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Writing for Immortality

Anne E. Boyd

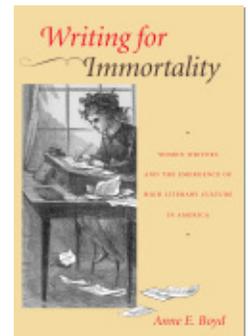
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Solving the “old riddle of the Sphinx”

Discovering the Self as Artist

Near the beginning of her first novel, *Anne* (1880), Constance Fenimore Woolson describes the central problem for her young heroine: “Anne never analyzed herself at all. She had never lived for herself or in herself.” Anne is unconscious, unaware of who she is or what she wants from life. Later, at a pivotal point in the novel when Anne is grown and trying to accept that the man she loves is married to another, she passes a mirror and stops to contemplate her reflection. In this moment, “The world, with all its associations . . . drops . . . like a garment, and [she] is left alone facing the problem of [her] own existence. It is the old riddle of the Sphinx.”¹ The same riddle also confronts many of Louisa May Alcott’s, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s, and Elizabeth Stoddard’s heroines. In Alcott’s first novel, *Moods* (1864), the heroine is “an enigma to herself,” and to everyone else. In Stoddard’s story “The Prescription,” a doctor advises a young wife suffering from a mysterious illness: “Comprehend yourself, . . . to do this is necessary in your case.”² For these authors, the greatest difficulty confronting women in the nineteenth century was self-discovery.

For Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson, the “old riddle of the Sphinx” was solved as they discovered their ambitions to be artists. They spent much of their

lives trying to find ways to cultivate an identity that young women were not generally encouraged by nineteenth-century American culture to adopt. The central drama of their lives was this struggle to overcome the obstacles of their society's prejudices against women becoming serious artists. This book, therefore, is motivated by an effort to understand how the world in which they lived made it possible for them to develop serious ambitions as artists (in spite of the barriers it put in their way), how they found a way to circumvent their culture's taboos against women's artistry, and how their struggles, experiences, and art initiated a tradition of American women's literary artistry.

In their attempts to fashion identities as serious artists, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson were embarking on a lifelong journey more suited to the kinds of lives privileged men had led. In his *Atlantic* essay "Literature as an Art" (1867), Thomas Wentworth Higginson described what he believed it took to create the kind of serious literature of which he had elsewhere deemed women incapable. The requirements he listed for producing such art were far beyond the reach of those who were not wealthy, educated, and male. "To pursue literature as an art," he wrote, is "to devote one's life to perfecting the manner, as well as the matter, of one's work; to expatriate one's self long years for it, like Motley; . . . to live and die only to transfuse external nature into human words, like Thoreau; to chase dreams for a lifetime, like Hawthorne; to labor tranquilly and see a nation imbued with one's thoughts, like Emerson."³ To become a creator of literary art meant dedicating one's life to such a pursuit. Women in nineteenth-century America were not supposed to dedicate their lives to anything but their homes and families. For a woman to adopt the aim of creating high literature would require a radical transformation in cultural expectations for female behavior and in her self-perception. In Higginson's eyes, and those of most of his contemporaries, the serious pursuit of art required seclusion, commitment, studiousness, inspiration, and even expatriation.

None of the four women writers who are the subject of this study built a cabin in the woods like Thoreau and lived in self-sufficient seclusion to discover her true relation to nature. They typically did not have the luxury of a study like Emerson's, in which he could shut himself up in seclusion from his family members. And unlike Hawthorne, none of them had a wife on whom they could rely to cook their meals and mend their clothes, allowing them the time to chase their dreams. While their husbands and fathers possessed studies and had wives and daughters to care for them, these women had to find their own spaces and time in which to "labor tranquilly." Their lives were not wholly their own. Alcott was

devoted to her younger sister and to her parents in their old age; Phelps had family responsibilities to her father and younger siblings; Stoddard was married and had two sons; and Woolson was her invalid mother's companion for the first decade of her career. So they all had to eke out a writer's existence in moments snatched from their other responsibilities. But none of these women felt compelled to always place family and duty before their writing, as Catharine Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and other antebellum women writers did. By cultivating lives as artists, which their culture had previously deemed a male privilege, they tried to overcome the association of women's writings with the popular and dared to imagine a place for themselves in the pantheon of American literature, which would become, but was not yet designated, all-male. The gendered split of high and low literary spheres, as potent as it became by the end of the nineteenth century, was only vaguely defined at midcentury and therefore allowed some women to imagine lives as "artists." While "the American genius" envisioned by critics unquestionably would be male, and many believed that he had already been found in Hawthorne, it seemed entirely possible that one or more female writers would rise to a position not exactly parallel with his but analogous to that attained by some exemplary women abroad. "We have no Elizabeth Browning, Bronte, George Sand or Miss Bremer," Stoddard wrote in 1854, but she and other women of her generation during and after the Civil War hoped that America soon would.⁴

What was the cultural climate, and what were the personal backgrounds that allowed these writers to develop the ambition to approximate the achievement of a female Hawthorne or an American Brontë? As yet the intellectual climate was sufficiently fluid that these women were able to feel optimistic about their prospects, even though the dominant strain of nineteenth-century literary nationalism presupposed a purely "manly" literature. Although the barriers were real enough, it was possible for some women to develop dreams of literary greatness. While some voices decried "the entrance of the Amazonian mania into literature," as one writer for the *North American Review* did, fearing "to be overtaken, and branded, and cruelly mauled . . . [by] this clapper-clawing from fair, but not gentle hands," other voices signaled the potential of women's inclusion. One was Margaret Fuller's in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), where she writes, "The world, at large, is readier to let woman learn and manifest the capacities of her nature than it ever was before, and here [in America] is a less encumbered field and freer air than any where else."⁵ In this declaration, Fuller combines the optimism of exceptionalist American democracy with the promise provided by

the achievements of extraordinary European and British women who had eroded prejudices against women's abilities. This is the kind of ferment out of which the ambitions of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson grew. The democratic discourses of American genius and individualism, Transcendentalism, and European romanticism, combined with the examples of female geniuses in Europe and opportunities for literary professionalization in America, helped to create an atmosphere of potential and possibility for women writers. Out of this fertile cultural ground and supportive families grew the first generation of American women to develop ambitions to pursue careers as serious artists.

Discourses of American Genius and Individualism

As Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson began to envision lives as artists, they were inspired to do so by the varied discussions that proliferated in nineteenth-century periodicals and books about the advent of an American genius who would rival those of Europe yet realize the promise of American democracy. Emerson's ideas, as the culmination of these discussions, particularly influenced this generation of women writers. His inspirational exhortations to Americans to trust their own thoughts and resist cultural pressures to conform took on a significance for these young women that he probably did not intend. His theories grew out of a ferment of ideas about a native literature, democracy, and liberal individualism, which together allowed women to imagine themselves as entities separate from their relationships to others and to begin to conceive of genius—at once otherworldly *and* near at hand—as something within their reach.

In the eighteenth century, public discourse about a national literature centered on a republican model of literature in which works written by ordinary (male) citizens would contribute to the social good. Writing was conceived as part of the mission to promote an enlightened citizenry. In this volatile period, though, many feared that this ideal would be short-lived and predicted grave consequences if the European model of *belles lettres* prevailed at the expense of an educated populace. Despite such concerns, however, as the Republic shifted to a democracy in the early nineteenth century, a "liberal" model of literature composed of masterpieces produced by "men of genius" gained currency. Central to this liberal model is the modern concept of the author that developed in eighteenth-century Europe, when "the inspiration for a work came to be regarded as emanating not from outside or above, but from within the writer

himself. ‘Inspiration’ came to be explicated in terms of *original genius*.⁶ In the context of the literary marketplace, which both validated the author’s originality in the form of copyright laws and provided an ethos of commodification against which the inspired author defined himself, German and British romantics initiated a new development in the ideal of the “artist” by claiming that he was not merely a copier of nature; rather, his creativity mirrored the power of the Creator. In the words of Thomas Carlyle, he was “a prophet, or . . . a Priest, continually unfolding the Godlike to men.”⁷ The proponents of this romantic cult of genius believed that a few chosen men could act as “prophets” to the rest of humanity.

This romantic ideal found a significant following in America at the same time that the ethos of Jacksonian individualism exerted its influence on American ideology, creating tensions between democratic and elitist tendencies in popular conceptions of a national literature. On the one hand, the writer as artist began to represent another, higher realm than that inhabited by ordinary men. The rhetoric that proliferated in the journals and magazines that sprang up in Boston and New York “to foster American genius” exhibited the elusive and divine qualities of art elevated above the masses.⁸ The artist had the capacity “not merely to narrate or describe, . . . but to create out of nothing,” the *North American Review* declared in its description of Hawthorne’s “genius.” According to James Russell Lowell, “genius in Art is that supreme organizing and idealizing faculty which . . . apes creation.” Hawthorne, in his story “A Select Party” (1844), summed up, perhaps ironically, Americans’ hopes for “the Master Genius, for whom our country is looking anxiously into the mist of time, as destined to fulfill the great mission of creating an American literature.” From such a genius, he wrote, “we are to receive our first great original work, which shall do all that remains to be achieved for our glory among the nations.”⁹

As Hawthorne’s story indicates, the greatest concern of most authors and critics was that while America showed great promise it had not yet produced a genius to rival those of Europe. According to a review in *Harper’s* in 1857, “Surrounding influences [in American life] were hostile rather than sustaining to [writers’] genius.”¹⁰ The prevailing perception was that the industrialization of American society, the increasing emphasis on business, and the accumulation of wealth were creating a hospitable environment for the development of genius in some fields, but not in art or literature. In addition, some felt that the public had embraced works of a decidedly inferior nature, making aspirants to literary genius despair of finding a large enough audience to sustain them. Because, many

critics believed, the masses had proven their indifference toward great literature, the American genius, when he did appear, would fail to gain the public's support. Such was Melville's argument in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), where he depicts Hawthorne as an "American Shiloh," a messiah figure who goes unrecognized by the people, who are looking in all the wrong places for "genius." It was precisely this line of thinking that led Hawthorne to decry the "damned mob of scribbling women" who were robbing him of an audience. In other words, the public was comprised largely of female readers who prized "trash," as Hawthorne called it, rather than the art produced by men of genius.¹¹ The increasing emphasis on the arts and culture as constituting a realm separate from the hustle and bustle of society led to an elitist notion of the genius embraced particularly by those male writers, such as Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, who felt themselves to be languishing owing to the public's neglect.

This view, overemphasized as it has been, does help to explain significant developments in antebellum literary culture. But, as scholars have shown, it is not entirely accurate. Even Hawthorne's "pose" in "The Custom House" as "[t]he respectable man of letters [who] supposedly never wrote for money . . . and addressed his work to a select group of peers" was a fiction calculated to win him a wider audience.¹² The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* solidified this fiction and his (limited) success. His newfound status was based on the mystique of his earlier neglect; it was as an underappreciated genius, not as a writer who appealed to the public, that he came to represent the zenith of American literary achievement.

But this association of the aloof male artist-author with the emergence of a national literature has obscured the many attacks against literary elitism, some of them from the very authors associated with ideals of high literature. For while many American authors complained about the reception of the "genius," suggesting an antipopulist exclusivity, they nonetheless ardently stressed the representativeness and individualism of the American author-genius in a way that allowed for the possibility that he could rise up anywhere. Emerson declared in "The American Scholar" (1837) that "genius" was "not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man." Even Melville, the American Ishmael himself, rejected the idea of the elitist genius who was removed from the masses of ordinary men. He called specifically for a halt to the near worship of Shakespeare as "unapproachable." "[W]hat sort of a belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life?" Indeed, "Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio."¹³

This strain of thought about the author-artist is closely allied with Jacksonian individualism, a development that had a tremendous impact on American women. By and large, this new worship of the individual was reserved for white males while others were still yoked by external constraints (from social customs to actual chains) that were guaranteed by law. But at the same time, the boundaries between conventionally masculine and feminine traits began to blur, mixing autonomy or separation from society and a deep sense of responsibility to others. With the waning of external authority initiated by the revolutionary generation, Americans feared that the pendulum was swinging too far in the direction of democratic equality and individualism. Male and female children alike were instilled with a sense of “self-control” and a “capacity for self-government” that linked autonomy and dependence.¹⁴ At the same time, evangelical Protestants forever changed American Christianity by successfully linking the two views of the self as autonomous (free from ministerial authority to form a personal relationship with God) and the self as submissive to the ultimate authority of the Creator.

This dialogic view of the individual, which grew with the rise of democracy and evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century, is paralleled by the tensions that existed in the discourse on the American genius. Take, for instance, the European romantic emphasis on the artist as a divinely inspired creator, which seems to lead to an exclusive notion of the artist as male, since women were not granted access to the divine.¹⁵ When read in an American context, this concept of the artist as divinely inspired took on a democratic emphasis. Because of the Protestant evangelical movement in America, with its romanticized vision of the priesthood of the individual believer, the idea of the artist as “prophet” or “priest” did not necessarily carry the same elitist coloring that it did in Europe. In the democratic grain, the common man or woman was perceived as possessing the ability to understand or at least catch glimpses of God’s design, indicating the capacity for genius. Therefore, although European romanticism on its own had a much more limited ability to inspire women writers, the mixture of romanticism, democracy, and Protestantism, which resulted in American Transcendentalism, proved to be more liberating, as Fuller proved with *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

While Hawthorne’s elitist disdain for the public and the women writers it lionized remained hidden in his private correspondence, Emerson’s views of the artist and his role in society were widely disseminated and had more impact on nineteenth-century discourses of American genius than any other thinker’s.

