

# An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard (1751) and The Eton College Manuscript

Thomas Gray



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# The Augustan Reprint Society

THOMAS GRAY

*An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard*

(1751)

and

*The Eton College Manuscript*

With an Introduction by

**George Sherburn**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**A NOTE ON THE TEXTS**

**AN ELEGY WROTE IN A COUNTRY CHURCH YARD.**

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**AN ELEGY &c.**

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## INTRODUCTION

To some the eighteenth-century definition of proper poetic matter is unacceptable; but to any who believe that true poetry may (if not "must") consist in "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed," Gray's "Churchyard" is a majestic achievement—perhaps (accepting the definition offered) the supreme achievement of its century. Its success, so the great critic of its day thought, lay in its appeal to "the common reader"; and though no friend of Gray's other work, Dr. Johnson went on to commend the "Elegy" as abounding "with images which find a mirror in every mind and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo." Universality, clarity, incisive lapidary diction—these qualities may be somewhat staled in praise of the "classical" style, yet it is precisely in these traits that the "Elegy" proves most nobly. The artificial figures of rhetorical arrangement that are so omnipresent in the antitheses, chiasmuses, parallelisms, etc., of Pope and his school are in Gray's best quatrains unobtrusive or even infrequent.

Often in the art of the period an affectation of simplicity covers and reveals by turns a great thirst for ingenuity. Swift's prose is a fair example; in the "Tale of a Tub" and even in "Gulliver" at first sight there seems to appear only an honest and simple directness; but pry beneath the surface statements, or allow yourself to be dazzled by their coruscations of meaning, and you immediately see you are watching a stylistic prestidigitator. The later, more orderly dignity of Dr. Johnson's exquisitely chosen diction is likewise ingeniously studied and self-conscious. When Gray soared into the somewhat turgid pindaric tradition of his day, he too was slaking a thirst for rhetorical complexities. But in the "Elegy" we have none of that. Nor do we have artifices like the "chaste Eve" or the "meek-eyed maiden" apostrophized in Collins and Joseph Warton. For Gray the hour when the sky turns from opal to dusk leaves one not "breathless with adoration," but moved calmly to placid reflection tuned to drowsy tinklings or to a moping owl. It endures no contortions of image or of verse. It registers the sensations of the hour and the reflections appropriate to it—simply.

It is not difficult to be clear—so we are told by some who habitually fail of that quality—if you have nothing subtle to say. And it has been urged on high authority in our day that there is nothing really "fine" in Gray's "Churchyard." However conscious Gray was in limiting his address to "the common reader," we

may be certain he was not writing to the obtuse, the illiterate or the insensitive. He was to create an evocation of evening: the evening of a day and the approaching night of life. The poem was not to be perplexed by doubt; it ends on a note of "trembling hope"—but on "hope." There are perhaps better evocations of similar moods, but not of this precise mood. Shakespeare's poignant Sonnet LXXIII ("That time of year"), which suggests no hope, may be one. Blake's "Nurse's Song" is, in contrast, subtly tinged with modernistic disillusion:

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And whisp'rings are in the dale,  
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,  
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,  
And the dews of night arise;  
Your spring & your day are wasted in play,  
And your winter and night in disguise.

Here, too, are no tremblings of hope, no sound confidence in the "average" man, such as Gray surprisingly glimpses. One begins to suspect that it is more necessary to be subtle in evocations of despair than in those of hope, even if the hope is tremulous. The mood Gray sought required no obvious subtlety. The nearest approach to Gray (found in Catullus) may likewise be said to be deficient in overtones; but it also comes home to the heart of everyman:

*o quid solutis est beatius curis,  
cum mens onus reponit, ac peregrino  
labore fessi venimus larem ad nostrum  
desideratoque acquiescimus lecto!*

These simple lines convey what Gray's ploughman is achieving for one evening, but not what the rude forefathers have achieved for eternity. From the ploughman and the simple annals of the poor the poem diverges to reproach the proud and great for their disregard of undistinguished merit, and moves on to praise of the sequestered life, and to an epitaph applicable either to a "poeta ignotus" or to Gray himself. The epitaph with its trembling hope transforms the poem into something like a personal yet universal requiem; and for one villager—perhaps for himself—Gray seems to murmur through the gathering darkness: "et lux perpetua luceat ei." Although in this epitaph we may seem to be

concerned with an individual, we do well to note that the youth to fortune and fame unknown, whose great "bounty" was only a tear, is as completely anonymous as the ploughman or the rude forefathers.

The somber aspects of evening are perhaps more steadily preserved by Gray than by his contemporaries. From Milton to Joseph Warton all poets had made their ploughman unwearied as (to quote Warton):

He jocund whistles thro' the twilight groves.

