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Perspective of Emotion

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By:

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The “World” of Ouyang Xiu’s Literary Work: From the Perspective of Emotion

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There are numerous researches on the biography of Ouyang Xiu; however the focus on his inner emotion is scarce. In my point of view, this aspect is actually the focal point of his life and is strongly reflected in most of his writings; from his memory of mentors and friends, his remembrance on the places visited, his writing on history, to his collections of ancient bronzes and stone tablets, his emotion is always the crucial part of his reflection and value judgment. This emotional state evolved continuously at his different period of life and different stages of writings. It was undoubtedly affected by his maturity in age and life experience but his physical, psychological and temperament conditions are the more prominent affecting factors. As a result, we can find a gap between the “Ouyang Xiu” shown in the biography and Chinese literary history compared with the “Ouyang Xiu” enshrined in his literary work. This might due to the objectivity underlined in biography and the emotional subjectivity underlined in literary works. More interestingly, the former is about reality of life and the latter is about “world” of literary works, which is not an objective reality, but was actually organized and experienced by an individual subject. This theory is put forward by the phenomenological criticism in their grasping of the “deep structures” of the author mind, which can be found in recurrent themes and patterns of imagery.¹ In other words, it is an attempt to grasp the way the writer “lived” his world. With this in mind, this paper aims to unravel the inner perception and emotions of Ouyang Xiu, with the hope that the more private self of the author could be revealed through his “world” in literature.

Sickness, Griveness and Solitary

Ouyang Xiu’s literary prose may be divided into three general categories: formal memorials and essays, casual or informal writings, and funerary writings. It is evident that Ouyang Xiu’s fame and reputation as a great writer was based largely on his skill in

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p.51.

composing various types of formal writings and documentary prose which he wrote throughout his career as a member of the bureaucracy. However, he has excluded all of his official or documentary writings in his literary collection *Jushi Ji* (居士集), a work whose contents he himself determined, but the informal writings and particular genre of funerary writings accounts for the bulk of the prose in his collection.

There is a tendency today to think of functional writing as being devoid of literary interest. However, such a notion was foreign to traditional China. The genre of the funerary writings, which consists of “grave inscriptions” (墓志铭), “funerary ode” (祭文) and “spirit-road tablet” (神道碑) is a case in point. It was written to record for posterity information about the deceased’s genealogy, his office, and his character. We might be tempted to dismiss this funerary writing as non-literary, but it was actually one of the genres of greatest literary interest.

The casual or informal writings consist primarily of four generic types: the letter (书), the preface (序), the “farewell” (赠序) and the “dedicatory inscription” (记). The four genres represent not only the bulk but also the best of his informal prose. The histories tell us that Ouyang Xiu was the leader of the Northern Song Prose Movement (北宋古文运动). However, there is nothing in the Prose Movement that actively advocates the writings of such informal prose. None of the earlier supporters produced more than a fraction of the informal prose that Ouyang Xiu produced.

As there are numerous researches had been done on his preface, farewell and inscription, I would like to discuss more on his letters and his formal memorial. In fact, it is in his letters, especially letters to his friends (together with his poetry and songs), which were not kept in his literary collection but instead collected by later literate Zhou Bida (周必大) in the (居士外集), that the essayist and moralist in Ouyang Xiu is kept far in the background, whereas the poet and the “real person” in him is very much in evidence. No earlier writer had used prose for subjective expression so often and no earlier writer consistently allowed so much personal sentiment into prose. He is more apt to make very personal remarks about his own physical pain and sickness, his grievance and loss, his reminiscence about his friends and the past or even about his solitary in life. So we are liable to connect the two in our minds, concluding that such informal prose, letters, poetry and songs was somehow “key” to the “world” of “Ouyang Xiu”, the “Ouyang Xiu” enshrined in his literary work.

It should be noted that it is a different use of implicit expression from that which researchers have been examining in Ouyang Xiu's prose pieces and poetry. His most famous essays which have set forth his remonstrations and his daring and outspoken character were all written during the early 1040s, that is, between the return to the capital that ended his first period of exile, and the calamities of 1045 that brought about his second exile. Researchers have also drawn attention before to Ouyang Xiu's accomplishment in the writing of light poem with carefree spirit, and it was stated that it is difficult to find antecedents for the precise type of spirit Ouyang Xiu captures.² Ouyang Xiu's literary values including the ideals of avoiding sorrowful, bitter verse had particular importance for his own writings.

