Architecture and Antiquities

CLIVE WAINWRIGHT

Various aspects of Graham Ovenden's art are discussed in this book. It is the impact of architecture and antiquities and his representation of them which is my concern here. The influences at work on any artist are many and varied, some of which are visibly expressed at different stages in his or her art; other influences, conscious or unconscious, are the domain of critics and art historians. I write neither as a critic nor an art historian, but as an antiquarian and a friend of the artist with whom, over the years, I have had the opportunity to discuss a whole range of artistic, architectural, antiquarian and literary subjects of mutual interest.

During the past two decades Ovenden has been closely involved with various aspects of the Victorian Revival. He has made major contributions to the study of Victorian photography on which he has written extensively. His interest in Victorian architecture is manifest in the creation of his own remarkable house Barley Splatt. He has thoroughly assimilated and put into practice the ideas of an impressive range of Victorian writers, from such well known theorists and poets as Ruskin, Pugin, Clare and Tennyson, to more obscure talents like Robert Hawker of Morwenstow.

In the 1985 exhibition 'The Continuing Tradition - An Exhibition of Biblical Subjects', Ovenden showed the first version of his remarkable painting *The Tower of Babel* (page 110). In March 1986 he completed a smaller painting on the same theme (page 11). He is now at work on a third version. The relevant text is *Genesis,* Chapter XI:

> *And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*

The scheme to build a city of itself would not have made Babel and the stuff of legend; it was the intervention of the Lord that ensured that:

> *Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's language. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.*

This subject has inspired a whole range of painters, including the celebrated painting by Brueghel. Charles I owned another Dutch painting of the same subject which was much later appropriately acquired by that celebrated tower builder William Beckford of Fonthill.

The nature of the painting itself immediately leads the viewer not to biblical speculation, but rather to that exquisite melancholy prompted by the contemplation of ruins. Here we begin to glimpse that fascinating interaction of widely differing influences which play their part in the creation of Ovenden's works. One such interest is early English poetry. Knowing that I shared this interest, he once brought to my notice what is not only one of the earliest English poems, but also the first to describe a ruin. The poem is actually entitled' *The Ruin'* and only a fragment survives on two badly burned

Upper Winchedon Church, c 1969

sheets in the so called *'Exeter Book'* given to Exeter Cathedral by Leofric, first Bishop of the See. The poem is a description of a ruined Roman city, possibly Bath, and it seems to have been written in the eighth century. In translation it begins thus:

Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst . . .
Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
the work of Giants, the stonesmiths,
mouldereth.
Rime scoureth gatetowers
rime on mortar.
Shattered the showershields, roofs ruined,
age under-ate them.

It is as much from this source that Babel springs as from the Bible itself. The impression given by Ovenden's conception of. Babel is both mystical and primeval and though undoubtedly rooted in the distant past, also has a singularly modern aspect.

A strong interest in monoliths runs through several of Ovenden's other works. *Spring Morning Wiltshire,* 1984 (page 106) includes several ancient monoliths and *Sentinels of Silbury,* 1982 (page 98) is very similar in character. It is the obscure and far distant origins of these numinous structures which makes them so attractive as subjects for the painter. There is always the possibility that they really *were* constructed by the Druids as was once thought - indeed, in his painting *The Druids Grove,* 1983 (page 99), Ovenden clearly displays this interest. As is so often the case with his art, his curiosity for monoliths was largely aroused by the extensive and interesting literature on the subject. This appeal is nowhere better summed up than by Samuel Daniel, who in 1599 wrote of Stonehenge:

That huge dumbe heape, that cannot tell us how,
Nor what, nor whence it is, nor with those hands,
Nor for whose glory, it was set to shew
How much our pride mocks that of other lands?

