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‘Leaves of Ivory’: Erasable Writing in Eighteenth-Century Fiction

In a letter of December 1816 to her nephew James Edward Jane Austen denied stealing two and a half chapters of his ongoing novel:

> What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow? - How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?[1]

Austen’s famous comparison between her writerly technique and that of the increasingly popular art of miniature painting has rightly been taken as playfully self-deprecating. As several critics have pointed out, it is also underpinned by a deep understanding of the other art. Janet Todd, for example, has shown how the analogy is ‘not simply […] a trope of modesty or gender, but […] an aesthetic credo’, employed by ‘a successful author well aware of art and artistic traditions’.[2]

It is less often appreciated however that throughout the eighteenth century ivory was a surface on which people wrote as well as painted. While acknowledging that miniature painting is the source of Austen’s comparison in her letter to her nephew, and that this is indeed an important

[1] Deidre Le Faye (ed.), *Jane Austen’s Letters*, fourth edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 323.
[2] Janet Todd, “Ivory Miniatures and the Art of Jane Austen” in Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (eds.) *British Women’s Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 76-87, 50. See also Moriah Webster, “Ivory and Canvas: Naval Miniature Portraiture in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*,” *Persuasions On-Line* 39, 1 (2018).

reference point for considering her style, this article considers writing on ivory in the period, specifically on ivory tablets, or, as they were known, memorandum-books. These were typically written on in graphite pencil, which could then be erased with a damp cloth. Drawing on a range of literary and non-literary sources from across the century, this article will examine for what purposes these tablets were employed, and how they fit into a long tradition of erasable writing. Though its contents were often dismissed as ephemeral and frivolous, the ivory memorandum-book reveals much about the affective power of material objects in the period. As a form of writing technology it also raised important philosophical questions concerning memory and the mind. As I will show, its appearance in two late eighteenth-century novels in particular, *Delia, a Pathetic and Interesting Tale* (1790) by Mrs/Miss Pilkington and Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), evokes and contributes to wider debates which are crucial to the period, specifically those concerning creativity and the perils of female authorship.

The ivory tablet/ memorandum-book

Erasable writing, of which the ivory tablet or memorandum-book is a form, has a long history. As Roger Chartier has shown, the ancient practice of writing on erasable wax tablets continued into the early medieval period. He claims that 'in the medieval period wax tables were the primary instrument of writing', giving as an example the late eleventh-century Benedictine abbot and poet Baudri, in whose case composition 'usually involved writing in wax, which allowed for crossing out words and changing one's mind.'[3] This was however just a first step: 'Writing on wax tablets was necessarily ephemeral. If poems were to be sent to a friend or

[3] Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1, 4.

collected in a book (referred to as *liber*, *libellus*, or *codex*), they had to be recopied onto parchment.'[4] Chartier notes that as paper became widely available across Europe in the later medieval period as a less costly alternative to parchment the use of wax tablets virtually disappeared.[5] Paper could however serve a similar function. Peter Stallybrass et al. note that by the sixteenth century erasable paper was being produced on a large scale, and was frequently sold bound together with a printed almanac. The combined products were known as 'writing tables' or 'table books' and are what Hamlet is referring to when he famously calls in Act 1 Scene V for 'My Tables,/ My Tables -- meet it is I set it down/ That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.' (ll. 107-9). In their discussion of Hamlet's writing tables in their Renaissance context Stallybrass et al. suggest they had four characteristic features: ubiquity, erasability, portability and convenience.[6] Of these erasability is particularly crucial to their appearances throughout Shakespeare, not just in *Hamlet*, but several other plays and sonnets, especially sonnet 122, which opens 'Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain/ Full charactered with lasting memory'.[7] Stallybrass et al. comment that in this poem, as elsewhere, 'a technology of memory, the tables are also a technology of erasure'.[8]

Wax and paper were not the only erasable surfaces on which people wrote in the medieval period and beyond. Stallybrass notes that 'the clerk of Chaucer's summoner writes upon "[a] peyre of tables al of yvory" with a "poyntel" or stylus.' He claims that 'this technology, relatively common in the Middle Ages, virtually disappeared from the early sixteenth century

[4] Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, 4.
[5] Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, 10-11. See also Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowery and Heather Wolfe, "Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55, 4 (2004): 379-419, 384-5.
[6] Stallybrass et al., "Hamlet's Tables," 410.
[7] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, edited by Colin Burrow (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 625.
[8] Stallybrass et al., "Hamlet's Tables," 417.

until the later seventeenth century, when it was revived again.'[9] When they reappeared, these ivory tablets were much smaller and thinner than those used centuries earlier. They were made like fans, with a number of leaves (usually six) held together by a single pin.

