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Discipline and Writing

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# ‘what an insignificant wretch I am’ : the Daily Discipline and Writing<sup>1</sup>

Mika SUZUKI

One of the questions arising from reading the writings left by some eighteenth-century men and women lies in their sheer quantity. We wonder why they wrote so much. It seems that they were engined by the insatiable desire to record what course one’s life led. Some were letter devotees, just like the modern e-mail addicts. They could not do without writing and receiving letters. Georgiana, Countess of Spencer (1736-1814), was one of them. In this paper I would argue that her writing is part of the remarkable obsession with the will to restrain and regulate her style of life; writing regularly is consistent with eating simple food, keeping early hours, listening to the unfortunate, feeling guilty of extravaganza, etc.

Although Georgiana Spencer sealed off such areas of activities as politics, her wide-ranging and never-ceasing interests made her seriously involved in variety of undertakings.<sup>2</sup> Amanda Vickery perceptively argues that the common story of women’s descent from useful involvement in occupation to an ornament at home between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries is misleading. There the assumption of separate spheres of work and home is formed and the woman is given the new role of domesticated femininity. By drawing on the records — letters, diaries, and account books — of genteel women in the north of England, her research shows that

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<sup>1</sup> A description in a manuscript letter from Georgiana Spencer to Caroline Howe in the Althorp collection in the British Library (Dec 24 1779, Althorp F45).

<sup>2</sup> She was a little interested in canvassing, but she preferred not being involved in politics in contrast with the famous involvement of her daughter, the Duchess of Devonshire. Her reasons were: firstly, she takes politics as conflict, which her pacifist mind wants to avoid; and secondly, she knows her opinion in politics differs from that of her husband and she does not want to publicize their difference (to Mrs Howe, Jan 4 1780, Althorp F45).

women's experience was rich and extensive, far from being confined to the servile domesticity. Contrary to the picture of a frail domestic angel, the women in her study are socially and intellectually active, proud of their stoical fortitude, self-command, and civic virtues.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to those women, Georgiana Spencer interpreted her position as the opportunity to exhibit her commitment to virtues shared by high-minded men and women in the eighteenth century, rather than wallowing in the worldly pleasures of a beauty who had a wealthy husband. Well aware of the duties and snares to the privileged, she assiduously breaks herself apart from the representation of a frivolous or languid woman of high society. Her attention is poured into efforts to refute stereotypes. A well-read woman, she was aware what sort of behaviour was to be pursued and what sort under attack. She was a frequent and avid reader of sermons and ethics as well as fiction. She liked to read Secker, Blair, and the Spectator. Of course she knew that a wife of a newly created earl could be the butt of voguish satire reflecting both the voices of the aristocratic guardian of civic virtues and the propagandist of the ethos of middle-class diligence; she might be represented as a status-craving haughty feather-brained flirt, who is quite indifferent to her husband; late night diversions might wholly occupy her hours, leaving no time for reading, writing, or any other useful engagement. Lady Spencer deliberately tries to justify herself against this picture and dissociate herself from it. Her extraordinary commitment to letter-writing and reading is part of her efforts to prove for herself and assure herself that she is a worthy mistress of herself.

John Spencer's father was the third son of Charles Spencer, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Sunderland and his second wife, Ann, who was daughter of the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Marlborough. The 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sunderland and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Marlborough were brothers to the father of John Spencer. The father of John Spencer was untitled, but John Spencer was thus born into an aristocratic family and inherited the Spencer estates together with most of the property owned by his grandmother, Sarah, the formidable and

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<sup>3</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998).

influential Duchess of Marlborough. It included Althorp and the Manor of Wimbledon. John Spencer married, on a day after he came of age in 1755, Margaret Georgiana, daughter of Stephen Poyntz. He was an MP before 1761 when he became Baron Spencer of Althorp and Viscount Spencer of Althorp and in 1765 created 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Spencer.