Fuller called his influence “deep-rooted, increasing, and, over the younger portion of the community, far greater than that of any other person.” According to Rebecca Harding Davis, he received widespread “worship” in the North and South as an “American prophet.” Even to the fiercely southern Sherwood Bonner, his “genius” was “strongly national in its most distinguishing characteristics,” suggesting that his influence crossed sectional as well as gender divides.¹⁶ His understanding of the self-reliant artist-author, which was heavily influenced by the cult of democratic individualism and the liberalization of Christianity, linked self-abnegation and self-assertion, communal responsibility and solitude. According to Emerson, the individual must shut out the rest of humanity to receive the divine inspiration of genius. But the ultimate goal and responsibility of the artist is to communicate that inspiration to the world. In his lecture “Genius,” Emerson explains that “genius is always representative. The men of genius are watchers set on the towers to report of their outlook to you and me. Do not describe him as detached and aloof; if he is, he is no genius. Genius is the most communicative of all things.” Far from being an outsider, the artist is a leader of the (ideally receptive) masses. He is also, Emerson implies, an integral member of the community, an embodiment of the whole.¹⁷ Therefore, Emerson’s ideas about the genius combined elitist and democratic tendencies in an idealistic view of the artist who doesn’t pursue art for art’s sake but art for humanity’s and truth’s sake. This blurring of the distinction between high artistic ideals and social responsibility is what made Emerson’s idea of the artist accessible to some women who responded to his combination of individualism and altruism.

There has been much disagreement, however, about how receptive Emerson was to the idea that women needed liberation from tradition and social conformity as much as men did. In particular, many scholars have noted the masculine rhetoric of Transcendentalism, especially in “Self-Reliance,” where Emerson sums up his admonition to American society by declaring that it “is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members,” and in *Walden*, where Thoreau seems to reserve his message for the “[t]he mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation.” Transcendentalism, the argument goes, excluded women as a class by emphasizing the maleness of the individual who desired seclusion even from family members and pursued self-reliance as both intellectual and economic enterprise. Emerson and Thoreau both sought, personally and culturally, to create a new man, what they called a “true” man, to replace the wasted shell of a man preoccupied with business and materialistic ambition. As an 1839 entry in Emerson’s journal makes clear, his early project of creating a true individual

could not include women: "I wish to be a true & free man, & therefore would not be a woman, or a king, or a clergyman, each of which classes in the present order of things is a slave." Autonomy, he was aware, was available only to white males; women were still "slaves" in a paternalistic order. For the most part, however, such explicitly exclusionary language did not enter into Emerson's public lectures and printed essays. And in later years, his admiration for and support of women poets like Helen Hunt Jackson and Emma Lazarus suggests that he may have recognized the potential for women to become his ideal "poet." In his many letters to Lazarus, beginning in 1868, Emerson gave her the same advice that resounds in "The Poet" and "The American Scholar," showing his recognition of women's striving for genius.¹⁸

Recent debate has also centered on the question of Emerson's relationship to Fuller and to the women's rights movement after her death. While some have argued forcefully for Fuller's feminist influence on Emerson and his support of women's liberation, others have made strong arguments concerning the limitations of his professed support. Jeffrey Steele, for one, claims that Emerson "embrace[ed] parts of Fuller's feminist program" but was ultimately unable to grant Fuller and women generally the capacity for prophetic insight, which he equated with masculinity. Certainly, Emerson's thinking about women's rights is important to any discussion of his influence on women writers, but if we take our cues from the writers themselves, we see little concern with Emerson's position on the issue. Instead, it appears that women writers coming of age in the 1850s and 1860s were more attuned to his Transcendentalist essays, such as "Self-Reliance," than to his lecture to the Women's Rights Convention in 1855, which was not published until after his death. Although there was disagreement among those in attendance about how supportive Emerson was of their cause, the effect of many of his other lectures, which did not specifically mention women, was strikingly inspirational to women. One woman told him after his lecture on "Power," "In listening to you, Mr. Emerson, no achievement seemed impossible; it was as though I might remove mountains." In these lectures and his published essays, he spoke to a general public well beyond the ivy-covered walls of elite male privilege. As Steele writes, in spite of Emerson's limitations, he deserves credit "for developing a model of personal transformation that opened the door toward female liberation." This was certainly the case for Fuller, as it was for the next generation of women. Ultimately, women writers who read and attended Emerson's lectures felt licensed by his iconoclastic message to imagine themselves as artists.¹⁹

The Transcendentalist ideal of self-reliance and concept of the artist were imbued with the same tension between duty and self that American women felt. At its core, Transcendentalism favored intellectual nonconformity and resistance to social dictates concerning styles of worship and living. Marginalized by society yet expected to conform to society's definitions of womanhood, women confronted many of the same issues that Emerson and Thoreau identified. Were not women also living lives of "quiet desperation"? Did they not also need to free themselves from the opinions of others to discover their true relations as individuals to nature? In fact, if Transcendentalism is largely about the crisis of male identity in an age of burgeoning capitalism, women were just as stifled, if not more so, by society's expectations for them and, therefore, more in need of a transforming ideology. If self-reliance proposed a new "true" man, it also seemed, to some women, to call forth a new "true" woman.

As social relations between men and women gradually changed and women's educational opportunities and involvement in the public sphere increased, Transcendental self-reliance spoke to more and more women, first to Fuller's generation and increasingly to the Civil War and postbellum generation of Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson. Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* provides the prime example of how Transcendentalist ideology could be used to help women shun society's definitions of who they should be and look inward to discover their "true" natures. Fuller's call for a "greater range of occupation" for women "to rouse their latent powers" echoed the beliefs of Emerson and Thoreau that identity and vocation were linked. But most importantly, she adapted the idea of Emersonian self-reliance, which entailed both autonomy and submission to a higher authority (God or nature), by arguing that women needed to stop seeing men as having authority over them and instead to locate it solely with God. She wanted women "to live, *first* for God's sake" and to have an unmediated relationship with God.²⁰ By doing so, women would join the ranks of individuals, each answering his or her own higher calling. While self-reliance was a radical proposal for women, it was one that women could justify as not mere willful independence or simple self-assertion; by seeing herself as beholden only to God, a woman could find new powers within herself. Just as well as any man, she could claim to be worthy of the title "prophet," "artist," or "genius." Fuller argued that the best male poets and artists incorporated the "feminine principle." Therefore, it was a small leap for her to claim that women were "especially capable" of the "sight" that is equated with the poet's creative inspiration.²¹

Phelps, especially, reveals her indebtedness to Fuller's ideas in her essay "The

True Woman" (1871), where she described the "scarecrow" of the "true woman," which told women they must live through others, precluding them from discovering their own individuality. She wrote, "We manufactured a model of womanly excellence — and that means the model most to man's convenience — and dragged the sex to it with a persistent, complacent, stupid, and stupefying good faith, which is to-day the greatest obstacle in the way of our perception of the important circumstance that we really know next to nothing of what we are about." Echoing Fuller's *Woman*, Phelps argued that society itself had to change for women to unlock the mystery of who they really were and of what they were really capable. Society must open the fields of "politics, art, literature, [and] trade" to women; it must judge them by the same standards as it does men; it must not see them solely as mothers; and it must allow them to become less self-sacrificing and more "self-reliant." Phelps believed, as did Fuller, that a redefinition of womanhood would not ignore gender differences but would nonetheless expand the possibilities for women.²²

Like Fuller, this later generation of women writers also revered Emerson and counted him foremost among their cultural "gods." Alcott claimed that she had had "Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all [of her] life," and Woolson declared him "one of my gods." Charlotte Forten Grimké's reverence for him began when she heard him lecture and she eagerly absorbed "the golden words which fell from the poet-philosopher's lips." Many women writers made pilgrimages to meet the Sage of Concord, including Phelps, Bonner, Lazarus, and Sarah Orne Jewett. The reclusive Emily Dickinson may have met him in Amherst, where he delivered a lecture and was a guest in her brother's home. In honor of this occasion she declared, "It must have been as if he had come from where dreams are born!"²³ Having received a copy of his *Poems* when she was eighteen, Dickinson was certainly greatly influenced by his ideas of the poet and self-reliance, which permeate much of her poetry, as they do much of Jewett's work. Jewett delighted in one day meeting on a busy street the "great Emerson, serene, remote / Like one adventuring on a sea of thought." Later she would become an intimate friend of his family's, as would Lazarus. As a young woman, Lazarus had been bold enough to send him her first book of poems and ask, as Bonner did, "You, sir, have helped so many struggling souls — will you help me?" While Bonner received only an invitation to visit, Lazarus became his protégé, and he became to her a "wise" father figure. Upon his death, she memorialized their relationship in her poem "To R.W.E.," calling him "Master and father!"²⁴

Alcott's idolization of Emerson was even more intense than Lazarus's. Alcott

grew up under his influence, her father being one of his best friends. As she later wrote to her father, “though I am no M. Fuller I have loved my Master all my life, & know that he did more for me than any man except my old papa.” After his death, Alcott declared that in his books “I have found the truest delight, the best inspiration of my life.” She was one of the “Many a thoughtful young man and woman [who] owe to Emerson the spark that kindled their highest aspirations.” Most tellingly, Alcott sent a copy of Emerson’s *Essays* to a young woman who was looking for advice on how to live. Alcott marked her favorite essays, including “Self-Reliance,” saying, “they did much for me.” Indeed, as she was developing her ambitions as an author, she copied Emerson’s ideas on genius and self-reliance into her scrapbook: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius.”²⁵ In other words, the confidence and courage that Emerson preached reached across the divide of gender for Alcott, making her feel that genius was not reserved only for men and that she could seek to cultivate it as well.

Most importantly, Emerson’s ideas provided the intellectual support that women writers needed to accept their differences from other women and to transform their unique identities into art. Alcott’s first and most ambitious novel, *Moods*, begins with his words, “Life is a train of moods,” which provide the central theme for this novel about a young woman’s painful process of self-discovery. Stoddard also began one of her novels, *Two Men* (1865), with an epigraph from Emerson: “Nature, as we know her, is no saint. The light of the Church, the Ascetics, Gentoos, and corn-eaters, she does not distinguish by any favor. She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings — the great, the strong, the beautiful — are not children of our law; do not come out of the Sunday-School, nor weigh their food, nor punctually keep the Commandments.” This quote from Emerson’s essay “Experience” legitimates the idiosyncrasy of her characters and probably gave Stoddard a way to understand her own difference and individuality. Writing to her friend Margaret Sweat, she indicated she “lately [had] been sitting at the feet of Emerson.” Although she objected to the fact that his philosophy “beg[an] and end[ed] in self,” she insisted, “I like him, he is a wonderful spurer [*sic*] on to self-culture.” Clearly, Stoddard did not feel, as a woman, excluded from his message. One entry in her writer’s journal reads simply, “Emerson is not original, but makes the originality of others appear in his pages.” Although she does not name the work she is reading, her assessment of his influence is noteworthy. Recognizing that he himself was not particularly an original artist, she located the power of his influence to inspire originality in

American authors. For example, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson exhorts, “Insist on yourself; never imitate,” and he asks, “Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? . . . Every great man is a unique. . . . Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare.” Such passages point the way toward originality for the inspired reader.²⁶

For Woolson, Emerson’s writings grew in importance as she developed as a writer. She wrote that although Emerson had “been thrown at me all [my] life; . . . only within the last few years has he dawned upon *me*, and words can hardly express my admiration for no; belief in *some* of his Essays. The sum of all earthly wisdom seems to me embodied in his ‘Nature’; ‘Essays[?]’; ‘*Second Series*.’ . . . I have two sentences of his copied and hung up on my wall at this moment. They help me when I feel disheartened, as nothing else does.” Unfortunately, she does not quote the lines. Several years later she wrote that although she did not have those words pinned to her wall anymore, Emerson’s works had always been her “Bible.” She was writing to Edmund Clarence Stedman about his essay on Emerson, in which he wrote, “Every American has something of Emerson in him.” She felt that, despite her residence in Europe, she was an “American” writer too.²⁷ For male and female writers of her generation, Emerson represented the quintessential American author because he was the primary articulator of the duty of individuals to value their unique perspectives. By justifying their desires to devote themselves to a literature that was a natural extension of their original selves, Emerson’s concept of the American author helped father the succeeding generation of women writers.