[See Figure 1: Ivory tablet from Jane Austen's House, Chawton].[10]

Invoice books from the late eighteenth century suggest an average price for the ivory memorandum-book of around two shillings, though this could go up to as much as five for the more deluxe models, which came with accessories such as a cover, or case, and a pencil.[11] This would have made them relatively affordable for the middling classes. Their appearance in booksellers' advertisements suggests that they were a common item of stationery, at least in the bigger cities. Amongst the items which 'may be had very cheap' from 'R. Whitworth, Bookseller in Manchester' were 'Stamp'd Paper and Parchment, Shop-Books, Pocket-Books, Slates, Stone and Black Lead Pencils, Ivory Memorandum Books'.[12] The picture is similar across the Atlantic. Benjamin Franklin sold them in his shop in Philadelphia, leading Stallybrass to claim that 'ivory notebooks were not exotic novelties but the kind of stationery you would expect to find in a major city in colonial America.'[13] Though it is hard to be precise about numbers, they were clearly part of an increasing trade in domestic ivory objects in both England and America. According to Benjamin Burack, 'the improved economic conditions of the 1700s meant that the middle classes could, for the first time, afford small ivory products.'[14]

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[9] Peter Stallybrass, "Benjamin Franklin: Printed Corrections and Erasable Writing", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 150, 4 (2006): 553-567, 556.
[10] This ivory tablet was a gift to Jane Austen's House from a Mrs Loveless in 1956. There is unfortunately no evidence that it ever belonged to Austen herself.
[11] See Walter Perry, *The Man of Business, and Gentleman's Assistant* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Author by David Willison, 1774).
[12] Advertisement following Henry Gore, *Vulgar Arithmetick Improved; or Merchants Accompts Made Easy* (Manchester: Printed and sold by R. Whitworth, 1733).
[13] Stallybrass, "Benjamin Franklin: Printed Corrections," 556.
[14] Benjamin Burack, *Ivory and Its Uses* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1984), 27. See also Maggie Campbell Pedersen, *Ivory* (London: NAG Press), 213.

As many have pointed out, the trade in ivory was always closely intertwined with that of the slave trade, especially after the arrival of the Portuguese in the key trading ports on the west coast of Africa in the late fifteenth century, followed later by the Dutch and the English in the seventeenth century. This led to the rise of the so-called 'white gold and black gold' trade, with ivory and slaves often being transported in the same vessels, under the command of the same merchants.[15] Yet the extent to which this connection was foremost, or even present, in the minds of ivory's domestic consumers is hard to judge. Jon Mee observes that 'ivory was carried on precisely the sort of ships which Jane Austen imagines taking Sir Thomas Bertram to his Antiguan plantations in *Mansfield Park*, but her mention of the material in her letter to James Edward Austen shows no sense of this exotic provenance. By the time Austen was writing, of course, ivory had been thoroughly domesticated, masked, as it were, by its familiar use in items ranging from miniature painting to piano keys.'[16]

'As hard, as senseless, and as light'

That the ivory memorandum-book was a feature of fashionable society in the early eighteenth century, used to record ephemeral trivia, is suggested in Jonathan Swift's "Verses Wrote in a Lady's Ivory Table-Book" (1706).[17] The poet compares the lady's ivory table-book to her heart, which is 'Scrawl'd over with trifles thus; and quite/ As hard, as senseless, and as light' (ll. 3-

[15] Pedersen, *Ivory*, 173-4. See also Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory & Slaves in East Central Africa: Changing Patterns of International Trade to the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1975).
[16] Jon Mee, "Austen's Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology and Empire" in You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (eds.) *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 77-94, 78. For Mee, this connection between ivory and the slave trade, however implicit, does underpin Austen's analogy. He argues that the 'the domestic is not always as homely as it might seem in her fiction' and that 'the exotic origins of the ivory beneath the portrait might be used as a convenient analogy to reinforce [Claudia] Johnson's stress on the engagement with her time that goes on behind the seemingly intimate surface of Austen's fiction.' (78)
[17] *The Works of J. S., D. D., D. S. P. D. In Four Volumes* (Dublin: Printed by and for George Faulkner, 1737). *Volume II, Containing the Author's Poetical Works*, 9-10.

4). Amongst the content written on the leaves are lovers' billet doux ('*Dear charming Saint'*) (l. 7), '*A new Receit for Paint'* (l. 8), a shopping list ('Item, *for half a Yard of Lace'*) (l. 16) and '*A safe Way to use Perfume'* (l. 12). The poet decides that 'Whoe'er expects to hold his Part/ In such a Book, and such a Heart;/ If he be wealthy, and a Fool,/ Is in all points the fittest Tool' (ll. 25-8). In a sign that he has in mind one of the fancier models of ivory tablet, he adds of this tool that 'it may be justly said,/ He's a Gold Pencil tip't with Lead.' (ll. 29-30). Another trivial use is suggested in Walter Harte's poem *An Essay on Satire, Particularly on The Dunciad* (1730), which asks the reader to view 'a Croud in damasks, silks, and crapes' whose more refined members 'transcribe their Opera-loves/ On Iv'ry Tablets'.[18]

These examples suggest that the ivory memorandum-book was something of a fashion accessory for the bon-ton ladies of high society. It could be used to jot down passing crushes, or exaggerated praise from admirers, or for more mundane notes on make-up or items to purchase. Its appeal clearly lay in its ability to record the instantly forgettable and ephemeral; that which, like a suitor's declaration of love, can be lightly wiped away. Its contents could however also be copied down elsewhere, into a more lasting form, before being erased. In his discussion of various forms of Early Modern erasable writing, including Baudri's wax tablets and Hamlet's writing tables, Chartier concludes that 'it is reasonable to assume that they were used to transcribe, stenographically or otherwise, sermons and plays, to collect quotations encountered in the course of reading, prior to being sorted under the headings of the commonplace notebooks, and, finally, to compose drafts of texts of which fair copies were later made on paper.'[19]