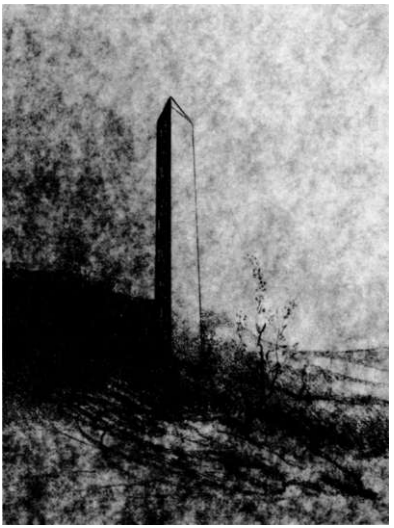
It is not only prehistoric monoliths which have attracted Ovenden - a much later monument forms the subject of *The Obelisk* of 1980, (page 104). The placing of such an obelisk within the landscape was a seventeenth and eighteenth-century ploy, though of course the form of such structures stems from ancient Egypt. Ovenden's obelisk, however, is so patently set in an English landscape that a vision of it having been placed by a Bridgeman, Kent or Brown would immediately be conjured up were it not for the wild character of the landscape. The effect of the picture is therefore more akin to Samuel Palmer's etching *The Lonely Tower* and the landscape which surrounds it than to the creation of any Baroque or Georgian artist or gardener. This is not just speculation, for Ovenden's debt to Palmer is great and freely acknowledged by him.

Here again several influences overlap, for *The Lonely Tower* was created, along with Palmer's etching *The Bellman,* to illustrate those haunting lines of Milton's *II Penseroso:*

- the Belmans drousie charm,
To bless the dores from nightly harm:
Or let my lamp at midnight hour,
Be seen in some high lonely towr,
Where I may oft out watch the Bear,
With thrice-great Hermes . . .

This verse has often inspired artists and interestingly that celebrated Arts and Crafts engraver F.L. Griggs, much admired by Ovenden, was influenced by it and also owned an impression of *The Lonely Tower.* Ovenden himself is drawn especially to the literature and philosophy of the England of Milton's day and of the Elizabethan period immediately preceding it.

Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliffe's dwelling, 1980



The Obelisk, 1980

It is easy to understand why in the late twentieth century Ovenden is particularly drawn to the metaphysical and poetic movements of the decades around 1600 when mediaeval England was attempting to come to terms with the new ideas of the Continental Renaissance. Ovenden has read the works of that deeply unfashionable Rosicrucian and Hermetic philosopher Robert Fludd (1574-1637), the pupil of the great Elizabethen Magus John Dee, and he owns a copy of *Utriusque Cosmi. . .* (1617-24), one of the most important of Fludd's works which has singular illustrations. Ovenden is also interested in Dee himself. The poets and philosophers of the early seventeenth century, in the process of becoming Renaissance men, also drew strength and inspiration from the past and Ovenden's attitude to the past is very similar to theirs. His depiction of the tangible relics of the past draws its strength and inspiration from his affinity with these ancient authors.

The philosopher and 'Doctor of Physick', Sir Thomas Browne, spoke for this generation in his *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall . . .* of 1658:

> *'Tis opportune to look back at old times, and contemplate our forefathers. Great examples grow thin, and to be fetched from the passed world. Simplicity flies away, and iniquity comes at long strides upon us. We have enough to do to makeup ourselves from present and passed times, and the whole stage of things scarce serveth for our instruction.*

The inspiration of two of Ovenden's most remarkable paintings derives from these very philosophers, though chanelled via that erudite writer Walter de la Mare. The first painting is *All Hallows (The Sea Cathedral)* (page 103), which is taken from the short story of that name. De la Mare prefaced the story with a quotation which immediately takes us back to the complex and

mystical world ofElizabethan philosophers such as Dee and Fludd. Like T.S. Eliot, his friend and contemporary, de la Mare was drawn to the Elizabethan andJacobean period. It was thus natural, that he should take inspiration for his story from the writings of Richard Hooker (1554-1600), the Elizabethen theologian. The quotation which de la Mare used was:

> *And because time in itself. . . can receive no alteration, the hallowing . . . must consist in the shape of the countenance which put upon the affaires that are incident in those days.*

The story is a chilling one concerning the demonic restoration taking place, *almost* unseen, to the very fabric of the cathedral of All Hallows. The building is situated on a singular, isolated site overlooking the sea which immediately conjures up a picture of how the church at Dunwich in East Anglia must have looked before eventually being claimed by the sea. The story of Dunwich was probably in de la Mare's mind and Ovenden closely follows his description ofthe siting ofthe cathedral. It was equally captivating for Ovenden, who even wrote a poem entitled *All Saints Dunwich,* published in his collection ofpoems *The Marble Mirror* in 1984, the year after *All Hallows* was painted.

