

PRE-RAPHAELITE NOVELIST MANQUÉ : OLIVER MADOX BROWN

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Please to remember
The fifth of November . . .

“**P**OOOR old Brown has lost his Nolly.” So wrote Edward Burne-Jones to Fairfax Murray, then in Italy, in 1874.¹ A regard for his son was the *sine qua non* for Ford Madox Brown’s friendship: “No man or woman suspected of lack of appreciation of Oliver had any further part in Madox Brown’s heart or life”, writes Signora Angeli, “and it was fortunate that Gabriel was genuinely attached to the boy and recognized his genius. . . .”² As Ford Madox Hueffer articulated his grandfather’s grief, “It was as if, with the death of Nolly, the end of a short bright period had come”³; and Brown himself, writing to Shields, said that “what seemed likely to turn out the crowning reward of a life not over-stocked with successes otherwise is suddenly turned into a mockery and illusion”.⁴ The father’s pride in the boy William Bell Scott always referred to as “my son Oliver”, was

¹ *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, ed. Georgina Burne-Jones (London, 1904), ii. 57.

² Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies* (London, 1949), p. 42. Signora Angeli continues about Rossetti, “above all, he entered with deep feeling into the father’s bereavement”. The day after Oliver’s death, he wrote to Brown: “How shall any friend of yours attempt to comfort you at such a moment? The best and only way is to admit the full measure of your loss—so much in exceptional ways beyond what is lost by other fathers in a dear son. Your son, with such a beginning, would probably—most probably—have proved the first imaginative writer of his time. This is what is lost to him, to you, and to the world. Alas, alas!—what can one say? Is it lost everywhere as here? If so, there is neither gain nor loss in anything, for all is dross” (*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl [Oxford, 1965-7], Letter 1536; *D-W* in later references). Rossetti expressed his grief more tangibly in his commemorative sonnet “Untimely Lost”, published in the *Athenaeum*, 21 November 1874.

³ Ford Madox Hueffer [Ford], *Ford Madox Brown: A Record of his Life and Work* (London, 1896), p. 297 (Hueffer, *FMB* in later references.)

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 295.

unqualified; after his premature death, that pride was sublimated into something very akin to reverence. Memorials were erected, both in the house at 37 Fitzroy Square—where a special room was set apart with Oliver's belongings—and in the printed records which were fashioned to convey Oliver to posterity.

Intimidated by the imminent wrath of a doting father and forestalled by the precocity of their subject, would-be critics were inhibited in evaluating the literary and artistic work of the "boy-wonder" whom Watts-Dunton called "the most promising young man perhaps of our time".¹ Undoubtedly owing to the efforts of Brown, appraisals of Oliver's performances in all media have tended towards hyperbole. When the *Athenaeum* reviewed *Gabriel Denver* "with some degree of asperity" (as William Rossetti says) Oliver—who, like most of the Pre-Raphaelites, felt, with Watts-Dunton, that criticism should be "an act of charity"—assured his friend, Philip Bourke Marston, that as far as he was concerned "anyone can say what he likes about the book". His only fear, he asserted, was that adverse criticism would dissuade Smith, Elder from considering his future works. Clearly, however, he had been stung by the reviewer's ungenerous response :

Applied by one novelist to another, "coarse, disagreeable, and hideous," be decidedly sarcastic, if not biting terms. I imagine he read the book through (here and there) and found he didn't like it, so—being highmindedness and respectability personified—he has felt it his duty to say so.²

William Rossetti notes that "Oliver Brown and his family were led to think that Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson was the reviewer; they were more than sufficiently ready to believe that such and such persons were 'enemies', and for some years Mr. Jeaffreson passed with them as an enemy. And yet the assumption was totally mistaken; Jeaffreson had nothing whatever to do with the review".³ It should be pointed out that there was apparently an

¹ T[heodore] W[atts]-[Dunton], "Oliver Madox Brown's Literary Remains", *The Examiner*, 29 January 1876, p. 129.

² John H. Ingram, *Oliver Madox Brown: A Biographical Sketch, 1855-1874* (London, 1883), p. 88.

³ William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences* (London, 1906), ii. 299 (SR in later references.) In this connection, it is interesting to note that both Leslie Stephen (the editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* who had refused *Gabriel Denver* for

attempt by William to “ puff ” Oliver in the public press, despite his feeling that—as he confided to his diary after hearing portions of *Gabriel Denver* read aloud—“ in point of originality, thrill of passion, & (the matters which Brown had more especially dwelt on in referring to the story), I think it is perhaps scarcely so uncommon as he supposes . . . ”¹ William Bell Scott, writing to Alice Boyd on Sunday, 23 November 1873, exposes the attempted “ puff ”:

My son Oliver's book is out, a one vol. story that seems very juvenile. It is reviewed in the Academy by Simcox, who was here the other day, and in the Athenaeum. This last rather severe, but on the whole I fancy old B[rown] will work the oracle with some effect. Simcox told me th[at] Billy had asked Appleton to let him review it in the Academy, but A. thought he must draw the line somewhere, and he would draw it at Billy puffing Nolly, but afterwards he considered he had better get a review of the thing in, and so asked Simcox to do one.²

The two major sources for information regarding Oliver Madox Brown—the Memoir to the *Dwale Bluth* and John H. Ingram's biography³—perpetuate the uncritical myth of Nolly's genius. Neither provides the slightest insight into his creative

that journal) and Edmund Gosse were variously accused of writing another unfriendly review, the anonymous one in the *Saturday Review* for 23 May 1874. Although William Smith Williams, Oliver's principal literary contact with Smith, Elder, thought it unlikely, Oliver said he had been “ told on excellent authority ” (see Ingram, pp. 175-6). That was on 5 August ; by the end of the month the focus had shifted to Gosse who writes on the 28th a long letter of denial, averring in a revealing aside : “ I want you to know distinctly that when I have my pen in my hand, no one has keener feelings of the duty of loyalty to one's friends than I have, and I do not know anything that would shame me more in my own sight than to know that I was giving one of them a blow in the dark ” (unpublished letter in the Angeli Papers). The Special Collections of the Library of the University of British Columbia contains two large groups of manuscripts drawn on in this paper. In subsequent references they will be cited as the Penkill Papers and the Angeli Papers respectively.

¹ William Michael Rossetti's unpublished Diary in the Angeli Papers (14 May 1871-12 October 1877), entry for 30 May 1872 (WMR : Diary in later references. Abbreviations have been expanded).

² Unpublished letter, dated 23 November 1873, in the Penkill Papers. Charles Edwards Cutts Birch Appleton (1841-79) was the founder and editor of *The Academy*.

³ Ingram's biography has already been cited ; *The Dwale Bluth, Hebditch's Legacy, and Other Literary Remains of Oliver Madox-Brown*, ed. William M. Rossetti and F. Hueffer, was published by Tinsley Brothers in two volumes in 1876. Cited as *Literary Remains* in subsequent references.

processes ; both are assertive rather than analytical about his obvious talents. "Of the Memoir with which the volumes open", said the *Athenaeum* reviewer of the *Literary Remains*, there is nothing good to say. Two editors might between them, one would think, have given a sketch of this gifted boy which would have impressed itself on the memory. As it is, there are in all but twenty pages, and of these about a third are, with questionable taste, taken up with the prattlings of his childhood and the ravings of his last delirium.¹

W. M. Rossetti's later comment in *Some Reminiscences* indicates that W. B. Scott's prediction that "old Brown will work the oracle with some effect" proved accurate, for Franz Hueffer and William Rossetti were only the "ostensible editors" of Nolly's posthumous writings :

... in point of fact, the prefatory memoir to the book is much more the doing of Madox Brown than of ourselves, and it enters into some details which we would have treated more cursorily.²

Ingram's *Oliver Madox Brown : A Biographical Sketch* is a reverential volume that gives every evidence of having been closely superintended by Brown himself. Taking his keynote from a letter from Richard Garnett to Ford Madox Brown, Ingram, who was also the biographer of Poe and Chatterton, produced a book that must have pleased Oliver's family and friends.³ Faithful to what Garnett called the charm of Nolly's character—"its sweetness and manliness"—it did little to establish the integrity of his work as the basis for a deserved reputation. J. Arthur Blaikie, reviewing Ingram's book in the *Academy*, lamented that he was

content to do little more than reproduce the criticism of others, which he repeats with sturdy iteration, varying the monotony of eulogium with a little extravagance of his own.⁴

Commemorating Nolly became, it would seem, a kind of occupational hazard for those friends of Brown with literary connections. Philip Bourke Marston, besides his poignant "Lament",

¹ No. 2521 (19 February 1876), p. 261.

² *SR*, ii. 426.

³ Ford Madox Brown's opinion of the volume is not recorded, but William Michael Rossetti notes in his Diary for 9 March 1883, that "Ingram's MS. of his Life of Nolly Brown is now with Lucy and me for perusal. I have skimmed it ; & think it a fair & gratifying treatment of the subject which would benefit by more of character in the literary style."

⁴ No. 585 (21 July 1883), p. 39.

which was published with the *Literary Remains*, supplied to *Scribner's Monthly* a long testimonial of Oliver's friendship in which he acknowledged him as "a novelist of the highest order [who] had little to acquire, though he had something to discard".¹ Theodore Watts-Dunton's notice of the *Literary Remains*, although it contains several provocative observations, over-emphasizes the dead prodigy theme—unlike Chatterton, Sydney Walker, Beckford, and Henry Kirke White, who had "precocity of intellect" only, Oliver had a maturity of understanding, a "precocity that is very likely unique". "Had Oliver Madox-Brown lived", Watts-Dunton concludes, "what would he not have achieved?"—and in the syntactical ambiguity of that question lies the elementary frustration of this approach.²

The apogee of all the sentimental eulogies of Oliver came, however, from the French critic, James Darmesteter, who later married Mary Robinson. When Lucy Madox Rossetti sent him a copy of *The Dwale Bluth* in November 1883, in return for a copy of his *Essais sur la littérature anglaise*, she reported to her father that she doubted "the book will be thrown away". It was not, though neither Ford Madox Brown nor his daughter Lucy lived to see the essay on Oliver in the posthumous volume of *English Studies* edited and translated by Darmesteter's wife.³ This French Moschus's lament for a young English Bion cut down before his time, a Bion whose first recorded word was "Beautiful", epitomizes all the weaknesses of what may be called the adulatory school of criticism:

In the limbo of the paradise of poets, the souls of children, floating in the mists of dawn, are frail, uncertain visions with little individual feature. Their aureole is made of the vague glimmer of the future. They have done little and dreamed much; and in their dreams it is difficult to see how much is all their own. Mostly

¹ xii (July 1876), 425-8. Marston goes on: "He had to learn that the completest art leaves something to the imagination. His word-pictures, always effective, were occasionally too set, and the canvas overcrowded with detail. His work generally would have gained by the excision of things even in themselves excellent. But time, doubtless, would have made these modifications" (p. 427). Marston's long "Lament" was first published in his volume of poems, *All in All* (1874).

² Watts-Dunton in *The Examiner*, p. 129.