[18] Walter Harte, *An Essay on Satire, Particularly on the Dunciad* (London: Printed for Lawton Gulliver, 1730), 34. On a similar theme Burack notes that the ivory memorandum-book could also function as a dance-card booklet (*Ivory and Its Uses*, 189), while Thomas Jefferson's surviving ivory memorandum-book at Monticello suggests that another potential use was as a diary, with the six leaves headed Monday to Saturday.
[19] Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, 24.

Frances Burney's 'poor worn Tablettes'

This practice is apparent for example in the journal-making of Frances Burney. Critics have noted her habit of jotting down the events of the day on erasable ivory tablets before writing them up in her lengthy 'Journals' sent to family members weeks or even months later.[20] As John Wiltshire comments, her brief notes on her erasable tablets would typically be 'amplified, ordered and many of them retrospectively revised.'[21] Evidence of this practice, as well as the broader affective meaning the tablets could carry, is apparent in the so-called 'Courtship Journal', a series of letters later sent to her sister Susan covering the period between 8 April and 9 May 1793, concerning her developing relationship with a new arrival in her circle: the French émigré Monsieur d'Arblay. She records that on 10 April the latter paid an unexpected visit to her family home. The two enter into a conversation concerning, amongst other things, her recent attempt to lend him some money via her sister, which he has returned out of pride.

> Soon after this, he said he had another *Grace* to demander - & this was for my *Tablettes*, - which he had seen me use the Morning we met in Norton Street, where I had written him a Thème upon them.
>
> 'Ah oui, cried I, j'ai eu moi-même cette pensée.'[22]

The '*thème*' which Burney had written for d'Arblay would have been a short note in French, ostensibly for him to critique, but in practice serving more as a form of flirtation. As Claire

[20] See Joyce Hemlow (ed.) (with Curtis D. Cecil and Althea Douglas) *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*. Volume I: 1791-2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), xxxi-ii.
[21] John Wiltshire, "Journals and Letters" in Peter Sabor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75-92, 76.
[22] Hemlow, *The Journals and Letters*, 62.

Harman observes, 'the *thèmes* that Fanny and Monsieur d'Arblay exchanged between February and April 1793 were never formal or particularly educational, but from the start a substitute for correspondence, often more intimate and immediate than their later actual correspondence. The two 'students' had agreed to write on whatever they liked (or could express).'[23]

To d'Arblay's delight Burney runs out of the room at this point, having apparently had the same thought as him. He is dismayed however when she returns not with her '*Tablettes*', but with some new ones she has bought for him, 'knowing by experience how useful they are to Lovers of writing & composition.':

> From a look of the utmost gratification, with which he had received my compliance, one of disappointment ensued, when he saw the new Tablettes, - he had meant to have *my own!* – He found fault with the finery of the Cover, with the Pencil, with the *newness*, with every thing though I had written at the opening 'À la Muse de M: D'Arblay.' & looked so uncomfortable, that I found I had done nothing, unless I consented to change. This, therefore, was the result. And then -- -- O how he brightened! – he took my poor worn Tablettes as if they had been formed of precious Stones – but for *HIM* that is no simile! – he welcomed them as if they had been a *Friend* – asked how long I had had them, & when I said some years – 'Ah! que de bonheur pour moi!' he cried, as if their Age & services were their best recommendations!
>
> I then began rubbing out the scribbling that filled the leaves: he wanted amazingly to have it as it was! - & *begged*! – yet said, if there any secrets he would not be so

[23] Claire Harman, *Fanny Burney: A Biography* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 235.

> indiscreet! – However, there was nothing but an old Thème to himself, & Diary hints for my Susan – so I erased all without mercy.[24]

The tablets Burney has bought for d'Arblay appear to be at the luxurious end of the market, with both a fine cover and a pencil. Yet of course what he wants is not a new set, but her 'poor worn Tablettes', which because of their connection to her, and their 'Age & services', are 'formed of precious Stones'. These are more valuable to him due to their potential access to her confidential, innermost 'secrets'. She agrees to give them to him, yet to his further dismay she begins rubbing out her most recent scribbles, which she claims consist only of 'an old Thème to himself' and 'Diary hints' for the journal she will later send to her sister. He goes on to ask her to write 'Cecilia' in the erased tablets, after the heroine of her second novel, and when she refuses he drolly asks 'Mais, pourquoi? […] - ce n'est pas – actuellement – vôtre nom? – '. Eventually she writes with the pencil his name, with which he is satisfied: '"Ah! cried he, most animatedly accepting it, c'est assez! – c'est vôtre main – Comme cela me fera du bien! – Comme ceci me sera cher! – "'.[25]