However, it is also obvious that his prose is toned down, and hence its capacity to express everyday sentiments and record mundane information is greater. More importantly, it must be stressed that the happiness or serene is only "superficial", overlies profound worries, sadness and even great sorrow that are to be found in his informal letters and formal memorials.

This might seem rather unusual—on one side are the domestic trivial letters, and on the other side are the formal memorials with strictly enforced standard. And yet, they both delivered an extremely anxiety over illness and death. The only common feature of both informal letters and formal memorials is that they are both not considered as "literature" in the sense of writing technique and figurativeness. Therefore, the man Ouyang Xiu who writes these letters and memorials is no longer the "literature man" but more of the "social person" -- as a bureaucrat, a father and more often, a friend. He consistently delivered his sentiment expression and impressed the reader as a man who speaks his own passion without hesitation, which is different from the sensible "Ouyang Xiu" shown in the biography and Chinese literary history. He talks repeatedly in his letters about his own sickness and pain. He talks around and around his subject, building up layer after layer of narration. And the narration itself, not the illness, that should be paid more attention.

² For example, Yoshikawa Kōjirō (吉川幸次郎) has called attention to the serene or joyful element in Ouyang Xiu's poetry, stressing its historical importance. Yoshikawa Kōjirō, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, tr. Burton Watson, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, No.17, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp.64-72. See also Ronald Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007-1072)*, Cambridge, London, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp.84-99.

French critic Gérard Genette in his book *Narrative Discourse* has made a distinction between *histoire*, *recit*, *narration*, and *frequency*³. In Ouyang Xiu case, the subject matter of his recitation is illness. However, he tends to talk about his illness, which happens in present, in a past and future tense. This made his narration instead of a simple recitation of his frequent illness, changed into a conclusion of his past experience as well as a forecast of the future⁴. The frequency of his narration is another thing that needed much thought. As could be seen from his letters, he tends to repeat his statement for a few times. This not only had emphasized the frequent occurrence of his illness and embodies the chitchatting feature of his informal letters with friends, but more importantly, it had formulated unspoken words of self-defend. In other words, in the repeated narration of illness, Ouyang Xiu had in fact revealed his “upright” reasons of asking to stay away from the office in capital city or even the request for retirement.

However, in the case of talking about the death of his children, Ouyang Xiu seems to have a tendency to keep them concise. His first child was born in 1033. From 1038 to 1064, Ouyang Xiu has had another eleven children. However, from these twelve children, only four survived through the years. In other words, he had to face the death of eight children in these thirty years. His grievence is so obvious and his anxiety over his children's illness could be seen through his letters and memorials. This is quite unusual and illustrates his grievence and anxiety was in fact unbearable and his urgent need to unbosom himself. More over, his anxiety over his children had been placed on a par with his concern and self-accusation over the national affairs. Thus one can imagine how the death of his children has casted shadow over him and brought about his psychological burden.

What needs particular attention was his way of recounting. Ouyang Xiu tends to talk about his sickness repeatedly. On the contrary, when it comes to the death of his children, his narration turned into a “generalization” mode that is “happens many times, but is only narrated once”. In other words, in his confronting of the repeatedly and irreversible death, his silence has in fact show his truly grievence. It is obvious that no matter how worried

³泰瑞·伊果顿 (Terry Eagleton) 著, 吴新发译: 《文学理论导读》 (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*), 台北: 书林出版有限公司, 1995年, 第133-135页。

⁴欧阳修: 《欧阳文忠公文集》卷一百四十六《与王懿恪公君贶》其七, 第1180下页; 卷一百五十《与焦殿丞千之》其十三, 第1218上; 卷一百四十九《与梅圣俞》其三十二, 第1210上页; 卷一百五十二《与薛少卿公期》其十八, 第1233上页。《四部丛刊初编》缩印本 (以下简称《欧集》), 上海: 商务印书馆, 1936。

or troubled Ouyang Xiu is, he eventually failed to save most of his children's lives. Of all the nine boys, only four survive; while all three girls died. Death is as if destined that needs no further illustration.

