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“THE TIME HAS NOT BEEN WASTED”: THE ACCOUNTING DIARIES OF
MARIAN EVANS AND LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

by

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, the Victorian desire for utility, respectability, and self-improvement became deeply ingrained in daily life, and consequently, the diary grew to be a popular tool to measure and evaluate time management and personal development. Accounting diaries, in particular, set out to provide a record of activity and achievement (or conversely, inactivity and failure). This thesis performs a case study of the accounting diaries of Marian Evans (George Eliot) and Louisa May Alcott, exploring how they document progress towards their personal goals of utility, morality, and productivity. Specific diary-writing techniques—such as an efficient style, income tracking, illness recording, annual retrospective accounts, and returning to past entries—help Evans and Alcott in their efforts to quantify the value of their work and to improve the selves that produced it. By attending to textual themes, the diaries can be positioned clearly within the cultural zeitgeist, emphasizing the Victorian obsession with self-improvement and efficiency. This case study demonstrates some techniques for rich analysis of nineteenth-century diaries and emphasizes the importance of reading historically.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1850, seventeen-year-old Louisa May Alcott confided in her diary a wish for her development and future legacy: “I hope I shall have something to show that the time has not been wasted. Seventeen years have I lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire,—a truly good and useful woman” (Alcott 61). In this early entry where Alcott exhibits the preoccupation with time, morality, and utility that will remain the focus of her diary for the rest of her life, her sentiments capture a desire shared by many Victorians to achieve usefulness, which they saw as a steppingstone to respectability. Additionally, the perspective of time as finite and valuable—a resource needed to achieve the ideal status of “good” and “useful”—connects with the urgent drive for personal development in the Victorian era.

In the nineteenth-century transatlantic world, utility and morality undergirded normative value systems, creating an imperative to prove oneself useful and productive. Consequently, and in conjunction with increased literacy and the decreased costs of books, the self-help genre exploded in popularity. In 1859, Samuel Smiley’s *Self-Help* sold more copies than any of the other highly successful works published that year, including George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, and Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (Richardson 1). Conduct books, too, promoted self-improvement as a crucial steppingstone towards respectability, especially

for girls. Lydia Maria Child's *The Girl's Own Book* (1833) urges in the preface that "every girl should know how to be *useful*; amid the universal dissemination of knowledge, *every mind should seek to improve itself to the utmost*" (iii–iv, original emphasis). Lydia H. Sigourney's *Letters to Young Ladies* (1833) includes sections such as "On Improvement of Time" and "On Utility" to encourage young people "to fit themselves for respectability and usefulness in life" (Sigourney 16). The language above, echoing Alcott's entry quoted in the opening (of wanting to be "a good and useful woman"), connotes that usefulness was essential to earning respect.

Philosophers, too, joined the conversation, offering insights into the moral imperative for self-improvement, from Thomas Carlyle's gospel of work to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. To John Stuart Mill, for example, self-improvement was paramount to the human experience, as he asserted: "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself" (Mill 106). Ralph Waldo Emerson's "self-helping man" gained traction, first in America and then in England, with Matthew Arnold calling it, "[t]he impulse of the English race towards moral development and self-conquest" (Emerson 46; Arnold 26). Additionally, organized religion influenced the culture of self-improvement. Harriet Blodgett describes how "Puritan conscience can erupt anywhere" in diaries due to its "pervasive force in English culture" (Blodgett 205). The Victorian desire to be useful, respectable, and constantly improving was deeply ingrained, and to meet the urgent needs of those who sought to better themselves, the diary became a popular tool to measure and evaluate one's time management and self-improvement goals.

Alongside the rising self-help genre, diaries grew steadily in accessibility and popularity in the nineteenth-century transatlantic world. Indeed, in one of the conduct books cited above, Sigourney promises that a diary is a “useful adjunct in this work of self-inspection” (Sigourney 20–21). The popularity of diaries increased with life writing published during that time—including works like Mary Shelley’s travel narratives, Elizabeth Craven’s travel writing and memoir, Harriet Martineau’s autobiographies, Leigh Hunt’s autobiography, and Fanny Kemble’s diary—inspiring new diarists by their examples. Several cultural and material developments also influenced the growth of diary keeping, including the decreasing costs of paper goods, the widespread adoption of homogenous time, and the commercialization and standardization of diaries by manufacturers. Rebecca Steinitz marks the exponential growth of commercial diaries produced by the stationery company Lett’s, noting how they only sold one diary product in 1812, but “by 1836 the company offered 28 different versions; and by 1862 there were 55” (Steinitz 3). The cultural and ideological shift of the more conservative Victorian era helped usher in the popularity of diaries for the masses since the form “enabled the enactment of Enlightenment observation and organization, Romantic interiority, Evangelical and secular self-improvement, [and] Victorian domesticity” (Steinitz 2). The increase in popularity of the diary is a clear product of the dominant self-improvement impulse of the age.