This example from the early phase of Monsieur d'Arblay's courtship of Frances Burney suggests that as well as being a useful resource for 'Diary hints', ivory tablets could have a personal, emotional resonance, and play a part in establishing an intimate connection between would-be lovers. They are a fitting medium for the exchange of the '*thèmes*' which played such a key part in their flirtation. Burney's purchase suggests that they are an appropriate gift, though d'Arblay's preference for her own tablets, and his resistance to her erasing them, suggest that their affective power is increased when they are 'worn'. Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway

[24] Hemlow, *The Journal and Letters*, 62.
[25] Hemlow, *The Journal and Letters*, 63.

and Sarah Handles observe that 'the ways that items are used to express emotions leave physical traces, not only in the circumstances in which they are kept, or discarded, but in the patterns of wear, the rubbed surfaces, the traces of tears, the attempts to distort or destroy, so that objects bear the scars of their emotional pasts.'[26] Here the marks left on the surface of Burney's ivory tablets are, to d'Arblay at least, to be desired as crucial representations of their owner, and a potential route to her heart. Her writing is especially attractive to him because of her status as a writer; after she has, to his distress, erased the tablets he asks her to write not her own name but that of the heroine of her most famous novel.

Perhaps surprisingly given this exchange at a crucial point in her courtship, in Burney's drama and fiction ivory tablets are often suggestive of foppery and foolishness. Dabler in *The Witlings* uses them to jot down epigrams and witty thoughts that he has had, for example following one aphorism on merit and modesty with 'Faith, I'll set that down. (*He takes out his Tablets.*)'[27] He freely admits that 'my Writings are mere trifles, and I believe the World would be never the worse, if they were all committed to the Flames' (II, 222-4). In her first novel the rake Sir Clement Willoughby uses his tablets to compose poems to Evelina: '"I wrote down in my tablets,' said Sir Clement, 'the stanzas which concern Miss Anville, this morning at the pump-room; and I will do myself the honour of copying them for her this evening"' (329).[28] In *Camilla* ivory tablets are associated exclusively with Eugenia's tutor, the learned Dr Orkborne. They signal both his pomposity and his lack of attention to the world around him. When Sir Hugh tries to engage him on the topic of a suitor for Eugenia, 'Dr Orkborne, who had just taken

[26] Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles, "Introduction", in Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds.), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 4-5.
[27] Frances Burney, *The Witlings* Act II, ll. 155-7, in Peter Sabor (ed.) *The Complete Plays of Frances Burney* (London: William Pickering, 1995), 24.
[28] Frances Burney, *Evelina; or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, edited by Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1778]), 329.

out his tablets, in order to enter some hints relative to his great work, begged him to say no more till he had finished his sentence',[29] while on another occasion he is discovered with his tablets in a field 'looking now upon his writing, now up to the sky, but seeing nothing any where, from intense absorption of thought upon the illustration he was making'.[30] The narrator comments acerbically that 'Eugenia was nothing to him, in competition with his tablets and his work'.[31] Dr Orkborne appears to be obsessively filling his tablets and never erasing them; the suggestion is that he is retaining too much information and over-stocking his mind, to the detriment of other abilities, such as being able to think on his feet: 'Dr. Orkborne, who, though copiously stored with the works of the ancients, had a sluggish understanding, and no imagination.'[32]

'The memory of genius is an ivory tablet'

The fact that Dr Orkborne's use of his ivory tablets signifies his psychological shortcomings is symptomatic of a wider, historically well-established connection between technologies of writing and the mind. Stallybrass notes that 'from antiquity, the human mind has been imagined as a writing surface: for Plato, it was like a wax tablet; for Hamlet, an erasable notebook; for Locke, a *tabula rasa*; for Freud, a "mystic writing pad" (a form of Etch A Sketch).'[33] For the eighteenth century Locke's conception was of course the most influential. His association with

[29] Frances Burney, *Camilla; or a Picture of Youth*, edited by Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972 [1796]), 129.
[30] *Camilla*, 139.
[31] *Camilla*, 140.
[32] *Camilla*, 185.
[33] Stallybrass, "Benjamin Franklin: Printed Corrections," 561. There are obvious similarities between Freud's *Wunderblock* and the ivory tablets used in the eighteenth century, especially in terms of erasability, though important differences too, particularly in the former's use of a transparent cover sheet made up of two layers. Freud's discussion of this technology along with Derrida's commentary in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" are discussed in Chapter 3 of David Farrell Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence and Writing: On the Verge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

the phrase '*tabula rasa*' comes from passages such as the following in Book II, Chapter X of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, on 'retention':

> The other way of Retention is the Power to revive again in our Minds those *Ideas*, which after imprinting have disappeared, or have been as it were laid out of Sight: And thus we do, when we conceive Heat or Light, Yellow or Sweet, the Object being removed. This is *Memory*, which is as it were the Store-house of our *Ideas*. For the narrow Mind of Man, not being capable of having many *Ideas* under View and Consideration at once, it was necessary to have a Repository, to lay up those *Ideas*, which at another time it might have use of. But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas* are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self ...[34]

Though memory is thus for Locke a 'Store-house' or 'Repository' of imprinted ideas, these 'cease to be any thing when there is no perception of them.' In order to be revived and become ideas again, they have to be revived and painted anew. This process is not straightforward; ideas are revived 'some with more, some with less difficulty; some more lively, and others