De la Mare's narrator describes All Hallows thus:

> *. . . having at last come limping out upon the green sea-bluff beneath which lay its walls - I confess the actuality excelled my feeble dreams of it .. . the cathedral was cruciform. Walls so ancient and so sparsley adorned and decorated could not but be inhospitable in effect. Their stone was of a bleached bone-gray; a gray that none the less seemed as immaterial as flame - or incandescent ash. They were substantial enough, however, to cast a marvellously lucent shadow, of a blue no less vivid but paler than the sea, on the shelving sward beneath them.*

It becomes obvious that All Hallows is as threatened by the sea as was Dunwich . . a sea so near at last that I could hear its enormous sallies and murmurings. Indeed I had not realised until that moment how closely the great western doors ofthe cathedral abutted on the beach'. Thus, what at first sight appears to be a painting of an anonymous church, reveals new and sinister overtones the longer one looks at it and the further one explores its literary origins.

Ovenden is a polymath in a way that has sadly become unfashionable for artists of our own day. He is at one and the same time an artist, musician, poet, craftsman, designer, photographer, writer and historian. It is thus perfectly in character for him to celebrate this picture in the poem *The Sea Cathedral* published in his collection *Satirical Poems and Others* of 1983. The first verse runs thus:

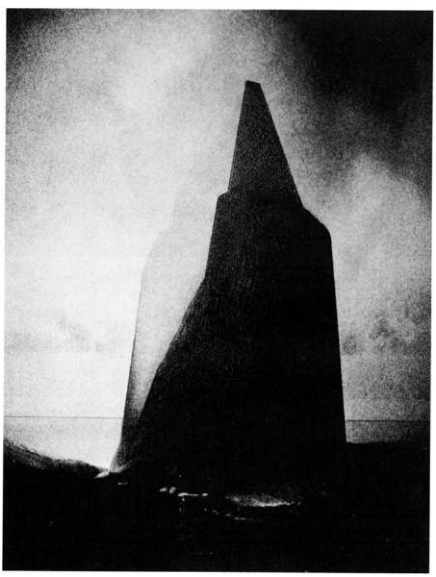
All Hallows, hollow Hallow,
sea stone
fraught fret
gaunt gallow
cliff hung
looming lonely
over shelving, sanding shallow.

The other painting inspired by a de la Mare short story is *The Residence of the Philosopher Kemp* of 1984 (page 107). The original story is entitled 'Mr. Kemp' and deals with the frightening experience of an uninvited visitor to Kemp's remote dwelling. Once again we are high on a hill, as with Ovenden's painting *The Obelisk,* and yet, though Kemp's dwelling is buried deep in an impenetrable forest, it is high on the cliffs above the sea, reminiscent of All Hallows. Kemp's dwelling was a:

> *. . . straggling gabled house to which he conducted me, with its low tower and smokeless chimneys now touched with the last cold red of sunset . . . almost more windows than wall. The dark glass of their casements showed like water in its discoloured sides. Beyond it the ravine ascended even more narrowly, and the house rested here in this green gap like a mummy long since deserted by its ghost.*

Once within its sinister and decayed walls, and inside Kemp's crammed library, we are transported back to the world of Fludd, Hooker and Browne. For Kemp was '. . . possessed, I gathered, by one single aim, thought and desire. All these years of his "retirement" had apparently been spent in this one quest - to *prove* Man's possession of a "Soul"'. With your appetite whetted by Ovenden's picture you should read the story of Mr. Kemp for yourself.