³ (London, 1896), pp. 153-69. James Darmesteter acknowledged the receipt of the volumes in a letter to Lucy Rossetti on 14 December 1883 (unpublished letter in the Angeli Papers).

they shine by a reflected light. Oliver Madox-Brown is assuredly one of the most vivid, one of the most personal, of these touching phantoms. Chatterton was a prodigy, but rather of assimilation than invention, an echo rather than a voice. Oliver was a voice, a voice still young, broken, uncertain. But he spoke true in his death agony. Had he lived he would have ranked among the great. His qualities were those which cannot be imitated: intensity of vision, dramatic force, power of emotion. . . . Oliver . . . was destined not to reach . . . the happy and glorious shore of greatness realised. But his shadow haunts the purlieus of the stream of fame, and lingers in the memory of mortals. Quires of poets have wept above his early grave, "Calling him master, though he was so young". And there are destinies more cruel than the fate of Marcellus.¹

It is to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's credit that he was totally intolerant of this extreme of praise and comparison. Writing to Oliver about his novel, Rossetti was characteristically enthusiastic but not wholly uncritical: "I have read *Gabriel Denver*, and been much astonished and impressed by it. I really believe it must be the most robust literary effort of any imaginative kind that anyone has produced at the age at which you wrote it. . . . The literary quality of the work is surprisingly accomplished and even." After taking exception to several specific points, Rossetti concludes that "the book is undoubtedly quite a wonder. There seems to me no question that you may reach any degree of success in the future, if your interest in your work remains undiminished. Nothing else can influence permanently a man's powers or their due recognition."² But Rossetti was unwilling to over-emphasize Oliver's precocity or to press comparisons with Chatterton. When Hall Caine parroted "the indiscreet remark of a friend who said that Oliver had enough genius to stock a good few Chattertons", Rossetti was quick to take discriminating exception:

You must take care to be on the right tack about Chatterton. I am very glad to find the gifted Oliver M.B. already an embryo classic, as I always said he would be; but those who compare nett results in such cases as his and Chatterton's cannot know what criticism means. The nett results of advancing epochs, however permanent on accumulated foundation-work, are the poorest of all tests as to relative values. Oliver was the product of the most teeming hot-beds of art and literature, and even of compulsory addiction to the art of painting, in which nevertheless he was rapidly becoming as much a proficient as in literature. What he would have been if, like the ardent and heroic Chatterton, he had had to fight a single-handed battle for art and bread together against merciless mediocrity in

¹ (London, 1896), pp. 168-169. The quoted line, "Calling him master, though he was so young", is from Stanza III of Marston's "Lament".

² *D-W*, Letter 1418; Ingram, pp. 83-85.

high places—what he would *then* have become, I cannot in the least calculate ; but we know what Chatterton became. Moreover, C. at his death, was two years younger than Oliver—a whole lifetime of advancement at that age frequently—indeed always I believe in leading cases. There are few indeed whom the facile enthusiasm for contemporary models does not deaden to the truly balanced claims of successful efforts in art.¹

Rossetti, of course, is right. More importantly, if a case can be made for Oliver Madox Brown as a writer, it must rest on stronger grounds than youth or frustration. As Blaikie observes in his review of Ingram,

The more the nature and quality of the genius of Oliver Madox Brown is considered, the more deplorable appear the efforts of panegyrists to gauge that genius by the standard of precocity. To do so is a positive injury to one whose genius is so incontestably manifested in his writings as to be perceptible to the most inattentive. It is something peculiarly individual and magnetic. It is a force to be felt, like poetry, “in a divine and unapprehended manner”, and requires not the adventitious plea of precocity to attract attention.²

The background of Oliver Madox Brown's reputation has been elaborated precisely because it is the only one the present age has inherited from the past. As literary criticism this received appraisal is unacceptable, and since it is the only one accessible to the modern reader it tends to forestall interest which, as Blaikie pointed out over eight decades ago, does gross disservice to the young novelist. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine in a critical context the life and works of Oliver Madox Brown. After a brief factual survey of his life and production in both literature and art—just sufficient to balance the

¹ Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1882), p. 187. This letter and other fragments of Rossetti's letters in the volume do not appear in *D-W*. That not all Rossetti's statements regarding Oliver were favourable is made clear by an interesting series of references to an undesirable passage in the proofs of Hall Caine's *Recollections* in William Michael's *Diary*. The entry for 28 September reads in part : “Watts called. . . . He brought me the final proofs of C's book, & called my attention to a passage reproducing some viva voce statements by G. about Nolly Brown, sure to be much disliked (tho' there is really no great *harm* in them) by Lucy & Brown ; & in fact L. was so hurt & angered when she saw them in the evening that she wrote a long letter for C, which on reflection she posted only to Watts, for further consideration. Unless C. cuts out this passage, I fear—tho' I have no wish to lose sight of him—that, in kindness to L, it will not be possible to allow him again to cross my threshold.” After several appeals, and not a little bullying on William's part over copyright material, Caine capitulated and the passages were duly cut, the *Recollections* appearing without them.

² *Academy*, p. 39.

established myth already presented—the emphasis will be on his literary output: first, a discussion of his total production; second, a critical study of the complex revisions attending the publication of his one completed novel, *Gabriel Denver*; third, a comparison of the two published versions of the novel, with a detailed analysis of the work—all with a view to re-evaluating for the modern reader the single novelist associated with literary Pre-Raphaelitism.

II

Oliver Madox Brown was born at Grove Villas, Finchley, on 20 January 1855 and died on 5 November 1874, the first anniversary of the publication of his single novel, *Gabriel Denver*. The middle child of the painter, Ford Madox Brown, and his second wife Emma (*née* Hill), Oliver was the brother of Catherine Madox Brown, who married Franz Hueffer, the music critic; and the uncle of Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford). His half-sister, Lucy Madox Brown, whose mother was Brown's first wife, Elizabeth Bromley, married, in the year of Oliver's death, William Michael Rossetti. Oliver's connections thus link him on both sides with figures prominent in literature and art.¹

Most of what is known about his early life consists of anecdotes exemplifying his precocity. What Westland Marston states perfunctorily in the *DNB*, that "from early boyhood he showed remarkable capacity, both in painting and literature",² Ingram in his biography dramatizes unnecessarily:

Reared in so rare a forcing-ground as was his parents' home, little Oliver speedily displayed signs of hereditary genius, and many are the significant anecdotes and remarks related by his relatives in proof of his innate cleverness.³

All three of Brown's children gave early indication of artistic talent,⁴ but it was Nolly chiefly who proved a surprise to his father. "He seems to be turning out a perfect genius", Brown wrote to Frederic Shields in 1868, bragging of Oliver's talents in

¹ For the complicated genealogy of Ford Madox Brown's family see W. D. Paden's "The Ancestry and Families of Ford Madox Brown", *BULLETIN*, 1 (1967-8), 124-35. ² vii. 22. ³ Ingram, pp. 4-5.

⁴ See Ford Madox Heuffer, "The Younger Madox Browns", *The Artist*, xix (February 1897), 49-53. This article contains brief discussions of Lucy, Catherine, and Oliver, with reproductions of their artistic works.

fusing design and picturesqueness, "that only belongs to the higher class of men"; "you will think I am mad to talk so," he confessed, "but I truly believe it."¹

The uncritical enthusiasm of the domestic environment in which Oliver spent his youth was probably intensified by the death of a baby brother, Arthur Gabriel, in 1857.² If it tended to cause the boy to overestimate his own abilities and to indulge himself emotionally through expressive outlets, at least it provided a sympathetic atmosphere in which his natural talents could develop. Oliver's general and artistic education were superintended by his father, though he had brief periods of formal instruction at various times. He spent two years in the Junior Classes of University College under Mr. Case in 1863-5, where he was "chiefly distinguished among his schoolfellows for his idleness" and where he was regarded as "the dirtiest boy in the school".³ In 1871, he attended life classes in the atelier of Monsieur Barthe, where he received on one occasion a prize in a drawing competition adjudicated by G. F. Watts.⁴ The most influential outside force on his education seems to have been that of Monsieur Jules Andrieu, later the French Consul at Jersey, who, during the last four years of Oliver's life, instructed him in French and Latin.⁵

Under his father's tutelage, Oliver produced his first water-colour, "Centaur's Hunting", at the age of eight; what may be called his first finished work, *Queen Margaret and the Robbers*,

¹ Hueffer, *FMB*, p. 238.

² Born 16 September 1856, died 21 July 1857.

³ Ingram, pp. 9-10. For D. G. Rossetti's amusing limerick on Oliver's habitual uncleanness, inscribed in a copy of Lear's *Nonsense Rhymes*, see Hueffer, *FMB*, p. 261:

There was a young rascal called Nolly,
Whose habits, tho' dirty, were jolly;
And when this book comes
To be marked with his thumbs,
You may know that its owner is Nolly.

⁴ Ingram, p. 33.

⁵ Andrieu provided the motto for the title page of *Gabriel Denver*: "Le bonheur vient souvent bien tard,—après la mort de toutes nos espérances. Aussi faut-il aux malheureux beaucoup d'esprit pour le reconnaître, et de force pour l'arrêter au passage."

was done three years later. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to whom Oliver presented the painting, assured the young boy that "I consider it very beautiful both in design and colour, and a first effort of which you need never be ashamed, however much you may advance as an artist".¹ He saw in the work a high promise, as apparently did Whistler, to whom he showed it, and who "admired it very much indeed"²:

Hard study and application are not to be dispensed with by any one entering on Art; but it is something to make such a beginning as this, and so feel sure that, though without labour no perfection can ever be attained, still there is no doubt of your labour to become a complete artist being really worth your while and not a mistaken course in life as it is with many.³

From this point, it seemed certain that Oliver was destined for a career in art. In style and technique, Oliver's works are markedly imitative of his father, who, as Dante Gabriel reported to William (perhaps remembering his own stultifying apprenticeship with Brown), "makes his Son work on the strict Praeraphaelite system".⁴

Between 1868 and 1872, Oliver continued his painting, almost exclusively in watercolour, exhibiting his first picture, *The Infant Jason Delivered to the Centaur*, at the Dudley Gallery in 1869. The picture illustrates, with exact fidelity to detail, the episode in Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* (Book I). In the next four years, Oliver exhibited five pictures; his last, generally regarded as his best, was *A Scene from Silas Marner*, shown at the Society of French Artists in Bond Street in 1872.⁵ Interestingly, none of the reviewers of Ingram's biography had anything to say about Oliver's paintings, and over the years they have seldom been exhibited. He never appeared in an exhibition

¹ *D-W*, Letter 716, dated 10 May 1867.

² *Ibid.* Letter 717.

³ *Ibid.* Letter 716.

⁴ From WMR: *Diary*, 16 September 1868, printed in W. M. Rossetti, ed., *Rossetti Papers, 1862 to 1870* (London, 1903), p. 329.

⁵ In all Oliver exhibited six pictures: besides those mentioned in the text, he showed the companion pictures, *Exercize* and *Obstinacy* at the Royal Academy and Dudley Galleries respectively in 1870; his subject from *The Tempest—Prospero and the Infant Miranda*—was hung at the International Exhibition at South Kensington in 1871. This last picture was bought by Charles Rowley of Manchester and presented to Ford Madox Brown after Rowley's death.

devoted to the Pre-Raphaelites until the Herron-Huntington Hartford exhibit in 1964, when *The Infant Jason* was shown.¹ Oliver's single experiment with book illustration was for W. M. Rossetti's edition of *The Poetical Works of Byron* for the Moxon Popular Poets Series (1870). He collaborated with his father in illustrating this volume, providing two of the drawings—"Mazeppa" and "The Deformed Transformed"; an oil version of the *Mazeppa* was exhibited at the British Institution in 1871, and he commenced, but never completed, an oil version of *The Deformed Transformed*.²

Although he continued to paint and to be interested in art until the year of his death, Oliver began to turn his attention to literature sometime around 1869. During this year, when he was fourteen, Oliver "produced some sonnets, six or seven in number", which he destroyed "in a fit of morbid irritability or bashfulness caused by their being shown to a few friends".³ Two of these early sonnets have survived, however; one, adopted as the motto (and printed in gilt on the frame) of a picture by Marie Stillman (*née* Spartali), a student of Ford Madox Brown, whose style she closely followed, was included among the

¹ *The Pre-Raphaelites: A Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Their Associates* (1964). *The Infant Jason*, lent by its present owner, Jerrold N. Moore of New Haven, Connecticut, appears as Item 9 in the Catalogue, with a description and a reproduction of the picture.

² For a summary of Oliver Madox Brown's artistic work, see also the listing by N. Peacock in Thieme-Becker, *Kunstler-lexikon*, v. 85. Given the tendency of Oliver's family to preserve even his personal belongings, it is curious that half his pictures now elude discovery. Of the six exhibited pictures, only *The Infant Jason* (see above note), *Queen Margaret and the Robbers* (now in the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow), and *Exercize* (now in Manchester City Art Gallery) are immediately locatable. Two small landscape drawings are in the collection of Mrs. Lucy O'Connor, but there are no works by him in the collections of Signora Angeli, either in Woodstock or among the pictures at Wightwick Manor. Of the major galleries which are repositories of Pre-Raphaelite art—Birmingham, Manchester, British Museum, Victoria and Albert, Lady Lever Gallery, Tate, Fogg Museum (Harvard), Wilmington Museum of the Fine Arts—only Manchester has a work by OMB.