It was in this shadow of death that Ouyang Xiu implied his feelings of solitary in his literature. The initial feeling of "solitary" might be due to his early experience as an orphan. In his *Memorial of Shuanggang Grave Monument* (泃冈阡表), Ouyang Xiu has stated from the very beginning that "I was unfortunate to become an orphan at the age of four."⁵ When his uncle died, he said "I am unfortunate for being orphan since young" (脩不幸幼孤)⁶; "As a child I have suffered lonely and difficulty" (孩童孤艰)⁷; when his mother died, he has expressed his feeling of "solitude and bitter" (孤苦)⁸, "solitude and at one's wits' end" (孤穷)⁹, "solitude and humble" (孤贱)¹⁰, "born in solitary and imminent adversity" (孤生多难)¹¹. In addition, his only brother is in fact his half brother. Thus his feelings of solitary became even more obvious.

We can conclude that this feeling of solitary has manifested in two different ways. Firstly, Ouyang Xiu was seen as a person with particularly high standard of morality in a declining era; secondly, his solitary protruding the in-depth and sensitive feeling one senses facing the reality of life: the dispersing of good friends and happy gathering, the facts that life is indeed lonely and solitary.

In 1045, Ouyang Xiu in his letter to Han Qi (韩琦) conveyed his "trouble due to lonesome and clumsy"¹². In 1052, he expressed again his "solitude and clumsiness"¹³. And this kind of expression continued for his entire life¹⁴. The stress on solitary by Ouyang Xiu could be seen as an "ethos". Solitary was used as a medium to convince his

⁵ 《欧集》卷二十五，第 205 下页。

⁶ 《欧集》卷二十七《尚书都官员外郎欧阳公墓志铭》，第 216 下页。

⁷ 《欧集》卷四十九《祭叔父文》，第 356 上页。

⁸ 《欧集》卷一百四十五《与苏丞相子容》其一，卷一百四十九《与梅圣俞》其二十二、其二十七，卷一百五十《与蔡交》，第 1164 下页；第 1207 下页，第 1209 上页；第 1220 下页。

⁹ 《欧集》卷一百四十五《与晏元献公同叔》其二、《与孙威敏公元规》其二、卷一百四十七《与刘学士澧》其一，第 1160 下页；第 1164 下页；第 1187 上页。

¹⁰ 《欧集》卷一百四十五《与晏元献公同叔》其二，第 1160 下页。

¹¹ 《欧集》卷一百四十七《与李留後公瑾》其一，第 1188 下页。

¹² 《欧集》卷一百四十四，第 1151 上页。

¹³ 《欧集》卷一百四十五，第 1164 下页。

¹⁴ 《欧集》卷一百四十五，第 1165 下页；卷一百四十四，第 1154 上页；卷一百四十五，第 1163 下页；卷九十六，第 742 下页；卷一百四十五，第 1167 上页；卷一百五十一，第 1223 下-1224 上页；卷一百五十二，第 1231 下页；卷一百四十四，第 1156 下页；卷一百四十五，第 1167 下页。

readers of his lonesome and clumsiness that were not suited to his time, his critical and difficult position; and thus agreed his decision of begging for county away from capital.

However, solitary that deserves to be mentioned is the one that have nothing to do with his childhood experience or excuse for retirement. This could be seen more clearly in his works during his relegation to the counties of Yiling (夷陵) and Chuzhou (滁州).

There was no one to drink with when I watch at the beautiful scene.
For the whole day I lean against the balustrade at the county office building,
alone.¹⁵

嘉景无人把酒看，县楼终日独凭栏。

I ascended the mountain and sigh.
The clear water spring reflects my white hair.
The door of the temples close, everybody had gone, only the birds sing,
And there came the beautiful moon.

我来登览登为叹息，暂照白发临清泉。
鸟啼人去庙门闩，还有山月来娟娟。¹⁶

It is a pity that this tree grows here.
No one has ever taken a look at its high branches of extremely beautiful
flowers.

The flowers are blown drop and put forth by the spring breeze.
Birds flit about in the mountain.

