



Dispatch to the *New York Tribune* Margaret Fuller (1847)

Margaret Fuller was a white feminist from New England. She did pioneering work as a woman in journalism, traveling to Europe to serve as the New York Tribune's foreign correspondent there. She sent this dispatch from Italy on the eve of the anti-absolutist revolutions that broke out across Europe in 1848. The essay shows Fuller's enthusiasm for democratic reforms and her support for nationalist movements (in Italy and Poland, specifically) seeking independence from imperial rule; at the same time, she accuses the United States of betraying its national mission to be the "advance guard" and "herald" of human progress. Subsequently, Fuller married an Italian revolutionary and ran a hospital for the military forces of the short-lived Roman Republic. She died in a shipwreck in 1850 while returning to the United States. Religiously, Fuller was raised as a Unitarian but came to embrace a more radically individualized, pluralistic faith in "Divine Love" and "Creative Spirit."

The history of our planet in some moments seems so painfully mean and little—such terrible bafflings and failures to compensate some brilliant successes; such a crushing of the mass of men beneath the feet of a few (and these, too, often the least worthy); [...] above all, so little achieved for humanity as a whole, such tides of war and pestilence intervening to blot out the traces of each triumph—that no wonder if the strongest soul sometimes pauses aghast [...]

Eighteen hundred years of this Christian culture in these European kingdoms—a great theme never lost sight of; a mighty idea, an adorable history to which the hearts of men invariably cling—yet are genuine results rare as grains of gold in the river's sandy bed! Where is the genuine democracy, to which the rights of all men are holy? Where the childlike wisdom learning, all through life, more and more of the will of God? Where the aversion to falsehood in all its myriad disguises of cant, vanity, covetousness, so clear to be read in all the history of Jesus of Nazareth? Modern Europe is the sequel to that history—and see this hollow England, with its monstrous wealth and cruel poverty, its conventional life and low, practical aims! See this poor France, so full of talent, so adroit, yet so shallow and glossy still, which could not escape from a false position with all its baptism of blood! See that lost Poland and this Italy, bound down by treacherous hands in all the force of genius! See Russia, with its brutal Czar and innumerable slaves! See Austria, and its royalty that represents nothing, and its people who, as people, are and have nothing! If we consider the amount of truth that has really been spoken out in the world, and the love that has beat in private hearts, [...] and how continually, unquenched, the spark of faith has striven to burst into flame and light up the universe, the public failure seems amazing, seems monstrous.

Still Europe toils and struggles with her idea, and, at this moment, all things bode and declare a new outbreak of the fire to destroy old palaces of crime! May it fertilize also many vineyards! [...] And thou, my country! Wilt thou not be more true? Does no greater success await thee? All things have so conspired to teach, to aid! A new world, a new chance, with oceans to wall in the new thought against interference from the old! Treasures of all kinds—gold, silver, corn, marble—to provide for every physical need! A noble, constant, starlike soul, an Italian, led the way to thy shores, and in the first days, the strong, the pure, those too brave, too sincere, for the life of the Old World, hastened to people them. A generous struggle then shook off what was

foreign and gave the nation a glorious start for a worthy goal. Men rocked the cradle of its hopes—great, firm, disinterested men, who saw, who wrote, as the basis of all that was to be done, a statement of the rights, the *inborn* rights of men, which, if fully interpreted and acted upon, leaves nothing to be desired.

Yet, O eagle! whose early flight showed this clear sight of the sun, how often dost thou near the ground, how show the vulture in these later days! Thou wert to be the advance guard of humanity, the herald of all progress; how often hast thou betrayed this high commission! Fain would the tongue—in clear, triumphant accents—draw example from thy story to encourage the hearts of those who almost faint and die beneath the old oppressions. But we must stammer and blush when we speak of many things. [...] Must I not confess to a boundless lust of gain in my country? [...] Can I help admitting that there is as yet no antidote cordially adopted which will defend even that great, rich country against the evils that have grown out of the commercial system of the Old World? Can I say our social laws are generally better, or show a nobler insight into the wants of man and woman? I do, indeed, say what I believe: that voluntary association for improvement in these particulars will be the grand means for my nation to grow and give a nobler harmony to the coming age. But it is only of a small minority that I can say they as yet seriously take to heart these things, that they earnestly meditate on what is wanted for their country, for mankind—for our cause is indeed the cause of all mankind at present. Could we succeed, really succeed, [to] combine a deep religious love with practical development, the achievements of genius with the happiness of the multitude, we might believe man had now reached a commanding point in his ascent and would stumble and faint no more.

Then there is this horrible cancer of slavery and the wicked war that has grown out of it. How dare I speak of these things here? I listen to the same arguments against the emancipation of Italy that are used against the emancipation of our blacks; the same arguments in favor of the spoliation of Poland, as for the conquest of Mexico. I find the cause of tyranny and wrong everywhere the same—and lo! my country! the darkest offender because with the least excuse; forsworn to the high calling with which she was called; no champion of the rights of men, but a robber and a jailer; the scourge hid behind her banner; her eyes fixed, not on the stars, but on the possessions of other men.

Source: Margaret Fuller, dispatch to *New York Tribune*, [c. November 1847]; as reproduced in Margaret Fuller Ossoli, *At Home and Abroad; Or, Things and Thoughts in America and Europe*, ed. Arthur B. Fuller (Boston: Crosby, Nichols & Co., 1856), 250-256, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t59c7n99n>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. An additional paragraph break inserted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. Among those modernizing changes, *crashing* has been emended to *crushing*, and the words *humanity*, *country*, and *eagle*, capitalized in the source publication, have been converted to lowercase. The term *Old World* is capitalized here, as in the source, to clarify that the reference is geographical, not chronological. Italics for emphasis retained from the source publication.

These edited excerpts from Fuller's dispatch are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2023 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.