Georgiana's father, Stephen Poyntz was a very successful self-made man. Born as son of an upholsterer, he was educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge. He was tutor to the sons of Lord Townshend and went into diplomatic service. He then was governor and steward of the second son of George II, and created a privy councillor. He married Anna Maria Mordaunt, who was maid of honour to Queen Caroline, and a famous beauty, admired in 'The Fair Circassian'.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of their marriage, the bridegroom was not yet an earl and the family of the bride was not wholly unacquainted with high society, yet the bride was undergoing an upward mobility by this union. The match between an aristocratic man and a bourgeois girl with a large dowry, the barter of title and money, was a staple object of society sketches in the eighteenth century. Among them one of the most well-known is Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode*. In his series of 'comic history'-painting, the spendthrift Earl of Squander and the Alderman exchange the marriage contract for the young couple who are seated back to back, indifferent to each other. The husband and wife are never depicted as affectionate to each other, leading dissipated and debauched lives separately. They are languid in the morning from the overnight amusements. The syphilitic husband has mistresses while the frivolous wife diverts herself with her lover. The marriage comes to an end when the husband pursues his adulterous wife, whose lover stabs him to death. Upset by the news of the execution of her lover, she takes laudanum to death.<sup>5</sup> Garrick, Georgiana's friend, also wrote a piece for performance in which Lord Chalkstone

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Croxall, 'The Fair Circassian, a Dramatic Performance' (London : Printed for J. Watts, 1720).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Janny Uglow, *Hogarth : A Life and a World* (London : Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 366-90.

declares, 'I married for fortune ; she for a title. When we had both got what we wanted, the sooner we parted the better'.<sup>6</sup>

The outpouring feelings of Lady Spencer toward her husband remind us of the marriage Lawrence Stone describes as a growing phenomenon, rather than of the piquantly satirized marriage à la mode or the marriage for convenience under the parental authority.<sup>7</sup> What Georgiana offers to describe to her confidantes is an epitome of affective companionate marriage. From the courtship to the husband's death and even afterwards, John Spencer is the focus of her emotional life. In her youth, she confides her joy and anxiety about him to her friend, Theadora Cowper : 'I wish to God he lov'd me half as well as I love him Oh Thea I could write of him for ever'. Her feelings about him are always intense. She is delighted to be courted by John Spencer, charmed by the gifts from him : the roses and the ring with the motto 'Mon Coeur est tout a Toi' and 'Gardes le tien pour moi'. In the courtship, the suspense of the situation makes her interrogatory and she wavers : 'I don't know why but I feel that most Unhappy of all Mortals, I hardly think I can ever be happy if I Marry Spencer & I am sure I cannot be happy without I do'. When she went to Althorp to get married, she was all happiness.<sup>8</sup> Spencer's arrangement for the wedding was charmingly informed and she was enthralled : 'Spencer begg'd he might shew me something it was the Licence & he smiling ask'd me if I wd marry him now I told him with all my heart in short what we both said in Joke turn'd to earnest'.<sup>9</sup> Later she shows reserve in the letters to Cowper as she knew her friend's unhappiness. In her letters to another confidante, mainly of her later life, Caroline Howe, she does not hesitate at all but is quite open about her infatuation. Fortunately she loved and esteemed her husband through

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<sup>6</sup> Uglow, p. 743.

<sup>7</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1977), esp. pp. 207-25, 303-39.

<sup>8</sup> Althorp F122. The undated letters from Georgiana Poyntz to Theadora Cowper. Theadora had been Georgiana's most intimate friend when she was courted and got married. When Georgiana enjoyed a happy married life, the friend suffered for William Cowper and remained unmarried. Though their situations became quite different and they exchanged fewer and fewer letters, they kept their friendship.

<sup>9</sup> Dated December 20 1755, to Theadora Cowper, Althorp F122.

her married life and even in her widowhood. She indulges in her overflowing emotion; and that emotion is approved by her sense of responsibilities. In her thoughts on her husband, the language of the heart and that of duties coexist and support each other. As if fulfilling the duties of a caring wife, she is grateful to the Providence for its 'uniting me to the Man my heart doats upon'. Her husband occupies her constant care :

my passionate attachment to my Lord, makes my happiness depend vastly too much on him ; if he is well I am contented, if he looks pleas'd I am delighted, but if he suffers it throws a thick shade about me which deprives me of every other comfort & makes me ungrateful as well as unhappy....<sup>10</sup>

Her affection to him was such that she suffered in accordance with his sufferings when he was ill : 'I think I ought to be called a Spencerometer, for my existence almost depends upon him'.<sup>11</sup>