“The triumphs of female authorship”

Of course, Woolson and her contemporaries would not have been able to develop their high ambitions without important literary mothers as well. In addition to Transcendentalism, the many financial and literary successes of women writers in America and abroad inspired a new generation of American women writers to strive for artistry. Fuller hailed “the triumphs of female authorship” and “the shining names of famous women [that] have cast light upon the path of the sex,” giving younger women the courage to follow in their footsteps. She recognized that before women writers as a class could gain equal respect, some exemplary women would have to pave the way and prove that women were capable of genius. The fact that some had done so should now open the way for others, particularly in America, she felt. “Even without equal freedom with the

other sex, they have already shown themselves [capable of great insight], and should these faculties have free play, I believe they will open new, deeper and purer sources of joyous inspiration than have as yet refreshed the earth."²⁸

In America in the 1850s, public authorship was increasingly perceived as a feminine realm, corresponding to the rise in female readership, although, as Lawrence Buell records in *New England Literary Culture*, only 26.6 percent of New England writers during the antebellum and Civil War years were women. But Americans generally felt that women were invading the realm of literature en masse, as the quotation about “the entrance of the Amazonian mania into literature” from the *North American Review* suggests. Another such suggestion comes from Richard Henry Stoddard. When his wife, Elizabeth Stoddard, was finishing up a new work in the 1860s, he wrote to a fellow literary man, “It is a novel, of course, for all the women the world over are writing novels now a day[s].”²⁹ Perhaps referring to her husband’s feelings, Elizabeth Stoddard wrote as early as 1855, “The Literary Female is abroad, and the souls of the literary men are tried.” Recognizing the threat that women writers posed to men, Stoddard understood that the examples of those who went before her were both inspirational and empowering: “I like to chronicle the success of a woman. If there be any so valiant as to trench on the domain appropriated by men to themselves, I hasten to do them honor. And I say—O courageous woman!” Woolson echoed these sentiments in her poem “To George Eliot” (1876), in which she wrote, “A myriad women light have seen, / And courage taken because *thou* hast been!”³⁰ It was important for women who were developing identities as artists to have models like Eliot to give them the faith that what they dared was indeed possible for women.

In *Woman*, Fuller had mentioned, in particular, Madame de Staël, and in 1845, she was the world’s foremost “triumph of female authorship,” apart from Fuller herself. But a host of other women writers would soon distinguish themselves in France and Britain, and for Civil War–era and postbellum women writers, these women of genius were particularly influential. Although Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson each had their own unique literary tastes, three women writers, in particular, appear most often on their short lists of favorite authors: George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Dickinson, who considered Barrett Browning and Sand “queens” and hung portraits of these two and Eliot on the walls of her room, was representative rather than unusual in her choice of role models.³¹ The successes of these five women writers from England and France forced the critics to contemplate and, in many cases, reevaluate their

biases about women's genius and gave aspiring women writers in America new goals to shoot for. And the heroines of these writers, especially Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh, were young women with whom Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson could identify, sharing their sense of individuality, self-doubt, strong-mindedness, and high aspirations.

While the works of these European women writers were certainly influential, it was perhaps their biographies that most inspired their American successors. Numerous articles appeared in America chronicling their lives as well as their literary feats. The publicizing of their private lives may have been a burden to them, but it also made them well known to aspiring American women writers. European women writers who had gained the critics' and public's admiration were magical, larger-than-life, glorious exceptions to the perceived rule of woman's inferiority to man. But to hear about their personal lives and read passages of their writings alongside autobiographical details made them human and made the heights they had reached appear more accessible.

The first European woman writer to become widely known for her intellectual prowess, Madame de Staël (1776–1817), was believed to be the best educated and the most articulate and philosophical woman of her age. Her novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) made her the most famous woman writer of her age. As Theophilus Parsons wrote in the *North American Review* in 1820, no woman “has displayed a mind of such power and extent, so well cultivated and filled; no one has done so much to vindicate the intellectual equality of woman with man.” Although her reputation waned over the century, a reviewer for *Appletons'* declared in 1881 that “for upward of three quarters of a century she has been accepted as the greatest of literary women.”³² She was particularly inspirational to Barrett Browning, Sand, and Eliot, as well as to American antebellum intellectual women like Lydia Maria Child, who wrote a biography of her, and to Fuller, who was known as the “Yankee Corinne.” But postbellum women writers felt de Staël's influence as well. Alcott listed her as one of her favorite authors; Stoddard's heroine of *The Morgesons* (1862) translates *Corinne*; and Woolson wrote her story “At the Château of Corinne” (1886) about de Staël's failed legacy to late-nineteenth-century women writers, who suffered from even greater prejudice than de Staël had. In her biography of de Staël, Child depicted hers as a painful life because she was too much of an anomaly to find happiness in her society. As Ellen Moers writes, “the myth of Corinne persisted as both inspiration and warning” to later women writers.³³ With her extraordinary abilities and audacity in daring to invade the

male sphere of genius, de Staël opened the door through which other women would pass. But because her ostracism was so severe, she did not provide a model that American women felt comfortable following.

Neither did de Staël's fellow Frenchwoman, George Sand (1804–76), who was considered even more brilliant and daring than her predecessor. She left her husband, donned men's clothes, and enjoyed her newfound freedom by smoking and having affairs. In order to have full access to the literary world, she also adopted a male pseudonym. Her early novels protested the restraints that marriage placed on women and shocked the public because of their frank subject matter, but these works also astonished reviewers with their genius. Critics often accorded her the highest praise of any woman author of her age, but they rarely overlooked what was widely viewed as the immorality of her personal life. The censure she received for taking such a bold path was severe and longstanding.³⁴ As a result of the public outcry over Sand, young women were forbidden to read her novels. To admire her was scandalous. As the respectable Julia Ward Howe wrote in the *Atlantic* in 1861, "Was she not to all of us, in our early years, a name of doubt, dread, and enchantment?" By daring the seemingly impossible, she inspired girls with dreams of fame, passion, and power. But, as Howe insisted, she was always to be the exception: "The world knows that [her] life . . . is no example for women to follow." Howe admitted that "the popular mind" had distorted her image, making her "a monster." But critics softened their views of her somewhat in the wake of her publication of *Histoire de ma vie* (1854–55), in which she presented herself as sincere, humble, and the victim of circumstance. In her later life, she retired to her family and became more respectable, leaving the critics little to condemn. In the *Galaxy* in 1870, Justin McCarthy claimed that although she had been deemed "a sort of feminine fiend," her literary triumphs had made her "the most influential writer of our day," male or female. "There is hardly a woman's heart anywhere in the civilized world which has not felt the vibration of George Sand's thrilling voice" and "been stirred by emotions of doubt or fear or repining or ambition," he asserted.³⁵ Sand's illustrious career had a profound effect on Stoddard, who considered her "a true prophet of what a woman can be." Alcott included Sand among her favorite authors, and Woolson counted her as one of her chief literary influences. Lazarus's opinion of Sand was a common one: she possessed "the most curious combination of genius, force, cleverness, generosity, . . . vanity, vulgarity & immorality ever seen." Nonetheless, Lazarus considered her "a truly great & noble woman, whom with all her faults one must love &

admire.”³⁶ Like de Staël’s, Sand’s audacity was thrilling, and her power as a writer was unparalleled. But she was so exceptional in her eschewal of femininity that most American women found her example forbidding.

Unlike de Staël and Sand, the British women writers of the Victorian era who commanded almost universal admiration — Brontë, Barrett Browning, and Eliot — provided what were considered by many to be more appropriate models of the woman of genius. Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), who had caused a sensation with *Jane Eyre* in 1847, was widely admired and respected. The novel, published under the name Currer Bell, was voraciously read and discussed by the American public, creating a “Jane Eyre fever,” as the *North American Review* put it.³⁷ Reviewers focused on a main conundrum posed by Brontë’s work: was a woman capable of producing the “masculine” effects that distinguished a work of art? While *Jane Eyre* had a tremendous impact on Civil War and postbellum women writers, Charlotte Brontë’s biography was just as, if not more, influential. After her death in 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell took up the task of defending Brontë against her critics, who continued to challenge her claim to womanliness. Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) told the story of an isolated, tragic genius who embodied self-sacrifice and filial duty. As Margaret Sweat, a friend of Elizabeth Stoddard’s, wrote in the *North American Review*, Charlotte’s inner life was one of “steady self-denial and struggle” at war with intense desires for “action” and “change.” The sisters’ desolate lives on the moors devoted to their demanding father and unstable brother gave birth to novels that were, Sweat felt, “the very outpouring of pent-up passion, the cry of fettered hearts, the panting of hungry intellects, restrained by the iron despotism of adverse and unconquerable circumstance.”³⁸ Their lives, therefore, became the ideal of woman’s tragic genius, mythic in its suffering and isolation.

Gaskell’s biography had an enormous impact on the women who read it and who sympathized with Charlotte Brontë’s struggles. Stoddard told her readers in her *Daily Alta California* column that she had always had “a Jane Eyre mania,” but that her “interest [in Charlotte Brontë] culminated while I read her biography by Mrs. Gaskell. Patience and pain ruled her [Brontë’s] life, and brought to perfection her wonderful genius.” Stoddard’s only depiction of a woman writer, in her story “Collected by a Valetudinarian,” is a composite of Brontë and herself, suggesting how much she thought of herself as a successor to Brontë. And her novel *The Morgesons* was clearly inspired, in part, by *Jane Eyre*. When Alcott, at age twenty-five, finished reading Gaskell’s biography, she also recorded her reaction to the “sad” story: “So full of talent; and after working long, just as success,

love, and happiness come, she dies.” Alcott could not help comparing herself to Brontë. “Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles,” she wrote. “I can’t be a C.B., but I may do a little something yet.”³⁹ Although it was yet difficult to imagine achieving Brontë’s stature, reading about her hardships and success gave Stoddard and Alcott a model for perseverance through their own difficulties on the road to renown as authors. *Jane Eyre* was also a favorite of Dickinson’s, as it was of Harriet Prescott Spofford’s, who wrote an introduction to an 1898 edition of the novel. And Jewett made a pilgrimage with Annie Fields to the Brontës’ homestead in 1892.

The Brontë sisters’ successors Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61) and George Eliot (1819–80) had careers that, while not fraught with the public condemnation the Brontë sisters endured, were nonetheless marked by similar difficulties. Barrett Browning and Eliot were widely recognized as the most accomplished woman poet and novelist, respectively, of their day. Reviews of their works invariably addressed the question of whether a woman could achieve mastery in poetry or serious fiction, and their works were taken as the most shining examples of female capabilities. Some critics insisted on placing them not only above all others of their sex but among the best writers in general. “Mrs. Browning is sometimes spoken of as ranking among the first female poets,” C. C. Everett wrote in the *North American Review*. “To many this would not seem great commendation.” But he declared that Barrett Browning’s “place is not merely in the front rank of our female poets, but of our poets.” Edward Eggleston, in the *Critic*, argued that Eliot had forever changed the genre of the novel, as Shakespeare did drama and Molière did comedy. He paid her the utmost compliment by discussing her not as a woman novelist but as one of the foremost practitioners of her art, if not the foremost.⁴⁰

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was in many ways the most unproblematic model for the nineteenth-century woman artist. Although she faced the severe attacks of critics who ridiculed her for trespassing on the male realm of poetry, her contemporaries mythologized her into a saintly, pure woman and poet. She was probably better educated than any previous woman writer, and her early literary efforts were criticized for their erudition. But when, in 1846, she married Robert Browning, she became in the public’s eyes less of an ambitious female poet trying to rival Milton and more of a “woman.” Many perceived her marriage as having a positive effect on her poetry, making it more appropriately devoted to women’s themes. While she had attempted to achieve the immortal stature of male poets, for many she remained firmly within the “earthly” bounds of a woman’s existence

by becoming a wife and mother and writing about those experiences. An accomplished poet who also epitomized womanhood, Barrett Browning thus embodied the cultural ideal of female authorship. She did not neglect her duty to her husband and child in her search for greatness, and she ultimately did not force society to question its most deeply held beliefs about womanhood. “What author of our times has held more loyally to the great aims of authorship than Elizabeth Browning,” a reviewer for *Putnam’s* asked; “and yet where shall we look for a more womanly woman than she?” In the *Atlantic*, Kate Field portrayed Barrett Browning as the invalid genius, “[i]mprisoned” at home, unable and not wanting to venture beyond her sphere as Sand had done. A kind of Virgin Mother, she was the antithesis of Sand’s Magdalen. “Sinless in life, *her* death, then, was without sting,” Field concluded.⁴¹

Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), a novelistic prose poem about a young woman’s quest for poetic genius, spoke to many young women writers who were struggling through the same dilemma, including Dickinson, who often quoted the work in her letters and possessed two marked copies of the book. Stoddard, who reviewed *Aurora Leigh* in her *Daily Alta California* column, criticized Barrett Browning’s execution but thought her “a great and glorious woman,” as did Phelps, on whom the book made a dramatic impression. Reading *Aurora Leigh* at the age of sixteen, Phelps claimed, “opened for me . . . the world of letters as a Paradise from which no flaming sword could ever exile me.” “I owe to her, distinctly,” she wrote, “the first visible aspiration (ambition is too low a word) to do some honest, hard work of my own in the World Beautiful, and for it.” Charlotte Forten Grimké was equally “bewitched” by *Aurora Leigh*. She sums up the power that this book and those of other European women of genius had to speak to her and other aspiring young women: “May thy sublime and noble nature strengthen me for life’s labor! I cannot but believe it will.” Barrett Browning’s work, in which was embodied her “noble nature,” could inspire a young woman like Grimké to desire to discover her own power and to achieve similar feats.⁴²

But it was George Eliot, more universally praised than any previous woman writer, who set the highest standard for women who desired to follow in her footsteps. In America, she was held up by nearly all critics not only as the greatest woman novelist but also as one of the finest novelists to have written in the English language. According to a eulogy in *The Spectator*, which was reprinted in America in *Appletons’*, she ranked second only to Scott in the art of the novel, although she was still compared to other female authors. Her books “will long continue to be counted the greatest achievements of any Englishwoman’s, and,

perhaps, even of any woman's brain," the eulogist asserted.⁴³ Despite the intense interest in her private life (her cohabitation with the married critic George Lewes caused much furor), she nonetheless transcended her identity as a woman and would always be known by her pseudonym. She stood for all that was serious and respectable in literature.