[34] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 149-50.

more obscurely.' If they are not painted anew on the mind they will fade away. '*The Pictures drawn in our Minds, are laid in fading Colours*', Locke asserts, 'and if not sometimes refreshed, vanish and disappear.'[35]

This conception of memory, by which ideas are imprinted on the mind, and then revived or repainted, belongs, as David Farrell Krell has pointed out, to a long tradition of thinking about memory in graphological and/or typographical terms. Naming this 'engrammatology', he describes how 'impression or incision in memory is invariably described as a kind of *writing*, sometimes with illustrations, sometimes not. Memories are letters and words incised on a wax tablet or inscribed on a blank sheet of paper; they can be stored away, then retrieved at will and read at a later date.'[36] Such is the longevity and ubiquity of this way of thinking about memory, that, according to Krell, 'we shall have to ask whether writing is a metaphor for memory or memory a metaphor for writing.'[37] His history of engrammatology from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries is however relatively perfunctory; he decides that 'even a brief look at Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, and an even briefer glimpse at David Hartley (through the critical eyes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge), will convince us of the staying-power of the ancient model of memory.'[38]

Another figure who deserves to be included in a more extensive account of ways of thinking about memory in engrammatological terms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the eccentric philosopher John 'Walking' Stewart. From the mid 1770s onwards Stewart made a number of extensive journeys by foot, starting from India, and including much of Asia,

[35] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 152.
[36] Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence and Writing*, 3.
[37] Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence and Writing*, 4.
[38] Krell, *Of Memory, Reminiscence and Writing*, 5.

Africa and Scandinavia. He later travelled to America and Canada, and was in Paris in 1792 when he met Wordsworth and impressed him with his conversational powers and political knowledge. He eventually settled in London in 1803 and spent much of the last twenty years of his life writing, lecturing and pamphleteering. His more than thirty books cover an eclectic range of topics; according to Barry Symonds they are 'curious compounds of geography, materialist philosophical speculation, extravagant moral rumination, occasional excursions into verse, and sundry unrelated harangues at the reader.'[39]

In one of his earlier works Stewart considers memory, deciding that 'this quality or function of the mind is produced by observation, reacted upon by reflection. Sensation presents many objects to the memory, without making any impression and pass on it as a shadow; but the will returning observation and reflection, the seal is stamped upon the wax, and memory bears a durable and accurate impression.'[40] Thus far he is following Locke closely, especially in his emphasis on the importance of a secondary reflection generated by the will, which ensures, in a suitably engrammatological metaphor, that 'the seal is stamped upon the wax'. Stewart considers further what happens if the repository of memory, or 'Store-house' in Locke's terms, becomes over-stocked: 'the matter in this repository, if arranged like a library, containing foreign ideas of history and science, with all their circumstantial detail, bound and docketed, the judgement will become in consequence a mere librarian to record, to note, or recollect the production of other minds.'[41] This is in effect the Dr Orkborne problem: an over-loading of memory such that imagination is stifled, understanding of the world becomes impaired, and judgement 'a mere librarian.'

[39] Barry Symonds, "Stewart, John [called Walking Stewart] (1747–1822), philosopher and traveller," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2013. Retrieved 9 April 2024, from https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26494.
[40] John Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason: or the Establishment of the Constitution of Things in Nature, of Man, of Human Intellect, of Moral Truth, of Universal Good* (London: Printed for J. Ridgway, [1790?]), 32.
[41] Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason*, 33-4.

Stewart's proposed solution deploys an analogy with a technology of writing which, as we have seen, belongs to his time:

> Memory should resemble the ivory tablet upon which all foreign ideas useful to the augmentation of wisdom, combined with the self-created ideas of the mind, should bear the pencil mark of cautious judgement, easily erazed to make room for new combinations, and these for others; and their last juxtaposition or record should be denominated sentiment. Such is the just oeconomy of memory, the companion of genius or progressive mind.[42]

All 'foreign' and 'self-created' ideas should thus be written cautiously in pencil on the ivory tablet of memory, so that they can be erased and replaced by new combinations. This constitutes the creative process for Stewart, or 'the companion of genius or progressive mind.' It crucially prevents memory from becoming overstocked: 'the repository, or library of the memory, instead of containing the numberless volumes of the detail of human experience, should be a synopsis easily transferred to the delible tablet, or cogitative memory, which being marked with few impressions, leaves an unembarrassed area, for the various items of inventive and practical calculation.'[43] He refers further to 'the cogitative or practical tablet of the memory' which belongs to 'the man of talents', and leaves plenty of room for 'the creations of imagination,'[44] even going as far as stating that 'the memory of genius is an ivory tablet.'[45]

[42] Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason*, 34.
[43] Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason*, 76.
[44] Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason*, 79.
[45] Stewart, *The Revolution of Reason*, 81.