可怜此树生此处，高枝绝艳无人顾。
春风吹落复吹开，山鸟飞来自飞去。¹⁷

Another good example is his *Rhapsody on the Yellow Poplar Tree* (黄杨树子赋):

Deliberately bound to a place difficult of access.
Stand in solitude with no trace of man.....

¹⁵ 《欧集》卷五十六《霁后看雪走笔呈元珍判官二首》其二，第414上下页。

¹⁶ 《欧集》卷二《晋祠》，第57上页。

¹⁷ 《欧集》卷一《千叶红梨花》，第11页。

Carry with it a sturdy integrity which found no one to admire

And who to understand the solitary heart that it cherish?

偏依最险之处，独立无人之迹……负劲节以谁赏，抱孤心而谁识？¹⁸

The dynasty of Song was established in a state of internal and external troubles. Even in the “prosperous” period (盛时) of Renzong (仁宗, 1022-1063), the war did not truly cease. All sorts of social problems led to a common concern of the scholars, and yet it is beyond their control to display their abilities. In this circumstance of attempt nothing and accomplish nothing, many literati do found themselves an implicit anxiety under the surface of leisure. This anxiety might not be recognized and difficult to utter explicitly. In this state of insecure and emotional turmoil¹⁹, this might be an important reason why Ouyang Xiu had expressed in his literature a solitude consciousness and sentiment of abandonment.

This kind of formulation can also be seen in his songs, although with a different way of expression. He had used the traditional images of “high building” and “lean against the railing alone” to reflect this feelings of solitary. For example, “Lean not against the railing for the building is high” (楼高莫近危栏倚), “Drinking on the high building and talk to oneself in solitude” (高楼把酒愁独语)²⁰. As said by Murakami Tetsumi (村上哲见), though songs seems elegant and gorgeous at the surface, but deep down they had been projected a profound feeling of despair and solitary towards life and times, which has gone beyond the traditional concept of “resentment from the boudoir”²¹. In other words, this feeling of solitary has bore the imprint of the times as well as the literati background of the author. It is obvious that Ouyang Xiu has a high frequency of diction regarding solitary in his songs as compared with other songs authors before him. Only Feng Yansi (冯延巳) and Yan Shu (晏殊) might be placed in the same category. Together they enabled the transformation of the lonesome feelings that was so commonly seen in the “Songs among the Flowers” (花间词) to a more in depth precipitation of inner solitary.

¹⁸ 《欧集》卷十五，第 138 下页。

¹⁹ 李若莺：《唐宋词欣赏架构研究》，高雄师范大学国文系博士论文，1995，第 10 页。

²⁰ 《踏莎行》（候馆梅残）、《玉楼春》（残春一夜狂风雨），《欧集》卷一百三十一，第 1015 下页；卷一百三十二，第 1023 下页。

²¹ 村上哲见著，杨铁婴译：《唐五代北宋词研究》，西安：陕西人民出版社，1987，第 106 页。

It should be stated here that though Ouyang Xiu at his early stage might have had some similarity with Feng Yansi in the portray of solitary – they both had emphasized on the reluctant and hovering about of the leading character after singing and dancing gathering – Ouyang Xiu had changed, however, in the later period. He learned to appreciate the solitary after the party, after the ceased of singing and drinking. In fact, in the sad situation of “remnant flowers scattered about in a mess” (狼藉残红) and “all visitors had gone after the dispersed of the party songs” (笙歌散尽游人去), Ouyang Xiu had clearly stated his view that “the West Lake is wonderful after the withering of its’ flowers” (群芳过后西湖好). This is a solitude which Feng Yansi had found it difficult to face, and which Yan Shu had not dealt with seriously. Hereof, the practical and reasonable ways of life remains as the dominant approach that governs Ouyang Xiu’s self-conduct and behavior.

