GRAHAM OVENDEN : ANATOMIES OF INNOCENCE

by

Jerrold Northrop Moore

PARTLY BASED ON CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ARTIST

volume 1

Anatomies of Innocence

Graham Ovenden's memories reach back more than sixty years now; and he celebrates memory as a creative resource. He recently observed to me: 'Once the mind can track onto a memory, you can actually make it concrete and very vivid. Time-scale is not something which has a great deal of relevance to it.'

His first home was on the edge of the little Hampshire town of Alresford – 'still one of the most beautiful English county towns,' he reckons. The house itself was a two-down-two-up end of terrace cottage, already too small for the growing family. Graham had arrived as a second child in 1943, after an elder sister. The small spaces inside the cottage encouraged outdoor adventure from the earliest:

> If you went down to the bottom of Dene Road, where we lived, it comes to a dead end at the shallows of the little River Aire. I can remember as a child being most intrigued by the beautiful clarity of the water flowing through that chalk country: every morning with the water weeds – very very beautiful forms continually ebbing and flowing. There's a physical freshness about it.
>
> Now I am an insomniac and suffer from headaches. When I look into those crystal clear streams, I return to a state where my head wasn't like that – when one was unfettered, unburdened, and could simply accept.
>
> I still do, indeed, every day I look out the window. There is much that is joyous, much that is ravishing. But the mature obverse of that is a certain degree of anguish.
>
> The little river flowing past the bottom of our road branched round in a large arc. It was, and still is, basically as it had been for centuries. If you walk along the bank to the right, you come to a fulling-mill, a black-and-white structure built across the water. Then it was almost derelict: that's terribly romantic.

Romantic because it invites visions of what might have been.

> If you walk to the left – the adventurous rout – you eventually reach Fob Down, and then right the way round past watercress beds to the Eel House: another building crossing the river on brick arches. Here they trapped eels in season (and still do).
>
> So the commerce of the country was brought home to me very very early. A child of that age doesn't understand the aesthetics. One accepts things for what they are – their beauty. At Alresford I was the child in grace, totally.

He explored these places first in the company of a grandfather who had been a country baker. Soon Graham went alone:

> They always talk about the 1960s and 1970s as the opening of freedoms, particularly sexual freedoms. But I can tell you that the freedoms one had as a child just after the Second World War have had no equal since. No traffic on the roads: if you went anywhere, you cycled. And I was a great cyclist from the age of six onwards. So one got around and probably saw far more than the average child does today. All they see is from a television screen.

His early settings were not all pastoral. Opposite the Ovendens' cottage was the gasworks, busy but unguarded. Graham recalls:

> You could just wander in – even to where they were stoking the retorts. There was no internal lighting, only the great hell-fire glowing red retorts. To see them, and even to help pull the clinker out with the rakers, was excitement indeed to a young man of six. I look back on it and see the beginnings of my fascination with vivid reds and oranges.

Later he would use these hot colours to climax his visionary landscapes.

The Ovendens' cottage was itself lit by gas. It gave a warm, golden light – less searching than electric bulbs, more conducive to shadow-contrasts of every subtlety. Graham was in the last generation to know from his beginnings this special interior light.

Inside the cottage his mother, an accomplished pianist, taught music through keyboard skills to each of her children in turn. 'It was', Graham remembers, 'a necessary part of one's childhood.' He enjoys it still through his own playing of Bach and Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann. But when at seven he was given a set of oil paints in little round drums, he found his own expression.

> I can remember the joy of being able to manipulate a body-colour, and to do things which you couldn't do in any other medium. Oil paint was a special revelation.
>
> I remember being told to go to bed about nine o'clock in the evening, having sat there the whole afternoon and the whole evening painting away in a state of real excitement. I was painting landscapes – the slightly romantic things that children will do.

In 1951, when he was eight, the family moved to the northern edge of Southampton. The new home was larger, and lit by electricity. Here the boy encountered a new emotion – some loss of his own past. 'I've missed Alresford, certain aspects of it, all my life.'

The Southampton house lay along another unpaved road leading to industrial remains. It was an abandoned brickworks with pottery kilns. This site was vast, yet here too the children explored at will - from underground tunnels to slides down forty-foot cliffs remaining from the clay extractions.

Graham's father, an engineer who had worked for Barnes Wallis during the War, was in need of new employment to support his growing family. Taking Graham down to the Docks, they met an unforgettable sight: the last of the great four-stack transatlantic liners, the Cunard-White Star *Aquatania*, in her final call on the way to the breakers's yard. Here was another aspect of the past – previously unknown to Graham, yet like the country of Alresford slipping helplessly astern.