Delia, a Pathetic and Interesting Tale (1790)

Although Stewart's writing, and its possible influence on his contemporaries, has received increasing attention in recent years,[46] it seems unlikely that his conception of memory as ideally resembling an ivory tablet had a direct impact on other writers of the period. That this form of erasable writing surface could feature in fictional depictions of the creative process and engage specifically with ideas of memory and forgetting, is however suggested in Miss or Mrs Pilkington's late eighteenth-century sentimental epistolary novel, *Delia, a Pathetic and Interesting Tale* (1790),[47] the plot of which revolves around the estrangement of the heroine from her lover Colonel Bloomfield. While he has been away fighting in the Revolutionary Wars Delia's stepmother has contrived to make each think the other has been unfaithful and no longer loves them. Delia is thus somewhat surprised when, on a walk with her new fiancé Lord Archer in the grounds of her family home in Ireland, she thinks she sees Colonel Bloomfield in the woods. The figure disappears before they catch sight of his face but they soon discover he has left something behind:

> We approached the place he had quitted, and found an ivory tablet in the grass. Judge with what trepidation I opened it. The lines it contained appeared to have been just written – and from some erazures and interlineations we concluded them to be original. I will transcribe them in this place.[48]

[46] See for example Ewan James Jones, "John 'Walking' Stewart and the Ethics of Motion," *Romanticism* 21, 2 (2015): 119-131 and Tom Mole, "Catching Up with Walking Stewart" in Norbert Lennartz, *The Lost Romantics: Forgotten Poets, Neglected Works and One-Hit Wonders* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 111-29.
[47] This novel is often wrongly attributed to the educational writer for children, Mary Pilkington.
[48] [Miss/Mrs Pilkington], *Delia, A Pathetic and Interesting Tale*. In Four Volumes (London: Printed for William Lane), III, 105.

The poem which Delia transcribes is a sentimental lament for the happier times the poet has spent in the neighbourhood, and the imagined loss of Delia's love. He hopes briefly that this could be rekindled, only to fall back into despair: 'Her smile - but why, alas! should Delia smile/ On the lost victim of her cold disdain!/ Why would the flatterer, Hope, my woes beguile,/ And with her fond delusions sooth my pain!'.

Delia does not know what to make of the discovery: 'It was written with a pencil, and so faint as to be scarcely intelligible – and yet I fancied the hand resembled Bloomfield's. Lord Archer said, with a smile, that the stranger was undoubtedly some rejected swain of mine, who was come to deplore my cruelty, and pour forth his strains of elegiac sadness, in these desart wilds.' Eventually she decides the poem can't be by her former lover: 'Bloomfield! impossible! does not the vast Atlantic roll its waves between us! – Or though it did not, has he not blotted me from his thoughts for ever – could he accuse me of disdain and coldness? What a romantic suggestion!'.[49] Despite this she sends a servant back for the ivory tablet, which is still where they found it. Bloomfield later gives his own account to his sister Julia of the incident, confirming that he did indeed write the poem while exploring the grounds where he had spent much of his childhood: 'these scenes recalled my juvenile ideas – all my tenderness revived - I scribbled in my tablets, something like an elegy – but the only remembrance I now retain of it is, that it was expressive of disappointed affection.'[50]

Bloomfield's writing on the ivory tablet is thus in his mind connected with the juvenile and ephemeral; he describes the poem he scribbled as 'something like an elegy' and claims he does not even remember its contents. Delia too dismisses the poem, refusing to believe it is

[49] *Delia*, III, 107.
[50] *Delia*, III, 113.

Bloomfield's hand ('What a romantic suggestion'), while the exaggeration in Lord Archer's comment that the poet was 'undoubtedly some rejected swain of mine' similarly suggests a similarly mocking and derisory tone. Yet for both its role in the narrative and what it implies about its author, the poem scribbled faintly in pencil on the ivory tablet cannot be so easily erased. It signifies the persistence of Bloomfield's sentimental childhood memories, amplified by the association of place, and his continued love for Delia, which despite being persuaded that it is no longer reciprocated, he cannot dismiss from his mind. In despair, knowing the answer, his sister Julia has earlier asked him: 'Have not four long years of absence been sufficient to eraze from your breast the image of a faithless fair one?'.[51] Bloomfield finds to his cost that the image of Julia cannot be erased. For Delia too we have learned that there are lingering feelings for Bloomfield which she cannot escape. As she writes to her friend: 'Ah, Henrietta, if I could but realize the delusions of those lying varlets, the poets, and procure one little draught from the Lethean spring to wash from my bosom some melancholy remembrances!'.[52]

The novel's concern with the power of memory is neatly captured by the ivory tablet on which Bloomfield has scribbled his poem. Like other forms of erasable writing it paradoxically foregrounds that which cannot be erased. Ivory is indeed a surface that often retains its traces. In a study of animal materials used for educational purposes in the eighteenth century Emily West examines an alphabet set composed of ninety-three rectangular ivory tiles, noting that 'ivory's cachet as an imported luxury product made it an ideal material from which to construct items that functioned as both status symbols and instructional objects for parents and children engaged in projects of self-making embedded in global capitalism.'[53] Yet despite their promise

[51] *Delia*, III, 92-3.
[52] *Delia*, III, 100.
[53] Emily West, "Animal Things, Human Language, and Children's Education," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 31, 1 (2018): 45-76, 52.