After the death of John Spencer, her affection, respect and gratefulness to him were far from being faded but strengthened. She indulged herself in sorrowful mourning till she found some relief in recollecting how benevolent her husband was, admiring his compassion. She feels too much when she recollects her husband's love to her. Avoiding his tenderness to herself, just focusing on his goodness to others, is a way to keep her composed while lovingly remembers him :

besides I have touch'd very slightly on the most affecting part his tenderness for me — how many things could I have said that would have shewn the uncommon delicacy of his way of thinking with regard to me — but I check'd myself then, as I do now, because my object is to draw comfort from every thing I can — not to increase distress —<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dated Dec 24 1779, Althorp F45.

<sup>11</sup> To Mrs Howe, April 2 1780, Althorp F46.

<sup>12</sup> To Mrs Howe, Feb 29 1784, Althorp F52.

In one of the greatest concerns in her widowhood, that is her charity, her basic attitude derives from his example of masterly generosity and magnanimity ; she explains :

the generous sympathy with which he always listen'd to the tales of Woe I had to tell him & the ready liberality with which he went even beyond my wishes, to relieve them, no disqualifying circumstance concerning the demerits of the unhappy sufferer, could obstruct his compassion, their misery was sufficient to blot out every error, & he seldom fail'd with true humility of Soul to observe, that he was by no means free enough from blame himself, to condemn others. ...— such was the Husband I have lost.<sup>13</sup>

This wifely respect of her late husband gives sanction to her to imitate him. Listening to others and doing good to others she perceives as a remedy to fill the void his death made in her experience.<sup>14</sup> She has always been devotedly offering help to others ; yet in her widowhood, the idealized husband offers superior example she feels she should follow. She gives herself this high goal and keeps herself constantly employed. Accordingly Lady Spencer's name came to be associated with piety and charity. Thus her charity and compassion as aristocratic virtues were particularly marked in her widowhood. Her obituary esteems her as a person 'giving a high example of virtue and piety'. Naturally the obituary is embellished with praises of virtues, but it does not end with banal routine praises. It does not fail to mention that she was not a foe to worldly pleasures. As it points out, she, however virtuous, was not a hermit or ascetic, but she could combine those virtuous regulations of life with 'a proper display of the splendour, and a due enjoyment of the pleasures' ; 'Amidst the pleasures and occupations of the world, she never had forgotten the offices of benevolence and piety'.<sup>15</sup> Knowing that a person in her station is susceptible to giddy

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<sup>13</sup> To Mrs Howe, Feb 26 1784, Althorp F52.

<sup>14</sup> To Mrs Howe, Dec 28 1783, Althorp F51.

<sup>15</sup> The *Gentleman's Magazine* vol. 84 (1814) : 308.

luxury and corruptive diversions, she consciously and deliberately leads herself to minding her own behaviour. She thoroughly imbibed the habit of reflection before marriage and kept it through her married and widowed life. In many letters describing herself to her friends, her attention is very often drawn to checking herself on principles. Contrary to the stereotypical sybarite aristocratic type of immorality, idleness, infidelity, and gourmandism, she mentions her insatiable desire to be morally upright ; she seeks for constant employment of mind ; she sticks to fidelity ; she detests keeping late hours, choosing to practice regular way of life ; she opts for simple diet.

The habit of minding moral principles was duly formed in her education. Her father, Stephen Poyntz, began to step up the ladder with the appointment to the position in charge of education of the aristocratic youth. It would not be too far-fetched if we assume that he was a reliable tutor and offered with credentials useful principles in moulding the young students' mind ; he was the source of principles that were given to young people including his daughter, Georgiana, for regulation of their lives. In the dedication preceding an educational fiction, *The Governess or, Little Female Academy* (1749), in which the students' reflection is thought most important, Sarah Fielding remarks that it was from Stephen Poyntz that she has learned the educational principles deployed in the work : 'this Scheme was, in a manner, directed by Mr. Poyntz'. He was also a friend of Samuel Richardson, who represents hard-working introspective moral authority. Later in her life, Lady Spencer declares that she is enthusiastic about Richardson, especially delighted to learn from Sir Charles Grandison's active benevolence and liberality.<sup>16</sup>

As the same obituary states, 'her personal exertions [were] unceasing and indefatigable'. She could not stand slackening the workings of body and mind. Placing herself in somewhere other than the work ethics of the middle class, she constantly engages and exerts herself. And she takes pride in declaring her hours are usefully engaged. The following is, she informs, the typical day of hers in her youth :

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<sup>16</sup> To Mrs Howe, Nov 11 1782, Althorp F49.