'At the age of eight - nine - ten, this is where *me* begins to come to terms with art.' The first of these terms was a dawning understanding that art was more than simple transcripts of experience. It began when his father brought home a book rescued as war-salvage from a bombed-out rectory. *German Romantic Artists* contained black-and-white reproductions, among which Graham picked out the pictures of Caspar David Friedrich. Handling the book now, he sees first hints of his own hill and moorland visions:

> Friedrich is the great master of painting mountain landscapes. I'm quite amazed that I can look at them and be inspired and awed in the way that I am when I look into Palmer's Valley of Vision. (It's a different vision, but he has a personal identification with that sort of terrain.)
>
> Friedrich still has an identification with that time in my life: the great mystery - the great seeing beyond the horizon - the edge of the sea. All of Friedrich's finest paintings have that very poetic quality.

In 1954, when he was eleven, Graham painted a fully fledged landscape – and sold it. (It is reproduced here for the first time, lent back for the purpose by the son of the original purchaser).

The eleven year-old's picture shows fully for the first time an influence that was to dominate his painting for the next half dozen years, and that is with him still – the art of Claude Lorraine. Here is Claude's formula of foreground trees, with a space opening between them.

In this very early work, the distant goal is perhaps less hidden than unresolved. None the less, the young artist's pathway stands open, and his painting technique is fully up to rendering the multifarious tree forms, their lights and shadows.

The mature artist reflects:

> Claude is one of the most seminal figures in landscape paining. His paintings are profoundly wonderful experiences. *There* is the image of the Golden Age, the Garden of Eden, held and made concrete - almost as if one's most ecstatic dreams were caught and held.
>
> From childhood I was aware that painting had this quality about it. Though Friedrich was closer to my own physical ideals of painting, Claude had the more potent influence on me. He taught me that painting is not just about picture-making - that there are other levels lying within the painting which you could express.
>
> I think that's a point of departure for any artist. Roger Fry and the whole of his philosophy doesn't really do that: it stops at the marks you make on the canvas - rather than the marks becoming an entrance, a gate opening into the great paradise...

With pocket money from delivering newspapers on his cycle, he found his way into second-hand shops with stacks of old gramophone records. He was so electrified with Bach performances by the great harpsichordist Wanda Landowska that at twelve, in 1955, he built from scratch his own harpsichord. Its lid and case he decorated with ideal landscapes painted with some accomplishment in the manner of Claude Lorraine.

He began to ask where Claude Lorrain's inspiration had come from, and who had preceded him. Looking back, Ovenden observes:

> There are certain precedents to Claude. One of them is Leonardo. Leonardo paints the most amazing landscape – an artist whose sense of eye and understanding of structure in nature was second to none.

He cites *The Annunciation,* thought to be mostly an early work by Leonardo: ' both figures and landscape painted with great delicacy, precision and refinement'.

> Though it's a very formal landscape, I feel one of the most breathtaking passages in the whole of Western art. It's a profoundly moving, mysterious landscape, where the veil of atmosphere lies.
>
> I love the formalisation of it. It's the sort of thing you get in Flemish painting – where the Garden of Eden has been organised, if you like. One feels very safe in those paintings. (In the art and the world we live in now, there's so much static going on: so much news – bad news usually). Safety in that sense is a very difficult quality to achieve.

If art ment more than transcribing nature, it also meant more than copying the work of predecessors. The year of the painted harpsichord, 1955, saw Ovenden beginning to glimpse a goal for himself. A smaller square painting of 1955 shows new unity and strengh. It comes through more assured brushwork, leading away from tight classical formulas through bolder

contrasts of light and shadow for the first time to a new dynamic composition which he still identifies as his own.

A quicker means of fixing his impressions had come with a Kodak Brownie camera given him when he was nine. At twelve he took his first photographs known to survive, developed and printed at home. In one composition an old harrow stands half buried in weeds: the huge spoked wheel makes a foreground focus for thick summer air over fields back to their horizon of hedgerow trees. It is, the mature Ovenden reflects, 'probably an example of my enduring fascination with nature encroaching on man's works'. Nature taking back her own – a healing process.

Another photograph of this time gives the vegetable world a strong hint of the animal. His close-up study of a huge ancient tree-bole is trimmed at the edges to enforce its resemblance to a gigantic torso: raised on squat bandy legs, with huge arms pollarded by the print-edge, it powerfully suggests a great ape rejoicing in its strength.