of smoothly-textured whiteness, West discovered that the tiles 'display clearly visible organic and palpable marks', which 'offer persistent evidence of ivory's former, embodied life'. 'Ivory', she concludes, 'is not a blank slate.'[54] Miniature painters of the period also discovered that ivory was a more complex surface than might first appear. Although it was introduced in the mid eighteenth century artists at first found it a tricky surface to work with, in part because of its unevenness and the marks it bore.[55] As Jim Murrell has noted, English miniaturists initially found ivory 'treacherously slippery'.[56]

A further example of an ivory tablet in eighteenth-century fiction plays further on its complexity as a surface. While again suggesting the power of memories that cannot be erased, in this case writing on ivory also suggests a lack of confidence, and raises debates surrounding female authorship in the period. Austen's playfully self-deprecating use of the metaphor of miniature painting in her letter to her nephew hints at ways in which female writers could feel constrained by the male-dominated literary marketplace, and forced to adopt a defensive position with regard to their work. In the final text under consideration here the difficulties with which the female writer was faced are evoked not by the metaphor of painting on ivory but by the literal practice of writing on it.

Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah **(1796)**

[54] West, "Animal Things," 53.
[55] See Katherine Coombs, *The Portrait Miniature in England* (London: V&A Publishing, 1998), 85.
[56] John Murdoch, Jim Murrell, Patrick J. Noon and Roy Strong, *The English Miniature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 17. Quoted in Mee, "Austen's Treacherous Ivory." It was not until the mid 1780s, and specifically the work of Richard Cosway, that the full potential of ivory as a medium for miniature painting began to be apparent.

Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (hereafter *Hindoo Rajah*) presents a naïve outsider's perspectives on English customs and intellectual fashions, in the satirical style of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721). After the death of his friend, the British officer Captain Percy, the Indian prince Zāārmilla travels to England and is often baffled by what he finds, which he reports in letters to his friend Mããndããra. The late Captain Percy's sister, Charlotte, is a poet, a fact which much intrigues Zāārmilla, and he refers to her throughout, quoting poems he has been given by her brother before his death. When he is staying with the Percys' friend Mr Denbeigh and his sister Emma the three are walking in the grounds of a neighbouring farm when he spots an object in a plantation of young trees:

> At the root of one of these trees, I perceived a small bright object glittering in the rays of the sun. I approached it, and found some leaves of ivory, fastened by a silver clasp, which on touching it, flew open, and discovered the hand writing of Miss Percy. "It is Charlotte's tablets," cried Emma. "It was in these she used to sketch the effusions of her fancy, on any subject that occurred. – It is still so," continued she, turning over the leaves. "Here is some poetry – she cannot think it any breach of faith to read it." "Read it then," said her brother.[57]

The poem details the poet's memory of happy scenes spent on the farm when 'the charmer Hope then perch'd on every bough, / And sung of Friendship true, and Love sincere/ But now – the charmer Hope is heard no more!/ Gone are my youth's lov'd friends; - for ever gone!'. Instead 'Sad Mem'ry now must these lov'd haunts invade/ With the dark storms of many a

[57] Elizabeth Hamilton, *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, edited by Pamela Perkins and Shannon Russell (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999 [1796]), 300.

heart-felt grief.'[58] The poet becomes increasingly melancholy as she considers the effect of memory:

> To every former scene of bliss she brings
> The throb of Anguish, and the sigh of Woe.
> As she retraces every blissful hour,
> Here spent with cheerful Hope, and youthful joy,
> Hope lost! Joy gone for ever; ---------- '

Here the poem breaks off; Zāārmilla notes that 'the tears which had fallen on the remaining lines had rendered them totally illegible. Those which suffused the blue eyes of the gentle Emma, stopt her utterance, she hastily put the tablets in her pocket – and we proceeded in silence.'[59] They come to 'the remains of an arbour' and see a woman sitting on the trunk of a former tree. Finally Zāārmilla meets the sister of his late friend, who receives him with kindness. Though Charlotte is clearly in low spirits she makes an effort to become more cheerful on seeing the Denbeighs and agrees to return with them to their home.

There are then many similarities between the discoveries of the ivory tablets in *Delia* and *Hindoo Rajah*. In each case the ivory tablets are found outside, before their writer is revealed. They are spotted glittering in the undergrowth, a sign of ivory's potential jewel-like attractiveness. The poems that are written on them have an ephemeral quality, and are described as scribbles or sketches. They are each dismissed as romantic juvenilia or 'effusions of fancy', yet each tackles themes that are crucial to each novel. Each is a melancholy lament for lost

[58] *Hindoo Rajah*, 300.
[59] *Hindoo Rajah*, 301.

hope and concerns the sadness as well as the lingering power of memory, dwelling on times that can neither be recaptured nor completely forgotten. In the case of Charlotte Percy's tablets, the poem has even been rendered illegible by tears, thus 'bearing the scars' of their owner's 'emotional past', in the words of Downes, Holloway and Handles. Though Charlotte's mood improves after she meets Zããrmilla and is welcomed by her friends, her countenance, like her tablets, still 'wore the traces of melancholy'.