Many women writers felt, like Dickinson, who claimed Eliot as "*my* George Eliot," that woman's fullest potential was reached in her works. Woolson counted Eliot among her chief literary models, and she declared *The Mill on the Floss* "the favorite novel of my mature years." Woolson's admiration of Eliot is conveyed in her poem "To George Eliot" (1876), which was published in the *New Century for Woman*. This short-lived periodical commemorated women's highest achievements and aimed to inspire American women, who were celebrating their nation's centennial, to partake in the new century of opportunity that was dawning. The poem reads, in part:

We dwell upon thy pages, not alone
 The beauty of thy rose, we see, as finely traced
 As roses drawn by other woman-hands
 Who spend their lives in shaping them, but faced
 We find ourselves with giant's work, that stands
 Above us as a mountain lifts its brow,
 Grand, unapproachable, yet clear in view
 To lowliest eyes that upward look.

Eliot could create womanly beauty, yet she was also a "giant" who surpassed all other women. She combined the delicate, feminine "rose," a common metaphor for women's writing that conveys its delicate and perishable nature, with the masculine solidity of the mountain. Eliot therefore proved herself capable of both creating feminine beauty in the small details and constructing grand masterworks that would endure as long as mountains. Lazarus used similar imagery to describe the experience of reading a biography of Eliot: "it is like being on top of a mountain — such intellectual & moral greatness combined, I have never felt equaled."⁴⁴ This idea that her genius was the result of a perfect confluence of mind and heart was echoed by Phelps, for whom Eliot was the consummate artist. Phelps became an ardent student of her work, giving lectures on her novels, corresponding with her, and publishing many articles on her. Eliot was "the greatest woman of literary history," Phelps wrote, "if not the greatest woman of the world." What made her so was her "massive power of personal tenderness,"

which combined with “the instinct of an artist.” She gave “to the world of men and women . . . the interpretation of a great mind through a great heart.”⁴⁵ For Phelps and many others, she was the complete woman artist, not simply because, like Barrett Browning, she experienced the love of a wife and mother, but because she embodied woman’s most basic instincts as an artist. Her personal life, therefore, was secondary in the public’s eye to her great achievements as a novelist. She was simultaneously woman and artist, proving that the two identities could be complementary rather than contradictory.

With these examples before them, Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson hoped they would earn a seat next to these artists in the gallery of immortal literary women. Nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans envisioned two separate literary firmaments: one for men and one for women, each possessing its own qualifications for entry. While male writers hoped to be ranked by their fellows as American geniuses representative of the best this country had produced, the most an American female writer could hope for was to be recognized as a woman of genius representative of the best her countrywomen or perhaps her sex were capable of. As Julia Ward Howe advised George Sand, “[t]he shades of the Poets will greet thee as they greeted Dante and Virgil,” but “there is a gallery of great women . . . where thou must sit.”⁴⁶ Nineteenth-century Americans’ and Europeans’ understanding of women geniuses suggests the widespread cultural influence of Greek and Roman mythology. In ancient schemata of the otherworld, female entities could be all-powerful, but male deities reigned supreme. The woman of genius, therefore, could be a latter-day reflection of Hera, but she could not directly compete with Zeus. It was this model of the literary firmament, therefore, that attracted this generation of women writers, and it was next to these European women of genius who had achieved the status of cultural goddesses that Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson hoped to be recognized. When Stoddard claimed, “We have no Elizabeth Browning, Bronte, George Sand,” she also sensed the possibility that America soon could. It was, therefore, in large part because of these precursors’ achievements (and their triumph over tremendous personal difficulties) that Civil War– and postbellum-era women writers could begin to imagine ascending to such heights themselves.

The field of American women writers, however, was not quite as barren as Stoddard believed. Fuller, Child, Lydia Sigourney, Catharine Sedgwick, Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and many others had helped to open the field for women writing in America. The question was what kind of writers American women could be. While women writers generally held on to republican ideals of

authorship, writing for the public good rather than for selfish motives or high ideals of art, it is also apparent that some women adopted this altruistic stance to legitimate their entrance into the public sphere, in much the same way that Hawthorne adopted his of the alienated artist. Just as Hawthorne abandoned his wooing of the market when it proved unsuccessful, some women writers abandoned or never fully developed high ambitions as they discovered that the American literary marketplace would not reward them.

Two good examples of such women writers are Fuller and Child. Both excelled as intellectuals and writers. However, Fuller never fully developed the ambition to make her mark as a creative writer, and Child abandoned her dreams of romantic genius early on. Despite her claims in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that women should and could excel as creators, Fuller was unable to find a form that gave her free expression. A revealing passage from Fuller's memoirs suggests the extent to which she felt stifled as a woman writer:

For all the tides of life that flow within me, I am dumb and ineffectual when it comes to casting my thought into a form. No old one suits me. If I could invent one, it seems the pleasure of creation would make it possible for me to write. . . . One should be either private or public. I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straitly-bounded to give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy when I would play the artist.

Fuller felt that no genre would allow her to fully express herself. Fiction, a genre associated with women's private lives, did not appeal to the intellectual Fuller, and poetry was too much linked with a masculine ideal of romantic genius for her. Therefore, although her treatise *Woman* was an intellectual influence on later women writers, Fuller did not provide a model of the creative artist for them. Helen Gray Cone's essay "Woman in American Literature" (1890) summed up her reputation in the nineteenth century: "hers was a powerful genius, but, by the irony of fate, a genius not prompt to clothe itself in the written word." The legacy she left behind, Cone wrote, was one of "hampered power, of force that has never found its proper outlet."⁴⁷

In comparison to Fuller, Child more easily adopted the romantic model of authorship as she wrote her first novel, *Hobomok* (1824). Child wrote at a time when "American literature" was still an open field; only Washington Irving was an established author, and James Fenimore Cooper had just begun his career. As a witness to the dawning of a national literature in the liberal tradition, made up of

great works of romantic genius, she believed she could participate in it, but not as a woman writer. Hence she used a “male persona” in her preface and as the narrator of her novel. “Child apparently felt free enough to think of herself as a man,” Molly Vaux writes, “but not free enough to write openly, that is, ambitiously, as a woman.” Having gained fame for her novel, however, the previously unknown Child could no longer write as a man. Her response was to revert to a position, as Carolyn Karcher argues, as “a woman writer, seeking moral influence and economic independence rather than intellectual greatness.” Although she started her career much like Sand, whom she thought of as her “twin sister,” her marriage and increasing commitment to social causes caused her to drop her masquerade as the male author and hence her pose as the romantic creator.⁴⁸

Even Child and Fuller, the antebellum women writers who seem to have been most inspired by romantic notions of discovering the artist within, could not escape the overpowering image of the artist/creator as male. Child and Fuller felt strongly that the exclusion of women from the production of art was not natural, and they hoped that in time women would overcome their reluctance to act as creators. But, as Susan Phinney Conrad argues, “the function of literary ‘women of letters’ was to analyze, not create romantic art. . . . Their social and intellectual orientations, in combination, had created an apparently unbridgeable gap between ‘woman’s sphere’ and the far-ranging, even unlimited, terrain of the artist-hero.”⁴⁹ In addition, the cultural matrix in which Child and Fuller wrote had not yet sufficiently imagined the possibility of a woman of genius who could realize her potential and gain the public’s respect. With only de Staël and Sand as their models, it is no wonder that Fuller and Child did not conceive of their potential as women writers in the same way as did later women writers, who had Brontë, Barrett Browning, and Eliot as models. As a result, Fuller and Child were unable to effect a marriage of woman and artist that could become a legacy for later women writers because they felt that to be a creator was the most aggressive assertion of individuality. To become such a creator was sure to spark intense resistance from a culture that believed society was held together at its very core by the self-sacrifices of its daughters, wives, and mothers.

Nevertheless, their successors in the 1850s, writers like Fern, Stowe, and many others, made authorship a respectable and in some cases even a lucrative profession for women. In “Woman in American Literature,” Cone also wrote about the influence that Stowe’s success had on women writers: “In the face of the fact that the one American book which had stormed Europe was the work of a

woman, the old tone of patronage became ridiculous, the old sense of ordained and inevitable weakness on the part of the ‘female writer’ became obsolete. Women henceforth . . . were enabled, consciously or unconsciously, to hold the pen more firmly, to move it more freely.”⁵⁰ Antebellum women writers blurred the boundaries between the domestic sphere and the outside world, legitimating women’s involvement in the public realm and thereby decreasing the anxiety many women felt about being published authors. These women drew on two kinds of arguments to legitimate a more active role in society. The first argument, based on natural rights theory from the Enlightenment and a cornerstone of republican and democratic ideology, was that all human beings, including women, possessed individual rights as citizens. Proponents of this view believed that each woman possessed her own individual personality, needs, desires, beliefs, and opinions, just like a man, and therefore she deserved the same rights and opportunities that men received. The other argument, which gained currency in the 1840s and 1850s, claimed that traits more commonly possessed by women than men, such as benevolence and a strong moral compass, made their involvement in the corrupt public sphere essential.

It was during the 1820s and 1830s, while the Enlightenment’s ideal of gender equality still held considerable sway in America, that Child had developed her early ambitions, believing that her gender did not automatically exclude her from pursuing genius. In 1828, Sarah Josepha Hale, the foremost female editor in America, promoted the idea in her *Ladies’ Magazine* that “There is no sex in talents, in genius.” The notion of gender equality that grew out of the Enlightenment, therefore, enabled some women to envision themselves as creators and intellectuals. As Nina Baym writes, female authors born before 1790 “were activated or enabled by an Enlightenment republicanism whose tenets guaranteed women intellectual parity with men and offered them the chance to serve their nation if they developed their minds.” Women were viewed as similar to men, especially mentally, and therefore in need of a formal education, especially as they were increasingly allotted the responsibility of raising children to become good citizens. But women’s special mission still confined them to the domestic sphere.⁵¹ Therefore, it was difficult for women to participate in the public debates about American literature and genius while they subscribed to this ideal, hence Child’s masquerade as a man when she wrote *Hobomok*.

In the 1840s and 1850s, however, American women both built upon and transformed the Enlightenment understanding of gender to formulate a new, Victorian ideal of womanhood that many women felt granted them greater

power in shaping cultural discourse. Hale was again a key proponent of the new ideal, which emphasized sexual difference and extolled women's special abilities and virtues as the inculcators of a moral citizenry. This separatist rhetoric helped pave the way for women's entrance into the public sphere as editors and authors. However, the Victorian ideal legitimized a public role for women based on the premise that their minds were fundamentally different from (and ultimately better than) men's, leading to a notion of a separate literary market for women.

It was important that women first saw themselves as having a public role to play and a right to contribute to the construction of the nation's cultural identity. Once they had become not simply marginal participants but, as Stowe had with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, central contributors to the public sphere and literary marketplace, many more could begin to think seriously about becoming "creators of culture."⁵² Women had to see themselves as formulators of public opinion before they could begin to think about being formulators of art. And once women writers had become key players in the literary marketplace, they might be allowed, some believed, to participate in the establishment of a national high literature. But as long as women legitimated their participation in the public role of authorship by claiming it as an extension of their maternal and domestic duties, they would not see themselves as contributors to the national high literature.

With the establishment of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1857, however, a new opportunity for participation in the formation of the nation's high culture presented itself to women. The magazine created a stable market for artistic literature and was seemingly hospitable to women writers. Despite the fact that those who were received warmly by the magazine in its early years had all but disappeared by the end of the century when its foremost male contributors were canonized, from 1857 to the 1870s, when Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson began their careers, there seemed to be a place for women not only in the pages of the magazine but in the ranks of the prestigious authors associated with it. Ellen Olney Kirk, writing in *The National Exposition Souvenir: What America Owes to Women* (1893), claimed, "In the same way that Putnam's Magazine had brought into notice men destined to make a permanent name in letters, the *Atlantic Monthly* was now [in the late 1850s] to give a strong impulse to American literature in general and to open a field where women in particular were to take high honors." Although the purpose of Kirk's book was to recognize women's achievements in various fields and therefore it tended to downplay the barriers to women's success, the sense that the *Atlantic* and the high realm of American literature that it was enshrining were an "open field" in which women could win "high

honors" was a potent one. Cone echoed Kirk's sentiments in her essay "Woman in American Literature," when she wrote, "The encouragement of the great magazines, from the first friendly to women writers, is an important factor in their development," mentioning specifically *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*, the latter which "opened a new outlet for literary work of a high grade."⁵³ In addition to Stowe, many women writers, including Child and Rose Terry Cooke, published in the *Atlantic* during its first few years. Although all pieces were published anonymously, it was clear that the fiction department, in particular, was hospitable to women writers, as the magazine courted female readers to help establish financial viability.