With Gray all this blithe whistling stopped together. Evening poems by Dyer, Warton, and Collins had tended to be "pretty," but here again Gray resisted temptation and regretfully omitted a stanza designed to precede immediately the epitaph:

There scatter'd oft, the earliest of ye Year  
By hands unseen, are Show'rs of Violets found;  
The Red-breast loves to build & warble there,  
And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground.

With similar critical tact Gray realized that one might have too much of stately moral reflections unmixed with drama. Possibly such an idea determined him in discarding four noble quatrains with which he first designed to end his poem. After line 72 in the manuscript now in Eton College appeared these stanzas:

The thoughtless World to Majesty may bow  
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success  
But more to Innocence their Safety owe  
Than Power & Genius e'er conspired to bless

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these Notes their artless Tale relate  
By Night & lonely Contemplation led  
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around  
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease  
In still small Accents, whisp'ring from the Ground  
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace



No more with Reason & thyself at Strife  
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room  
But thro the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

"And here," comments Mason, "the Poem was originally intended to conclude, before the happy idea of the hoary-headed Swain, &c. suggested itself to him." To reconstitute the poem with this original ending gives an interesting structure. The first three quatrains evoke the fall of darkness; four stanzas follow presenting the rude forefathers in their narrow graves; eleven quatrains follow in reproach of Ambition, Grandeur, Pride, et al., for failure to realize the high merit of humility. Then after line 72 of the final version would come these four rejected stanzas, continuing the reproach of "the thoughtless world," and turning all too briefly to one who could "their artless tale relate," and to the calm that then breathes around tumultuous passion and speaks of eternal peace—and "the silent tenor of thy doom."

That would give a simpler structure; and one may argue whether turning back from the thoughtless world to praise again the "cool sequester'd vale of life" and then appending "the happy idea of the hoary-headed swain, &c." does really improve the poem structurally. Its method is, however, more acceptable in that now the reflections are imbedded in "drama" (or at least in narrative), and the total effect is more pleasing to present-day readers since we escape, or seem to escape, from the cool universality of humble life to a focus on an individual grief. To end on a grim note of generalized "doom," would have given the poem a temporary success such as it deserved; and it must be acknowledged that the knell-like sound of "No more ... No more" (lines 20, 21) echoed and re-echoed for decades through the imaginations of gloom-fed poets. But Gray, although an undoubted "graveyard" poet, is no mere graveyard poet: he stands above and apart from the lot of them, and he was not content to end despondently in a descending gloom. His, as he told West, in a celebrated letter, was a "white melancholy, or rather leucocholy"; and he wrote of "lachrymae rerum" rather than of private mordant sorrows.

The poem is couched in universals: Gray writes in "a" country churchyard, and the actual Stoke Poges, dear and lovely as it doubtless was to Gray, clings to the fame of the poem almost by accident. And yet, by a sort of paradox, this "universal" poem in its setting and mood is completely English. One could go too far from home for examples of distinction—for the polar stars of the rude

forefathers—just as one could err by excess of "commonplace" reflections. Some such idea encouraged Gray to modify his fifteenth quatrain, which in the Eton MS reads (the first line has partly perished from folding of the paper):

Some [Village] Cato [who] with dauntless Breast  
The little Tyrant of his Fields withstood;  
Some mute inglorious Tully here may rest;  
Some Caesar, guiltless of his Country's Blood.

The substitution of English names is an obvious attempt to bring truth closer to the souls of his readers by use of "domestica facta" and the avoidance of school-boy learning.

All these changes illustrate the quality of Gray's curious felicity. His assault on the reader's sensibilities was organized and careful: here is no sign of that contradiction in terms, "unpremeditated art." He probably did not work on the poem so long as historians have said he did, but he scanted neither time nor attention. Mason thought the poem begun and perhaps finished in 1742, and he connected its somberness with Gray's great sorrow over the death of his close friend Richard West. All this seems more than doubtful: to Dr. Thomas Wharton in September 1746 Gray mentioned recently composing "a few autumnal verses," and there is no real evidence of work on the poem before this time. Walpole evidently inclined to 1746 as the date of commencement, and it may be pointed out that Mason himself is not so sure of 1742 as have been his Victorian successors. All he says is, "I am inclined to believe that the Elegy ... was begun, if not concluded, at this time [1742] also." Gray's reputation for extreme leisurely composition depends largely on the "inclination" to believe that the "Elegy" was begun in 1742 and on a later remark by Walpole concerning Gray's project for a History of Poetry. In a letter of 5 May 1761 Walpole joked to Montagu saying that Gray, "if he rides Pegasus at his usual foot-pace, will finish the first page two years hence." Not really so slow as this remark suggests, Gray finally sent his "Elegy" to Walpole in June of 1750, and in December he sent perhaps an earlier form of the poem to Dr. Wharton. Naturally delighted with the perfected utterance of this finely chiseled work, these two friends passed it about in manuscript, and allowed copies to be taken.