In Hamilton's novel the use of the ivory tablets is suggestive of a further layer of anxiety. After Charlotte has been received into the Denbeigh family, Mr Denbeigh Sr attempts to convince her that melancholy, '"instead of being an amiable weakness, rather deserving of admiration than censure, is, in reality, equally selfish and sinful."'[60] He urges her to overcome her low spirits by disseminating her poetry for the public good, and hence exerting the powers of her mind '"not only for your own entertainment, but for the instruction, or innocent amusement of others", provoking her to reply:

> "Ah! Sir," returned Charlotte, "you know how female writers are looked upon. The women fear, and hate; the men ridicule, and dislike them."
>
> "This may be the case with the mere mob, who receive every prejudice upon trust," rejoined Mr Denbeigh; "but if the simplicity of your character remains unchanged – if the virtues of your heart receive no alloy from the vanity of authorship; trust me, my dear Charlotte, you will not be the less dear to any friend that is deserving of your love, for having employed your leisure hours in a way that is both innocent and rational."[61]

[60] *Hindoo Rajah*, 302.
[61] *Hindoo Rajah*, 303.

According to Zããrmilla Mr Denbeigh is successful in persuading Charlotte at least to consider bringing her poetry to wider attention: 'Thus did this venerable old man persuade Miss Percy to reconcile her mind to the evils of her destiny; and, by the exertion of activity, to seek the road to contentment.'[62]

Charlotte Percy is often regarded as a self-portrait. In the *Memoirs* of her late friend, published in 1818, two years after her death, Elizabeth Benger describes Charlotte as Hamilton's 'prototype', noting that each 'had been accustomed from the dawn of youth to string the pearls of poetry'.[63] Each has lost a beloved brother; Charles Hamilton, an orientalist scholar, died in London in 1792 on the verge of a return to India where he had lived for many years. Benger notes that *Hindoo Rajah* 'bears many traces of the melancholy that pervaded the author's mind' and that while 'her individual feelings are embodied in Charlotte … a beautiful tribute is offered to her lamented brother, in the delineation of the character of Percy.'[64] Hamilton's struggles with the writing of *Hindoo Rajah* and her reluctance to put it forward for publication are repeatedly emphasised in the *Memoirs*. Benger claims that 'when she had written a few sheets, she submitted to her *chosen friend* the plan of the work, but with a diffidence that betrays the dejection of her spirits.'[65] She then quotes from Hamilton's self-lacerating letter to this friend, Mrs G., in which she claims that '"I have so little of authorship about me, that there is no occasion for the smallest degree of delicacy in pointing out its defects"'. She leaves the decision whether or not to publish to her friend, claiming that '"that which has been done by my own diffidence, will be still more easily accomplished, when aided by the judgement of a

[62] *Hindoo Rajah*, 303.
[63] Elizabeth Benger, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton with a Selection from Her Correspondence and other Unpublished Writings.* In Two Volumes (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 61.
[64] *Memoirs*, 127.
[65] *Memoirs*, 125-6.

friend"'.[66] Benger notes further that 'when the Hindoo Rajah was finished, it was not without reluctance that the author consented to prefix to it her name. She was sensible that the woman, who has once been brought before the public, can never be restored to the security of a private station; and she naturally revolted from a measure which might seem to imply a dereliction of that delicacy which was her peculiar characteristic'.[67]

Hamilton's diffident attitude to her work is aptly captured by Charlotte Percy's use of ivory tablets in composing her poetry. On them she can 'sketch the effusions of her fancy, on any subject that occurred', without the risk of bringing them to public, or indeed anyone's attention. They are discovered separately from her, at the root of a tree, as if she has discarded them carelessly, regarding them as of no value. Colonel Bloomfield is similarly dismissive of the poem he has scribbled on his ivory tablets in *Delia*, unable to remember much about it other than that it was 'something like an elegy' and 'expressive of disappointed affection'. However while his use of his tablets suggests an impetuosity and lack of care, Charlotte Percy's traces on ivory, sometimes rendered illegible by tears, evoke a female writer struggling to bring her work into being, battling with the concept of authorship of which she is so uncertain.

Each example demonstrates that the function of ivory tablets in eighteenth-century fiction is indicative of wider debates. Though they were often used to jot down the ephemeral, light and senseless by the fashion conscious, they could acquire considerable affective meaning through their role in social interaction. Their significance often lay in their intimate connection to their owner rather than their actual contents, as the example from the exchange between Frances Burney and Monsieur d'Arblay shows. Their use for the drafting of poems in *Delia* and *Hindoo*

[66] *Memoirs*, 126-7.
[67] *Memoirs*, 128-9.

Rajah reveals much about each poet's creative process, as well as their attitude to their work and the concept of authorship. Like other technologies of writing they are suggestive of contemporary conceptions of memory and the mind, with the specific properties of ivory complicating Locke's metaphor of painting anew on a blank canvas. Though its contents are designed to be erased, the eighteenth-century ivory tablet is indelibly linked to the period's key literary and philosophical debates.

Figure 1: Ivory tablet from Jane Austen's House at Chawton. © Jane Austen's House.