³ *Memoir, Literary Remains*, pp. 10-11. The earliest reference to Oliver's literary work occurs in WMR: Diary for 7 November 1869, in which the sonnet on Miss Spartali's picture is mentioned and Oliver is called "a hitherto unknown poet".

Literary Remains ; the second on a chameleon, written about the same time, was first printed by Ingram :

Made indistinguishable 'mid the boughs,
 With saddened weary ever-restless eyes
 The weird Chameleon of the past world lies,
 Like some old wretched man whom God allows
 To linger on : still joyless life endows
 His wasted frame, and memory never dies
 Within him, and his only sympathies
 Withered with his last comrade's last carouse.
 Methinks great Dante knew thee not of old,
 Else some fierce glutton all insatiate
 Compelled within some cage for food to wait
 He must have made thee, and his verse have told
 How thou in vain thy ravening tried'st to sate
 On flylike souls of triflers overbold.¹

This sonnet is remarkable for reasons other than the age of the author when he composed it. Thematically, it bears the press of his adolescence, though it is amazingly mature in technique. The symbolic overloading apparent anticipates the atavistic imagery used so frequently in Oliver's later fiction to depict the monsters of the mind. His pictorial, almost mythopoeic, imagination is strongly attracted by the symbolic possibilities of the grotesque (in this poem—elsewhere by the exotic, the erotic, the demonic) in a setting that, either supernatural or deterministic, is always indifferent. If, in the octave, the chameleon bears too close a resemblance to Tennyson's Kraken, and the old man, in the comparison, to Tithonus, the author redeems his borrowings in the sestet by extending the symbolic dimensions of his chameleon to Dantean proportions.

It was during his fifteenth year, according to the Memoir in the *Literary Remains*, that Oliver first "thought out his narrative" for his one completed novel, projecting it initially in verse, a scheme from which he was diverted by reflecting that, among the authors belonging to, or highly prized in, his own social circle, there were various writers of poetry, but few or none who produced prose fiction.²

¹ Ingram, pp. 25-26. Oliver's fascination with the Chameleon is apparent also in *Gabriel Denver* (p. 291) ; the reptile is the first thing Denver sees when he resumes consciousness after his long illness.

² p. 10.

It would appear, then, that in composing *The Black Swan* over the winter of 1871-2, Oliver was committing himself to an apprenticeship with a definite view to becoming the novelist among the Pre-Raphaelite group, with whom he was closely affiliated. Having previously flirted with, certainly not mastered, the twin arts of Pre-Raphaelitism, he saw in fiction, possibilities that so far had gone unsounded.

It is not possible to specify the precise date of composition of *The Black Swan*.¹ The earliest reference to it occurs in the entry for 18 March 1872 in William Rossetti's Diary :

Brown called. He says Nolly has, to the astonishment of everybody, & without consulting anybody, written a prose tale of passion, of extraordinary power : it drew tears from Mathilde Blind. He wishes Gabriel, myself, & perhaps Morris, to meet soon at Miss B's, to hear the tale read by Lucy, & to offer opinions as to its merits, & chances of success. It seems that some little while ago Nolly burned a lot of sonnets he had written.²

That reading, of the first eight or ten chapters of the novel, took place on 30 May 1872, but without Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Morris being present. William Michael's reaction was mixed. He thought the tale certainly very remarkable, " considering that

¹ It is generally stated, even by William Rossetti, that the original title of *Gabriel Denver* was *The Black Swan*. However, in WMR : Diary, 30 May 1872 (Angeli Papers), William writes, " Attended with Brown & Lucy, by B's request, at Miss Blind's, to hear the story which Nolly wrote some little while ago, ' Gabriel Denver '." Since this entry follows the first mention of the book by only six weeks, and precedes negotiations over publication by three months—an important concession in which was the alteration of the title—William's use of this title is puzzling. Oliver's titles seem at best arbitrary : he variously thought of *To all Eternity* (finally, the title of a poetic fragment) and *Agnes Desborough* for *Heb-ditch's Legacy* ; and *The Dwale Bluth* began as *Deadly Nightshade*, with *Nightshade*, *Belladonna*, and *Atropa Belladonna* also being considered (see Ingram, pp. 126 and 171). In a letter to Williams, he rejects *Belladonna* as having already been used as the title of a novel ; there is also a French novel called *Le Cygne Noir : une haine à bord* (see Darmesteter, p. 158), but whether Oliver knew of the book is uncertain. Despite the likely possibility that *Gabriel Denver* may have been the original title of both versions of the novel, it is used in this article to refer to the last (published) version only. *The Black Swan* is reserved for the first, printed in the *Literary Remains*.

² Entry from unpublished WMR : Diary in Angeli Papers. Mathilde Blind (*née* Cohen, 1841-96) was a poetess and translator who for some years (from about 1867 when as Claude Lake she published her pseudonymous *Poems*) was a protégé of Ford Madox Brown, an intimate of the family, and a frequent visitor at Fitzroy Square.

N. is now only 17", and felt it showed "indisputable gift & power", but, with the reservations already noted, he found it "scarcely so uncommon" as Ford Madox Brown had indicated. W. R. W. Ralston, who was present at the reading, thought that "the moral twist in the story would be much against its general acceptance, were it to be published", and with this view William Michael agreed. Although the whole of the story was not read—only the "main connecting chapters"—William Michael's praise was highly qualified:

I think many things are given at too great length, & that the quality of the story is rather questionably balanced between that of a full-sized romance with very few incidents, & that of a condensed tale of passion narrated with some excess of scale.¹

By the summer of 1872, Oliver had finished *The Black Swan*, and was hoping to attract a publisher. He had also commenced (probably in June) the writing of his second novel, *The Dwale Bluth*, as a letter from Ford Madox Brown to George Rae, the Birkenhead banker and Pre-Raphaelite patron, makes clear.² This was the summer of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's breakdown, during which the ailing poet spent two months in Scotland under the constant surveillance (at various times) of Ford Madox Brown, Dr. Hake and his son George, William Bell Scott, and Henry Treffry Dunn.³ Oliver was considered as a possible companion, but he was rejected, even by Rossetti, as being too young and inexperienced.⁴ Rossetti's health was the principal preoccupation of many of his friends during this summer, and the responsibilities that Ford Madox Brown shared with William Rossetti were so onerous and time-consuming that there is practically no mention of Oliver's novel or the arrangements for its

¹ Entry from unpublished WMR: Diary in Angeli Papers. William Ralston had earlier been an official in the British Museum Library. He later won a small reputation as a translator of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and other Russian writers and as a lecturer on Russian literature (see *SR*, i. 88). ² Hueffer, *FMB*, p. 280.

³ A collection of over 130 unpublished letters (in two packets) mainly from these correspondents, but also from W. M. Rossetti, Jane Morris, and others, is among the Angeli and Penkill Papers at U.B.C.

⁴ Rosalie Glynn Grylls (Lady Mander), in her *Portrait of Rossetti* (London, 1964, p. 152) states that "Nolly Brown came up, though Rossetti considered him too young and tried to persuade Stillman to pay a visit instead". It is clear from the correspondence in Angeli-Penkill that Oliver was deterred from going.

publication in surviving letters. It may safely be stated, however, that the search for a publisher was more prolonged than Ingram implies,¹ and, though the full correspondence is not available, it is clear that several possibilities were being explored. From Stobhall, near Perth (one of two houses put at Rossetti's disposal by his friend and patron, the M.P., William Graham),² Dr. Hake writes on the last day of July to William Michael Rossetti :

Please to ask Madox Brown to let me know at his pleasure what he is doing about the novel of Nolly. If it comes about that it is to go to Chapman & Hall's, I have no doubt R may be induced to write the letter to Meredith but it is better not to urge this until it is absolutely wanted—as he has some scruple about doing it for reasons which I have already stated.³

By September, when Oliver embarked on a walking tour of Sussex and Kent, *The Black Swan* had been submitted to William Smith Williams, the reader for Smith, Elder who had been so largely responsible for promoting the publication of *Jane Eyre*. The source of the contact is uncertain, though Ingram attributes it to what he calls "female intervention", explaining that it was Lowes Dickinson's wife, Williams's daughter, who, struck by the "power and originality" of the book, succeeded in getting her father to read it. Williams's initial letter to Oliver is not extant, but Oliver's reply (dated 27 September 1872) is printed in Ingram's biography.

Given the relative uneventfulness of Oliver Madox Brown's life, the publication of his novel, and the arrangements for its publication, constituted the highpoint in his nineteen years. At this point, therefore, it may be appropriate to discuss Ingram's biographical account. The limitations of this biography have already been sufficiently indicated, and, indeed, the book has all

¹ Ingram, p. 70.

² Ford Madox Brown, George Hake, Rossetti, and his servant, Allan, first went to Urrard House, Pitlochry, Perthshire, arriving there on 21 June; they left one week later for Stobhall (near Stanley Station). Rossetti left Stobhall for Trowan on 26 July.

³ Unpublished letter in the Angeli Papers. The reasons for Rossetti's hesitation to approach Meredith are not clear, but a partial explanation may lie in the charges of "Coterie Glory" which Buchanan had levelled at Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites in this year.

the weaknesses of a commemorative study. Nevertheless, Ingram's book is the major source for information on Oliver, and it does contain much material inaccessible elsewhere. Over fifty letters (counting excerpts) from Oliver to his family, to Philip Bourke Marston, to W. Smith Williams and others are included, together with some twenty letters to him.¹ While these materials, woven into an abbreviated chronological sketch of the artist's life, hardly compensate for the absence of anything like a critical examination of Oliver's works, they do make the volume indispensable. In presenting the novels, Ingram substitutes for criticism two chapters of extended plot summary, but, though he refers to *Gabriel Denver* as a "white-washed foundling",² he does not really address himself to a comparison between the two versions of the novel. He does, however, in Chapter 4, include most of the extant documents relevant to this important period of Oliver Madox Brown's life.

The negotiations for the publication of Oliver's novel—for what was to prove to be the transformation of *The Black Swan* into *Gabriel Denver*—began, as has been noted, in September of 1872. From Williams's first letter, they must have been a devastating disappointment to the young author. Although sufficiently impressed by the book to encourage Oliver in revising it, Williams, from the outset, insisted on substantive changes—in tone, plot, motivation, even in title—that necessitated a total restructuring of the book and considerable rewriting. Williams's scruple was in large part on moral (that is to say, commercial) grounds; the novel had to be made acceptable both to Mudie and to Mrs. Grundy. Though Oliver was reluctant to mutilate his story, expedience clearly loomed larger than integrity, and a patchwork novel published seemed more attractive than honest anonymity.

Nor was Oliver advised by his family to stand too insistently

¹ Ingram notes that "It can scarcely be claimed for Oliver that he was a letter-writer: he hated correspondence and, as a rule, only followed it up from necessity" (p. 97). The 50 letters in Ingram from Oliver probably constitute a major portion of his surviving correspondence. Many of those to Philip Bourke Marston are now in the Marston Papers at the Library of Congress; others of minor importance are in the Angeli Papers and in the Oliver Madox Brown Papers in the Rylands Library (English MS. 1235).