Got up at 7  
Breakfast with milk and toast  
Gardening till eight  
Reading to mamma  
Reading for herself till dinner  
Dinner  
Reading in the garden  
Seldom drink tea  
Working or reading till supper  
Supper  
Read prayer and go to bed at 11<sup>17</sup>

The reading companion switched to her husband, her brother, or her friends, and when she began to write to Mrs Howe, writing came first after getting up, but the basic routine kept similar. She has many rules that she imposes on herself, taking pleasure in keeping them. Throughout her life, she is usually an early riser, while her mother was habitually in bed till eleven. What she eats for dinner and supper is not stated above, but her breakfast is very simple ; here and elsewhere she thinks it best to keep simple diet. Not being a strict practitioner of continence, she sometimes, or when required oftentimes, enjoys playing games and joining diversions at her countryseat and in London. However, she consciously thinks much more of tranquil regular life replete with the pleasures of reading and writing in the shade in resourceful nature.

In her remarkably numerous letters, she is not so much a society watcher as a spectator of herself. However concerned she was with the affairs of the society, she regards the initial role of epistles as conveyance of inner workings of the mind. Two of her major correspondents, Theadora Cowper and Caroline Howe, were such readers who encouraged Georgiana's self-analysis. Her favourite subject in her long-standing correspondence with Mrs Howe is her own daily life, her emotion and her mind. Mrs Howe

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<sup>17</sup> To Theadora Cowper, Althorp F122.

was an able listener and good correspondent, but Spencer sometimes complained that Howe should talk more about herself in response to her own practice :

Egotism must be allow'd of & I must speak the thoughts of my heart as they arise or not speak at all.—... in return for all this I desire you will write in the same manner leave news & Politicks till we come to Town, & let me know only what you think of all the stuff I send you — as well as your own thoughts upon any subjects that occur —<sup>18</sup>

In her letters Georgiana carefully studies herself and checks herself. This is because, she explains, she perceives herself as a very weak creature often vulnerable to temptations; for that very frailty, she feels obliged to examine and control herself. She herself remarks that her sentences sound like sermons. Certainly, she is a willing follower of what sermons advise people to practice in their thoughts :

Yet they might not comprehend some things that I am thoroughly convinc'd of & shall make no scruple of owning to you..., the principal of them is concerning what you say of my seeming to judge it necessary to be out of the way of temptation to go on right — I should be very sorry to find that I could never be right without this precaution & yet I think the safest way is to suppose it, I should have examin'd my heart & conduct often to very little purpose if I had not found out that I am the weakest of all Creatures You must have seen it for ever at play — how often do I make resolutions & break them — & shall I presume after such daily such hourly instances of folly to aver that I can resist temptation — I know of no good purpose that could be answer'd by boasting but of many that may arise from doubting my own strength — it keeps me humble & in spite of Vanity itself makes me feel what an insignificant wretch I am — it teaches

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<sup>18</sup> To Mrs Howe, Dec 30 1779, Althorp F45.

me to make allowances for others, by shewing me how despicable I might have been had my temptations been of the same nature with theirs ; & lastly (for this is very sermon like) it inspires me with continual gratitude to that Providence ...<sup>19</sup>

In her perception, her self-discipline is an essential requisite of her life to save herself from the insignificance she thus describes. Such self-regulation included regular and simple way of life, and above all, reading books as well as writing and reading letters.

In a study of reading practice in the eighteenth century, Naomi Tadmor argues that reading was part of a daily routine, which consisted mostly of hard work. She regards reading as part of a religious discipline and also part of social life.<sup>20</sup> These are the case with Lady Spencer, and in her case, writing letters as well as reading letters was also categorised parallel to reading practice. And in addition, these practices were also a great source of pleasure to her. Especially the correspondence with Howe was product of enthusiastic commitment. For a considerable period between 1759 and 1814 they exchanged letters every day. They even wrote a couple of letters in a day. Their diligence and regularity are amazing. When there was no collection of letters, sometimes they asked their friends and servants to deliver their letters :

It is so pleasant to me to converse with you every day my Dear Howey that I cannot give up the writing till you do, to day indeed there is no post but as I have time & as it is doing as I would be done by, I will send this letter by Lord Jersey, & desire him to let you have it on Sunday when I think it will be rather an agreeable surprise to you at least if I may judge by myself for an unexpected one from you would certainly be so to me ...<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dated Dec 24 1779, Althorp F45.