Around this time the budding artist was taken to visit a cousin in the East End of London. Here terraces of ruined dwellings and warehouses still showed the War's bomb damage. Yet against those wrecks of the past came lively girls playing – from toddlers to adolescents like himself, with knowledge beyond their years:

They seemed to be the logical foil for those vast and monumental works of man in the East End. I couldn't have been less interested in the great buildings of the *West* End. It was the back streets, the perspectives of long-terraced houses intermingled with factories and strange derelict back yards. The child fleetingly passes in front of it all: the melodic line against the great architectural structure of the music.

The fourteen year old in 1956 felt an irresistible wish to take his camera there. He was earning enough from his newspaper rounds to find the return fare (and to pay a friend to do the weekend rounds):

I used to catch the early train on a Saturday. I would sleep rough over Saturday night (factory vents are valuable places to sleep because of the warm air coming out) – and come back by the last train Sunday. I went at all seasons – probably twenty to twenty-five weekends a year.

(The photographing weekends were to go on for eight years – until his admission to the Royal College of Art made living in London obligatory and 'negated the mystery of visiting it'.)

The mystery may have had its roots at home in his own childhood. When Graham was six, his next younger sister Lesley had died of pneumonia. Asked whether his fleeting impressions of her could have touched off his interest in photographing little girls, the mature Ovenden answers:

It's not something I have ever sat down and analysed. As a very young child, one doesn't understand the nature of death: children appear, and then they go away. But I think, with the sense of loss as one grows away from the state of innocence and 'grace', it could well be. It could well be.

Lesley had not followed him and the younger Ovendens as they moved through childhood and towards maturity. The half-ruined East End neighbourhoods where the little girls still played sharpened the edge of innocence.

I think probably from the earliest age I was partly aware of ghosts. I don't mean ghosts in the sense of gothic horror-haunt: but the fact that life was a passing, fleeting moment.

Every landscape and every environment in which I find myself is haunted in that sense. I am aware of the presence of past individuals – not specifically, but as a whole. When I'm in a landscape, one is aware not only of the physical perspective, but the perspective of the time. And also the timelessness.

As he became expert at anticipating momentary compositions of the East End girls in constant animation, the adolescent photographer found himself more and more attracted to the smaller figures. They were the girls farthest from his own age: so they might revive in his camera an innocence already appealing to the adolescent artist as belonging to his own past.

> Nobody ever said to me 'You're too young to be doing this'. There was none of this stupid political nonsense that goes on now – that behind every dark shadow is a paedophile. It's one the great corruptions of the last two hundred years.

The mature Ovenden identifies the real guilt ' not in him who takes the fig-leaf off to reveal nature's truth, but in him who puts the fig-leaf on to conceal it.'

> This passion for girls in their season of spring begins very very early. I think I can understand the sort of imagery Dickens had of women – the angel child.

Soon his photography of the East End girls led him back to his first medium:

> I suddenly realised it was possible to expand the instant of time to something other. By the age of fourteen or fifteen I started seriously drawing them.
>
> I had to work hard at drawing the human figure. I still had no formal instruction. I simply sat down and worked away at it, throwing acres of paper away in the process. It's the way I've done everything: if there was a problem to be solved, there was only one person to solve it.
>
> As an artist, one becomes quite excited when one is sufficiently accomplished actually to be able to put down one's thoughts and responses in pencil and paint. So the photography and painting were growing side by side.

Laying side by side the two themes in his art - landscape and the figure - the young man began to explore their interconnections within himself. The mature Ovenden reflects:

> One's art is bound to change formally as one gets older: but in essences, no. Not one iota changed since the days of tiddler-fishing in the shallows of the Aire.
>
> One of the reasons I draw and paint little girls is that I love long hair and its rhythms. The parallel to that is looking into those wonderful trout streams which you get in chalk country. The water is clear as a bell: looking at the weeds in it, one sees the continual ebbing and flowing rhythms. And as I say that, immediately the child running down the road with its hair flowing behind it comes to mind.

So the fascination of other childhoods deepened the landscape of his own life's beginning at Alresford. The innocence of earliest consciousness, lost in gathering experience, could be recaptured through memory and imagination. In their expression, past and present - innocence and experience - might rejoin each other as two halves of the apple. Why reconstitute the apple? To see life whole from its beginning.

Ovenden's upbringing included regular church attendance (twice on Sundays), with frequent chances to ring the bells. But his art from earliest times was and is about earthly life. In his Garden, life touches full maturity only when remembered innocence finds its place within growing experience. It is not the 'fortunate fall' of Milton's *Paradise Lost* - nor any unfortunate fall either. There is no fall in Ovenden's art, because there is no guilt. It is a diptych where either panel matures understanding of the other.