In addition to the significant number of women publishing fiction in the *Atlantic*, the successes of two widely celebrated female contributors were particularly influential for aspiring women writers. Both Harriet Prescott Spofford and Rebecca Harding Davis, previously unknown authors, became famous with their first stories published in the *Atlantic*. Spofford made her spectacular debut in the magazine in 1859. The editors were so astonished by her story "In a Cellar" when they first received it, according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, that he "had to be called in to satisfy them that a demure little Yankee girl could have written it." When it was published, it was quickly declared "the most popular which had appeared in the magazine." It was for this reason that Spofford was accorded the tremendous privilege of an invitation to a special dinner hosted by the Saturday Club (the all-male club that established the *Atlantic*) for Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1859, prior to Stowe's departure for Europe. (Only two other women were invited — Cooke and Julia Ward Howe — but they declined.)⁵⁴ Other stories by Spofford appeared in the magazine, and she published many books, the earliest of which the *Atlantic* reviewers accorded very high praise. The success of Spofford was a sign that the *Atlantic* had the power to confer serious recognition on its contributors, even young women who otherwise had little access to privilege or power in the literary world. And lest her case be deemed an exception, that of Davis proved the point. Her success is even more extraordinary because she lacked any connection to the literary world, whereas Spofford had been a student of Higginson's. As another previously unpublished and even more powerless woman, this time from the South, Davis experienced her meteoric rise to fame with the publication of "Life in the Iron Mills" in the *Atlantic* in 1862. The story of her instant fame was widely spread and is still well known today. Both Phelps and Alcott were aware of the successes of Spofford and Davis and read their early stories in the *Atlantic*. Alcott made a special effort to meet Davis

during her 1862 visit to Boston to meet the *Atlantic* luminaries and recorded in her journal that Davis's new novel "has made a stir, and is very good." Late in her life, Phelps acknowledged both Spofford's "Amber Gods" and Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" as having had a formative influence on her when she first read them in the *Atlantic*.⁵⁵ Spofford's and Davis's stories made a strong impression because readers could not believe they were written by women (owing to Spofford's worldliness and Davis's stark realism). In addition, the successes of these two obscure women writers suggested that others could follow in their footsteps into the new tier of high literary culture that was opening up just below the great Hawthorne, Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell, who formed the core of the *Atlantic*'s canon.

Discovering the Self as Artist

While American individualism, Transcendentalism, the examples of earlier women writers, and the inclusion of women in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* created the cultural climate that enabled women of the Civil War and postbellum years to envision contributing to America's emerging high literature, young women also needed encouragement closer to home in order to begin to imagine themselves as artists. Most families raised their girls to live for others rather than for themselves, creating the greatest obstacle to self-discovery. Phelps, like others before her, including Fuller and John Stuart Mill, identified the essential dilemma for women as the tension between self-sacrifice and self-reliance. In her essay "Unhappy Girls," she wrote that although "[i]ndividuality is the birthright of each human soul, . . . society crushes [it] out of women," as did the family, she argued, by expecting that only sons had the duty to develop their talents and share them with the world.

It is a selfish affection, a sickly sentimentality, and a terrible error of parental judgment which says to the young man: "Go, life is before you; cut your way; leave your mark; make for yourself an honest independence and an honored name. . . ." And to the young woman: "My dear, we cannot spare you now; wait a while . . . wait a lifetime perhaps. Give us yourself—your young energies, and ingenuities . . . your gifts and graces . . . your opportunities of growth and gain; your chance of usefulness or fame. . . ."

It was exactly this restraining of young women, Phelps believed, that prevented them from attempting great things in life and art. "Suppose that Raphael had

refused to gaze into the divine eyes of the Sistine Mary because his mother advised him not to. Or that Milton had not entered Paradise because his father thought he'd better not," she reasoned. This was precisely what happened to women. Raised to think only of others, they were discouraged from seeing themselves as individuals capable of great feats and sublime insights, thereby depriving the world of future Raphaels or Miltons.⁵⁶ Although Phelps was still railing against these social and familial pressures in 1871, we can see in her early life, as well as those of Alcott, Stoddard, and Woolson, examples to the contrary. Each of them found in their families enough encouragement to break away from the expectation that women were supposed to devote themselves to the service of others. Instead, they were supported to varying degrees in their development of independence, individuality, and ambition to be artists.

A certain amount of rejection of society's gender codes was necessary for women to understand themselves as artists. In fact, it appears that a strong bond with a mother who, to some extent, had set aside society's definition of women's abilities was an important source of strength for this generation of women writers. While later New Women asserted their individuality by separating from their mothers,⁵⁷ Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson (Stoddard is an exception) found in their mothers a role model for autonomy and authorship. These four women also shared many other similarities in their personalities and upbringing that helped them form identities as artists, such as opportunities for self-development and work outside the home during the Civil War, exposure to the outside world through travel, feelings of uniqueness and difference from other women, desires for independence, and a restlessness or ambition to live self-directed and intellectually fulfilling lives.⁵⁸ In addition, there were external forces, what R. Ochse, in *Before the Gates of Excellence*, calls "stress" or conditions that leave one feeling powerless, that led these women to pursue lives as artists. Artists manage stress, Ochse argues, by mastering their special talents, thereby regaining control over their lives. Examples of such stress include financial need or the death of one or both parents, factors that played a role in the lives of all four of the writers examined here.⁵⁹ To these I would add society's prejudices about women's abilities. While such prejudices certainly acted as barriers to developing literary ambitions for many women writers, for Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson, combating society's ideas about womanhood was a basic motivator; it helped define them as artists.

All four came to understand themselves very early on as different from other girls. As young women they developed a craving to participate in a revolutionary moment of women's expanding opportunities and abilities. They went through

intense periods of self-discovery as adolescents and young women, wrestling with their unconventionality and the feeling that they did not fit in with other women or their communities. All four could be described as “tomboys,” who often preferred running “wild” and rejected traditional female activities, much like Jewett, who described herself as a “wild and shy” child. “I always thought I must have been a deer or a horse in some former state,” Alcott recollected about her childhood. She continued, “No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race, and no girl if she refused to climb trees, leap fences, and be a tomboy.” Likewise, Phelps called herself a “tomboy” in her autobiography and described an incident in which a man stopped her one day and told her that “little girls should not walk fences.” She only looked at him “with contempt.”⁶⁰

Stoddard and Alcott, especially, felt “moody” and ill-tempered, not sweet and cheerful, as girls were supposed to be. They noticed that their sisters possessed sunny dispositions in contrast to their own. Stoddard thought her sister, Anne, was “not one bit like me — there’s no devil in her. [N]o ginger hot in the mouth.” By contrasting herself with her mild-mannered sister, Stoddard discovered her own “devil,” which she would come to see as necessary for the woman artist. Like Hawthorne, who appreciated Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* because she wrote “as if the devil was in her,” Stoddard believed that women had to set themselves apart from ordinary women in order to be good writers. The young Alcott found it more difficult to embrace the “devil” in her. Her diary exhibits her painful struggles to curb her temper and moods. At the age of twelve she recorded “*A Sample of Our Lessons*,” in which a teacher’s interview of her reveals her feelings of difference: “What is gentleness? Kindness, patience, and care for other people’s feelings. / Who has it? Father and Anna [her sister]. / Who means to have it? Louisa, if she can.” At the age of fifty, Alcott inserted a note at this point in the diary indicating that she had tried all her life “without any great success” to learn these lessons about “self-denial.” While her sisters Anna and Lizzy embodied the selflessness and sweetness that her father prized, she had to learn to accept her lack of feminine deference to authority. Although “some people complain[ed]” that Louisa and her youngest sister, May, an artist, were “brusque,” Child, a friend of their mother’s, considered them simply “straightforward and sincere,” two qualities that served them well as artists.⁶¹

Alcott’s, Phelps’s, Stoddard’s, and Woolson’s essential feelings of difference from other girls also centered on their disdain for women’s domestic tasks. For example, Phelps described in her autobiography how she protested against domestic duties and how, as a “girl who is never ‘domestic,’” she was a “trial” to her

family. She recalled the desperation she felt as a young woman who would rather be reading or writing than helping with the spring sewing: “To this day I cannot hear the thick chu-chunk! of heavy wheels on March mud without a sudden mechanical echo of that wild, young outcry: ‘Must I cut out underclothes forever? . . . Is *this* LIFE?’” Wanting to be an artist required a rejection of the domestic tasks linked with womanhood. Accordingly, Phelps reportedly held up a painter’s brush and a thimble to a friend and told her, “It is a choice between the two.” In her autobiography, she also described her first literary effort at the age of thirteen as a manifestation of her “determin[ation] to become an individual.” Even Dickinson, who managed to keep up her extensive household duties while nurturing a largely secret life as a poet, resented the time such duties took away from her writing. She once complained, “my hands but *two* — not four, or five as they ought to be — and so *many* wants — and me so *very* handy — and my time of so *little* account — and my writing so *very* needless — and really I came to the conclusion that I should be a villain unparalleled if I took but an inch of time for so unholy a purpose as writing a friendly letter.” Although letter writing was a thoroughly sanctioned activity for women, Dickinson summed up the tension she felt in her daily life between her desire to write, a solitary activity, and her family’s expectations of her. For a young woman to decline to perform even the smallest tasks for her family made her a “villain,” or, as Phelps felt for preferring to write over doing household chores, a “burglar.”⁶²

Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson also decided early in life against marriage and in favor of financial self-sufficiency. In 1860, Alcott wrote in her journal, after a visit to her newly married sister, “Very sweet and pretty, but I’d rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe.” Being self-reliant meant first of all making one’s own money. Stoddard remembered, when she was contracted as a columnist early in her career, “I was the first female wage-earner that I had known, and it gave me a curious sense of independence” (despite her married status). When Phelps received her first payment for a published piece, she recalled, she felt a “sense of dignity” at becoming a “wage-earner,” which for her was closely tied to feelings of self-worth. “I felt that I had suddenly acquired value — to myself, to my family, and to the world.” This sense of value could not be achieved at home. It required recognition from the outside world, and financial compensation for her work was part of that recognition. Elsewhere in her autobiography Phelps claimed that she was “proud to say that I have always been a working woman” and “could take care of myself.” Alcott similarly described her desire for financial independence in a letter to her father in 1856: “I am very well and very happy.

Things go smoothly, and I think I shall come out right, and prove that though an *Alcott* I *can* support myself. I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it. . . . I will make a battering-ram of my head and make a way through this rough-and-tumble world." These women saw that in order to be self-reliant, they had to earn money in addition to committing themselves to the pursuit of excellence in their writing, hence their twin goals of achieving serious recognition as artists and financial security.⁶³ As this generation began their careers, the motivation to support themselves (and/or their families) was part of the artist identities they were developing.

Although most women of the Civil War and postbellum years remained tied to their families of origin, increasing numbers of them did not start families of their own. Although there were twenty thousand more women than men in the United States in 1850, that number rose to fifty thousand by 1870 and continued to rise in the next decade. In New England, the disparity was especially pronounced. Stoddard married before the Civil War, but the war probably influenced Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson not to marry or at least reinforced their decisions not to. Phelps lost her beau, Lieutenant Samuel Hopkins Thompson, at Antietam, a factor that contributed to her decision to launch a literary career. Indeed, as Susan Coultrap-McQuin writes, "His death would echo through her fiction for many years." Her first published story for adults, "A Sacrifice Consumed" (1864), was about this loss. Phelps claimed in her autobiography that when she wrote this story she had no distinct plan to start a career as an author, and "had my first story been refused, or even the second or the third, I should have written no more." But the success of this story, born out of her loss of a potential husband, opened up a new path for her. Woolson may also have lost a beau, Colonel Zeph Spaulding, to the war. Cheryl Torsney writes that Woolson had "a soldier boyfriend, . . . who returned from action a changed man." Later, Woolson wrote that her feelings for Spaulding were due to the "glamor [*sic*] that the war threw over the young officers who left their homes to fight," and, as Sharon Dean writes, "She never expressed regret over her broken relationship with [him]." The war, however, probably interrupted an affair that may otherwise have led to marriage and certainly changed the direction of her life.⁶⁴

While many women felt forced into independence by the war's casualties, others saw spinsterhood as a tremendous opportunity, as Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson did. In her essay "Happy Women" (1868), Alcott celebrated the "superior women who, from various causes, remain single, and devote themselves to

some earnest work; espousing philanthropy, art, literature, music, medicine, . . . remaining as faithful to and as happy in their choice as married women with husbands and homes." By calling these women "superior," Alcott plays upon the common reference to "superfluous women," to which she strongly objected. "Never was there so splendid an opportunity for women to enjoy their liberty and prove that they deserve it b[y] using it wisely," she declared.⁶⁵ Although the four writers of this study tried out different occupations and looked for the path in which their true talents lay, ultimately they turned to writing, an accessible medium that required little formal training and could be practiced at home. What was needed, though, were special circumstances and encouragement to pursue the lofty goals of excellence and literary laurels.

