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“‘To Mold in Clay and Carve in Stone’:  
Temporality and Literary Form in Margaret Fuller’s Italian Dispatches”

In the middle of a dispatch published 16 May 1849, Margaret Fuller turns sharply from the promise of a republic in Rome to a claim about sculpture, the artistic mode that is, she argues, “the natural talent of an American.” “The facts of our history,” Fuller attests, “ideal and social, will be grand and of new import; it is perfectly natural to the American to mold in clay and carve in stone. The permanence of material and solid relief in the forms correspond to the positiveness of his nature better than the mere ephemeral and even tricky methods of the painter—to his need of motion and action, better than the chambered scribbling of the poet.” As recent conversations about Fuller’s *Tribune* articles emphasize, the sometimes fragmented, self-interrupting quality of her prose reflects important journalistic circumstances and artistic choices (2017 SSAWW Fuller Society Panel). In fact, the moment I quote above dramatizes the very subjects that captured Fuller’s geopolitical imagination during this period: complex temporalities with which she contended as a foreign correspondent reporting news that would be delayed to her readers by several weeks/months. Fuller may not be the first Romantic to muse over representational crises (who should choose clay and stone over paint or ink? why?). Yet the fact that she wonders over sculptural “permanence” is worth pause, precisely because she seems so self-conscious of her responsibilities as a transatlantic journalist at this particular moment in American and Italian history.

In this paper, I close read passages where Fuller links questions about literary form with questions about political/philosophical reform through her critiques of expatriate sculpture. As I demonstrate, Fuller’s studies of Thomas Crawford, Horatio Greenough, and Hiram Powers ( dispatches 15, 17, and 29) reveal her evolving approaches to antislavery writing. Part of my argument is about how Fuller transitions from specific points about specific works of art to broader philosophical/political arguments about the potential for sculpture to represent “motion and action.” Part is about what such representational crises have to do with her recursive allusions to slavery in these moments. Fuller’s discussions of sculptural temporalities contextualize changes we witness in her abolitionist writing during this period: columns that discuss Crawford’s *Orpheus* and the institution of slavery in the same breath; paragraphs that critique Powers’ *Greek Slave* and his bust of *Calhoun* (not once but twice). While Fuller’s references to slavery in these passages may seem out of place, at least at first, her meditations on form—in stone, in clay, or, as she intimates, in newspapers—illuminate a belief in the potential for art to move people to action at moments when inaction/stillness is unnerving.

Fuller’s appreciation of sculptural permanence is all the more poignant given the ways other writers compare her—and her literary body of work—to this medium. “Margaret was one of the few persons who looked upon life as an art,” Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in *Memoirs*, “and every person not merely as an artist, but as a work of art. She looked upon herself as a living statue, which should always stand on a polished pedestal, with right accessories, and under the most fitting lights. She would have been glad to have everybody so live and act. She was annoyed when they did not, and when they did not regard her from the point of view which alone did justice to her.” What does it mean for a person to be remembered as a work of art? How might we read this passage through Fuller’s own ideas about sculpture? I’ll end by tracing the ways sculptural conceits/connections shape how some nineteenth-century artists read, or refused to read, Fuller’s late writing as literature.