Here is an English understanding older than Milton. Graham Ovenden's art revives in secular terms an apposition seen in the contrasting panels of the fourteenth-century Wilton Diptych. Innocence is there on the right, taking form in the Virgin Mother and Holy Child surrounded by angels and attendants (one of whom holds a standard bearing the Banner Cross of St.George). The Child looks and gestures left - towards his mature form as Christ, opposite.

On the left panel the mature Christ presents – to the image of his own innocence opposit – the kneeling figure of the King of England in the person of Richard II. The King is supported by the English royal saints: Edward the ring-giver to St John the Baptist in front, Edmund the martyr behind.

So innocence and experience face and explicate each other. It is the achievement of Graham Ovenden's art to have renewed this old ideal for our time.

* * *

His formal education had begun at an old fashioned Dame School in Alresford, followed by large schools in Southampton.There was no art instruction until his parents accepted his destiny as an artist and allowed him to enter Southampton College of Art at seventeen in 1960. His most valued tacher there was the head of print making, James Sellars (1927-2000). Sellars was also a considerable painter in tempera, pastel and gouache. His teaching bore directly on the landscape side of things. Ovenden recalls:

> Like all artists of true substance, James Sellars held to his inner visions. His intellect was well honed both in writing and in teaching, yet there was no dry formality. The richly and intensely observed ' portraits' of his Test Valley temperas are as see*n* and *felt* as any in English landscape. (*right*)
>
> He always did his own work with us, so you became part and parcel. Quite stern: that was something I thrived on, because I was always a hard worker. But he would also listen to criticism – for I didn't stand shoulder to shoulder with him in certain areas like Matisse, which he deeply loved.

One Sellars enthusiasm struck deep in the young Ovenden: the art of Samuel Palmer. (Years later Ovenden was able to return the favour by securing a commission for Sellars to write the first full-length biography of Palmer to appear in modern times.)

Ovenden's first surviving oil paintings reach back to his time with Sellars at the Southampton College of Art. Their subjects already occupy the ground his landscapes have held ever since: hills and valleys, trees and fields, skies and horizons entirely lonely. From the first (and in marked contrast to much Sellars's work), Ovenden's places are glowingly coloured – as if they would relight the golden glow of gas-lighting in the first house at Alresford.

Two small oils from around 1960 hold reflections of Sellars's bicycle expeditions with his pupils westwards into Dorset and the moorlands of the Purbeck peninsula about Swanage.

Both are hotly coloured, to catch the brilliant sunlight near the coast: yellows concentrate towards orange, thence moving into reds and light purples. The estuary picture shows a presence hardly ever to reappear in Ovenden's mature landscapes – the sails of a tourist boat. Both pictures follow the broad brush work of Sellars's art. But the mound in the estuary picture reaches towards the 'stumpwork embroidery' textures of the early Samuel Palmer.

Several tiny landscape studies in oil, around 1962, extend experiments in finer brushwork. One uses colours in very soft focus to shadow forth larger forms. Others contrast Sellars's long brush-strokes through foreground grasses with middle-ground trees and bushes rendered in Palmerish dappling; while Ovenden's softest focus is kept for distant hills, horizons and skies. A *Landscape with Moon* of 1963 (the year before he left Southampton College) moves more deliberately towards Palmer's contrasted areas of worked textures.

Ovenden spent 1964 – 65 as an enforced gap year while waiting for a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London. He supported himself by employment with a builder's merchant. The head of a section there was a man of some sophistication, who introduced his wife and daughter Lorraine. The 10-year-old Lorraine, with her parents' consent in that less guilty era, became Ovenden's model for a new series of formal nude camera studies.

Such photographs, as well as his pencil drawings of girls, celebrated discoveries in smooth tones and textures. To bring them to his landscapes, in the same year Ovenden began a series of monochrome studies of Dorset moorlands in pen, conte and wash. Looking at these drawings one could, if so inclined, read a mons veneris breaking one horizon, a penis head dominating the hills of another. The mature artist retains no memory of any deliberate sexual presentations in these drawings: but the artist who drew them was twenty-one.

To expand his landscape for vision, Ovenden turned westwards to Dartmoor. Putting his bicycle in the train to Plymouth, he headed out of the city to stay with his mother's aunt and uncle in their large house on the southern edge of the moor. Its reaches of secret valley and distant tor opened new chances to extend his landscape towards the female figure – this time in maturity. Graham's visits to Dartmoor, for a month or six weeks each summer, were to continue until the end of his time at the Royal College of Art in 1968. Several tor-studies around 1964 –

Moor Spirit 1967

65 take his brushwork back in rougher directions – beyond Palmer's 'stumpwork' to the threshold of Van Gogh.