The first and foremost influence on the development of the self as artist is a family that prizes literature, perhaps even a family that can provide a sense of literary heritage for its daughters. For Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson, this was most certainly true. Scholars have noted the (conflicted) role models that literary and intellectual fathers provided their talented daughters in the cases of Fuller, Stowe, Dickinson, and Jewett. But the role of literary mothers has not been adequately explored as crucial to the development of women authors. It is abundantly clear that Alcott, Phelps, and Woolson all benefited immensely from their mothers' support and example. Mary Kelley has documented the lack of positive female models for antebellum women writers, arguing that "the absence of 'distinguished' women, in fact the invisibility of females in their ancestry, contributed to and heightened their insecurity and sense of illegitimacy as public writers."⁶⁶ In order to gain a sense of legitimacy not only as writers but as potential artists, the next generation of women writers learned from the examples of their talented, thwarted mothers, who hoped their daughters would achieve what had not been possible for them.

Woolson's mother, Hannah Cooper Pomeroy, bequeathed her daughter an illustrious literary heritage. She was a niece of James Fenimore Cooper, from whom Woolson received her middle name and her early pen name "Fenimore." When Woolson began her literary career, she allied herself with this legacy, and throughout her life she prized her relations with her aunts, Cooper's daughters, one of whom, Susan Fenimore Cooper, was also a published author. Some of Woolson's early publications were essays about Cooperstown, her uncle, and the Cooper family. Identifying herself with this family lineage, which included women, gave her confidence and immediate clout. She inherited her pride in her

Cooper ancestry from her mother, who had been a writer herself. Although Hannah never published any of her writings, she nonetheless provided an important model and source of support for her daughter.⁶⁷

Woolson early on developed an interest in literature and the habit of writing. She later claimed that in her youth when she received her copies of the *Atlantic*, she first turned to the book reviews, indicating her desire to follow developments in the literary world and study the literary craft. But she did not begin her career until after her father's death in August 1869. Her first publication appeared almost a year later, and it was at that point that she began to write in earnest, publishing essays and stories in *Harper's* and other reputable journals, as well as a column on New York for the *Daily Cleveland Herald*. Why she did not publish earlier is not clear. Perhaps after her father's death she needed to support herself and her mother. But her desire for an independent life, which was always strong, was instilled in her quite early and nurtured by her family, who considered her both very talented and unconventional. According to her sister, Clara, Woolson's "literary talent . . . led her to do things that those *not* thus gifted, did not do." Her mother often warned her, Clara wrote, not to carry her uncorked inkstand up and down the stairs for fear she would "spoil one of [her] pretty new dresses." One day, she did exactly that, tripping down the stairs and spilling ink all over "a lovely grey costume." As this letter conveys, while her family made sport of her preference for literature over personal appearance, they valued her individuality and took pride in their "gifted" family member. Woolson's mother was an especially important source of support for the ten years the two lived together after her father's death. Three years after her mother died, Woolson wrote, "I look back and see how wonderfully good to me Mother was when I was finishing 'Anne' [her first novel]. She was always pleasant and kind, never put me on the defensive, as one may say; never said 'don't!' or tried to make me do anything I didn't want to!" By never saying "don't!" her mother revealed her difference from the more typical parents admonished by Phelps in "Unhappy Girls." Hannah Woolson likely understood her daughter's talent and ambition from personal experience, and she did not stand in her way.⁶⁸

Woolson also probably developed a stronger sense of her individuality through her experiences during the Civil War. She participated in the war effort from the home front, working for the United States Sanitary Commission. She wrote to Stedman years later that she had received a letter from Hawthorne in response to hers asking for an autograph when she was "postmistress at a Sanitary Fair." These fairs were conducted by the commission to raise money for the war

hospitals and relief efforts, and Hawthorne's autograph presumably would have been sold for that purpose. (Alcott was also active with the commission, contributing "poems, stories, hand-sewn flags, and clothing for the Boston fair.") Woolson was deeply affected by the excitement and horror of the time. She later recalled, in another letter to Stedman, that "the war was the heart and spirit of my life, and everything has seemed tame to me since." And although she did not begin her writing career until the 1870s, her travels through the South during that decade made the effects of the war a prominent theme in her early stories.⁶⁹

Throughout the 1870s, Woolson steadily developed her literary reputation, hoping to become known all over the country, as she revealed in 1875 to the southern poet Paul Hamilton Hayne: "I thank you sincerely for any notices you may write of my little volume [her first collection of stories, *Castle Nowhere*], and feel especially pleased that your words may be read in the south and southwest, where I am entirely unknown." Although she earlier had difficulty coming before the public (as she confided to her childhood friend — "I have had to get used to my pen, and to 'speaking in public' as it were"), she was now feeling confidence in her abilities. When her mother died in 1879, Woolson was devastated by her loss. "She had been my all for many years. I did not know how to live without her," she wrote to Hayne. Yet the void left by her mother opened up new opportunities, and Woolson entered a new phase in her life and career. She traveled to Europe, a dream of hers since childhood. For the rest of her life, she lived there, traveling extensively and pursuing the vocation of an artist in the company of Henry James and others. Although her mother was once her "all," Woolson conveyed to her nephew that now literature was everything to her: "It is dangerous to ask a writer of novels about novels! He may swamp you with the ocean of his words. The truth is, that, to a writer, the subject is so vast, — really his whole life's interest." Clearly, she was referring to herself, although she used the masculine pronoun, which was common in many women writers' references to the "writer" or "artist." Now, without parents, husband, or children, she was free to identify herself solely as an author.⁷⁰

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, born in 1844, also inherited her desire to pursue the arts from her mother, who died when Elizabeth was only eight years old. In tribute to her mother, Phelps discarded her given name, Mary Gray Phelps, and took her mother's. The first Elizabeth Stuart Phelps had become a popular author of Sunday school tales and novels, so by taking her mother's name, she essentially took up her career as well. This strong link with her mother gave Phelps a model to follow throughout her life and influenced her decisions as a

woman and a writer. Her mother first published short stories and articles at age sixteen or seventeen under the pseudonym H. Trusta. But it was after her marriage in 1842 to Austin Phelps that she published her most popular works, all of which continued to appear under her pseudonym. During the first year of its publication, *The Sunny Side; or, A Country Minister's Wife* (1851) sold one hundred thousand copies. Her next two works, *A Peep at "Number Five"; or, A Chapter in the Life of a City Pastor* and *The Angel Over the Right Shoulder*, were published in the following year and also sold well. She was very proud of her achievement as an author, but, according to her daughter, it came at a steep price. The latter wrote in her autobiography, "Her 'Sunnyside' had already reached a circulation of one hundred thousand copies, and she was following it fast—too fast—by other books for which the critics and the publishers clamored. Her last book and her last baby came together, and killed her." Forever after Phelps would attribute her mother's death to the demands of maintaining both a family and a literary career, a mistake she did not want to repeat.⁷¹

As a prelude to her mother's posthumously published book, *The Last Leaf from Sunny Side*, Austin Phelps, her father, published a "memorial" to his wife that portrays her as at once a sympathetic figure struggling to find her true mission in life and a larger-than-life ideal mother. The impact of this portrait on the daughter must have been immense. Austin Phelps argues that all of her life his wife wrestled with her love of the arts, fearing that her "indulgence of those refined tastes" conflicted with her life as a Christian. But she eventually came to understand that suppressing her true talents made her depressed and unfit to contribute to the happiness of others. She once wrote to a friend, "I learned at last to be happy as God would have me be. I found out, that He who made me knew better than I, what He made me for; and that He had not given me tastes, and inclinations, and talents, all in themselves innocent, to be suppressed." By reconciling her Christian beliefs with her creative desires, she paved the way for her daughter to accept her own similar inclinations. In fact, one of her mother's deathbed requests was that "her daughter might be carefully instructed in the fine arts."⁷²

Phelps's recorded memories of her mother, which convey awe for an almost saintlike creature, echo her father's tribute. Whatever her talents, Austin Phelps wrote, she was above all a "true wife and mother," whose "literary pursuits . . . were religiously subordinated to her duties 'at home.'" In her autobiography, Phelps similarly depicted her mother as committed to her family first and her own career second and as unusually accomplished in both respects. Phelps wrote of how her mother "achieved the difficult reconciliation between genius and

domestic life," insisting, "I cannot remember one hour in which her children needed her and did not find her."⁷³ The first Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, therefore, was representative of the antebellum woman writer who understood her talents as secondary to her familial duties and as only to be used in the service of God's design. Although her daughter's generation would also call upon the sense of a divine calling to become writers, the difference was that the mother understood her God as a paternal, authoritative figure whom she served, while her daughter, more in keeping with Emerson and Fuller, would feel sanctioned to unfold the divine within herself. In the end, however, Phelps's mother looms over her autobiography like the shadow of an unfulfilled promise, a Christ figure who gave up her life so that the daughter could fulfill hers. The daughter felt that she had to live out the promise that had been extinguished with her mother's premature death, which she understood as a direct result of the unresolved conflict between genius and domesticity.

Ultimately, Phelps's mother provided both a guide and a warning to her. Phelps explained that she learned a valuable lesson from her mother: "I have sometimes been glad, as my time came to face the long question which life puts to-day to all women who think and feel . . . that I had those early visions of my own to look upon."⁷⁴ The question was whether to try to combine a literary career (or any other single-minded pursuit) with marriage. Phelps held her mother's tragic fate always before her as a guide. It is very telling that while her mother had been too modest or fearful to put her real name before the public's eye, Phelps took her mother's name for both personal and public use. In a sense, she took up the identity of the woman behind the domestic writer H. Trusta, who moralized about women's conventional role. Phelps became a different type of woman, one that her mother could not envision. The daughter was first and foremost an author and an artist. While her first literary efforts (Sunday school books for children) mirrored her mother's, her more mature writing branched out in new directions. And she devoted her life to perfecting her art, a mission she also saw as commensurate with her life as a Christian.

Unfortunately, in her mother's absence there was no one left to support Phelps's developing ambition. In fact, her family (father, stepmother, and younger brothers) appear to have provided only obstacles to the young writer. They expected her to fulfill her household duties and watch over her brothers. Phelps remembered that she shared her writing with no one, undoubtedly because of their disapproval. For many years she was given no place of her own in which to write, and she described in her autobiography the great lengths to which she had

to go to secure enough peace and quiet to bring pen to paper. Whereas her father secluded himself in his study, she was not accorded the same privilege but was instead expected to assist *his* endeavors by keeping her brothers occupied and quiet. Her role in the household was to be a supportive caretaker, much like the “unhappy girls” she later wrote about. When she did find time to write, the only place she was afforded any peace was in an abandoned, unheated room; significantly, she took refuge there under the warmth of her mother’s old fur cape. Only after *The Gates Ajar* (1868) made her famous was she granted her own space in the household in which to write.⁷⁵

Like Phelps, Alcott (who was born in 1832) was provided with the example of a brilliant mother whose talents were sacrificed to her husband and children. But Alcott’s family was more supportive of her early development as an author. Indeed, her family was considered extraordinary by those who knew the Alcotts when Louisa was growing up, and her early life provides a fascinating study of how a young woman could come to understand herself as an artist in nineteenth-century America. The Alcotts can be credited with instilling in their daughters a sense of freedom and purpose in life that inspired two out of the four daughters to pursue lives as artists (Louisa as an author and May as a visual artist). Although the Alcotts had no sons to send forth into the world, and Louisa felt herself to be the “son of the house going to war” as she went off to nurse soldiers in the Civil War, it would be inaccurate to suppose that the Alcotts simply projected ambitions onto Louisa that they would have harbored for a son. Bronson Alcott’s ideas about childhood, which were well received by his friend Emerson, reveal a striking gender neutrality that would belie any such notions. Most Alcott scholars have condemned Bronson for placing heavy burdens on Louisa, citing his neglect of financial matters, which made it necessary for her to churn out less serious writings to support her family and prevented her from reaching her full potential as an author. While there is some truth to this view, Bronson’s ideas on the inherent genius of every child, male or female, also suggest that he instilled in his daughter a liberating philosophy that gave her faith to pursue life as an artist. To him, genius was a “flaming Herald” sent from God to “revive in Humanity the lost idea of its destiny.” Each human being was born with this divine spark, but, unfortunately, fear and intolerance stifled children’s potential. It was the job of the teacher — the role Bronson adopted — to awaken the genius of children and to nurture it into fruition. In this role, he made no distinction between the genius granted to boys and to girls; he looked to both sexes for messages from above.⁷⁶

Bronson also conveyed to Louisa the pride he felt in her abilities and accom-

plishments. On her fourteenth birthday, she received from her father a book into which he had copied her original poetry, a clear sanction and appreciation of her imaginative writing. When she was only twelve years old, he wrote that she “will make a way, perhaps fame in the world” with her “ready genius.” When she went to Europe in 1865, Bronson praised “the Genius that draws so skillfully” descriptions of places she visited, descriptions that he proudly read to Emerson and encouraged her to publish. “Dont [*sic*] name your writing ‘poor scribble,’” he told her; “write away about whatever interests you: all is delightful to me, and will be so suggestive to you on your return. May you have the health, leisure, comforts, as you have the Genius to shape them into fair volumes, for the wider circle of readers.”⁷⁷ There is no question that Bronson, throughout his life, explicitly urged Louisa to have faith in her abilities and take pride in her writing, which he consistently deemed worthy of publication. In stark contrast to the parents in Phelps’s “Unhappy Girls,” Bronson Alcott encouraged his daughters to gaze straight into the divine and make “honored name[s]” for themselves.