² Ingram, p. 69.

on his artistic prerogative. Writing to Lucy from Bracken Dene, Gateshead on Tyne, on 26 September 1872, Ford Madox Brown, offered his response to Williams's first letter :

I think Nolly should write at once & thank Williams warmly for his long & kind letter & say he would prefer to be guided by *him* as to whether the story should be submitted to Smith & Elder or not—that he *is* writing another but that meanwhile he wishes this one to be published by some one either in a magazine or by itself. That he accepts his criticisms with perfect belief in their truth & usefulness & would willingly, for the purpose of securing S & E as publishers, modify the wickedness of this tale as much as possible, but that he does not see his way to much in this line. The abuse in the first chapter might be modified. The idea about making the wife to some extent entrap him into marriage is not a bad one perhaps for the general reader though that it would make the tale much more moral I don't see, because anything like an ordinary excuse would only tend to make him more like an ordinary scoundrel—his only excuse if there be any is in the misfortune of the situation & the sudden intensity of his passion. The idea about the gold is a good suggestion & might be interrelated with good effect. The notion of his not committing suicide is absurd—but Nolly might offer to shorten the slanging in the 1st chapter. Altogether I think Nolly should do as *he* likes in the matter. I think the tale is horrible, yet, complete in its way. . . .¹

That Oliver took his father's advice in replying to Williams is evident from his letter of 27 September 1872 :

. . . I have not the slightest objection to modifying the harshness of the plot so far as I am able, for I perfectly recognize the truth and usefulness of the alterations you have so kindly suggested. However, I do not see how I could make Dorothy merely Denver's cousin and not his wife. The only excuse that can be offered for Denver's conduct seems to me to be the utterly isolated situation he is placed in, and the extreme and unexpected suddenness of his passion. He, undoubtedly, behaves badly, and the tragic ending he comes to is supposed to be a just retaliation upon him. . . .²

There followed a long correspondence between Oliver and Williams in which, point by point, Oliver made the required concessions and agreed to the dilution of *The Black Swan*, renamed *Gabriel Denver*, to make it acceptable to the publishers. He spent the fall and winter of 1872-73 "completely rewrit[ing] the whole story page by page".³ Occasionally, Oliver balked on a point, as (in a letter of 24 January 1873) he did over the positioning of the first chapter—*The Black Swan* begins *in medias res* and moves through two flashback chapters to pick up the action—but when, in the same letter, he conceded the issue

¹ Unpublished letter in the Angeli Papers.

² Ingram, p. 71.

³ *Ibid.* p. 73.

of Dorothy's relationship to Denver, mentioned in the letter quoted above, he was already foredoomed to submission. By 10 March 1873, he had completed his revisions, which included four different chapters and a new conclusion. At last, Williams was satisfied, and he wrote at once to say so and to tell Oliver that he was submitting *Gabriel Denver* to Leslie Stephen, the editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*. Stephen ultimately rejected the novel, but Smith, Elder decided to go ahead with publication, agreeing to purchase *Gabriel Denver* outright for £50. "It will make only one volume of the usual novel size", Williams wrote to Oliver, "and though your name is not yet known to the public as a writer, I hope that your first book will make so strong an impression on the novel readers as to establish your popularity as a writer of romance."¹ Subsequent correspondence with Williams concerns the technical aspects of publication—a motto to "lessen the blank space of the title-page", the dedication (to Oliver's father), the design for the cover.² By mid-July, the

¹ Ingram, pp. 77-78. Letter 1261 (*D-W*) suggests that at least a tentative agreement between Oliver and Smith, Elder was reached by 12 November 1872.

² Oliver first offered to do the cover design himself. He wrote to Philip Bourke Marston: "I am designing a binding for my unfortunate little book, and find it a very difficult and laborious task. There will be a great curling flame very much blown about by the sea-wind, springing and shooting out from the foam of a large wave. It is supposed to be night:—a little light falls on the water beneath and on the clouds above, just dimly outlining them—while two or three stars are visible, and all the rest is hidden in the darkness. Of course, it is purely ornamental and not realistic" (Ingram, p. 80). Williams thought the offer "too good to be neglected", commenting that "a striking outside might attract notice to a powerful story. . . . The only hindrance is Mudie's labels, which interfere with a handsome cover" (Ingram, pp. 79-80). In the end the cover was designed by Ford Madox Brown. The design, "treated decoratively rather than pictorially", depicts a burning ship and a smaller boat within a cartouche. The billowing smoke bursts the contained design and curls round it in an art nouveau-like pattern in which the title is stamped. Beneath the circle, clinging to a spar which houses the name of the author, are three rats (which figure prominently in the story). An albatross (also in the novel) and the constellation of the Southern Cross round out the design, which is partially duplicated (in outline only) on the back cover. Of this design, Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to Oliver: "Cover excellent. Obverse perhaps a little Japanese." The second edition of *Gabriel Denver* (1875, almost certainly merely a re-issue from the original sheets—by July 1874 Williams informed Oliver that only 300 copies had been sold) appeared without the decorated cover.

proofs had been corrected, and there remained only the actual publication and the reviews to be anticipated. *Gabriel Denver* was published on 5 November, Guy Fawkes Day, 1873, a year to the day before Oliver Madox Brown's death.

Oliver's last year was hardly a satisfying one, though it was productive. The press reception of his novel was a disappointment, but the reaction of his friends and family was, predictably and consistently, enthusiastic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's comments have already been recorded. Christina Rossetti, who read the novel in proof, wrote Oliver "in admiration of the talent of which it is full, which realizes and conveys so vividly, and wields both power and beauty". She liked "touches about animals, and sympathy with their poor little cures and fortunes", but she was less favourably disposed towards the book's theme and its characters, which she found "detestable".¹ Dr. Westland Marston surely spoke for his son, Philip, as well as for himself in writing, "I really think there is scarcely any crown of fiction which may not eventually be won by a writer who has so begun his career".² Oliver, eager to secure favour with his publishers, sent Williams Rossetti's letter of praise, which, together with Simcox's review in the *Academy*, Williams said, will "help your book".

Four major notices of *Gabriel Denver* appeared—in the *Academy*, *Athenaeum*, *Spectator*, and *Saturday Review*.³ Of these, that in the *Saturday Review*, which Oliver found "slashing, if not eccentric", was the last, the longest, and decidedly the best. Recognizing many of the weaknesses of *Gabriel Denver* as "the errors of youth", the reviewer saw a power in the derivative story that transcended the fictional formula used by the author: "Mr. Brown appears to have adopted Rochester, his first wife, and Jane Eyre, from Miss Brontë's first novel, set them afloat

¹ *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. W. M. Rossetti (London 1908), p. 41. The manuscript is in the Angeli Papers.

² Ingram, p. 82.

³ Simcox's review appeared in *The Academy* on 22 November 1873; *The Athenaeum* notice, which may have been by Lord Lytton, appeared on the same day. The two anonymous reviews in the *Spectator* and *Saturday Review* appeared late, on 28 March 1874 and 23 May 1874 respectively. The *Spectator* review is only a perfunctory notice.

together on the ocean, and involved them in a melodramatic adventure after the manner of Mr. Charles Reade." Unfortunately, Oliver lacked both Charlotte Brontë's "power of describing certain types of character" and Reade's "peculiar realism". The events of the novel the reviewer found extravagant, the style too frequently "highflown poetical"; "the sentiments of the actors are for the most part so highly pitched, that we rather wonder that they can preserve their sanity, as indeed some of them do not . . . we end by doubting whether we have been reading a romance or the description of a nightmare." After a lengthy run-through of the plot, in which he leaves it to "our readers to imagine a conclusion for themselves", the reviewer reverts to a discussion of the power of the novelist, which "is to be found rather in his descriptions of natural scenery . . . than in the speeches of his characters":

Mr. Brown . . . has thrown the reins on the neck of his rhetoric, and in the constant effort to be impressive has not only taken leave of common sense, but has overlooked some of the most obvious resources of his imaginary situations.

"The great writer", he advises the young author, "can make the most commonplace objects pathetic or terrible; it is so far a proof of inferiority when a man is forced to strain his voice to the uttermost at every page and to keep his passion always at boiling point."¹

Perhaps not unnaturally, Oliver was fearful that such a review would deter the publisher's interest in his new work, *The Dwale Bluth*, twenty-two chapters of which he had completed by July 1874. He wrote to Williams then that he had "begun and carried considerably forward three novels within the last nine months," but that he had settled on the completion of his "long story".² Williams's reply (dated 29 July 1874) was sympathetic and encouraging, and within a week (4 August) he wrote opening the possibility that *The Dwale Bluth* might be suitable for the *Cornhill Magazine*. To this suggestion, however, Oliver, remembering the lukewarm response of the editor in rejecting *Gabriel Denver* and, further, having heard that Stephen was the reviewer of the *Saturday Review* notice, was decidedly cool.

¹ 23 May 1874, pp. 660-1.

² Ingram, p. 173.

Ultimately, of course, the lure of possible publication overcame his hesitation ; as Ingram puts it,

Persuaded, if not convinced, Oliver gave his consent ; and . . . altered the plan of his projected romance, in order to suit it to the requirements of the *Cornhill* editor . . . the same heart-breaking system of mutilation and alteration that had sufficed to injure *The Black Swan* was now at work to destroy the vitality of *The Dwale Bluth*.

Revisions were made along lines suggested by Stephen, but after the manuscript had been retained by the editor for some time, it was returned without explanation.¹

These negotiations were being conducted in August and September 1874. By the end of September, Oliver, whose health was never particularly strong, lay dying from pyaemia, or blood poisoning. The last five or six weeks of his life were spent in alternating periods of heightened lucidity and creativity, during which he dictated new works, and hallucinative semi-comas, in which he imagined himself “ condemned to be shot ” by a group of red-coated soldiers. But here the myth takes over and facts give way to sweet nostalgia and dedicated memories. Dead on 5 November, Oliver was buried on the 12th, amid the eulogies of Moncure Conway (who conducted the non-sectarian service) and his devoted family and friends.²

III

The Literary Remains of Oliver Madox Brown, published two years after his death, contains the whole of his known writings with the exception of *Gabriel Denver*, the revised, published

¹ *Ibid.* pp. 176-7. During his final illness, Oliver “ read or had read to him the first chapters of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as they appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and after coming to that where Gabriel Oak cares for the young lambs through the winter night, he generously exclaimed, ‘ No wonder they did not want *my* writing ! ’ ” (Ingram, p. 236).

² The letters sent to Ford Madox Brown on the occasion of Oliver’s death were, without exception, effusive in their praise. Rossetti’s has already been quoted. Charles Augustus Howell’s is published in part in Helen Angeli’s *Pre-Raphaelite Twilight* (London, 1954, p. 127). Among the Angeli Papers there are letters from Philip Bourke and Westland Marston, Justin McCarthy (who later wrote a glowing review-article on Oliver in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* when the *Literary Remains* was published), and William J. Stillman—a handful obviously of the letters received.

version of *The Black Swan*, which is the single prose non-fragment in the two volumes. Considering that Oliver did not embark on his writing career until 1871, it is not surprising that he completed no more than one novel, and that the canon that survives is essentially one of fragments. Besides *The Black Swan*, the *Literary Remains* includes Oliver's two long unfinished novels, *The Dwale Bluth* and *Hebditch's Legacy*; three shorter fictions on which he had hardly made a beginning—*The Yeth Hounds : A Legend of Dartmoor*, *Dismal Jemmy : A Fragment*, and *The Last Story*; a "Note on the Plot of *An Irish Story*"; and a small collection of fourteen "Verses".¹ For each of the shorter fragments the editors have provided continuation précis,

¹ In all, 15 poems by Oliver Madox Brown are recorded, 14 of which are published in Vol. II of the *Literary Remains*. The sonnet on the chameleon has already been quoted. Half of the fourteen are songs from *The Dwale Bluth*, including the Zingali songs. Besides these, there are "Laura's Song" from *The Black Swan*, three untitled love lyrics, two sonnets, and the long fragment, "To all Eternity", beginning "God! what a soul that woman had." This last blank verse monologue consists almost exclusively of an apostrophe to love, and though there is only the seed of an incipient narrative in the fragment, the poem demonstrates an amazing amount of control. Oliver's attraction for the mysterious woman who possesses some kind of supernatural power—here she is the siren who casts her spell through song—is apparent in the poem.

