmany, 1872), University of California Library digitized copy.


16. Wooster Democrat, May 12, 1841; Fuller remembered this poem later as “The Soldier Boy,” but her description fits these stanzas exactly: “I wrote five eight-line stanzas called the soldier boy — a sort of prophecy I suppose, of the Fine Soldierly Young Man — I think so because there wasn’t any war then nor any soldier boy that I knew of. But my five stanzas looked so grand and martial.” “Florence Fane in San Francisco,” The Golden Era, October 9, 1864. On Willard’s history as devoted to war, see Baym, “Women and the Republic,” 133.


18. Ibid., 124; see also 121–25, and chapter three. On Fuller’s interest in the Romantics, see the discussion below of her essay “The West, and Western Literature” in Wellman’s Literary Miscellany 3: 1 (July 1850): 42–44.


27. On anapestic rhythm, see Timothy Steele, All the Fun’s in How You Say A Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 234–35, 310.


35. Kelly, In the New England Fashion, 68–82. Frances’s verses possibly could be read as an extended erotic metaphor — she writes of “trem[bling] most with rapture when another’s touch can thrill.” Cheryl Walker has commented that in nineteenth-century women’s poetry the “lyre” was often evoked “as an image of female sexuality and poetic sensibility” (see Frances Sargent Osgood’s “Reflections” for a good example), though Walker notes as well that “sexuality rarely makes a full appearance in these women’s poems.” See Walker, The Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poet’s and American Culture Before 1900 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 42.

36. See “L.E.L.” in Frances A. and Metta V. Fuller, Poems of Sentiment and Imagination, 66.


41. The exact date of publication for “Ah Mel!” is unknown, but reference to it is made in *The Daily Sanduskyian*: “Miss Frances A. Fuller, who has favored us frequently, is an elder sister of ‘Singing Sybil.’ Her ‘Ah, Mel!’ ‘Spring’ and ‘A Letter,’ in style have a sisterly affinity or resemblance to that of her sister” (September 1, 1849). Frances Fuller Victor republished the poem in the *Overland Monthly* 23:135 (March 1894): 326. For the “free bird” archetype in women’s poems, see Walker, *Nightingleale’s Burden*, 37–38, 46–48.


43. “My Lonely Room”; see also “Verses for M—” (Poems, 1900).

44. Fuller, “The West, and Western Literature,” 43–44.