Aggresive brush work was much in fashion. But it could nullify a quality which Ovenden was coming to value above all others: luminosity, in the reflection of light through colours.

> I discovered that if you use impasto – thick, three-dimensional application of oil paints – to any great extent, then when light falls on the picture, it is broken up by falling on the various angles of the impasto surface.
>
> That reduces colour values. The impasto painters then try to remedy the loss of colour by increasing crudity.

Ovenden wanted unimpeded colour *through* unimpeded light. It is the luminosity which meets the eye when looking at the sky – the source of light. Here his teacher was Turner:

> Turner's impasto in his oils was never hugely thick, and so his oils achieve luminosity. His oil painting really comes from watercolour techniques: probably subconsciously, his watercolour techniques guided his oil painting.

Ovenden's first written paper at the Royal College of Art was on Turner's watercolours.

He sought the same luminosity in his paintings and drawings of figures: ' To draw a girl child, you have to be able to draw almost like Holbein.' The goal of such drawing had been defined by the young Samuel Palmer in a sequence of contrasts noted in his sketchbook:

> 1st. the firm enamel of a beautiful young face, with
> 2nd. going down from the forehead smooth and unbroken over the shoulders, Hair, wondrous sleek, and silkily melting...into
> 3rd. a background of the crisp mosaic of various leaved young trees thinnishly inlaid on the smooth sky.

Everything in this sequence springs from the bright skin of youth.

Palmer's note met Ovenden's eye only later. Yet it encapsulates something his art had recognised from at least the time when the boy had begun to photograph East End children. ' Light and luminosity', he observes today, ' are the symbols of our spirituality.' Spirituality has always about it the hint of innocence. Allowing any insistent technique to overtake light stands for Ovenden as an ultimate perversion – equivalent to harnessing innocence to the demands of mature sexuality.

The entire ensemble of Ovenden's mature techniques is directed to the service of light and luminosity. He applies his oil colours straight from the tube. For the past thirty years and more, his whole 'palette' has consisted of five tubes of permanent colours: cadmium red, cadmium lemon, titanium white, viridian, cobalt blue (with occasional

use of cyrillian blue). Having laid in his design in watercolours, the best translucence and reflective power lies in applying each mixed hue as a thin glaze. That is allowed to dry thoroughly before he applies any further hue (also thinly) over the first.

Some of this understanding was already his when the twenty-two year-old Ovenden entered the Royal College of Art in 1965. There he found opposite counsels prevailing. He had no wish to trowel thicknesses of premixed colours in the fashion demanded by nearly all the College teachers then. Several of them were quite ready to use Ovenden's paintings of girls to bolster their discomfort with his unconventional techniques – and their disapproval of his insistence on subject matter before aggressive technique. Standing against the prevailing winds turned Ovenden into a fighter when necessary. It sharpened self-reliance and self-knowledge side by side.

The outstanding exception to nay-saying among the Royal College teaching staff was Peter Blake (b. 1932). Blake's own painting was influenced by Pop art: that gave prominence to subject matter in his work unusual among the College teachers. Beyond this, Blake's soft deep voice and his quiet presence exuded strength and gentle judgment. Soon he began to play a vital part in helping Ovenden to hold onto what he had already achieved – in the face of most persistent cross-questionings aimed at denigrating his ideals.

Blake was certainly interested in the girls of Ovenden's subject matter. But it was Ovenden's landscape painting that began to turn teacher-pupil formality almost inside out – as Blake looked over Ovenden's shoulder saying: 'I have to keep coming and looking at the way you paint landscapes'.

Altogether, Ovenden remembers, Peter Blake gave him the courage not to be afraid of being precise. It was less any specific technical training than a reassurance that subject matter remains at the centre of visual expression. The human presence – whether shown in landscape or rendered only in the high finish of the artist's work – is a traditional English formula. Blake's interest throughout Ovenden's three years at the Royal College served as a constant reminder of the tradition.

Less than a year out of the Royal College, in March 1969 Ovenden married the artist Ann Gilmore. Soon they started a family. By 1973 they judged that he had gained sufficient presence with the London dealers to be able to move to the country. ' I'd wanted to get back to the country ever since I'd stepped out of it,' he recalls: ' I need to be surrounded by nature.' The choice fell on Cornwall, at the edge of Bodmin Moor. It extended the inspiration of Dartmoor.

In the upper reaches of a small valley with its own stream, Ovenden set about building his dream house. Much as he valued the chances his parents had given him, there were to be no more cramped quarters. The new house would be a mansion – the only major Gothic Revival house raised in England since the Second World War. Much of ' Barley Splatt' (the traditional name of the property) was built over the next decade from Ovenden's plans – a lot of it with his own hands.