Publication, normally abhorrent to Gray, thus became inevitable, though apparently not contemplated by Gray himself. The private success of the poem was greater than he had anticipated, and in February of 1751 he was horrified to receive a letter from the editor of a young and undistinguished periodical, "The

Magazine of Magazines," who planned to print forthwith the "ingenious poem, call'd Reflections in a Country-Churchyard." Gray hastily wrote to Walpole (11 February), insisting that he should "make Dodsley print it immediately" from Walpole's copy, without Gray's name, but with good paper and letter. He prescribed the titlepage as well as other details, and within four days Dodsley had the poem in print, and anticipated the piratical "Magazine" by one day. But the "Magazine" named Gray as the author, and success without anonymity was the fate of the "Elegy." Edition followed edition, and the poem was almost from birth an international classic.

One of the author's prescriptions for publication concerned the verse form. He told Walpole that Dodsley must "print it without any Interval between the Stanza's, because the Sense is in some Places continued beyond them." In the Egerton MS Gray had written the poem with no breaks to set off quatrains, but in the earlier MS (Eton College), where the poem is entitled, "Stanza's, wrote in a Country Church-Yard," the quatrains are spaced in normal fashion. The injunction shows Gray's sensitiveness as to metrical form. He had called the poem an Elegy only after urging by Mason, and he possibly doubted if his metre was "soft" enough for true elegy. The metre hitherto had not been common in elegies, though James Hammond's "Love Elegies" (1743) had used it and won acclaim. But the heroic (hendecasyllabic) quatrain was regarded in general as too lofty, stately, cool, for elegy. For the universal aspect of Gray's lament, however, it was highly apt as compared with the less majestic octosyllabic line, hitherto normal in this genre. For years after Gray's great success, however, most elegies, if in quatrain form, followed Gray's quatrain in manner, whether or not their subjects demanded the stately line.

The reasons why Gray is almost a poet of only one poem are not far to seek. He did not covet applause, and apart from melancholy his own emotions were too private to be published. In the "Elegy" he is true to himself and to the spirit of his age—perhaps of most ages. When he sought for material outside of his own experience, he went curiously to books, and was captivated by the "récherché." He was also caught by the rising cult of sublimity in his two great pindaric odes, and by the cult of the picturesque in his flirtations with Scandinavian materials. In these later poems he broadened the field of poetic material notably; but in them he hardly deepened the imaginative or emotional tone: his manner, rather, became elaborate and theatrical. The "Elegy" is the language of the heart sincerely perfected.

The poem has pleased many and pleased long—throughout two centuries. In part

it works through "pleasing melancholy"; in part it appeals to innumerable humble readers conscious of their own unheralded merit. Inevitably, since the industrial revolution, modernist critics have tended to stress its appeal to class consciousness. This appeal, real though it is, can be overemphasized. The rude forefathers are not primarily presented as underprivileged. Though poverty-stricken and ignorant, they are happy in family life and jocund in the field. "Nature is nature wherever placed," as the intellectuals of Gray's time loved to say, and the powers of the village fathers, potentially, equal the greatest; their virtue is contentment. They neither want nor need "storied urn or animated bust." If they are unappreciated by Ambition, Grandeur, Pride, et al., the lack of appreciation is due to a corruption of values. The value commended in the "Elegy" is that of the simple life, which alone is rational and virtuous—it is the life according to nature. Sophisticated living, Gray implies in the stanza that once ended the poem, finds man at war with himself and with reason; but the cool sequestered path—its goal identical with that of the paths of Glory—finds man at peace with himself and with reason. The theme was not new before Gray made it peculiarly his own, and it has become somewhat hackneyed in the last two hundred years; but the fact that it is seldom unheard in any decade testifies to its permanency of appeal, and the fact that it was "ne'er so well express'd" as in the "Elegy" justifies our love for that poem.

George Sherburn  
Harvard University

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The first edition of the "Elegy" is here reproduced from a copy in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library.

By permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College, the manuscript preserved in the library of Eton College is also reproduced. This manuscript once belonged to Gray's friend, biographer, and editor, William Mason. In spite of its dimness, due to creases in the paper and to the fact that the ink shows through from the other side of the paper, this manuscript is chosen for reproduction because it preserves the quatrains discarded before printing the poem, and has other interesting variants in text. Two other MSS of the poem in Gray's hand are known to exist. One is preserved in the British Museum (Egerton 2400, ff. 45-6) and the other is the copy made by Gray in Volume II of his Commonplace Books. This, is appropriately preserved in the library of Pembroke College, Cambridge. Sir William Fraser bequeathed to Eton College the MS there found, which in certain editions of the poem is called "the Fraser manuscript."

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AN

**ELEGY**

**WROTE IN A**

# Country Church Yard.

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*LONDON:*

Printed for R. DODSLEY in *Pall-mall*;

And sold by M. COOPER in *Pater-noster-Row*. 1751.

[Price Six-pence.]

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## **Advertisement.**

*The following POEM came into my Hands by Accident, if the general Approbation with which this little Piece has been spread, may be call'd by so slight a Term as Accident. It is this Approbation which makes it unnecessary for me to make any Apology but to the Author: As he cannot but feel some Satisfaction in having pleas'd so many Readers already, I flatter myself he will forgive my communicating that Pleasure to many more.*

The EDITOR

---

**AN**



## ELEGY, &c.

The *Curfeu* tolls the Knell of parting Day,  
The lowing Herd winds slowly o'er the Lea,  
The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way,  
And leaves the World to Darkness, and to me.

Now fades the glimmering Landscape on the Sight,  
And all the Air a solemn Stillness holds;  
Save where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight,  
And drowsy Tinklings lull the distant Folds.

Save that from yonder Ivy-mantled Tow'r  
The mopeing Owl does to the Moon complain  
Of such, as wand'ring near her sacred Bow'r,  
Molest her ancient solitary Reign.

Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yew-Tree's Shade,  
Where heaves the Turf in many a mould'ring Heap,  
Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep.

The breezy Call of Incense-breathing Morn,  
The Swallow twitt'ring from the Straw-built Shed,  
The Cock's shrill Clarion, or the ecchoing Horn,  
No more shall wake them from their lowly Bed.

For them no more the blazing Hearth shall burn,  
Or busy Houswife ply her Evening Care:  
No Children run to lisp their Sire's Return,  
Or climb his Knees the envied Kiss to share.

Oft did the Harvest to their Sickle yield,  
Their Furrow oft the stubborn Glebe has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their Team afield!  
How bow'd the Woods beneath their sturdy Stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful Toil,  
Their homely Joys and Destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful Smile,  
The short and simple Annals of the Poor.

The Boast of Heraldry, the Pomp of Pow'r,  
And all that Beauty, all that Wealth e'er gave,

Awaits alike th' inevitable Hour.

The Paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.

Forgive, ye Proud, th' involuntary Fault,  
If Memory to these no Trophies raise,  
Where thro' the long-drawn Isle and fretted Vault  
The pealing Anthem swells the Note of Praise.

Can storied Urn or animated Bust  
Back to its Mansion call the fleeting Breath?  
Can Honour's Voice provoke the silent Dust,  
Or Flatt'ry sooth the dull cold Ear of Death!

Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid  
Some Heart once pregnant with celestial Fire,  
Hands that the Reins of Empire might have sway'd,  
Or wak'd to Extacy the living Lyre.

But Knowledge to their Eyes her ample Page  
Rich with the Spoils of Time did ne'er unroll;  
Chill Penury repress'd their noble Rage,  
And froze the genial Current of the Soul.

Full many a Gem of purest Ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd Caves of Ocean bear:  
Full many a Flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its Sweetness on the desert Air.

Some Village-*Hampden* that with dauntless Breast  
The little Tyrant of his Fields withstood;  
Some mute inglorious *Milton* here may rest,  
Some *Cromwell* guiltless of his Country's Blood.

Th' Applause of list'ning Senates to command,  
The Threats of Pain and Ruin to despise,  
To scatter Plenty o'er a smiling Land,  
And read their Hist'ry in a Nation's Eyes

Their Lot forbad: nor circumscrib'd alone  
Their growing Virtues, but their Crimes confin'd;  
Forbad to wade through Slaughter to a Throne,  
And shut the Gates of Mercy on Mankind,

The struggling Pangs of conscious Truth to hide,  
To quench the Blushes of ingenuous Shame,  
Or heap the Shrine of Luxury and Pride  
With Incense, kindled at the Muse's Flame.

Far from the madding Crowd's ignoble Strife,

Their sober Wishes never learn'd to stray;  
Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
They kept the noiseless Tenor of their Way.

Yet ev'n these Bones from Insult to protect  
Some frail Memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth Rhimes and shapeless Sculpture deck'd,  
Implores the passing Tribute of a Sigh.