As the Alcott children grew up, Bronson practiced his theories and methods of instruction on them, making the home a schoolroom or, as Cynthia Barton puts it, a “laboratory.” Conversations, reading and discussing the classics, telling stories, acting out scenes from their favorite Dickens novels, and putting on plays Louisa had written were some of the activities the Alcotts fostered in this household imbued with a republican emphasis on education and a romantic belief in imagination. Unlike Phelps’s father, Bronson welcomed his children into his study, encouraging them to play there and to read his books, in which Alcott even remembered scribbling. The study, filled with busts of the great thinkers, was not an exclusive sphere of patriarchal privilege and seclusion but a place where daughters were welcome and books were accessible.⁷⁸

While her father’s idealism seemed to provide an opportunity for Alcott to explore her own peculiar genius, his beliefs were nonetheless so all-consuming that they also had a pernicious effect on her family. In his relentless search for the divine within himself, he shut out his family and the material world to the point that he neglected his responsibilities, forcing others to carry more than their share of the burden of earthly existence. He was well known for his refusal to engage in any work that he felt compromised his beliefs, which was just about everything other than teaching and chopping wood. When his teaching methods came under attack, the family subsisted on the charity of friends and relatives until the girls were old enough to contribute to the family’s income by sewing, teaching, and, in Louisa’s case, writing. But in his family’s eyes, he posed an

even greater threat to their survival by desiring separation. Throughout Louisa's childhood, her family appears to have been a very unstable one. In her satirical account of the utopian experiment Fruitlands, which nearly destroyed her family, she poked fun at how "some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away" when it came time to bring in the grain. But the threat of desertion was potentially more than temporary. When Bronson was casting about for the new project that would eventually become Fruitlands, Emerson noted, "He is quite ready at any moment to abandon his present residence & employment, his country, nay, his wife & children, on very short notice, to put any dream into practice."⁷⁹

The Alcott family exemplifies the hidden matrix of support that is required when one individual in the family is as devoted to the pursuit of genius as Bronson Alcott was. When asked once to define "philosopher," Louisa responded, "A man up in a balloon with his family at the strings tugging to pull him down." Her metaphor conveys the mutual effort that was required of family members to keep Bronson earthbound and the family intact. While some would prefer to call him simply selfish, Bronson was trying to fulfill the Transcendentalist ideal of self-reliance. As Louisa was painfully aware, when taken to its logical extreme, self-reliance really meant reliance on others and required the self-sacrifice of family members. She watched her mother give up everything—a comfortable life, her independence, control over her life, and her own separate identity—to Bronson's idealism. She watched as her mother was allotted the care of worldly matters, despite her own spiritual and philosophical nature, while her husband and his friends lived in the metaphysical realm. Abigail was left at home while he attended the meetings of the Transcendental Club, and she was excluded from the intellectual discussions at Fruitlands. As she wrote to a friend, "higher intelligences . . . admit me sometimes to their debates when the carnal things are to be discussed." The women Louisa saw participating in the world of ideas were usually single women, like Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody, both of whom were friends of her family and teaching assistants to her father. The message she inevitably received was that marriage meant self-sacrifice and the end of one's own intellectual and spiritual identity. In essence, she learned the same lesson as Phelps: if you want to be a writer, which requires autonomy and individuality, do not marry.⁸⁰

No doubt as a result of her experiences, Abigail Alcott instilled a strong desire for independence in her daughters. She once wrote, "I say to all dear girls keep up, be something in yourself. Let the world feel at some stage of this diurnal revolution that you are on its surface alive, not in its bowels a dead, decaying thing." Abby's own talents, untiring support, and expansive views about women's

opportunities made her in many ways exactly the kind of mother the young Phelps longed for after losing her own. Abby provided not only encouragement but also a certain understanding of Louisa's nature that helped to legitimate her daughter's ambition. "People think I'm wild and queer; but Mother understands and helps me," Alcott wrote at the age of thirteen.⁸¹ Abby also provided a model of women's abilities for her daughters. According to Charles Strickland, "Abigail provided her daughter both encouragement and a model for imitation. Abigail was a writer of considerable talent, and although she never wrote for publication, her letters and diaries possess a vigor of expression that is reflected in the best of Louisa's writing." Abby's literary talents were accessible to the young Louisa from a very early age. She wrote letters to Louisa as lessons on her behavior, rather than lecturing her, and, as Madelon Bedell writes, "the two wrote continually back and forth to each other, reading and annotating each other's diaries, composing poems in each other's honor."⁸² While Abby possessed literary as well as musical and dramatic talents, the dreams she harbored of becoming a writer were left unfulfilled. Instead, she undoubtedly channeled her own ambitions into the young, headstrong Louisa, who showed both talent and determination. At the age of ten, Louisa wrote a poem titled "To Mother," which describes the intertwined artistic aspirations of mother and daughter:

I hope that soon, dear mother,
 You and I may be
In the quiet room my fancy
 Has so often made for thee —

The pleasant, sunny chamber,
 The cushioned easy-chair,
The book laid for your reading,
 The vase of flowers fair;

The desk beside the window
 Where the sun shines warm and bright:
And there in ease and quiet
 The promised book you write;

While I sit close beside you,
 Content at last to see
That you can rest, dear mother,
 And I can cherish thee.⁸³

Abigail provided Louisa invaluable emotional support. At the age of eight, for example, Louisa produced her first poem, “The Robin,” about which her mother was very proud, exclaiming, “You will grow up a Shakespeare!” And when Louisa was fourteen, her mother gave her a pen with the following poem: “Oh! may this Pen your muse inspire / When rapt in pure poetic fire / To write some sweet, some thrilling verse.” Abby also predicted a brilliant future for her daughter. She told Louisa, “Lift up your soul then to meet the highest, for that alone can satisfy your great yearning nature. . . . believe me you are capable of ranking among the best.” In 1863, after Alcott’s first success with *Hospital Sketches*, Abigail wrote in her diary, “She will have no mean rank assigned her now. She is in the vestibule of the temple, but the high altar is not far off.” And when her first novel, *Moods*, was published, Abigail believed that “Her powers are greater than she knows.” Beneath this entry, she also pasted a clipping announcing the novel’s publication and added that readers have found it “the finest American novel they have read, powerful, natural, and of the highest literary merit.” This novel was dedicated to Abigail — “To Mother, my earliest patron, kindest critic, dearest reader” — as was her first book, *Flower Fables* (1855), about which Louisa wrote to her mother, “Whatever beauty or poetry is to be found in my little book is owing to your interest in and encouragement of all my efforts from the first to the last.”⁸⁴

Many of Alcott’s biographers have noted the strong message she received to be a self-sacrificial daughter, the implication being that her parents stifled her creativity by demanding that she relinquish her ambitions to the service of her family. For instance, on Louisa’s tenth birthday, Abigail gave her a picture of mother and daughter with a note that included the following lines: “I enclose a picture for you which I always liked very much, for I imagined that you might be just such an industrious daughter and I such a feeble but loving mother, looking to your labor for my daily bread.”⁸⁵ But in her journals we find an evolving sense of self that closely mirrors the larger culture’s liberal ideas about individuality. In other words, we see a dual emphasis on duty to family and a desire to discover and realize her own unique potential. At thirteen she confided to her journal, “I have at last got the little room I have wanted so long, and am very happy about it. It does me good to be alone. . . . I have made a plan for my life. . . . Now I’m going to *work really*, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother.” This entry reveals the complex identity Alcott was creating, even at so young an age. With the help of her parents, who gave her a place to be alone and who nurtured her creative impulses, she saw herself as both a dutiful daughter who put her family’s needs first and an individ-

ual who developed her God-given talents. Her family fostered her creative activity, and she thought of the times she spent alone as some of the most satisfying and free of her life, unlike Phelps's mother and other antebellum women, who felt they had to suppress any desire for solitude or creative endeavors. Alcott more closely resembled Dickinson, who said, "here is freedom" when she closed the door to her room.⁸⁶ But unlike Dickinson, Alcott did not feel the need to hide her writing from her family. Instead, her parents and sisters were her first and most appreciative audience, cheering her on to literary fame. Within a mutually supportive family one was supposed to reach his or her fullest potential. Alcott learned from her parents that by discovering and fulfilling her own destiny she would be the asset to her family that they desired. These two identities as dutiful daughter and self-reliant author, while they at times conflicted, also combined to make Alcott feel that she could aspire to be a "woman artist."

Undoubtedly, the fact that Alcott spent most of her formative years in Boston or Concord — the centers of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, and the locale to which the nation looked for America's "culture" — contributed to her ability to feel that the development of her God-given talents was not only important but also imperative. As she would later write, Concord "is popularly believed to be the hot-bed of genius." The fame of its most illustrious inhabitants — Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and her own father — was firmly established by the time she began her writing career. Fuller had been a member of their circle and had taught under Bronson and visited his home, but she moved to New York in 1844, never to return. So while Fuller's memory loomed large over the young Louisa, most of the literary idols of her youth were male (although Child visited occasionally). These literary idols provided living examples to her, setting a standard of excellence at once tangible (because they were her neighbors) and remote (because they were men). So while Alcott grew up as the occasional playmate of Emerson's and Hawthorne's children and idolized their fathers and Thoreau, she also envisioned an eminent future for herself. Rather than feel stifled in their midst, she drew inspiration from their achievements. She wrote to her aunt in 1860 that she expected herself, "the great authoress," and her sister, the "artist," to add to the fame of "this famous land of Emerson Hawthorne Thoreau Alcott & Co."⁸⁷

When the Civil War began the following year, Alcott felt as if her moment had arrived. With a strong desire to participate in the fighting, she capitalized directly on her experience during the war. When Alcott found a way to join the war, as a nurse in Washington, D.C., she wrote, "*must* let out my pent-up energy in some

new way. . . . I want new experiences, and am sure to get 'em if I go." While getting new experiences was a way to release energy and discover a larger purpose for herself, it was also a way to become a writer. After publishing *Flower Fables*, Alcott wrote to her mother of her desire "to pass in time from fairies and fables to men and realities." The Civil War gave her the experiences and the material she needed to do just that. "I like to watch it all & am very glad I came as this is the sort of study I enjoy."⁸⁸ It was this watching, studying, and writing about all she saw that led to the publication of *Hospital Sketches*, from which she gained her first literary recognition. Thus, before she found her most lasting fame as a children's author, Alcott ventured far beyond the domestic sphere to discover herself as an author.

While Phelps and Alcott began their literary apprenticeships during childhood, Woolson and Stoddard, for the most part, developed their ambitions later in life and began their careers as adults. In Stoddard's case, it is easy to see why her powers remained latent for so long. She was born in 1823 in a remote village, perhaps too early and too far removed from the cultural centers to enjoy the opportunities for self-culture that New England was beginning to provide to its young women. She often lamented this fact later in life. "Of literature and the literary life, I and my tribe knew nothing; we had not discovered 'sermons in stones.'" In other words, the influence of Transcendentalist ideas had not reached the little coastal village of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, where she grew up. In her first novel, *The Morgesons* (1862), she depicts her hometown as an isolated place, barren of any sort of culture and dominated by the sea trade. Perhaps because of the willful independence Stoddard exhibited even as a child, her family left her to pursue her own interests. That those interests tended more toward novel reading and walking by the sea than more appropriate pursuits like sewing and reading the Bible distressed her family. She later recorded that reading "had been laid up against me as a persistent fault, which was not profitable; I should peruse moral, and pious works, or take up sewing, — that interminable thing, 'white seam,' which filled the leisure moments of the right-minded."⁸⁹ But, like Phelps, she rejected the idea that domestic tasks should be her main occupation.