With the three shorter fragments there need be little concern. *Dismal Jemmy* is a pedestrian story of a lacklustre artist who, because of his "indomitable perseverance . . . attains to the summit of his ambition in being elected a member of the Society of British Artists" (II, 274). *The Yeth Hounds* is a ballad-like story of triangulated love, murder, and retribution, which shows considerably more promise in the projected completion than in the finished portion, though the story does have a few interesting descriptive passages. *An Irish Story* is merely a bare outline of a melodramatic love story built on betrayal and murder. *The Last Story*, dictated by Oliver on his death bed, is a tale of London low-life. Oliver's intent, according to his editors, was to treat this subject as "serious and pathetic, in contradistinction to the habit of representing these classes from the ridiculous point of view" (II, 304). The two-chapter fragment is told from the point of view of a street urchin, who was to have become the protégé of a celebrated historical painter, but who, because he was "wanting in true artistic perception," was to abandon art and become "a sort of Vasari of the period." All these fragments amply illustrate Oliver's fictional weaknesses, but they do underscore his concern with certain recurrent themes, such as betrayed love, the supernatural, and art, his essentially melodramatic view of life-fiction, and his fascination with the narrative and descriptive possibilities of local colour. More important, they are surviving evidence of continued experimentation with the form of the romance or novel.

based either on Oliver's notes or on conversations with him, in which they sketch out the plot as he intended to develop it. The two longer works are finished only in the sense that they follow the plot through to its denouement, but they are clearly fragmentary. Violent rents in continuity are apparent, affecting the elementary architectonics of the novels, and the proliferation of minor flaws, in such obvious matters as chronology, repetition and transitions, point to first draft states which have been little, or hardly at all, revised. William Michael Rossetti and Franz Hueffer make no attempt to explain their editorial practices in handling the works, and, apart from their signed notes, it is impossible to specify instances in which they may have tampered with the author's original texts. For this reason, and because the surviving manuscripts are incomplete, it has seemed inexpedient to discuss textual matters or variations; both the general commentary on the literary works and the comparative study of the two versions of *The Black Swan* are, therefore, based on the printed versions, available either in the *Literary Remains* or in the first edition of *Gabriel Denver*.¹

Each of Oliver's works may be described as in some way experimental—as was his turning to fiction in the first place—but they are all characterized by recurrent themes, by reiterated plot and character situations which relate to those themes, by repeated devices, such as dreams, to suggest dimensions of awareness, and by an insistent concern with elemental forces which shape, parallel, or mirror the psychological forces operative within the characters of the novels. Oliver is attracted by the grotesque, the unusual, the weird, the supernatural, the mysterious, and

¹ The largest group of surviving manuscripts is in the Rylands Library (English MS. 1235). In this collection are the manuscript of *Hebditch's Legacy* (242 MS. sheets) plus fragments of *Gabriel Denver* and *The Dwale Bluth*; there are also the manuscripts of *The Yeth Hounds*, "To All Eternity" and a few lyrics, several miscellaneous items (mostly in French), and a small group of letters from various correspondents to Ford Madox Brown. A tiny fragment of *The Dwale Bluth* is among the Angeli Papers, together with several letters already mentioned. The notebooks of Oliver Madox Brown recorded by me as being in the Manchester City Art Gallery in *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1965, p. 46) were reported to me by the Gallery in a letter dated 21 January 1958. However, subsequent inquiry has failed to produce further information regarding them.

the demonic. His preoccupation with superstition often leads him to explore experience that lies just at the verge of insanity, but his naïveté and inexperience, coupled with an insufficiently refined discrimination between the tragic and the melodramatic, lead him to stop just short of psychological realism. His novels are heavily, if not carefully, plotted, though in most of them there is a paucity of action; and too frequently the burden of what action there is, is relegated to disproportionately long, and consequently unbalanced, retrospective or flashback chapters. Though chronological time figures in the novels, psychological time is the author's real concern. However, a certain unsophisticated ineptness in his handling of point of view tends to intrude between the reader and the character making the tensions seem calculated and artificial.

At the centre of Oliver's fictional world lies the whole problem of good and evil, but the symbolic equivalents of these antithetical forces, depicted not in chiaroscuro but in unsubtle categorical extremes of black and white, betray the immaturity of the author and his inability to construct a sustained narrative that builds, through successive revelations of character, to a convincing and suitable climax. Thus, Dorothy in *The Black Swan* (Deborah in *Gabriel Denver*) is, from the outset, posited as a Lamia—as one reviewer called her, “a mere demon in petticoats”¹—who does not alter but only becomes more intense as she is increasingly the victim of Gabriel's neglect and the object of his hatred. Her weakness as a character rests in her two-dimensional flatness as a personality; she is simply the personification of evil, an abstraction rather than a human character. This same flatness is apparent in Helen Serpleton (whose name suggests her symbolic qualities), the heroine of *The Dwale Bluth*, and in Crayston Blackoder, the literally named villain of *Hebditch's Legacy*. Oliver's characters, however, are not all inhabitants of an allegorical world; what is being described is a limitation in character delineation. The three characters already mentioned are so overshadowed by their particular monomanias—the revenge of Dorothy, the death-wish of Helen Serpleton, the avariciousness of Blackoder, the hatred and love of Gabriel

¹ *Saturday Review*, 23 May 1874, p. 661.

Denver—that they almost defy realization in human terms; they are, as Watts-Dunton recognized, merely dark silhouettes,¹ and in each instance their monomania has a definite dehumanizing effect.

Oliver's principal strength as a novelist lies in his natural descriptions rather than in his handling of narrative or in his mastery of technical devices. In the conception of his three major works there is considerable power, as most of the early reviewers recognized, but the young novelist is seldom able to muster the necessary control over his materials to sustain the ambitious themes that underlie his narratives. He was obviously searching for a mode which lay beyond his capacity as an artist. In part, his failure rested with his youth, and his novels betray in their very fragmentation the frustration of an adolescent who, striving for a cosmic statement, was inhibited by the limitations of his own experience and technical resources. In each of his novels, Oliver is exploring the effects of passion on personality, but it is not simply passion as a part of the human condition that fascinates him. Passion is a universal urge linking contemporary man to his past; it is also the animal side of his duality—the raw, wild force that breaks down the artificially induced restraints of civilization. Thus, Oliver's novels are filled with semi-symbolic animals that frequently serve as cue-signs or signatures for the characters: Dorothy's is the snake, Helen Serpleton's the cat (more predator than pet), Gabriel Denver's is the tiger or the lion, emblematic of his inhuman rapaciousness. The passion of his characters is, of course, equated with their monomanias, which both consume their own humanity and effect a disintegration of the natural order. Fogs and fires and electric storms dominate the novels, obscuring the moral as well as the natural scene. In the face of an indifferent nature and wild, weird, uncontrollable passions, innocence is insecure and love becomes an obsessive and perverted force, leading only to death or madness. Even childhood is no protection in a deterministic world. Helen Serpleton of *The Dwale Bluth*, who has inherited both the curse of her father's family and the doom of her mother's gypsy origins, manifests at five years old the direction of her destiny.

¹ *The Examiner*, p. 127.

Although his novels have something of the pastiche about them, the literary influences evident are not so much direct borrowings or imitations as they are the result of the unconscious absorption of other writers' subjects and themes, techniques and styles. Reviewers saw in his works signs of the influence of the Brontës, Hawthorne, and Hugo, and certainly they are liberally sprinkled with passages that echo not only these novelists but also Dickens and Poe. However, the ingredient common to all of the novels (and to the novelists whom he imitates) is that of gothic romanticism, so that his borrowings belong more to the class of imaginative sources, overall mood or tone, and thematic atmosphere than to specific incidents, characters, and plot.

The influence of the Brontës is not so much apparent in parallel passages as it is in general atmosphere in a work such as *The Black Swan*. The interlacing of the elemental forces in nature with primitive, human passions suggests immediately analogues with *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Even Oliver's extravagance of style and rhetoric to produce a grotesque and weird effect is Brontësque, though in his attempt to portray violence *verbally* through rhetoric he never achieves the force or the psychological realism of either of his models. His weakest quality as a novelist is apparent in his handling of dialogue, where too often passion, lost in a vortex of vituperative abuse and bombast, is reduced to bathos. The opening chapter of *The Black Swan* demonstrates vividly Oliver's incapacity as a dialogist. The psychological setting is perfect to produce tension and conflict. At sea for eight weeks, Gabriel has deserted his wife, Dorothy, and openly flaunted his love for Laura Conway, the only other passenger aboard the ship. Dorothy has retreated into a shell of hatred and revenge, giving Gabriel and Laura the exclusive propinquity in which their stolen love can flourish. On this night, having overheard Denver and Laura arranging to meet on deck, Dorothy secrets herself in the gloom, just beyond the reach of the fore-castle light. For some unexplained reason, Laura does not come; Denver, pacing the deck restlessly, suddenly sees the dark outline of a woman silhouetted in the shadows. Instinctively (and mistakenly), he rushes to her,

speaks her name, and stoops to kiss her. Recognizing Dorothy, he is instantly repulsed. "Starting back from her, [Denver] appeared to stagger for an instant as if a snake had stung him." This is Denver's moment of recognition, the climactic encounter of the whole novel, but it is vitiated by twelve pages of mere verbal violence in which the action of the novel is suspended. Dorothy raves and rants and screams in an extended monologue which, only simulating passion, destroys the power inherent in the dramatic scene. When Denver remains speechless and motionless, she frames his unarticulated responses, screaming at him that though she had bitten her lips till the blood came to forestall this fit of madness and even contemplated flinging herself overboard, she had been restrained by the thought that her suicide would make him happy: "I'm your lawful wife, you've linked your life to me. You swore at God's altar to share all my sorrows, and I swear you shall to the last bitter dregs!" Oliver takes advantage of a lull in Dorothy's diatribe to describe at some length the conflict within Denver, whose mind, "flooded by his blind reckless passion for her rival was utterly incapable of pity for her". His loathing for Dorothy, who is repeatedly described in serpentine terms, is so great that, reflecting that she could "always cling to him all his life as she had threatened", he has to struggle to control his impulse to kill her. Before Gabriel, his ire and his determination roused by her taunting, can act, however, Laura's song, "Alas! who knows or cares, my love",¹ intrudes, and it abates temporarily by its tonal contrast "the mad flood of passion and hatred and recrimination which swept round those two" (II. 76-87).² The dramatic force of this scene is so seriously weakened by the rhetorical excess of the dialogue, which never quite succeeds in capturing the hatred of the two principals or in carrying the weight of the emotional conflict, that even the powerful conception of the scene and the

¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti singled out "Laura's Song" for comment in his letter to Oliver criticizing *Gabriel Denver*, stating that it "shows that you can even write, when called for, verse well able to stand by itself" (*D-W*, Letter 1418).

² All subsequent page references to the *Literary Remains* will be internally documented by volume and page number.

narrative and descriptive breaks in the dialogue scarcely manage to rescue it from total triviality.

Contrasting with the artificiality of Oliver's staged dialogues are those set pieces of description which are found in each of the novels. Sometimes they are purely naturalistic, such as the Hawthornesque description of the insane garden in *Hebditch's Legacy*, which suggests its counterpart in "Rappaccini's Daughter"—a garden which, with its wild look, its disused fountain "crumbling into dust on the lawn", its smashed statues with broken limbs and noses, and its "summer-house with the roof caved in", "seemed to have gone mad in brief and shaken itself to pieces" (I. 285). Or, in the same novel, the long symbolic picture of the fog, which reminds one perhaps too immediately of Dickens's use of the same device in the opening chapter of *Bleak House*. Oliver remembers his Dickens too well, for the time in both novels is November and the setting Chancery Lane. But the tonal quality in the two passages is distinctly different. Dickens's fog, though thick and ubiquitous, defines (inadequately, as he says) the "groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth".¹ Oliver's interest in the fog is less symbolic than pictorial, though it does obscure the moral issues upon which the plot of the novel turns :

Early one November afternoon, now left some thirty-five years behind us in the remorseless flight of time, an immense, squalid volume of fog swept down across the central parishes of London ; blocking out the residue of the brief wintry sunlight, and suffocating their crowded, tumultuous thoroughfares. It was as though some horrid dream, some diurnal nightmare, had suddenly enthralled the town ; it was *tohu va bohu* realized again, for London is essentially the city of dyspepsia—of morbid self-torturing imagination ; and there are certain days towards the fall of the year on which its sense of degradation and of misery appears to transcend all bounds—grown too uncontrollably poignant even for suppression. Sinister and poisonous and hiding the sun away, it seemed just such a vapour as that which once upon a time rolled forth and embodied itself from the magic jar of Suleyman—unsealed by the Arab fisherman—a sullen, long-imprisoned monster, an Efrete, consecrating its recovered liberty only in the blood of its deliverer. Or it was as though the houses had been swept off the visible face of the earth by some stupendous conflagration—emptied and dissolved into the

¹ Riverside edition of *Bleak House*, ed. Morton D. Zabel (Boston, 1956), p. 1.

drifts of lurid smoke that yet enwrapped the ruins. . . . All the atmosphere was full of vague palpitating sounds and rumours. In the streets . . . men lost sight of each other's corporeal identities, or shrank into mere sound-creating shadows. Every visible object became the disembodied phantom of some former self. The fog was at its worst round Chancery Lane ; a district then environed by a secluded, capulous labyrinth of streets and alleys, which seemed better adapted to the necessities of a colony of toads than to the "swarming" of human beings they then gave shelter to ; a district pestilential enough in fact, even without the fog which now hung over it so impenetrably (i. 239-40).