Within a year of the move to Cornwall, he began to paint pictures of a kind new in his art. A double portrait of their friend Jenny Dyke and her six-year-old daughter Sophie is dated 1974. Smooth skin framed with long hair is matched by a long-lined Cornish landscape behind them – all worked in clear luminosities. Two or three solid blocks of colour about them nod towards Cubism. Ovenden observes now:

> If you look at my figure painting, you'll notice there's a lot of structure - verticals, horizontals and that type of geometry goes in. As often as not, the figures will stand *into* the geometry.The geometry is also there in the landscape, but more subtly.

These hints of abstraction opened ways between Ovenden's figures and his landscapes. Yet no mere formula could challenge his subject matter. Cubism recedes into a dark hedge (end-stopped by a gatepost) in the most famous of his early ensembles of girls in rich landscapes. *The Old Garden* (1974, 1976–1978) juxtaposes its excluding hedge-front (left) with wild moorland grasses (right) across a shadowy stream. About the stream two girls raise their own contrasts of expression, dress and undress, fingering their melodies as finely as any Lewis Carroll photograph. (*Alice In Wonderland* has proved a theme of lifelong fascination for Ovenden.)

The most celebrated Ovenden portrait-in-landscape was shown at the Royal Academy in 1976. Behind that exhibition lay a remarkable story. The subjects in his double portrait are Peter Blake and his daughter Juliette. Blake had moved with his wife, the sculptor Jann Haworth, and their young family to Wiltshire. There he had been welcomed with exhibitions in Bath and Bristol. For a mixed show of 'Peter Blake's Choice', he sought out other artists in the area including David Inshaw, Graham and Ann Arnold. Those three shared the wish to paint country subjects with fine techniques: and they often used thin glazes. It was so contrary to prevailing fashions that Inshaw and the Arnolds had formed a tiny ' Brotherhood'. Blake's mind instantly went to Graham and Annie Ovenden in Cornwall. In March 1975 they all met at Blake's house, and that day formed ' The Brotherhood of Ruralists' (a word chosen by their friend Laurie Lee).

Peter Blake, recently made a Royal Academician, was to hang the Academy Summer Exhibition for 1976. He half-promised the 'Ruralists' a wall of their own work, if each would paint a picture to show his feelings for the group. Graham Ovenden so valued this extension of his own ideals that he made his Academy picture a double portrait of Blake and his daughter – in their Wiltshire garden before an old brick wall overgrown with plants and weeds and flowers.

In all of Ovenden's portraits-in-landscape, both elements are rendered with equal richness. Yet the balance could not be kept. His landscapes were more and more made from diverse impressions, remembered and reshaped toward new syntheses. The girls in his art, by contrast, remained mostly prepubescent or on the cusp. So their ideal, in the nature of things, steadily opened a distance from the artist's accumulating years and experience.

Thus pressure mounted for Ovenden to separate his figure-paintings from his landscapes. Since the later 1970s he has painted only the very occasional girl in an elaborated landscape. The majority of his paintings are firmly one or the other.

Still human anatomy lent its lines and volumes to Ovenden landscapes. In *The Burning Bush* (a small intense oil-with-chalk of 1975) one of the main roots extends an astonishing likeness of human leg or even full-length figure towards the rich stalks of a Samuel Palmerish harvest.

Palmer had been especially forward in using paper itself as a base of luminosity in his watercolours. Paper provides Ovenden with an equally effective luminosity through the thin glazes of his oils. *The Burning Bush* shows secret lights everywhere. They appear in the upper corner of blue sky and fleecy cloud merging to softest horizon. Increasing definition leads the eye downwards and forwards to a climax in the brilliant yellow of the bush.

Sometimes an Ovenden landscape half fills with a single colour (thus far reminiscent of the solid colour blocks in some of his portraits). Such an area appears in *The Obelisk* (1979, the first of several paintings inspired by an obelisk on Bodmin Moor). Here richest yellow spreads up, in soft buttock-like shapes, through nearly two-thirds of the picture. The yellow is so powerful that it calls out purples in the middle ground to mediate back to the greens of trees and blues of farthest hills and sky. Atop the last horizon the needle-like obelisk rises as if to mark a point for new definition.

* * *

From 1975 the Ruralists had shared their holidays. They took two or three Landmark Trust cottages in the remote hamlet of Coombe, fifty miles north of the Ovendens' extending house, and close to the Cornish coast at Morwenstow. This new place showed Ovenden a new luminosity. The softer brightness of sea air extended his painted lights again. A watercolour *Tree near Coombe* (1977) evokes a rain-washed tree stem rooted amid rocks whose wetness reduces them (with a few middle-ground bushes and distant hills) to soft near-planes of colour.

