
Travel, Gender, and Genre in Fuller's European Writings

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Abstract

Transatlantic perspectives ask us to pay a different kind of attention to the genres that characterized antebellum writing, especially travel writing. If genres can be defined by the relationships they posit between the observing consciousness and its object, then travel writing—as an insistently first-person genre that privileges visual comprehension—not only highlights this interaction but may prompt its analysis. Fuller's New-York Tribune dispatches from Europe in 1846-50 exemplify travel writing's elasticity, as she incorporates various forms: the journalist's reportage, the tourist's aesthetic response, and the reformer's appeal. The dispatches flag her "restless approach" to "familiar forms" (as Christina Zwarg has noted), but this restlessness also comes from her transatlantic reading, as Charlene Avallone has shown, of George Sand's "experiments with form" in travel writing and journalism. In such "letters" to the Tribune as the one on the founding of the revolutionary Roman Republic, Fuller moves among the three perspectives I list above, incorporates a translation of an Italian political document, and samples the views of other observers, whose perspectives on this event sharply diverge. For Fuller, transatlantic reading and travel, translation, and travel writing itself trigger dialogic thinking and the reexaminations of categories of identity that critics have noted. In addition, the contradictions within the viewing positions of nineteenth-century women travelers as both embodiments of their nations (i.e., as silent national icons) and expressive cultural agents (as writers) can provoke a fruitful alienation from normative male views. In the dispatch above, Fuller's gendered position reinforces the dialogic impulses associated with transatlantic reading, translation, and travel and leads to an analysis of travel writing as a nationalist activity—but one that can be opened up through this very analysis to a transnational gaze.

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