The fog, which actively strangles the last breath of life from the consumptive, dying Christine Helmore, and conspires to cause the accident that kills Dr. Crashaw, becomes the willing accomplice to Blackoder's sinister act that launches the novel. The crowd that forms after Dr. Crashaw's accident provides Oliver with one of the best descriptions in this novel of London life :

No better idea of the immensity of London can be acquired than by watching the way in which one of these crowds swarms together in a street where previously no single soul seemed visible. In this fog it looked more mysterious than ever. A crowd rises in London like a cloud in the sky—it comes one knows not whence, and seems to dissolve back again into bricks and mortar. Most of the lookers-on followed the cab however : and presently, save for the police who stood over the shattered carriage while the horses were led away, and for two or three momentary loiterers, the square was emptied of movement and clamour again (i. 259).

The Dwale Bluth has its share of fine pictorial descriptive passages, such as the death scene and burial of Sir Geoffry Serpleton (Introduction, Chapters 4, 5), the description of Serpleton House (Book II, Chapter I), the fog on Dartmoor (Book I, Chapters 3, 4), the storm on the moors with Helen and her cat (Book II, Chapters 4, 5), and the wild and weird scenery clothed in "mist and moonlight" around Castle-Rock (Book IV, Chapter 4).¹ However, not all of Oliver's best descriptions are

¹ Many of the descriptions in *The Dwale Bluth* are less set pieces than they are symbolic, and organic to the narrative. For example, the story hinges on the curse on the descendants of the Tracies, "one of whose ancestors was a ring-leader in the martyrdom of St. Thomas a'Becket" (i. 37). Serpleton House, the family mansion is described in Book II, Chapter I. On three sides, the house is surrounded by a "stragglng neglected garden", where the paths are "over-tangled with wild-briars, brambles, gooseberry bushes, and weeds, with here and there a bright wild-rose emerging, as if half-choked among the thorny embraces of the thistles". At the entrance to the garden there is a gate with a corner stone, on which there is a carving in bas-relief "with a serpent writhing from side to side, standing on its tail, and threatening the spectator with its large-fanged head ; a

naturalistic and pictorial. Frequently, they are impressionistic, as in the passage on death that follows Christine Helmore's demise in *Hebditch's Legacy* :

There are two sides to death : an illimitable terror blended with the subtlest pathos ; it is more natural than the sobbing of a hurt child, and yet wilder than the reverberation of thunder among mountains. . . .

A sufferer from consumption, as Mrs. Helmore had been, is like a bird in the claws of a cat. It is cruel, subtle, and inexorable. It reassures only to betray the more profoundly. It caresses and crushes. It plays with you—disguises its whole nature—clings to you with nervous tenacity, and yet suffers you to elude it up to the end even—almost to escape ; and then, suddenly and at the last, it turns and rends you to pieces ! (i. 256).

Similarly, in *The Dwale Bluth*, one of the most interesting sections in the entire novel is the impressionistic account of Helen's dream during her delirium following her eating of the nightshade. This passage reveals an insight into the whole psychology of dreams, and of their symbolic function, and, indeed, Oliver's general treatment of conscious and unconscious mental processes is far in advance of his time. Helen, who is only five, is haunted by fantasies "that ought never to have been imaginable in the brain of a child so young". Obsessed by an uncontrollable death wish, the child, who shares many elf-like qualities with Little Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, seeks furtively for her own destruction, finding it at last in the Deadly Nightshade.¹ In her

grey indentation showed that the forked tongue had been broken away. On the carved inscription-roll underneath, one could indistinctly make out the motto, *Fligo postea Sibilo*" (i. 124-5). Thus, the garden and the gate form an appropriate setting for the doomed and mysterious Helen, the heroine of the novel. Again, Helen is frequently equated with the bad-tempered cat who always accompanies her : "The luminous eyeballs, inflated nostrils, contracted irises, lithe supple movements, and tenacious distended claws, of the feline animal seemed reproduced in the eyes, fingers, and limbs, of the child, to a degree, which was almost repulsive and terrible in a human being" (i. 131).

¹ It should be pointed out in conjunction with this dream sequence that Helen does not die at this time, an antidote being provided by her uncle. An interesting error in *The Dwale Bluth* was noted by the *Athenaeum* reviewer of Ingram's book (21 July 1883), who pointed out that Oliver had confused the Deadly with the Wood Nightshade, *Atropa belladonna* with *Solanum dulcamara*. Oliver Serpleton, in identifying the plant (i. 144), first classifies it accurately, but then immediately alters his classification. *Dwale Bluth* is properly translated as the Deadly Nightshade, but the plant described in the novel is a creeper which *Atropa belladonna* is not. However, Oliver's botanical mistake has no palpable effect on

delirium, she is pursued by a series of visions fused from the narrow range of her memory and experience which coalesce to portray symbolically the struggle between life and death. Even more interesting than the dream itself, however, is Oliver's exploration of the surrealistic world of dreams :

The vital force, or power of receiving impressions, contained in the brain, never sleeps, and death alone can render it insensible. Even death itself is full of dreams to some of us—full of the souls of our dead friends—angelic sirens who lure and sing to us from its bleak and visionary shores.

A vague, dim landscape surrounded the child, no single object of which had power to impress itself on her memory ; for a dream is a perfect work of art and never distracts the sleeper's attention from the chief point of interest in its composition. The impressions received in a dream are infinitely vaguer, and at the same time more accurately delineated, than those received by the mind when perfectly awake. A dream is more pitiless and unrelenting than life itself. Woe to the wretch who seeks refuge in sleep from the tormenting pangs of an evil conscience ! A dream is a thing utterly by itself. It is illogical ; for it *appears* to produce effects which are seemingly causeless, though, in reality, a pool of water does not reflect the sky more faithfully than a dream reflects some forgotten action in the dreamer's life (i. 184-5).

Perhaps the finest example of Oliver Madox Brown's power of description is found in the penultimate chapter of *Hebditch's Legacy*, entitled "Man and his Conscience". This reflective chapter really concludes the crucial story of the novel by exposing the psychological motivation of Blackoder's nefarious actions as another instance of aberrant love :

It had all been done for his daughter's sake : no one could analyse the affection in which he held her : the wild unreasoning love as of some animal for its offspring—the passion, the one object of his love (ii. 61).

The first part of this chapter is a description of a picture by David Scott, from which the chapter takes its name, and it is important not only because, as Ford Madox Heuffer says, the ability "to feelingly describe a picture [is] one of the most difficult feats of descriptive literature",¹ but because the sketch becomes, as Oliver says, "an epitome of the human mind". Scott's picture

the symbolic use made of the plant in the novel. William Michael Rossetti points out (*SR*, i. 175) that "the scholarly wool-gathering clergyman Oliver Serpleton is in several respects limned from [Charles Bagot] Cayley . . . Whether Cayley read it and recognised the 'take off' of himself is unknown to me; it may well be that he did so".

¹ F. M. Hueffer, "The Younger Madox Browns", pp. 52-53.

represents two wild-visaged figures, stark-stripped and running swiftly down the damp sand of a desolate sea-beach ; one in the footsteps of the other. It might have been designed by Michelangelo. The waves are an inspiration in themselves ; wild, cold, and inveterate, a few strokes of the pencil have set them dashing and surging for ever. Behind, the sky—grey, dumb, speech-bound as it were, “awearied with all her wings,”—leans vaporously on the horizon and rests there. The whole sketch is filled with the monotony and foam-speckled desolation of these waves, and with the steel-grey frozen neutrality of the horizon beyond ;—with the sense of movement and of gradually quickening flight. You can hear the waves hiss through the pebbles—the wind whistle round the limbs and the nakedness of the fugitives. And nothing else save these two figures visible,—subtly designed : incredibly swift in action ; one running in the other’s footsteps. Where will the race end ?—Will the pursuer ever look fully in the eyes of the pursued, as he strains to do, even now ?—Will the foremost be forced to remove the convulsive fingers from his ears ?—Will the one who follows unburthen his tight-shut lips at last ? None can tell ! It may perhaps be they will face each other in some final goal (out of sight now and to all eternity)—where the fatal sea, rising, will have driven them in, till they can run no further—where they may be friends at last : while the waves will sweep them away in their embraces and their reconciliation, even as it now consumes the mutual footprints of their hostility and flight (ii. 59-60).

But the picture is more than simply an allegory of the mind ; it is also an emblematic statement of Oliver’s theory of fiction, elucidating his preoccupation with the psychological basis of human actions, his attempt to get behind the external appearance to the reality that lurks in the inner recesses of the subconscious, and his insistence on the inexorability of defeat in the human struggle, the solution to which lies, if anywhere, outside the limits of the framed picture of life, beyond the ability of the artist to delineate it. His own interpretation of the picture (forming the second half of the chapter) explains the imaginative appeal of certain subjects for him :

... In the modern civilization a mask has been laid upon all the interior ways of the soul ; the soul’s struggles take place in secret, and the face smiles openly. Inside the soul all the terrible horizon of sea and cloud unfolds itself—the soul’s conscience and the soul’s accuser walk there together, and the soul itself looks on with ghastly sickening distrust : the brain tingles and booms, the eyes leer suspiciously, for how is it possible that things so visible to one mind are not real and visible to all others ? How can it be that the secret which burns for ever on the lips, has never yet found utterance—unconsciously in sleep—in momentary forgetfulness ? No. The soul flies, the accuser pursues : and the soul (the body’s identity) day after day follows its occupations, and mingles in the turmoil of the city and the haunts of its fellow-men—each with his own heart gnawing perhaps :—and the world turns over and over, and fresh men are born and the old die off again (ii. 60-61).

And the application clarifies the moral basis of Oliver's use of retribution as a thematic corollary in all of the novels.

But it is a result of civilization, that no man having once done wrong can escape the moral consequences of his action—unless indeed he be not mentally responsible for it: unless his mind be deranged—for the nerves vibrate perpetually to it, and the brain never forgets its wrong-doing. The punishment is so severe for infringement of the laws in force, the fall so terrible, the mingling of the mental and physical agony so intense—and discovery above all so easy, so overwhelmingly imminent—that there can be no rest after; save in the severest toil and bodily ailment (ii. 61).

There is in each of the major works of Oliver Madox Brown a flawed and obsessive character whose amorality sets into motion destructive forces that, once unleashed, cannot be controlled. Like Lady Barbara in *The Yeth Hounds*, they are from that point pursued either to death or to a madness wherein the pursuit becomes cyclical and, in psychological terms, eternal. His novels become, then, at least in part, analytical of the evil that motivates these characters and of the effect that their action has on the world they inhabit.