<sup>20</sup> Naomi Tadmor, ‘“In the even my wife read to me” : women, reading and household life in the eighteenth century’, in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor, ed. (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996), 162-74.

<sup>21</sup> To Mrs Howe, Jan 1 1780, Althorp F45.

The correspondence became 'habitual', something that cannot be omitted in daily routine :

The writing to you my Dear Howey & still more the hearing from you every day is became (as had Customs are very apt to do) so habitual to me, that I cannot bring myself to leave it off, tho' it certainly takes up more of my time than I can well spare ;...<sup>22</sup>

Bad habits are not easily shaken off my dear Howey I have acquired that of sitting down & writing to you as soon as any subject occupies my mind, ...<sup>23</sup>

The intensity of the letters was heightened toward 1783 when her husband passed away. Busy as she was in taking care of her sick husband, she wrote more and more.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes the letters look like the journal of a nurse with simple descriptions of the patient — it was occasionally because she had an intention to ask Howe to seek advice of Dr Warren, her favourite London doctor but not always for this purpose. However, most of the time an affectionate wife, full of worries for her husband's well being, tries to understand the situation for the better and make herself believe the hopeful assumption. When she realizes his condition is good, her sentences transparently reflect her mood; when he is ill, negative thinking overwhelms her, which also is written down as it is, and soon afterwards she feels sorry for the recipient of her unhappy letter, asking for her tolerance :

it [the last letter] was if I remember right a long dull sermon but if you will hear from me so constantly, you must be content with it for better for worse — my heart must dictate or my pen will not go on — so when I am grave you must be serious, when I am nonsensical you must be good humoured & when I am tiresome which in the course of things will happen you have nothing for it but to be patient.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> To Mrs Howe, Jan 5 1780, Althorp F45.

<sup>23</sup> To Mrs Howe, Nov 5 1782, Althorp F49.

<sup>24</sup> See especially Althorp F45-F51.

<sup>25</sup> To Mrs Howe, Dec 29 1781, Althorp F48.

Often she realizes she depends too much on the forbearance of the addressed and does not write for Howe's pleasure, being too forward in sharing her woes: 'I wish I could make amends for this unpleasant detail by writing any thing that would amuse you'.<sup>26</sup> She is aware that she is writing for her own comfort. By going through the practice of writing to the particular confidante, she perceives she could keep herself up. She wanted to hide her fear and agony from Lord Spencer himself and also from their children; Howe was the only person to whom she freely let out her feelings. In short, the act of writing letters offers her the opportunity to watch and reflect the matter more composedly: composure of mind is the most required in her situation. The importance here is that she needed the medium of post; she felt allowed to put her distress on paper and show it to Howe. Indeed, the letters written during this period are the 'writing to the moment'. They are not only the direct record of her emotional life, but also the active agent to work on her: a soothing tool to invite her to get control of herself as well as a channel of indulgence in otherwise secret sensations. Consequently, writing served her to discipline herself.

Although she claims that 'writing is not my Genius', she liked to write quite a lot.<sup>27</sup> She wanted to fashion herself cultured and thoughtful through writing and she could find satisfaction. Surely the result of her writing activity has left an evidence of her refinement, but what was more important to her was the immediate contentment in finding herself meaningfully engaged. Considering together with her concerns in walks and riding in fresh air, daily diet and sleep, she was an aficionado of mental well being as well as physical health, who thought that she should carry on constant occupation and exercise of body and mind. Showing to her friend, or more importantly to herself, that her daily course of living was as regulated and disciplined as 'an insignificant wretch' could afford, Lady Spencer could justify her privileged comfortable situation.

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<sup>26</sup> To Mrs Howe, Oct 13 1783, Althorp F51.

<sup>27</sup> Althorp F122.