An excerpt in his Letter to Song Xian (答宋咸书) is worth to be noted: “We look ahead, yet, in vain, as there is no sight of the far gone sages. We look back and there is no sight of successors.” (茫乎前望已远之圣人而不可见, 杳乎后顾无穷之来者) Although the letter concentrates on the “lost of gist of the six classics” (六经之旨失其传), while the significance of “looking ahead” and “looking back” in the excerpt resonates with Chen Zi Ang’s (陈子昂) famous passage: “there are no sight of sages when we look ahead, no sight of successors when we look behind, in a lengthy world I am alone”. (前不见古人, 后不见来者, 念天地之悠悠) One must pay attention to the signature in the finale of the letter: “Ouyang Xiu from the Luling prefecture”(庐陵欧阳脩)²². The use of such signature appears only in the “preface” for *New History of the Five Dynasties* (新五代史序), *The Collection of Inscriptions* (集古录), as well as in the “grave inscriptions”, the memorial tablet of tomb (墓表), the miscellany (杂记), the “foreword” of prose and poetry, the “farewell”, and postscript (题跋). This is the mere occasion when a signature is used in a correspondence. Ouyang’s intense feelings of desolation have implicitly revealed his initial awareness and contemplation on the importance of family history and his psychological changes when one begins to situate himself within the flows of history²³. This letter to Song Xian was written in the year of 1055. Four years later, Ouyang Xiu had completed *The Genealogy of the Ouyang* (欧阳氏谱图). He had traced clearly the

²² 《欧集》卷四十七, 第 345 下页。

²³ 谢佩芬: 《欧阳修书牍探论》, 《纪念欧阳修一千年诞辰国际学术研讨会论文集》, 台北: 台大中文系, 2009, 第 288-289 页。

beginning, migration, career at the government, and experiences of his ancestors. Using this as an entry point, he built the genealogy of his family by setting up the representation of his ancestral sages (先君诸父), which points to the foundation for self positioning. Again, he used his experiences as an 'unfortunate orphan' as a starting point for his narration: "for the family members of Ouyang, be loyal to our rulers, be dutiful to our parents, be honest as servants, and engage yourself with lifelong learning." (传於其家者, 以忠事君, 以孝事亲, 以廉为吏, 以学立身)²⁴

In 1070, the *Memorial of Shuanggang Grave Monument* was completed. It should be noted that it has been sixty years after Ouyang's father's death. This timing can be regarded as very unusual. Ouyang explained that "It is not my intention for the delay. Hitherto it has to be waited"²⁵. One might query as to what is to be waited. In my opinion, Ouyang Xiu might be influenced by his strong belief pertaining to the sustainability of his own writing. He was impeccable to his writing for the memorial inscription for other people, so did to the writing to commemorate his own father. Thus the possible reason for Ouyang's incessant editing which had prolonged for sixty years could be his concern on the intelligibility of the text, which takes into consideration that it should avoid as being read as a work for self-arrogance. Nevertheless, the reason that "it has to be waited" might also point to the expectation towards personal achievements, that, with all his might and effort, Ouyang Xiu worked as an official in the anticipation that he might be rewarded by the Emperor, in which the rewards could contribute to and make his family as well as ancestors to be proud and glorified. Ouyang's initial writing of the *Memorial Tablet of Tomb of Late Father* (先君墓表) to the completion of *Memorial of Shuanggang Grave Monument* represents the accomplishment of his personal achievements. It also indicates the actual completion in the shaping of the virtue image of his father, which was also the ultimate role model for Ouyang to follow in his whole life — based on the narration of his mother.

Ouyang's unique experiences, on one hand, demonstrate that he had explored inwardly in writing about his solitary and vulnerability. On the other hand, by drawing on a detached aesthetic perspective and dispassion, he had examined and reconstructed the genealogy of his family roots and the robustness of life that endures the challenges of

²⁴ 《欧集》卷七十一, 第 533 上页。

²⁵ 《欧集》卷二十五《泷冈阡表》, 第 207 上页。

times. The value of life lies in here for its crystallization and establishment, although it does not assuage the pain one experiences in life.