Any discussion of the complete corpus of Oliver Madox Brown must be restricted by the fragmentary nature of so great a part of his literary canon, and *The Black Swan*, as his only finished work, must receive the greatest attention. However, the two major fragment-novels in the *Literary Remains* are important for the light they throw on the completed work. In addition, because they represent later stages in Oliver's development as a writer of fiction, they do provide examples of maturation and technical advance. It can be stated categorically, for example, that both *The Dwale Bluth* and *Hebditch's Legacy* contain isolated passages—many of which have already been cited—which are far superior to anything to be found in *The Black Swan*, though in total conception and execution the fragment-novels are inferior. Some of the reviewers felt that *The Dwale Bluth* was Oliver's masterpiece, and it may be that the novel contains a potential that if realized would have produced a more tightly structured and organically complete work of art. One quality immediately apparent in the novel that is not at all observable in *The Black Swan* is humour. The humour is not simply the external sort associated with exaggerated characters such as the

bookish Oliver Serpleton and the termagant Devonshire house-keeper, Margery, both of whom produce situations that are in themselves incongruous and amusing ; nor is it in the somewhat cumbersome use of dialect (with attendant footnote translations) that Oliver employs as part of the local colour of the novel. Rather, the humour in *The Dwale Bluth* is an integral part of the philosophic vision of the author which operates in the novel, and to a large extent it is humour in the broadest sense that lends verisimilitude to the story of Helen Serpleton.¹

In spite of their importance to a total appraisal of Oliver Madox Brown, it is not likely that the fragmentary works in the *Literary Remains* will ever be revived ; nor would it be easy to make a critical case for doing so. As novels they are severely weakened by technical deficiencies already indicated. In fact, in many respects it is inaccurate to regard them as novels at all, for they bear a much closer resemblance to the mode of the romance (in Hawthorne's sense) than to the novel. As fragments, they deserve attention only in so far as they clarify the fictional microcosm which Oliver was seeking to describe. In both works there are giant flaws which no amount of polish would have erased ; but there is also potential and strength, which, given the opportunity to mature, might well have produced a novelist of stature and distinction. The silhouette of that novelist—to use one of Oliver's own favourite words—is apparent in the background of *The Black Swan*.

IV

The extent but not the severity of the revisions of *The Black Swan* for publication as *Gabriel Denver* has already been discussed in part II, above. How devastating these were for the novel is succinctly summarized by James Darmesteter :

¹ Watts-Dunton's appraisal of this aspect of the novel is of some interest despite his hyperbolic estimate : "... in the ' Dwale Bluth ' we get humour—humour which is philosophic, at once, and dramatic—humour which unquestionably affines the writer to the great prose humourists. If the highest humour is that which is at the same time truthful representation, the greatest humourist of our century is George Eliot. Yet there are scenes in the ' Dwale Bluth ' which, though not equal to hers, may be compared with them " (*Examiner*, p. 128).

All the cruel logic of necessity, all the fatal determinism, the poetic justice of Oliver's Æschylean vision give place to an Adelphi melodrama. *The Black Swan*, white as a whitened sepulchre, was published under the title of *Gabriel Denver* and obtained a decent success of esteem: the central idea had vanished, but all the publisher's cleverness had not purged the book of more passion and psychology and picturesqueness than often fall to the lot of the reviewer.¹

In order to simplify discussion, a schematic comparison of both the structure and the narrative of the two novels has been provided in the Appendix. Even the most cursory consideration of this chart will reveal that the publication of *Gabriel Denver* was done at the expense of the literary integrity of *The Black Swan*. Whatever the technical deficiencies of the novel as originally written, it had at least the virtue of an architectonic unity, with a consistent and coherent tragic motivation and dénouement, which in the revision was completely sabotaged.

"Nothing would be easier", said the *Saturday Review* critic of *Gabriel Denver*, "than to treat this book from the purely ludicrous point of view".² Certainly, the truncated and mutilated version of *The Black Swan* to which the critic refers is insubstantial fare, even when compared with much of the fictional blancmange that passed for novels in the Victorian period. In its original form, the book has an elemental forcefulness in its treatment of adulterous love that ultimately wreaks destruction not only on the three principal characters but also on the twenty-one innocent and uninvolved crew and officers of the ill-fated *Black Swan*. The strength of the novel lies principally in the thematic boldness of its broad outline and in the neat balancing of structure and plot, which serve to offset the paucity of action, the limited focusing on only three static characters, the obtrusive omniscient point of view, and the rhetorical excesses of the dialogue—all of which tend to distort and blur the illusion which the novelist is seeking to create.

The major share of the blame for defacing *The Black Swan* belongs to the publisher's reader, William Smith Williams, who undertook to counsel Oliver in his revisions, and on whose authority all the surgery on the novel was made. Williams's concern seems from the beginning to have been orientated more to

¹ *English Studies*, p. 161.

² 23 May 1874, p. 660.

moral than to literary considerations. Although his first letter to Oliver is not extant, it is clear that he insisted that Oliver "modify the wickedness" of the tale as much as possible as a precondition of his recommending it to Smith, Elder for publication.¹ No less effective as a reader-censor than Miss Twinkleton in *Edwin Drood*, Williams tailored *The Black Swan* to fit a fictional form designed by that distinguished guardian of public morality, Charles Edward Mudie, who announced *Gabriel Denver* as a new acquisition to the "Select Library" in January 1874.² Failing an adoption by the lending libraries, *Gabriel Denver* would almost certainly never have been risked by the publishers, and even with it the book realized only minimum sales. The history of Victorian literature offers no better example of the perniciousness of the censorship system than that pale, innocuous parody of *The Black Swan* revised and published as *Gabriel Denver*.

The Black Swan is not only the single completed work of Oliver Madox Brown; it is also the least complex and the most unified. Compared with either *The Dwale Bluth* or *Hebditch's Legacy*, the story is direct and straightforward, without the weakening hiatuses that violate so disastrously the continuity of both the later novels. For the clutter of details and characters on which those novels depend, *The Black Swan* substitutes intensity of character analysis and description in a simply plotted, coherent study. Whereas both the later novels merely pile up melodramatic incidents to achieve their effect, *The Black Swan* works on an incremental principle, though the initial situation is to some extent no less melodramatic, and the suspense is at times so artificially contrived that it backfires and reduces the reader to laughter rather than gasps. But *The Black Swan* makes an impact that neither of the later novels nor *Gabriel Denver* succeeds in achieving.

As presented in *The Black Swan*, the narrative moves evenly to a consistent, if somewhat calculated, inexorable and deter-

¹ This fact is clear from Ford Madox Brown's letter to Lucy of 26 September 1872, quoted in part II, above.

² The novel is included in a long advertisement in the *Athenaeum*, No. 2410 (3 January 1874), p. 6.

ministic retribution. The blackness of the theme is unrelieved, and no concessions are made to the reader's involvement with the characters in this fated triangle. In fact, there is not even the distraction of an outside point of view, since on board ship the focus never shifts from the three principal characters. When Denver and Laura are rescued by the *Albatross*, the captain and crew are ignorant of all that has transpired on the *Black Swan*; and it is the working out of the triangular conflict that constitutes the sole dénouement, the *Albatross* being a kind of belated and ineffectual *deus ex machina*.

Gabriel Denver, on the other hand, provides concessions with a vengeance, stripping the narrative of its tragic integrity, diluting the blackness to a thin grey, which by the end of the novel has paled to a pure whiteness that belies the betrayal on which Denver's and Laura's stolen love has been secured—a betrayal that the publishers seem to have forgotten was attained at the expense of Deborah's sanity and life. An analogous reversal might be achieved if *Moby Dick* were construed as a fishing story, and the white whale were captured by Ahab, reduced in scale, and mounted as a trophy in the Spouter Inn. Disregarding the mayhem committed on the structure of *The Black Swan* in the Smith, Elder version, the newly written chapters hopelessly bowdlerize the narrative and introduce a domestic element which is less moral than saccharine and sentimental.

Since the relationship between Denver and Dorothy is altered from wife to cousin-fiancé, the betrayal is considerably mitigated, and the motivation for Dorothy's revenge shifts from adultery to a kind of limp incest; and changing Denver's foredoomed meeting with Laura on board the ship to merely a reacquaintance implants at least the possibility of an unconscious love that antedates his engagement to Deborah, and explains why Gabriel, in affiancing himself to her in the first place, candidly confesses his incapacity to love her. These two initial changes necessitated an increased blackening of Deborah's character from the outset, and she is revealed as a cold, sinister, calculating woman who, when the opportunity presents itself, is willing, for her own price, to lend Gabriel the money to provide his sister with a dowry on the occasion of her marriage—"The return she

expected was that Denver should become her husband". Far more damaging to the theme and structure of the book, but inextricably linked to those preliminary alterations, is the happy ending of *Gabriel Denver*, in which Gabriel and Laura not only escape the ordeal of the fire and exposure at sea but also the curse invoked by Deborah on their illicit love. Extraneous to everything else in the novel, this ending transforms a story which had initially at least a modicum of originality to the most banal sort of formula fiction of the *Boy's* or *Girl's Own* variety. The destruction of Denver and Laura in *The Black Swan* is not only the logical but, more crucially, the appropriate, culmination of the action. Even an ambiguous open ending, such as the compromise forced on Dickens in *Great Expectations*, would have been more effective than the substitution of an improbable and inconsistent closed ending which destroys the novel's organic completeness. For these reasons, it is not really feasible to base a critical interpretation of the novel on a comparison of parallel texts.

The Black Swan is a fictional analysis of the primeval forces that permeate nature and motivate human conduct. Essentially indifferent rather than good or evil in absolute terms, these forces manifest themselves in amoral actions that immediately conflict with the learned values of society and civilization. Removed from their environmental contexts, isolated from the restraining checks and balances of social, legal, and religious mores, raw human emotions or passions, which are the other side of man's duality, find free vent, and they are creative or destructive at will. In the grandiosity of its conception and the universality of its themes, *The Black Swan* is as ambitious as those great exploratory novels of the nineteenth century which seek to grapple with the elemental aspects of life and death—*Wuthering Heights*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Moby Dick*. Perhaps because it does suggest such masterly prototypes, the failure of the novel is all the more glaring. The feelings of Denver and Dorothy do not even begin to approximate in stature to the primitive passions of Heathcliff and Cathy; beside the arrogant monomania of an Ahab, Denver's seems almost parodic; and the presentation of evil in *The Black Swan* pales in comparison with

Hawthorne's or Melville's treatment of the same theme. The thematic ambiguity which these novels share and which validates so expertly their use of symbolism and allegory is missing in *The Black Swan*. Owing to the inexperience of the author, everything operates on surface levels, conflicts are expressed in simplistic terms, and techniques are inadequate to realize convincingly the original intention. Thus, while *The Black Swan* echoes greater novels, in achievement it is closer to a *Wieland* or an *Elsie Venner*.

It is tempting to advance, but impossible to sustain, a full allegorical reading of *The Black Swan*. Dorothy, Denver, and Laura are the only passengers on a ship without a Captain (Mr. Gregory, injured in a shooting accident, has been left behind at the Cape). The ship itself is a microcosm of the world, but the duality that should preserve balance in that world is upset by a permeating blackness. The *Black Swan* is painted completely black except for some fantastic gilt carving round the stern where the name of the ship is painted in red. The flammable cargo of turpentine which the ship carries—the seed of its own destruction—requires only the sparking of human passions to ignite. The three main characters are virtually isolated on the ship, enclosed, as it were, as players in a drama of the soul.

Denver and Dorothy are united in a marriage of hate, for which they are both culpable. However, Denver is the aggressor, and Dorothy's demonic nature is in large measure owing to his treatment of her. Laura Conway is the innocent caught in the conflict of this perverted marriage, and it is Denver who, with Dorothy's connivance, seduces Laura. "Now for Denver to learn a thing was banned to him, was enough almost to make him unconsciously long for it." Oliver explains that "this disposition, frequently found among half-civilized men who begin life in strange and new colonies", is "a sort of protest of nature, or half return to the blind, though in the main unerringly-right, instincts, from which civilization has originally evolved them" (II. 90). Denver's indifference perhaps mirrors nature's own and is more amoral than immoral, but at least in his victimization of Dorothy he fulfils the symbolic overtones of his name (for

Denver read *D'Enfer*).¹ By involving Laura in the web of his conjugal hatred, Denver to some degree uses her to punish Dorothy for nine years of unhappy marriage. Though this may be an unconscious motive on his part, for it is reciprocated love that he finds with Laura, Denver nevertheless becomes the instrument of Laura's destruction, the corruptor of an innocence not yet capable of discriminating between right and wrong. In a world where primitive passions dominate, without the moral restraint of society, and in which the orphaned girl has lost her natural protectors (even her nurse has died), Laura is faced with realities which she cannot comprehend and with which her moral resources do not enable her to cope. Helpless and alone, she accepts Denver's love, with the amorality of innocence. "A dark foreboding filled Laura's mind. . . . But it was no use thinking; she had given her love irrecoverably to Denver." Laura is thus caught in a maelstrom of love and hatred from which there is no escape. The compulsiveness of Denver's love for Laura, which he recognizes is essentially selfish, causes him to dismiss his responsibility: "He knew he was doing two wrongs, in obtaining Laura's love, and in deserting his wife" (II. 127). ". . . Baffled and tantalized by injustice beyond endurance, he had despised and broken through every restriction of his Maker or destiny"; but he is "infatuated", "mezmerized", "paralysed", "bewitched", obsessed by the monomania of his love for Laura (II. 129).