One particular diary style that supported personal development goals was the accounting diary, a term I use to emphasize its agenda to record both progress and failure. Scholars call it by several names, including: “a type of balance sheet” (Wood xxiv); “accounts of a household or business” (Delafield 9); “account books of emotion” (Millim

26); “bareboned notebook-style diary” (Millim 22); “evaluative balance-sheet” (Millim 68); and “pocket diary” (McCarthy 277). Anne Marie Millim, in her study of the emotional labor of professionalization in Victorian diaries, “demonstrate[s] that the diary is instrumental in the creation of . . . an economic lifestyle, which seeks to date, count, and objectify experience” (Millim 25). Therefore, these accounting diaries are not the emotional purging and analytical diaries we’ve come to associate with life writing; they represent the true meaning of the word “diary”: a record of the day. Frequently, accounting diaries were created in pre-dated books, like the ones Lett’s marketed. Analyzing the form, Molly McCarthy pays specific attention to the materiality of diaries, indicating a tendency for “diarists [to] record[] terse, matter-of-fact comments,” influenced by the compact form, which she contrasts with the less structured form of letter writing (McCarthy 276). The condensed style indicates a culture that is beginning to measure time as finite and precious and to feel an urgent need to make the best use of time.

When reading accounting diaries, readers may be surprised to discover that they do not emphasize expression or confession. Instead, accounting diaries document progress towards personal goals. Many contemporary discussions about diaries revolve around the form’s unique ability to draw out their authors’ innermost thoughts, secrets, and feelings. This generalizing preconception does not properly attend to the historical context of the diary’s creation, and it neglects the many possible modes of the genre. An accounting diary, for example, may avoid personal expression entirely. Harriet Blodgett, in her detailed study of nineteenth-century female British diarists, addresses preconceptions about diaries and emphasizes how “remarkably few Englishwomen of the past used their diaries for active self-creation or transformation” compared to contemporary uses of the genre (Blodgett 4).

Furthermore, she adds how “[m]any more . . . envision it in terms of self-improvement” (76). Here we find that while a diary *can* be a vehicle through which one’s sense of self is developed and finds expression, developing self-discipline and recording productivity have also been key motivations of the practice, particularly for accounting diary writers in the nineteenth century.

For those who kept accounting diaries, the days centered around work and were considered wasted if they were not productive in a way that met their culturally influenced, but self-imposed, expectations. For example, in 1857 Marian Evans, having just become “George Eliot,” published her first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. At the end of that year, she composes an annual retrospective, noting how “[t]his last year especially has been marked by inward progress and outward advantages” (Eliot 71). But more than her work, Evans rejoices in her personal growth:

My life has deepened unspeakably during the last year: I feel a greater capacity for moral and intellectual enjoyment, a more acute sense of my deficiencies in the past, a more solemn desire to be faithful to coming duties So goodbye, dear 1857! May I be able to look back on 1858 with an equal consciousness of advancement in work and heart. (72)

Like Alcott’s—Evans’s diary centers around personal growth and work productivity, keeping with the agenda of an accounting diary. Her desire to realize “advancement in work and heart” shares the drive Alcott felt to become “a truly good and useful woman.” Keeping their shared agendas in mind, this thesis focuses on the nuances of the accounting

diary via case study, revealing the cultural desire for utility and productivity that informed the diaries of Marian Evans and Louisa May Alcott.

While accounting diaries tend to frustrate diary readers because of their repetition and seemingly surface-level focus, I contend that it is precisely the repetitiveness and the prioritization of recording what seems mundane that assists in the understanding of the accounting diary and its place in nineteenth-century life writing. By attending to textual themes, we can position the diaries within the cultural zeitgeist, emphasizing the Victorian obsession with self-improvement and efficiency. Ultimately, the agenda of the diarists discussed here is to quantify the value of their work and to improve the selves that produced it.