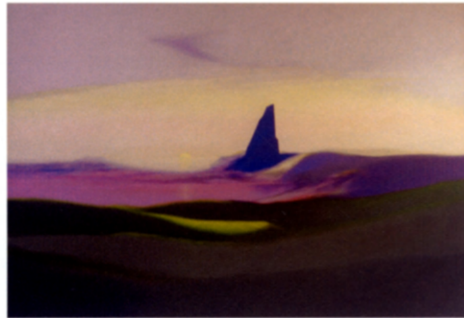
He also began making camera studies of sea and land at Sharpnose point off Morwenstow. Most of his photographs there show the sea at flat calm: that affords greatest contrast with the headland's rocky profile. Flat calm water also offers a maximum reflection of light.

This formula was soon enriching Ovenden's oil paintings. A rough sea, like a thick impasto of paint, would break up and disperse the light which it is always Ovenden's goal to preserve. His only pure seascape without any land shows its flat calm water with shapes, confined to the clouds above. (Painted for a 1984 exhibition devoted to Elgar, it is called *The Enigma*.)

Painting land directly at the flat sea's edge, he often faced a strand equally flat. That would need something further to make a picture. And here came an unusual case of Ovenden's landscapes touched by his reading. In 1982–83 he found himself enthralled by Walter de la Mare's *The Connoisseur and other Stories*. One was called 'All Hallows' after a lonely cathedral rising beside a western sea. Its' landward side is guarded by nearly impenetrable hills, through which a solitary walker makes his way in late afternoon. Descending, he enters – to find the vast interior haunted by a single verger. In the gathering darkness the verger shows him secret places in the fane – where ruinous masonry seems to be under repair by forces not at all divine.

Ovenden painted a large *All Hallows* (*The Sea Cathedral*). Sharp angles define dead-white surfaces with slits for windows – all deeply shadowed in blue back-light from the western sea and sky. The building's hardness elicits by its contrast some softness in the surrounding horizontal planes of nearly treeless ground at the coast. So it shows man's monstrosity imposed on nature.

A series of seaside monoliths followed. For a London show the Ruralists were to paint Biblical subjects, Ovenden chose *The Tower of Babel*: on a canvas four feet by six and a half, a blank windowless shaft rises on a green but barren coast (1984–85). *A Sea Tower* on a purple strand (1985) sharpens the building's intrusive profile to a brutal point (*right*). A second *Tower of Babel* (1986) halves the canvas dimensions of the first, but doubles its tower bulk in a shaft of stark blue and stark white. The monstrous point finds faint enlarging echo in clouds above it – hinting perhaps that the artist feels himself amid mirrors.



A better answer had already suggested itself in another de la Mare story from the same book. In 1984 Ovenden had painted *The Residence of the Philosopher Kempe.* Kempe has spent his hermit's life seeking to prove the existence of the soul. He is sought out, in his all-but-inaccessible tower behind high coastal hills, by another solitary traveller through the evening. Ovenden's painting shows Kempe's tower house not on the sea strand but amid hills above. It is thus set between the earth and sky, day and night – almost lost amid darkening hills whose far sides hold last sunset rays from an ocean sky. The painting technique is as broad as in the seaside monoliths. But now that the land has regained hegemony, dark shadowy blues and greens hold touches of red below the pale sky.

And thus the colours of light, near the centre of Ovenden's art almost from its beginning, are re-enthroned. It is the true way for this painter to integrate the sea into his landscape, because it is the true counterpoint: nature's erections, more than man's, illuminated by the flat calm sea.

* * *

These years had also seen Ovenden's development of a land-theme which rooted back to his student expeditions about Dartmoor: more than one tree stem sharing a common crown. In *The Communion of Trees* (1980) two tree stems lean towards each other – a virtually supernatural sight. He would return to it again and again. In *The Druid's Grove* (1983) several trees support a single pyramid of foliage (*right*). The co-operative stems grow again from a single area of colour.

Was there, in all this merging, a subconscious attempt to reconcile and repair the integrity of the Ruralist group? It had partly fragmented in 1981, when Peter Blake's wife Jann Haworth had suddenly left him. Blake was so devastated that, on the edge of a nervous breakdown, he felt himself forced to return to his own roots in London. Now David Inshaw wanted to follow Blake. It left the Ovendens and Arnolds to fly the Ruralist flag.

The next years saw Ovenden's rich colours explored through later and later lights. *Dartmoor, Evening* (1983) travels back again over his old painting grounds to explore last panoplies in a rich red field held between foreground and middle-ground. It emerges grandly from surrounding areas of mauve, orange-browns, and greens ranging from light to dark: all but the red field seemingly back-lit from the pale sky.

