

*Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
 Full characterized with lasting memory,
 Which shall above that idle rank remain
 Beyond all date ev'n to eternity.
 Or at the least, so long as brain and heart
 Have faculty by nature to subsist,
 Till each to razed oblivion yield his part
 Of thee, thy record never can be missed.
 That poor retention could not so much hold,
 Nor need I tallies my dear love to score.
 Therefore to give them from me was I bold
 To trust those tables that receive thee more.
 To keep an adjunct to remember thee,
 Were to import forgetfulness in me.*

This sonnet picks up the thread of “tables” (pocket memorandum books), which were often given as presents. The friend’s book mentioned in Sonnet 77 may well have been such a gift. In Sonnet 122, the speaker talks about a gift of “tables” given to him by his friend, perhaps in an exchange. Now the issue is the endurance of memory and written records, part of the larger thread of time.

We learn that the speaker has boldly given away his tables (l. 11) because, he claims, they were already indelibly written in his brain (l. 2). This argument would be more convincing if the speaker did not also brag that his memory would last “beyond all date, even to eternity.” (l. 4) But his boast is immediately qualified: at least the memory will last as long as “brain and heart” (l. 5) survive in nature, and until oblivion erases all records (l. 7).

The table, he argues, is a “poor retention” (l. 9) because it couldn’t hold nearly as much as he remembers. The speaker needs no “tallies” (counting devices) to “score” (chalk up) the “dear love” he has for his friend. (l. 10) In short, he says in the couplet, he needs no memory aid (“adjunct”). If he did, it would prove that he was forgetful of his friend. The sophistry of this argument is delightful, but the implied negation of immortality through poetry is significant.