CHAPTER TWO

TECHNIQUES OF THE ACCOUNTING DIARY

Both Marian Evans and Louisa May Alcott kept diaries for several decades. Marian Evans began her diary in 1854 at age thirty-four upon her marriage with George Henry Lewes and continued until her death in 1880. Louisa May Alcott started her diary much earlier in life—at ten years old—and maintained her diary until her death in 1888. The diaries reveal the voracious reading habits and prolific writing practices that made these women so successful, yet they also reveal how hard these authors worked and how critical they were of themselves. The accounting diary, therefore, is these authors' way of "showing their work," justifying their own usefulness to their harshest critics: themselves.

Not a strict mathematical equation, the calculation of usefulness and productivity is self-determined, and Evans and Alcott are critical judges of their successes and failures. Illness—or anything else that hinders productivity—is frequently mentioned as justification for the lack of tangible results or even a journal entry, exhibiting anxiety about the finite resources of time and bodily capacity. Ultimately, they're counting how much work has been done—sometimes the quality of that work—often their ability to do the work. Building on Phillippe Lejeune's idea that "[t]he diary . . . is methodical, repetitive, and obsessive" and that "[j]ust four letters, a, b, c, and d are usually enough to flag the contents of a single diary," this thesis proposes that the repetition of the mundane reveals the goal of productivity and a desire for personal growth (Lejeune 179–180). Specific

diary-writing techniques—such as an efficient style, income tracking, illness recording, annual retrospective accounts, and returning to past entries—support the goals of the accounting diaries of Marian Evans and Louisa May Alcott.

2.1 EVANS AND STYLE

Marian Evans’s typical diary style emphasizes the goal of productivity because of its efficiency. The work-focused style of the accounting diary is nowhere more evident than when juxtaposed with the style of her travel journals. The travel journal tends to include flowery, Romantic, full sentences, and the subject pronouns are predominantly “we.” For example, an entry from her Weimar, Germany travel journal reads: “We devoted the day to an expedition to Ettersburg. On our return homewards the solemn grandeur of the Pine forest, in contrast with the sunbathed woods through which we had been passing, impressed us” (Eliot 23). In contrast, a typical day’s entry in the accounting diary sounds like: “Read Schrader. Translated Spinoza. Walked feeling much depression against which I struggled hard. Read Henry V and Henry VIII. Wrote to Mr. Chapman. Revised Spinoza” (56). Her accounting diary is stylistically choppy and efficient; it cuts out any unnecessary information.

Due to the lack of subject pronouns in Evans’s accounting diary, many sentences start with a verb, emphasizing action; in other words, for accounting purposes, filling up a day means *doing* something. This is typical of nineteenth-century diaries at large, which are notorious for their interminable lists of completed tasks, errands, and visits. The clipped sentences of Evans’s diary emphasize a preoccupation with efficiency, and the vagueness of her style reveals that the diary is not for an outside reader. Furthermore, present tense is

rare throughout her diaries. The most-used tense is the past tense, highlighting how she does not use the diary for in-the-moment problem-solving or catharsis but for recording what has already transpired or, ideally, what has been accomplished. Emotion and feelings are not priorities, such as when “A painful letter from London caused us both a bad night,” and nothing else was said on the matter because the personal is not privileged in her diary (26). In her 1857 New Year’s Eve retrospective entry, she writes, “I have had some severe suffering this year from anxiety about my sister and what will probably be a final separation from her—there has been no other real trouble” (72). While the lack of analysis here may seem cold, it emphasizes the focus of her diary on work and not personal matters. An outside reader is not privy to the specifics of the episodes above because emotional confession and catharsis are not prioritized in the accounting diary; however, the inclusion of lists of mundane tasks, errands, and visits are prioritized, showing that the success of the accounting diary depends on activity.