And so to an exploration of darkness and moonlight. A nocturne of 1982, *Sentinels of Silbury,* showed its moonlight behind clouds. The next year brought a direct confrontation in *Full Moon*, superbly luminous below a canopy of trees. Finely painted though it is, several distant fields and the top of the foreground tree canopy remain too highly coloured for nature in the fullest moonlight.

A dozen years later, the problem was memorably solved – by applying the formula seen in many of Ovenden daylight pictures. *Orchard Moon* – now recognised as an iconic image of Ruralist painting – keeps its distances in softest blues, gradually increasing colour intensities and contrasts as we come forwards. Foreground colours may still exceed what the eye would see in actual moonlight. But the formula is true, and therefore powerful.

Ovenden's moonlight reached farther, to touch the surreal. A small *Red Moon* (1999) shines supernaturally just above seaside hills. This moon's harvest red illuminates a distant solitary tree in gold which also touches another hill top farther off. Here is no hint of Pop art (which this picture could so easily have projected) but the lights of earth momentarily transcending diurnal experience.

The *Philosopher Kempe* landscape led Ovenden to another superb series, painted over many years, of distant sea lights illuminating coastal headlands. *Gloaming towards the Cornish Coast* (2000) recomposes his *Late evening, Morwenstow* photograph of 1997 (*page 25 above*) with colours of astonishing subtlety. It was dubbed by one too-casual observer 'The Black Picture' – until Ovenden pointed out that there is not a stroke of black anywhere. Close examination reveals minutely variegated glazes of shadowy blues, deep greens fringed with light as the eye moves back and back to pursue the light's source. It comes from a low sun hidden behind the nearest hill, yet still enriching the visible sea as it bathes a distant headland opposite and the sky in glazes of ivory, lemon yellow and faintest orange, pink and purple.

Soon after of *The Red Moon* and *Gloaming towards the Cornish Coast* were finished, the writer was lucky enough to witness the kindling moment of another vision. In April 2001 the Ovenden's visited me at Broadway, on the edge of the Cotswolds. Late one afternoon our car emerged on a short stretch of road crossing a high hill. To our right, between trees, opened a vast prospect westwards over the Vale of Evesham. Yet our attention was taken by a colour of sky I had never seen (and have not seen since): an unbroken sheet of grey cloud turned pink by a sinking sun behind – whose lower edge just emerged in dull gold.

We stopped to look, and I said to Graham: ' There is an Ovenden vision if ever I saw one. What a pity we haven't a camera with us.' He answered: 'Let's just look at it for a couple of minutes.' After perhaps ninety or a hundred seconds he said: 'That's all right. We can go on. I have it here', pointing to his forehead.

I saw none of the painting's progress. The finished picture appeared in a Ruralist exhibition that September as *The Evening Fall.* The foreground trees and distant hills are of Cornwall. But the grey-pink sky with its lower edge of sun are exactly as we saw them above Broadway. The artist's memory had held that unique colour – to recreate it perfectly for us to enjoy again and again – and to share with those who never saw the sight in nature.

Later years have brought excursions less physical than spiritual. One is seen in broad strokes of rain against rain-soaked moorland and sky in *Receding Rain: Bodmin Moor* (2002), refining a small oil study of forty years earlier. Another lies in plenary developments

of deliberately limited colours. *Barley Splatt: Early Morning* (2006) reveals a breathtaking range of blues through morning mist backing crisp trees of gold (actually orange-yellow-green) in image and reflection.

* * *

It is not for an observer to sum up a career still evolving. Final thoughts are best left to the artist himself. In a recently recorded conversation he speaks of the kinship of vision to technique:

> I'm an old-fashioned craftsman, and I believe that the *doing* is all-important: doing as well as it's humanly possible to do it. In a beautiful piece of cabinet-making this is an immense pleasure. When you reach the levels of Rembrandt and Michelangelo, there you meet a very very potent alchemy of technical virtuosity with human communication.
>
> It's no coincidence that the great works of the world are also consummate works of technical virtuosity. If we were able to listen to Mozart playing his own music, or Chopin playing his, I'm certain we would feel the same thing.
>
> Music of all the arts has the greatest perspective. I'm talking not only about Claudean visual perspectives in landscape, but spiritual perspectives. People sometimes talk about playing music to death: but I think you play it to life.

So Graham Ovenden has played and continues to play on his perceptions and experiences, and his memories of them, to create the visions which infuse his landscape painting.

Jerrold Northrop Moore

2006-2009