

Adrienne G. Perry
University of Houston
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Thinking Fuller: The Ethics of Transcendental Translation

That Margaret Fuller's early translations of Goethe and Bettina von Arnim informed her thinking, writing, livelihood, and, more broadly, American Transcendentalist thought, has been actively explored. Since Arthur Schultz's "Margaret Fuller—Transcendentalist Interpreter of German Literature," contemporary scholars such as Colleen Glenney Boggs and Christina Zwarg have gone on to frame Fuller's translations and translation practice as multilingual, transnational, and vital in shaping Fuller's feminism, subjectivity, and influence within the Transcendentalist sphere. While these and other scholars have put Fuller's translations into play with translation theorists ranging from Dryden to Benjamin, and from Derrida to Venuti, Fuller scholarship has not adequately engaged contemporary translation theory beyond these familiar canonical theorists. As a result, Fuller's translations and practice occupy a more limited position within the field of translation studies and Fuller scholarship than they deserve. My paper addresses this position by recasting Fuller's German translations, and their relationship to transcendentalism, in light of Henri Meschonnic and Naoki Sakai's theories in *The Politics and Ethics of Translating* and *Translation and Subjectivity*, respectively. Specifically, this paper will explore Fuller's prefaces to *Die G nderode* and *Eckerman's Conversations with Goethe* and her gestures toward translation theories that move, like Meschonnic and Sakai, beyond a hermeneutical approach. Placing Meschonnic's theories on ethics and rhythm, as well as Sakai's analysis of translation's role in shaping politics and subjectivity, in dialogue with Fuller's prefaces will recast the ethical dimension of her project and her potential effort to, in Meschonnic's terms, "Think Transcendentalism" and "Think Translation." Through these texts, I argue that Fuller's approach to translation reveals not simply a transcendentalist's method, but a multifaceted relationship to language—from code-switching to thick translation—and ethical implications, in Meschonnic's terms, beyond a mere "code of conduct." Fuller certainly wanted to translate von Arnim and Goethe "faithfully," yet the struggles and priorities she voiced as a translator underscore the tensions Meschonnic and Sakai see as inherent in translation, in an act that simultaneously reconstitutes the writer, translator, reader, and text, thereby calling the very notions of authorship, language, and authenticity into account. This paper, by closely examining Fuller's critique of her German translations, continues this act of reconstitution as it complicates and re-contextualizes Fuller's feminist, transcendental project in light of contemporary translation theory.