2.2 ALCOTT AND MONEY

One of the most obvious ways Alcott’s diaries center productivity is the focus on her income. It was a common practice to use a notebook to keep track of income and expenditures, evidenced by the pre-printed income pages in diaries published during that time; but Alcott also includes her earnings in the body of her journal entries, revealing her focus on remedying her family’s precarious socioeconomic status by her work. In January 1868, she indicates which profitable projects she is working on with a focus on their specific monetary value:

F. pays me \$500 a year for my name and some editorial work on Merry's Museum; "The Youth's Companion" pays \$20 for two short tales each month; L. \$50 and \$100 for all I will send him; and others take anything I have. My way seems clear for the year if I can only keep well. I want to realize my dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent. Heavenly hope! (Alcott 162)

Her dream of supporting the family continues as a refrain for her entire life, and her journal is the record of her achievement of that goal when finally, in June 1872, she writes: "Twenty years ago I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, even the outlawed ones, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose" (182–183). In the same pen stroke that she acknowledges the achievement of an extremely difficult goal, Alcott begins to seek a new horizon of perfection, looking for more to do. (And she does: for the rest of her life she carries her family financially, and the journal is a record of all the investments and gifts she generously gave them.)

2.3 RECORDING ILLNESS

The desire to account for an unproductive day can be attributed to the imperative of the daily diary, which Rebecca Steinitz describes in her book *Time, Space, and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary*. According to the daily imperative, a diary that is not full—meaning that it hasn't accounted for every day— translates as a deficit, no matter how rich in content (Steinitz 17). According to Steinitz, success in a diary is measured by 1) "the thorough representation of experience in time;" 2) "the achievement of the fully improved self;" and 3) "the full and authentic representation of the self" (6). In an

accounting diary, the first goal—the thorough representation of experience in time—is prioritized. A good example of the goal of thorough representation occurs when Evans reveals that she has no tangible progress to report: “The fortnight has slipped away without my being able to show much result from it . . . I have done no visible work. But I have absorbed many ideas and much bodily strength” (Eliot 62). The qualification of visible versus invisible work gives Evans the opportunity to achieve the diary’s daily imperative, even though she has no tangible evidence of it.

Both Evans and Alcott suffered from serious bouts of poor health—whether bodily or mentally—and their diaries display an obsession with accounting for lost time. The technique of recording illness or poor health is an important strategy for the accounting diary because it allows the writer to fill the empty space of an entry, offering an account for the day that excuses the lack of “meaningful” work. The significant focus on health in both diaries reveals the writers’ preoccupations with their productivity; in their calculations, health equals work and illness equals failure to work or poor work quality.

Evans records her illnesses like an accountant, measuring her productivity by the concrete amount of time lost. Throughout the diaries, daily entries both record and justify her silence: “Unable to work still, so that I have lost 3 days” (73); and “For the last ten days I have done little owing to headache and other ailments” (58); and “headache . . . has made these last two days barren” (135). The diction surrounding these entries—lost, done little, barren—conveys her perspective on the value of her time; in other words, if her time is not spent productively, then it is wasted, and the journal is the site of her calculation. In many entries, “unfruitful” is a common choice for describing her work, and there is often a direct correlation between her health and her perception of the quality of her work, such as when

she recorded that she felt “[v]ery good for nothing in health, and consequently depressed about my work” (114).

Similarly, in Alcott’s 1867 journal, she boils down her entries to a sentence or two, depending on an accurate record of her illness to account for the lack of productivity:

January 1867. Sick from too hard work. Did nothing all the month but sit in a dark room & ache. Head & eyes full of neuralgia.

Feb. Ditto ditto. Mother rheumatic fever had bad time with her eyes.

Mar. Ditto ditto., Got a little better at one time but tried to work & down I went again worse than ever.

April. Slowly mending. Nan came to pass the summer at the Pratts.

May. Still gaining, but all feeble. Mother half blind, Father lame & I weak, nervous & used up generally. Cold, wet weather & dull times for every one.

June. Better, & began to write. Ticknor paid \$150 for the lost Ms. Loring \$25 on ‘Moods’ & Fuller wanted a fairy book. (Alcott 157)

After “doing nothing” for several months as a result of poor health, Alcott returns to her typical content in June, documenting her work and her earnings from it. The shift that occurs after she recovered and “began to write” indicates that her interpretation of “doing nothing” actually means that she did nothing of significance for her work as an author. Like Evans, Alcott perceives the value of her time in direct correlation with her output. In other words, if her time is not spent productively, then, for the purposes of the accounting diary, it is not meaningful work.

Frequently, entries such as the ones given above will be the only content for an “unproductive” day, but even with no additional indications of how the time has passed, it is obvious that they are not doing “nothing.” Evans and Alcott had professional responsibilities and relationships they prized and prioritized. Silence on personal matters does not necessarily indicate lack of interest; however, the focus on output instead of what is considered—to them—the minutiae of their lives highlights a goal of measuring the efficient usage of time in their accounting diaries.