Their Name, their Years, spelt by th' unlettered Muse,  
The Place of Fame and Elegy supply:  
And many a holy Text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic Moralist to dye.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a Prey,  
This pleasing anxious Being e'er resign'd,  
Left the warm Precincts of the chearful Day,  
Nor cast one longing ling'ring Look behind!

On some fond Breast the parting Soul relies,  
Some pious Drops the closing Eye requires;  
Ev'n from the Tomb the Voice of Nature cries  
Awake, and faithful to her wonted Fires.

For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead  
Dost in these Lines their artless Tale relate;  
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,  
Some hidden Spirit shall inquire thy Fate,

Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,  
'Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn  
'Brushing with hasty Steps the Dews away  
'To meet the Sun upon the upland Lawn.

'There at the Foot of yonder nodding Beech  
'That wreathes its old fantastic Roots so high,  
'His listless Length at Noontide wou'd he stretch,  
'And pore upon the Brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon Wood, now frowning as in Scorn,  
'Mutt'ring his wayward Fancies he wou'd rove,  
'Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,  
'Or craz'd with Care, or cross'd in hopeless Love.

'One Morn I miss'd him on the custom'd Hill,  
'Along the Heath, and near his fav'rite Tree;  
'Another came; nor yet beside the Rill,  
'Nor up the Lawn, nor at the Wood was he.

'The next with Dirges due in sad Array  
'Slow thro' the Church-way Path we saw him born.  
'Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the Lay,  
'Grav'd on the Stone beneath yon aged Thorn.

The EPITAPH.

*Here rests his Head upon the Lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown:  
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble Birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.*

*Large was his Bounty, and his Soul sincere,  
Heav'n did a Recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a Tear:  
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a Friend  
No farther seek his Merits to disclose,  
Or draw his Frailties from their dread Abode,  
(There they alike in trembling Hope repose)  
The Bosom of his Father and his God.*

FINIS.

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## **PUBLICATIONS OF THE AUGUSTAN REPRINT SOCIETY**

FIRST YEAR (1946-47)

Numbers 1-4 out of print.

5. Samuel Wesley's *Epistle to a Friend Concerning Poetry* (1700) and *Essay on Heroic Poetry* (1693).

6. *Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the Stage* (1704) and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Stage* (1704).

SECOND YEAR (1947-1948)

7. John Gay's *The Present State of Wit* (1711); and a section on Wit from *The English Theophrastus* (1702).
8. Rapin's *De Carmine Pastoralis*, translated by Creech (1684).
9. T. Hanmer's (?) *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736).
10. Corbyn Morris' *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, etc.* (1744).
11. Thomas Purney's *Discourse on the Pastoral* (1717).
12. *Essays on the Stage*, selected, with an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch.

#### THIRD YEAR (1948-1949)

13. Sir John Falstaff (pseud.), *The Theatre* (1720).
14. Edward Moore's *The Gamester* (1753).
15. John Oldmixon's *Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter to Harley* (1712); and Arthur Mainwaring's *The British Academy* (1712).
16. Nevil Payne's *Fatal Jealousy* (1673).
17. Nicholas Rowe's *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespeare* (1709).
18. "Of Genius," in *The Occasional Paper*, Vol. III, No. 10 (1719); and Aaron Hill's Preface to *The Creation* (1720).

#### FOURTH YEAR (1949-1950)

19. Susanna Centlivre's *The Busie Body* (1709).
20. Lewis Theobald's *Preface to The Works of Shakespeare* (1734).
21. *Critical Remarks on Sir Charles Grandison, Clarissa, and Pamela* (1754).
22. Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) and *Two Rambler*

papers (1750).

23. John Dryden's *His Majesties Declaration Defended* (1681).

24. Pierre Nicole's *An Essay on True and Apparent Beauty in Which from Settled Principles is Rendered the Grounds for Choosing and Rejecting Epigrams*, translated by J.V. Cunningham.

FIFTH YEAR (1950-51)

25. Thomas Baker's *The Fine Lady's Airs* (1709).

26. Charles Macklin's *The Man of the World* (1792).

27. Frances Reynolds' *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty, etc.* (1785).

28. John Evelyn's *An Apologie for the Royal Party* (1659); and *A Panegyric to Charles the Second* (1661).

29. Daniel Defoe's *A Vindication of the Press* (1718).

30. Essays on Taste from John Gilbert Cooper's *Letters Concerning Taste*, 3rd edition (1757), & John Armstrong's *Miscellanies* (1770).

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Publications for the sixth year [1951-1952],

(At least six items, most of them from the following list, will be reprinted.)

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