Sans Euphoria: The Undertone of Life

During the Northern Song Dynasty, although Ouyang was recognized as a prominent politician, a scholar of classic texts, a historian, a literary sovereign, etc, it is through literature that he expresses his inner world behind his achievement and accomplishment. Readers who come across Ouyang's life history and biography may find different pictures of his life which diverge from what the ordinary literary history reveals—the undertone of Ouyang's life is in fact, the discourse around “sickness”, “sorrow” and “solitary”. We may be able to understand further about the inner world of this literary giant through the reading of his corresponding letters and official documents. As both a writer and a literary prominent figure, his readers may include the emperors, government leaders or famous poets. However, the repeated contents throughout Ouyang's letters are ordinary events, such as “eyes diseases” (目疾), “pain on the left arm” (左臂疼痛), “teeth problems” (齿牙摇脱), “swollen at the neck and cheek” (颈颊间又为肿核)...The complaints about these sicknesses are not in any way avoided even in the memorials to the imperial court. In these short letters and memorials, the words are in use to describe trifles and problems in real life, including inevitable episodes such as disease, grief, death, old age and loneliness in life. Besides spending decades in writing about the topics of sickness, Ouyang was also repeatedly hit by the deaths of loved ones or close friends. This has combined with a profound personal understanding of solitary in shaping the silhouette of his emotional experience.

Furthermore, when studying Ouyang's correspondence with his friends, it seems that “boredom” (无聊) and “dullness” (无趣) is the regular sentiment that he incessantly has had during the sunset of his life. For instances, “the depression of mind” (心志萧条), “the monotony of feeling” (情棕索然), “the scarcity of joy” (少欢意), “the absence of pleasure in life” (鲜棕). Frequently, his writing points to the themes of “sans happiness” (无棕) and “scarcity of joy” (鲜欢) which are repeatedly emerged throughout his letters. It seems that Ouyang has attempted to express a seemingly helpless state of desolation, a state of mind filled with boredom, a disillusion towards mortal life—and this is somehow related to his own experiences of life.

The randomness and leisure as reflected in Ouyang's writing, such as "the scenery is beautiful and lovely" (物色晴妍, 深可爱), "I was so happy yesterday" (昨日颇欢)²⁶, or "invite a few good mates to gather over chitchatting... and have a nice cup of tea" (约数君奉同闲话一日.....佳水烹一两盃茶)²⁷, "lying under the blanket to read the *Miscellanea of Li Tai Bai*" (拥被卧读《太白集》)²⁸ are rarely found in his letters. In fact, the expression of his "restricted" happiness "he he" (呵呵), which is different from the roar of laughter "ha ha" (哈哈/绝倒) is also rare. There are only twelve occurrences in which such expression is found: five in Ouyang's early letters, as in the *Letters to Wang Jidao* (与王几道復) in 1034; *Letters to Mei Shengyu* (与梅圣俞) in 1039, 1044 and 1046; and *Letters to Wang Yike* (与王懿恪公君贶) in 1055²⁹. Ouyang has had a prosperous career during the period of *Jiayou* (嘉祐 1056-1063). However, only six occurrences of "he he" are found in his writings during this period. Such expression is no longer appearing after 1060. It reemerges only in 1072 when Ouyang retires and stays in the city of Yingzhou (颍州). It is then that the writings of "the delight of taking pleasure in the blossom of flowers" (一赏群芳之盛)³⁰ reappear.

In other words, despite his successful career and his great achievement in literature, it does not seem to assuage the physical pain of his body, the grievousness of his mind and the desolation of his spirit. Even at time of *Jiayou*, his power and high rank did not ensure his happiness and self-complacent which he once enjoyed during his youth. The "rational" scholar side of Ouyang Xiu has gradually replaced the passionate side of Ouyang Xiu. From someone who is "upright and unbending" (狷而刚)³¹, someone who stands to bear the critics and furious of many (横身当众怒), that turns into someone who "look ahead in vain" and "look back and find no sight of successors", this may not be the entire truth of Ouyang's late life. Nevertheless, this is the "true image"/the "world" that he tangibly constructs and presents throughout his literary works.

²⁶ 《欧集》卷一百四十八《与刘侍读原父》其七, 第1191下页, 第1192上页。

²⁷ 《欧集》卷一百五十一《与刁学士约》, 第1225下页。

²⁸ 《欧集》卷一百五十一《答丘寺丞》, 第1226下页。

²⁹ 《欧集》卷一百五十, 第1220上页; 卷一百四十九, 第1204下-1205上页, 第1206上页, 第1206上下页; 卷一百四十六, 第1179下页。

³⁰ 《欧集》卷一百四十五《与吕正献公晦叔》其四, 第1162下页。

³¹ 《欧集》卷五十《祭梅圣俞文》, 第359下页。