Evans and Alcott also use their accounting diaries to measure their present output against their former productivity. For example, Alcott complains that “my headaches, cough, and weariness keep me from working as I once could, fourteen hours a day” (171). And Evans, thinking about her former habits, writes, “I have a dubious head which has prevented me from doing as much as I could have done if I had been quite well” (Eliot 121). The vigorous records of remarkably productive seasons function as personal bests that become more difficult to meet or surpass with the poor health that plagues these writers into their late adulthood. In recognition of their perceived shortcomings, both reveal their deeply rooted fears that they have not achieved enough. Evans knows, for example, “Alas! I could have done much more if I had been well—but that regret applies to most years of my life” (89). For Alcott, the equation also includes her financial status, and she highlights the connection when she writes: “When I had the youth I had no money; now I have the money I have no time; and when I get the time, if I ever do, I shall have no health to enjoy life” (Alcott 191). These regrets are frequently reiterated in both journals, suggesting that the goal of the journals is to record and encourage progress and productivity.

2.4 EVANS’S RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNTS

The impulse to return to a diary to review or edit shows how a diary can be used to organize one's lived experience. Both writers return to their journals to glean from them. Evans, with acute self-awareness, specifically makes an effort to record the toil of her writing process. Despite the widespread success of her novels, Evans experiences crippling self-doubt with every novel she publishes. In 1859, after publishing *Adam Bede*, she wonders, "Shall I ever write another book as true as 'Adam Bede'? The *weight* of the future presses on me and makes itself felt" (Eliot 300). Then, shortly after beginning *Romola* in 1862, she writes, "it is impossible for me to believe that I have ever been in so unpromising and despairing a state as I now feel" (108). A month later, she continues, "I have a distrust in myself, in my work, in others' loving acceptance of it which robs my otherwise happy life of all joy. I ask myself, without being able to answer, whether I have ever before felt so chilled and oppressed" (109). Evans's self-critical entries and fearful tone convey the value she places on her ability to work and the quality of that work. When she questions her abilities and capacity, she experiences disorientation, a result of the disconnect between cultural and personal expectations and her lived reality.

The writing of *Middlemarch* marks a shift in her recognition of her diary as a place that not only records her progress but serves as a resource that can encourage her when she falls into self-critical patterns. In September 1869, a little over a month after beginning *Middlemarch*, she writes: "I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of Middlemarch. I have need to remember that other things which have been accomplished by me, were begun under the same cloud" (138). A few days later, she says in the same vein: "It is worth while to record my great depression of spirits, that I may remember one more resurrection from the pit of melancholy" (138). After this breakthrough, when self-

doubt creeps in, she re-reads her journals for encouragement. Describing the characteristic headache and depression that commonly plague her, she interjects: “I look into this little book now to assure myself that this is not unprecedented” (141). And when *Daniel Deronda* begins to weigh on her, she re-reads her journal and notes, “I see on looking back this morning . . . that I really was in worse health and suffered equal depression about Romola—and so far as I have recorded, the same thing seems to be true of Middlemarch” (145). Her record of struggle and achievement provides Evans with the example she already set for herself, which makes her believe she can do it again. When she comes to the end of the journal in 1877, she acknowledges the value of what these entries have done for her: “Today I say a final farewell to this little book which is the only record I have made of my personal life for sixteen years and more. I have often been helped by looking back in it to compare former with actual states of despondency from bad health or other apparent causes. In this way a past despondency has turned to present hopefulness” (148). By turning her darkest seasons into lessons that bring hope, Evans ensured that her accounting diary maintained its usefulness upon re-reading.