In the face of Denver's neglect, Dorothy has undergone since

¹ The heightened blackening of Dorothy's character in *Gabriel Denver* has already been noted. In *The Black Swan* she shares Denver's hellish qualities, but hers is a corrupted rather than an inherently evil nature. As Deborah Mallinson (my italics) in *Gabriel Denver*, she is evil incarnate, a shift necessitated largely by the happy ending. Always described in snake-like terms, she becomes a kind of temptress, seeking to expose and release the forces of evil embedded in the innocent hearts of Denver and Laura. The associations of Denver's name are absent in *Gabriel Denver* and the death of Deborah represents the triumph of good over evil. The curse produces only a few titillations when, following Deborah's burial at sea, the storm, which, like the fire, is the work of a malevolent and hostile evil spirit, nearly founders the ship. The instrument of Deborah's malice, the storm, is also snake-like. Finally, Deborah appears to Denver in his delirium, to beckon him to his suicide, but he is saved at the last moment by Laura's intervention, and true love conquers.

her marriage a metamorphosis in which her soul has "hardened into strange formations of dull callous feelings". "Love's sentiment and duty [are] all frozen and congealed together, [and] only predominant hate and passionate resentment [are] alive and undying in the midst." Her calculated revenge on Denver and Laura disposes of the moral ambiguities in the relationship, but the fulfilment of Dorothy's curse is more than simply a platitudinous culmination to a trite tale of infidelity.

There is throughout *The Black Swan* a sense of fate or destiny that overhangs the action. The characters (by implication if not by skilled delineation) are larger than life, and the situation transcends the ordinary experience which is being depicted. Dorothy, Denver, and Laura are all, to some extent, pawns in an alien environment. Physically, morally, and psychologically they are at sea, where the scale of the human context is reduced, the scope of its conflicts narrowed and intensified; experience is truncated, time foreshortened, responses accelerated, and, above all, passions limited to primitive expressions of commitment and survival. Into this realm of the unfamiliar, impelled by an inevitability in which they are all trapped and yielding to atavistic impulses released from their place of imprisonment in the heart and mind, the characters are hurled; and what defeats each of them in the end is, in part, the remorse of recognition. Dorothy, who would like to watch the dying faces of Denver and Laura, is unable to live with the guilt she feels for having set fire to the ship; she drinks the sea water, goes mad and dies, with her curse upon her lips. Laura's death, despite four days of exposure and inanition, can only be accounted for by her desire to expiate her guilt. Dorothy's death, which Denver says frees them "to love each other without shame or mockery", in fact precludes the continuance of his affair with Laura. "His whole mind one dark soulless chaos, through which the aimless desultory beating of his heart shook ceaselessly, like a perpetual wind through an arid fire-blackened desert", Denver can only follow, clinging desperately in his suicide to the girl he has destroyed. The point is not that the moral niceties have been observed in this solution, but that the creative usages of love having been perverted, the toll exacted from each of the principals is death, a death for which

Gabriel Denver (*D'Enfer*), the Angel of Hell, bears the brunt of the responsibility.

It must be emphasized, however, that the allegorical handling of the story is not so neat as the above reading might suggest. And the universalizing that is evident in the novel is never really successful. At best, *The Black Swan* is a limited or inconsistent allegory, for there is no attempt to fit every detail into a maintained scheme, and a great deal of the novel's imagery is thrown away. For instance, there are hundreds of animal images in the book, in addition to the actual animals: a dead kangaroo who is meat for the voyage, an albatross which dives into the burning ship and may foreshadow the rescue vessel, a baboon named Tom Jones, who dies in the fire and is later found stiffened and embered on a spar, and the rats who serve as harbingers of the panic of the crew during the fire. But all are thematically extraneous. The two most recurrent images are those of the snake, identified with Dorothy, and of the lion, panther, or tiger describing Denver. On the most obvious level these connote the venomous and predatory qualities of the two characters, but, in fact, they belong more to the diction and style of the author than they do to any allegorical extension of the narrative. Yet, on another level, here and in his other novels, he uses animals as concrete representations or symbolic transfers of mental states or psychological processes, especially for those which lie beyond the ken of what may be called the civilized conscious mind. What the novel finally possesses is a potential for allegory that is hardly tapped by the author. Had he chosen to pursue his symbolism to the extended limits of its suggestibility, he might have clarified his own ideas about the novel and overcome the awkward handling of point of view which is the chief distraction in *The Black Swan*. More important, he might have realized in more effective fictional terms the vital power of his mythopoeic imagination.

V

Nothing has yet been said about Oliver Madox Brown as a Pre-Raphaelite novelist, and it may fairly be asked what qualities

there are in his novels that may accurately be labelled Pre-Raphaelite. The reference to him in the title of this paper as a "Pre-Raphaelite Novelist Manqué" is intended to suggest no more than his association with the painters and poets of the group, his intimacy with their aesthetic theories and practices, and his stated intention to become the novelist of the movement. To single out his marked emphasis on the minutiae of descriptive detail, the functional application of local colour in his narratives, or the clutter of his fictional canvases, is to insist on a literal application of Pre-Raphaelitism more pertinent to the Brotherhood stage than to the phase of the movement which Oliver encountered two decades later.

Oliver was little attracted by the medievalism of Rossetti's and Morris's Pre-Raphaelitism, but his use of historical settings and symbolism may in part derive from their works. And the direction toward which he was moving as a novelist in such works as *Hebditch's Legacy* and *The Last Story*, dealing as they do with contemporary life, suggests that he was inclined to portray in art "the poetry of things about us", which was an early Pre-Raphaelite concern that never materialized.¹ It is in more general areas than subject or theme or treatment, however, that his real liaison with Pre-Raphaelitism is to be found, if at all—in the Pre-Raphaelite faith in universal artistry, in the reciprocal interchange between painting and literature, and in the essential "literariness" of all art. All of Oliver's novels betray his artistic training, and the predominance of description as a narrative device suggests a transference to fiction of those pictorial habits of mind which were instilled from earliest youth. The most effective passages in any of his novels are those in which he "paints" the action, setting, or characters from what may be called a controlled visual point of view; and the least effective are those in which the characters are called on to reveal or depict

¹ An emphasis on contemporary subjects is found in two discussions in *The Germ* (see John Lucas Tupper's "Subject in Art" in No. 3, F. G. Stephens's "Modern Giants" in No. 4), and, of course, several of the best known Pre-Raphaelite works do treat modern themes. In painting, Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, Rossetti's *Found*, and Hunt's *The Awakened Conscience* are notable examples; instances in the poetry are less frequent, but Rossetti's "Jenny", and William Michael Rossetti's "Mrs. Holmes Grey" may be cited.

themselves. His interest in interior action would almost certainly in time have led him to discover more sophisticated devices to present point of view, but the basic limitation of the pictorial mode—that it leads the author to talk about action rather than to show it dramatically—would almost certainly have precluded his ever mastering the presentation of simultaneous action. But his penchant for psychological realism, however faltering may be his attempts to display it, does lead him frequently to approximate the subtleties of the interior monologue.

Always, in evaluating the accomplishments of Oliver Madox Brown, the reader is forced back on the immaturity of the artist and the fragmentary nature of so much of his work. What he might have become had he lived, or what he might have produced had he been born in a less compatible environment, is at best the subject of fruitless speculation. To under-estimate his very real talent would be as critically unsound as to overvalue him for the wrong reasons. His novels reveal more potential than achievement, perhaps, but, as this study has indicated, the quality of that limited achievement is sufficient to warrant him more than simply historical interest as an obscure novelist of the Victorian period and the only fiction writer among the Pre-Raphaelites.¹ Inescapably, his youth and his early death tend to forestall an evaluation in exclusively critical terms and to magnify his literary worth in the light of his received reputation. His nephew, Ford Madox Hueffer, managed an objectivity about him over seventy years ago with which this discussion can appropriately conclude. Fusing both extremes of response—the sentimental and the dispassionately critical—it provides a perspective against which—in an extended examination such as this of his total production—Oliver Madox Brown can be weighed and not found wanting :

I have, perhaps, written with too much feeling about the merits of this uncle of mine, whom I never knew. Yet when one comes to consider his great gifts and his early death, it is difficult not to outstep the bounds of cold analysis, and difficult it is to be quite passionless in the face of that silent sheer-rock—the “ might have been ”. When every scrap has been gathered and treasured a little above its worth for the sake of unfulfilled promise ; even then, Oliver’s work does not bulk

¹ Works such as Rossetti’s “ Hand and Soul ” and “ St. Agnes of Intercession ” and Simeon Solomon’s “ A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep ” are the nearest approximation to fictional writing to be found among the other Pre-Raphaelites.

largely in the mass of good work done. Yet, taking him and his work as a whole, I cannot but hope that his may be one of those memories kept green if only to point a sad moral and adorn a sadder tale.¹

APPENDIX

Schematic Comparison of *The Black Swan* and *Gabriel Denver*

I. STRUCTURE

<i>The Black Swan</i>	<i>Gabriel Denver</i>
Chapter I (beginning <i>in medias res</i> —climactic encounter on deck between Denver and Dorothy)	Chapter 5 (encounter occurs on what was to have been Denver and Deborah's wedding day)
Chapter II (retrospective—account of Denver's life in Australia, his marriage, and notice of inheritance; details of arrangements for passage and first sight of Laura)	Chapter 1 (that portion of this chapter dealing with Denver's prior meeting with the young Laura Conway is new to <i>GD</i>); Chapter 2
Chapter III (retrospective—declaration of love between Denver and Laura)	Chapter 3, 4
Chapter IV (continuation of Chapter I—starting of fire scene)	Chapter 6, 7, 8
Chapter V (fire and escape to the boat)	Chapter 9 (new to <i>GD</i> —Denver's near escape from death in the fire attempting to reach Laura)
Chapter VI (castaways)	Chapter 10, 11
Chapter VII (adrift for four days)	Chapter 12
Chapter VIII	Chapter 13, 14, 15
Chapter IX (retrospective to 3rd day aboard <i>Albatross</i> ; death of Dorothy)	Chapter 16

¹ Hueffer, "The Younger Madox Browns", p. 53. I should like, in this last note, to acknowledge my indebtedness to Signora Helen Rossetti Angeli and to the Special Collections of the University of British Columbia for permission to utilize the unpublished materials in this study. My special thanks are also due to my graduate student, Mr. E. Warwick Slinn, whose kind assistance in checking details and proofing the typescript (many times) greatly facilitated my task.

I. STRUCTURE (contd.)

Chapter X (rescue—dénouement and revelation : death of Denver and Laura)

Chapter 17, 18 (that portion of this chapter dealing with Laura's recovery and Denver's attempted suicide is new to *GD*)

Chapter 19 (Denver's illness ; he and Laura put ashore at Capetown ; Denver's recovery ; their return to England—new to *GD*)

Chapter 20 (happy ending—new to *GD*)

II. NARRATIVE

The Black Swan

Dorothy Denver (Gabriel's wife)

Denver first meets Laura on ship-board

Motivation : adultery

Black Swan goes down with all hands lost

Laura dies

Denver jumps overboard with Laura's corpse

Dorothy's curse works to produce tragic ending

Gabriel Denver

Deborah Mallinson (Denver's cousin)

Denver renews acquaintance with Laura, whom he had met as a child

Motivation : broken engagement

Sailors from *Black Swan* rescued by Russian ship months later

Laura lives

Denver tries to jump overboard and is foiled by Laura who rescues him and nurses him back to health

Deborah's curse fails

Denver and Laura return to England, marry, have a daughter (also Laura), and find domestic happiness

III. OTHER

Time of the novel : 15 December-9 February 1824

Time of the novel : 15 September-17 November 1834 (action on board *Black Swan* and *Albatross*) ; Conclusion takes place seven years later, on 24 June 1841

Chapter mottoes added