

# Noting the Mind: Commonplace Books and the Pursuit of the Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain.

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Lucia Dacome

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**Noting the Mind:**

# Commonplace Books and the Pursuit of the Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Lucia Dacome

University College London

Ae for "Adversariorum methodus." Be for "Beauty, Beneficence, Bread, Bleeding, Blemishes."<sup>1</sup> By associating the first letter with the initial vowel of a word, generations of eighteenth-century readers, students, and observers diligently regulated access to information they reputed worth retaining. Following this rule, they organized the notes they took on a certain subject, the thoughts and observations they believed were worth remembering, and the exemplary words of their favorite authors. The rule was devised by John Locke for his "new method of making commonplace-books," a method characterized by a particular system for indexing the entries of a notebook that became popular in the eighteenth century. Before Locke developed his new method readers had already familiarized themselves with the practice of keeping an account of their readings, excerpting passages of texts, and copying them in their notebooks under a relevant heading. Throughout the early modern period commonplace books provided repositories for arranging notes, excerpts, drawings, and objects.<sup>2</sup> Regarded as aids to memory and storehouses of knowledge, they were part of a pedagogic tradition related to rhetoric and the art of memory that dated back to the classical period. Reducing vast amounts of knowledge to a [End Page 603] manageable form, they instantiated a special relationship between the accumulation of knowledge and the organization of space. At the turn of the eighteenth century Locke's new method promised to facilitate compilers' task by providing a new way of accumulating *multum in parvo* at a time of increasing concern for the uncontrollable growth of the "Stock of Knowledge."<sup>3</sup> It did so by seeking to increase the amount of information one could annotate in the notebook, while also speeding up its retrieval. Many eighteenth-century compilers relied on it in order to reduce the volume of their notebooks and save time. Some were lured by the promise that this technique could also help them to order their minds and thus turn them into better people.

Although commonplace books have dropped out of usage today, they were still mentioned in nineteenth-century educational manuals. As tools that lay at the intersection between practices of collecting, reading, classifying, learning, and the arts of rhetoric, they have come to the fore of historical discussion.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, commonplace books have been regarded as capable of providing insights into compilers' reading patterns and as biographical sources casting light on compilers' personal idiosyncrasies and cataloguing manias.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual and cultural significance of Locke's own new method of compiling has [End Page 604] accordingly been discussed in relation to Locke's own intellectual biography (and in particular his medical interests), in the context of shifting patterns of systematization of knowledge and in light of the dissemination of eighteenth-century encyclopedic projects.<sup>6</sup> However, still little is known about the uses and the popularity of the Lockean method in the eighteenth century.

What follows considers the spreading of Lockean commonplacing in the context of eighteenth-century discussions on the nature of the self. Locke himself contributed to these discussions when, in the second edition of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1694), he famously suggested that self-identity lay in the mind and resided in the continuity of memory and consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Now a widely shared assumption of Western modernity, the view that self lies in the mind has long been dated back to the Age of Enlightenment. Yet early in this period Locke's proposal to make self-identity coextensive with memory and self-knowledge proved controversial. The debate that followed is now part of the canon of the history of philosophy and of the philosophical literature as a whole.<sup>8</sup> In the course of the debate some of Locke's critics doubted that it was possible to found the self in conscious memory: they wondered about the destiny of the self during intervals...

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *A New Method of a Common-Place-Book. Translated out of French from the Second Volume of the Bibliothèque Universelle*, in John Locke, *Posthumous Works of Mr. John Locke* (London, 1706), 311–36; and Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences* (London, 1728), I, entry on "Common-places" (in the second edition of the *Cyclopaedia* [1738], changed to "Common-place-book").

<sup>2</sup> John Covel, master of Christ College, Cambridge (1638–1722), for example, collected in his commonplace book botanical drawings and seals, see British Library, Add. 57.495.



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