As I have mentioned Ovenden is a great admirer of the art and literature of the Victorians. The links between his work and that of the Pre-Raphaelites is well known and indeed he is also the author of *Pre-Raphaelite Photography.* As a fervent admirer of Ruskin, Ovenden is familiar with the famous dictum



The Tower of Babel, 1986

from *Modern Painters:* 'go to Nature . . . rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing'. Though greatly inspired by the natural world he does not follow Ruskin literally. He rather follows William Michael Rossetti's description of Pre-Raphaelite principles: ' i) to have genuine ideas to express; ii) to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; iii) to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; iv) and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.'

Ovenden has studied the natural world with an intensity worthy of Ruskin or any of the Pre-Raphaelites, but his depiction of it is in no sense uncritically naturalistic. The landscapes and buildings in his pictures are precisely those which he himself inhabits in his imagination, inspired by, but not of the natural world. The inspiration which Ovenden draws from the literature of the past is also very similar to the use made by the Pre-Raphaelites of literary sources. One only has to think of Rossetti's paintings taken from Dante or Arthurian literature or Millais' and Hunt's paintings after Keats. Ovenden also draws inspiration from those ancient Flemish and Italian painters on whom the Pre-Raphaelites modelled themselves, but is fortunate in being able to utilise the art of both schools as he chooses.

Another dimension has been added to both Ovenden's depiction of architecture and literature in the drawings which he did to illustrate a recent German edition of *Wuthering Heights.* The book takes its name from Heathcliffe's remote and windswept house and Ovenden's drawing perfectly

Frontispiece for Ovenden's short ghost story 'The Old House on the Estuary', 1986

captures the character of this house (page 101). The relevant passage in the book runs:

> *Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr. Heathcliffe's dwelling. 'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure bracing ventilation they must have up there at all times indeed: one may guess the power of the North wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun. Happily the architect had the foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones.*

The brilliance and accuracy of Ovenden's pencil drawings for this and the other illustrations for the book are faithfully captured by the German printers. It is no accident that Ovenden's drawings should have a powerful appeal for a German audience, for he is fascinated by the art of Caspar David Friedrich and the Nazarene artists like Friedrich Overbeck and Peter Cornelius. Ovenden is particularly attracted to their fluent yet linear pencil drawings whose technique is strongly echoed here. Again we have one influence reinforcing another: the pencil drawing technique perfected by Millais and Rossetti was closely modelled on that of the Nazarenes and of course Ovenden is as much an admirer of Pre-Raphaelite drawings as paintings.

It is of course wrong to discuss the architecture in Ovenden's paintings without looking at his photographs, many of which are of architectural subjects. His earliest photographs such as *Shad Thames* and *Wapping Old Steps* of 1957 already betray not only his fascination with architectural subjects but his ability to imbue them with romance and mystery. Both his own photographs and those of the celebrated Victorian photographers which he has collected and written about for so long are a source of inspiration for his paintings. In his urge to record with photographs the buildings of the East End before their wholesale demolition of the 1960s, he was following in the footsteps of his Victorian heroes. The urge to rescue the fabric of the past from 'The Rage of Time' drove Ruskin, for instance, to commission photographs of the mediaeval buildings of Rouen when he learned of their impending demolition. Ovenden's photographs are discussed more fully elsewhere, so I will deal with them no further.

I have dwelt at length on the sources for Ovenden's art, most of which are indeed consciously exploited by the artist himself. He belongs to a generation which has freed itself from the need to paint pictures without relation to the past, a terrible self-imposed burden which bore down upon several generations of artists this century working in the Modern style. It is now intellectually respectable in painting, as in architecture, to draw inspiration from and pay homage to the great artists, writers and architects of the past. I have mentioned a number of Ovenden's heroes; there are many others like Hardy, Blake, Schubert, Shakespeare, Goethe and Elgar; and as Ovenden's work evolves over the coming decades, others will no doubt join them, both in his art and in the gymnasium of his mind.