Stoddard stood out in her family and community as everything that other girls were not (and should not be). In his memoirs, her husband wrote, "Elizabeth Barstow was one of those irrepressible girls who are sometimes born in staid Puritan families, to puzzle their parents, and to be misunderstood. Her spirits were high, and her disposition wilful [*sic*]." Stoddard herself felt that there was no one to sympathize with her. While she was petted by her family, she nonetheless

felt like an outsider. Her sister, for example, did not have “a particle of sympathy with or a knowledge of my mind,” she wrote to a friend.⁹⁰

Probably the most distinguishing characteristic of this “wilful” young woman in the religiously conservative community of Mattapoisett was her resistance to organized religion. She disdained the church her mother regularly attended and she refused to be converted when a revival swept up her fellow students at Wheaton, much like Dickinson did when she was away at school. This set her farther apart from her community. “When I was young, I was fed on the strong dish of New England polemics,” she wrote in 1855. “God, my teachers said, did not reside in the natural heart of man, which fact I must learn through some process that my soul refused to understand.” It was years before she would discover Thoreau, Emerson, and Transcendentalism. But in her effort to free herself from hollow tradition and conformity, she went farther than the early Transcendentalists and avowed something akin to atheism. Her pessimistic view of the cruel universe led her to look to the sea as a symbol of the alternating and arbitrary forces of good and evil. But despite her rejection of her family and community, she often returned to her childhood home to rest and write, looking to the sea for inspiration. The sea, her most personal connection to the nature that the Transcendentalists and romantics exhorted aspiring artists to study, figures prominently in her fiction, representing the awesome force of nature and reflecting the inner turbulence of her heroines.⁹¹

Although Stoddard was sent to a number of female seminaries, including the well-known Wheaton in Norton, Massachusetts, she was not “studious.” Rather than pursue a formal course of study, she preferred perusing the library of her minister, who fed her insatiable appetite for literature. Under his guidance she was able to seclude herself, wander through previously unknown worlds, and discover her love for books. According to her husband, she read “thousands of volumes,” mostly eighteenth-century classics, constituting “the only education she ever had.” In cultivating her literary tastes, she was also withdrawing from her family. In her later letters, she described her father as utterly uninterested and even antipathetic toward her literary endeavors. Her father, she wrote to a friend, “said to me utterly forgetting that I had ever written any — that he had no faith in novels, poor stuff —.” In addition, he had loaned a copy of her first novel to a neighbor and forgotten to retrieve it for twenty years. Each time she returned home she felt as if she lost that part of herself that was so important to her — her writer self, whom no one at home would acknowledge. Her sister, she wrote, “has never given me a sign of recognition of my powers.” Had Stoddard stayed

at home she likely would not have developed her ambition to make her mark as an author.⁹²

Stoddard's life at home effectively came to an end when one of her sisters and her mother died in 1848 and 1849. "Without these two deaths, Elizabeth might never have left Mattapoisett," James Matlack writes. These "sudden" deaths "cut her loose from the old moorings," and as her home broke up, she felt restless. Her brothers intended to go to California to make their fortune, and she had vague plans of accompanying them. However, while her brothers' restlessness found an object, hers could not. In 1852 she wrote to her friend Margaret Sweat that she also possessed "aspirations," but, "What is there for such women as you and me are? I have decided that an irresistible will compels me to some destiny, but vaguely shaped yet much desired."⁹³ The main problem, she suggested, was that she was a woman. Had she been a man, she could have gone to California like her brothers. When she began to visit New York in the early 1850s, she learned of another possibility. She attended literary gatherings and met many of the famous men and women who were in the business of making journals and books. She became a regular at literary parties where she rubbed elbows with publishers, editors, and famous writers like Bayard Taylor, George Boker, Caroline Kirkland, Phoebe and Alice Cary, and Richard Henry Stoddard.

When she first met Richard, they both possessed a "love of books," but while he had become a poet of some small fame, she, it appears, had not yet taken up her pen. However, the literary atmosphere of New York was beginning to have an influence on her. In the fall of 1851 she wrote to Sweat, "You are then living the life of books! . . . I have not fairly made a debut, but expect to in various ways be an admiring expectation of men & things." She went on to mention her literary friends in New York, indicating that their world enticed her. Indeed, she was beginning to think of the possibility of becoming an author by joining the circle of writers in New York, which included some women. But how would she establish herself there? "I am bitterly afraid I shall go to California," she wrote Sweat. "If I do, it upsets my theory of my destiny—I have arranged a different programme." At this point, she was torn between her love for her brother Wilson and her desire for independence. But a third element entered her life—Richard. He had confessed his love for her, but her feelings for him were uncertain. She had written to Sweat two months before, "Now I possess the quality of love for a man, . . . yet my self possession is indomitable. I am my own, I still hold to this devilish faculty of analyzation, still am actor & spectator, What shall I do?" She felt herself split in two—"actor & spectator"—but she also saw two potential

identities for herself—wife and author—one defined by her love for a man, the other by her desire to be independent. In her letters to Sweat, she struggled (obliquely) with these two possibilities, attempting to resist Richard but never quite defining what her alternative was.⁹⁴ In October 1852, her father's financial failure set into motion the final breakup of her family. The house was sold and her brothers began to solidify their plans to go to California. In the following months, she wrote to Sweat of being in love, although she was reluctant to tell all. In fact, although she married Richard in early December 1852, she didn't tell Sweat of her plans to marry until December 23 and didn't admit to being married until early February, sure signs of her ambivalence about leaving her family and giving up her newfound independence.⁹⁵

The “crisis of identity” that Stoddard felt during this period is a central theme of much of her early fiction, which depicts courtship as a “battle” between men and women. Often, as in her novel *The Morgesons* and the story “Tuberoses,” the hero and heroine are both so willful and independent that romance requires a weakening of one or both parties, and their union is pictured as a “defeat.” As part of her effort to maintain a sense of her individuality in marriage, Stoddard began to write. While Richard implied in his *Recollections* that she didn't start to write until after their marriage, she had written to Sweat, “In October [1852] I began to write, my first little sketch was published in the *Lit World*.” She may have begun even earlier, considering that the sketch, “Phases,” was published in the *Literary World* in October 1852. It is unclear what, if anything, Richard may have had to do with this first publication or her beginning to write. But she apparently did not publish another word for two years. In the meantime, she wrote to Sweat of her apprenticeship and her aspirations and doubts about writing. At first her expectations were low. “I fancy I shall never be much in a literary way anyway,” she confided in May 1853. A month earlier she had claimed there were “moments . . . when I am ready to sacrifice an ambitious future to the most intensified form of love,” and she anticipated that she would not be very “intellectual” anymore because “I must be in [a] clothes & housekeeping atmosphere.” Again in May, she complained of the lack of mental stimulation in her life: “What shall I do to satisfy my intellect? The devices that fill our woman life are *nothing* to me. I chafe horribly when S. leaves me to go into the world of men. While I remain under cover waiting for him. But I am happy thank God as a wife.” By September, however, she admitted that her lot as a wife was not enough for her. She had hoped “Love would prove Lethe,” but she still felt “restless as a tiger. All others seem to me to be fulfilling their destiny; everybody has a way of labor but me.”⁹⁶

During her early marriage, then, she seems to have felt the two identities of wife and author to be at odds. But Richard may have encouraged her to try to combine the two. In his *Recollections*, he mused, “The habit of writing is sometimes catching, as my wife finally discovered when she caught herself penning little essays, and poems, and stories, which she brought to me in fear and trembling. She had a fine intellect, but it was untrained, and all that I could do for her was to show her how to train it.” He does not account for her intense ambitions but sees her wanting to write as merely a form of emulation. However, what her family had not provided for her—a stimulating, supportive, literary atmosphere—her marriage in some ways did. Her husband gave her some encouragement, space, and time in which to practice her writing. He also tutored her, as she wrote to Sweat. “I go to school daily to my master-poet. . . . I play a very quiet part I assure you, and the most that I learn is my own insignificance.” While she grew in her admiration of her husband’s powers, she seemed to doubt her own. “I believe more & more in [Richard’s] *genius*,” she wrote to Sweat, adding, “You ask me about my *own* writing[.] Alas, laziness doth hedge about me as divinity about a king—or perhaps it is incapacity. [M]y desires or aspirations are above my creative powers. Sometimes a pang of belief shoots across my mind that it *is in me* but [it is] momentary. I relapse into the meager formulas of daily life & am no more than I seem to be.” Although discouraged, she also revealed that her “desires or aspirations,” which were more clearly defined versions of the vague aspirations that she had earlier felt, were still very much with her. Writing, then, was beginning to reveal itself as a way to fulfill her “destiny.”⁹⁷

The early years of Stoddard’s marriage and her close association with the circle of poets to which her husband belonged threatened to stifle her ambitions, but these two circumstances also stimulated her to reach for the heights she perceived these poets to have attained. In 1901 she recalled how and why she first developed her ambitions as a writer:

I had now come to live among those who made books, and were interested in all their material, for all was the glory of the whole. Prefaces, notes, indexes, were unnoticed by me. . . . I began to get glimpses of a profound ignorance, and did not like the position as an outside consideration. These mental productive adversities abased me. I was well enough in my way, but nothing was expected of me in their way, and when I beheld their ardor in composition, and its fine emulation, like a “sheep before her shearers,” I was dumb. The environment pressed upon me, my pride was touched; my situation, though “tolerable, was not to be endured.”⁹⁸

She felt goaded on to prove to Richard and his friends that she was capable of the literary feats on which they so prided themselves. She was now in an atmosphere of intense aspiration, competition, and egos.

The circle of literary men to which her husband belonged was dominated principally by Bayard Taylor and George Boker. Later, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Thomas Bailey Aldrich would also join the inner circle. These men met in New York in the late 1840s and 1850s, and, as Richard Stoddard wrote of himself and Taylor, they shared “a love of poetry and a belief that we were poets. We may have doubted some things, but that supreme thing we did not and would not doubt.” They gathered together in their rooms or at parties to discuss literature, art, beauty, and truth, those romantic ideals that linked them in brotherhood and helped give them strength in the face of a culture that did not appreciate its poets. They formed a mutual admiration society in which they hailed their powers as superior to others’. In 1856, Elizabeth Stoddard offered her humorous impression of their “literary visit[s]”:

A finds B writing a poem. A insists on B’s reading it. B reads and A says “glorious.” Then A takes a manuscript from his pocket, which B insists shall be read. A reads and B says “glorious.” A asks if B has seen his last squib in *Young America*. B asks if A has seen his last review of that book by Muggins. Each man puts his feet on the sofa (no, literary people don’t have sofas) — somewhere above his head — and then Tennyson, Browning, Longfellow, and their faults are discovered.⁹⁹

As the wife of “A” or “B,” however, Stoddard felt herself consigned to the margins of this literary fraternity, much as Abigail Alcott had been in the presence of her husband and his circle. But instead of allowing herself to be relegated to the role of bystander, she aspired to become a “C” in this chummy literary alphabet.

Although these men felt neglected by their society (especially Richard, who was less successful than Boker or Taylor), they drew strength from adversity and fashioned strong identities for themselves as poets, defining for Elizabeth what it meant to be a writer. They lionized the British romantics and admired the sages of Concord and Cambridge who were gaining the fame they hoped to achieve. Struggling to scrape together lives as men of letters, they had to work in editorial and political positions. Their belief in themselves and their strong egos as poets had two effects on Stoddard: they inspired her, but they also left her feeling ignorant and “dumb.” They seemed to possess a secret, as she wrote in one of her early poems, “The Poet’s Secret,” that they would not share with her:

The poet's secret I must know,
 If that will calm my restless mind.

.

In vain I watch the day and night,
 In vain the world through space may roll;
 I never see the mystic light,
 Which fills the poet's happy soul.

.

The poet's secret I must know: —
 By pain and patience shall I learn?¹⁰⁰

This was essentially the primary question of her life as writer. The secret, one could say, was confidence, which they gained from each other, and which she satirized in her sketch of “A” and “B.” Throughout her career, she looked to these men for the same kind of puffing up, but she often found that she would have to look elsewhere. Her husband and his friends were incapable of giving Stoddard the kind of confidence that Alcott's enthusiastic family circle gave her.

As she wrote, they expected “nothing” of her “in their way,” so she had to fight to claim these poets' world as her own, to dare to ask for inclusion in their club, and to gain the respect of her husband and his peers. She once wrote to Stedman that she was “anxious” for him to see her new poem and that Richard “thinks it the best I have done — if I am right in my hope and aim, I shall prove to you males that I [am] your comrade.” Although Richard encouraged her newly focused ambition, ultimately his support appears to have been ambiguous. At times, he thought very highly of her work and extended much-needed praise; at other times, his judgment was harsh and left her in tears. In 1854, she confided to Sweat that Richard was “a severe master and I get so discouraged that I cry dreadfully.” After she had written her three novels, she wrote to William Dean Howells that Richard “had no interest in that art [novel-writing], he never cared for mine, in his heart never believed in them. When I gave him my first story to read, he had so little faith in it, in my prose talent, that he went off to read it by himself, and came back to say that it was good enough to offer.” In contrast, his response to her poetry was “magnificently generous, and a wonderful help to me.” One would expect that Elizabeth Stoddard chose to channel her energies primarily into fiction instead of poetry partly because of her desire not to compete with her husband and to establish her literary independence. Ironically, she received less support from him as a fiction writer than as a poet.¹⁰¹

Although Stoddard grew up in an isolated village and in a family that did not value literature, she had come “to live among those who made books,” and their studiousness and enthusiasm about that art provided an environment that helped her begin to think of her own literary powers and ambitions. “Your literary patience, courage and conscience delight me,” she wrote to Stedman, “for in my small way I possess them too —.” But the close-knit, masculine community to which she belonged as a literary wife and hoped to enter on a more intimate basis as a “comrade” also left her feeling inadequate. Unlike Woolson, Phelps, and Alcott, Stoddard would give up her career, discouraged by the dismal sales and ambivalent critical reception of her work. Without a supportive family that could instill in her a strong sense of self-worth and provide her with models of creative and accomplished women, she was at a distinct disadvantage in her pursuit of the life of an artist.¹⁰²

Alcott, Phelps, Stoddard, and Woolson all developed ambitions to be artists in the context of American individualism, Transcendentalism, the rise of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and their literary families. And they were inspired by the examples of illustrious women of genius in France and Britain. This cultural matrix explains the generational nature of their ambitions. Their generation of women, which Fuller anticipated, believed that they had something unique and important to say, not only in the formation of public opinion and not only as women or representatives of their sex, and yet not quite as individuals in a gender-neutral sense either. Their culture was too preoccupied with sexual difference to allow them to view themselves in a way that precluded gender. Rather, they believed that as *individuals among women* they had significant and extraordinary contributions to make to a national high literature, which seemed for the first time willing to grant provisional entrance to women writers. Such was the aspiration of these four women — to distinguish themselves as outstanding American women writers, as *women artists* — as difficult as the combination of those two identities would be.