2.5 ALCOTT’S MARGINALIA

Like Evans, Alcott maintained a record that was of use to her, both personally and professionally. For one, Alcott gleaned inspiration for stories from her experiences, and she likely returned to her diaries for similar inspiration. Additionally, the marginalia in her diary manuscripts indicates how re-reading was a part of the process that made the diary an important habit throughout her life. For example, marginalia throughout the manuscripts suggests that she returned to her journals several times between 1867 and 1885 (Alcott 30). Throughout the manuscript, she added comments, typically reflecting on how the events of

her life unfolded. The most famous is a sarcastic reaction to her negative attitude regarding the commission of a “girls’ story”: “Mr. N. wants a *girls’ story*, and I begin ‘Little Women.’ Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don’t enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it” (165–166). At a later date, she metadiscursively enjoyed the irony and replied, “Good joke. – L.M.A.” (166). This note is not dated, but the next three entries include dated notes from 1876 and 1885, suggesting that Alcott had returned to this section of the diary several times for reflection (which makes sense given that this was the beginning of her fame as an author). Other comments focus on the fates of her family members, and others highlight her professional success, such as the one that responds to an entry rejoicing over thirty-two dollars earned from a story: “A pleasing contrast to the receipts of six months only in 1886, being \$8000 for the sale of books, and no new one; but I was prouder over the \$32 than the \$8000. – L.M.A., 1886” (73). By returning to an old diary and comparing the money she makes and the joy she feels in receiving compensation for her work, Alcott exemplifies a goal of the accounting diary, which is tracking progress.

2.6 CHOOSING TO KEEP A DIARY

For all the effort expended in trying to increase productivity, accounting diaries are themselves feats of productivity because they require constant attention in order to record faithfully. In particular, the fact that Alcott, who worked tirelessly and compared herself to a mill churning out stories, even took the time to keep a diary is indicative of the usefulness she ascribed to it. Alcott was eager to describe her dreams and strove constantly to achieve them. Still, the journal is an obligation that she made time for: “I have neglected my journal

for months, so **must** write it up” (71, my emphasis). Alcott’s journal collection is extensive, covering many years; however, the manuscripts in existence do not even constitute the full collection. According to the editors of her journals, “[a]ll available evidence indicates that Alcott kept a daily journal or diary,” yet the only extant daily journals are those kept from 1885 to 1888, the last years of her life (Alcott xiii). What remains are the neatly condensed monthly summaries that Alcott composed in a journal volume and a “Notes and Memoranda” volume written at a later time. This means that Alcott was actively revisiting, reflecting, and consolidating her journals, and the topics that have made the cut can easily be said to be her top priorities, or at least the things she believed were worth remembering. Making three copies—the original entry in a daily journal and the condensed versions in both her monthly journal and her Notes and Memoranda volume—took up time and doubled the amount of work it already took to maintain a consistent diary.

Ultimately, Alcott’s choice to keep a diary emphasizes the value of her time. With various responsibilities on her plate, professionally and domestically, time was her most valuable resource, and her entries often give the impression that she filled every day to the brim. But even the time in the diary must be disciplined. She sums up her philosophy for her journals by noting, “Being behindhand, as usual, I’ll make note of the main events up to date, for I don’t waste ink in poetry and pages of rubbish now. I’ve begun to *live*, and have no time for sentimental musing” (73). The focus on “main events” over “sentimental musing” clearly indicates an awareness of the different diary styles and highlights her hope for what this diary was meant to be: a useful record.

2.7 CONCLUSION

The accounting diaries of Marian Evans and Louisa May Alcott are remarkable for their attempts to achieve personal standards of perfection, while also juggling the demanding expectations of professional authorship and a culture obsessed with self-improvement and efficiency. I selected these authors as representatives of one of many diary types in order to prove how fruitful it can be to attend to the specificities of a diary's style and form. Here, one can avoid generalizing or mismatched interpretations. This thesis catalogues some techniques of the accounting diary that help give it its distinctive form in the nineteenth century. Further work could catalogue the techniques of other types of diaries, such as domestically oriented diaries, confessional diaries, shared diaries, or historical diaries.

The accounting diaries of Marian Evans and Louisa May Alcott are intended to be useful records for the purposes of achieving goals of self-improvement and productivity. They measure the efficient use of time—recognizing it as a finite resource—and the interplay of cultural and personal expectations is evident in the choice to focus on a record of output, instead of private emotional matters. The preoccupation with productivity or “meaningful” work manifests itself in the focus of recording time spent on activity or improvement (or inactivity and failure). Ultimately, Evans and Alcott justify their own usefulness to themselves through their accounting diaries, revealing the cultural desire for utility and productivity that informed their writing and the moral spirit of the Victorian era. In the end, it would be safe to say that each woman realized her dream to achieve “advancement in work and heart” to become “a truly good and useful woman.” Even if they didn't know it or believe it themselves, their diaries are the record that proves it.

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