TWO ESSAYS

by

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WOOD ENGRAVING AND THE PRINTED BOOK

One of the earliest forms of artistic expression is that of the line scratched upon a surface, whether a stone scored upon another stone, or a stick drawn through sand or ashes. The word 'graphic', indeed, is derived from the Greek 'graphe', a scratch. For many artists today the line and its incision continue to exert a compelling and perhaps primordial fascination as no doubt they did for their ancestors in remote antiquity and as they still do for all of us in part.

The activity is, moreover, quite apart from its elemental appeal, physically and hence also emotionally satisfying since it involves a struggle with a refractory medium in which the wrestle to achieve an artistic vision is not only symbolised but also concretely manifested and perceived. Further, the 'wiry bounding line' of Blake is, as he observed, the antithesis of the gentle modulation and tonal gradations characteristic of other two-dimensional arts such as painting and fresco. The line is forceful and direct rather than nuanced and suggestive, a terse and univocal statement. The clarity and definition of a linear image, moreover, is not only distinctive and valuable in itself but is also proper and necessary to the material in which it is created.

It is, furthermore, essentially and normally – though not necessarily – a monochrome process and this also is a stimulus

and perhaps occasionally also a release for an artist primarily concerned with polychrome media such as oils and watercolour. The wood engraving, moreover, is an art of miniature – it is a song and not a symphony, a lyric and not an epic – and there is a consequent difference in scale and hence in approach which is a challenge to the artist in more capacious media. For such, therefore, engraving has the attraction of an opposite and its particular virtue is in enabling the artist to work within a narrow compass and thereby to test and widen his techniques and to complement and by opposition to sharpen and enhance his vision and preferred medium of expression. Engraving is, of course, also an art in itself and for every artist as for workers in other fields there is not only, as Yeats wrote, 'the fascination of what's difficult' but also the reward and satisfaction of technical mastery.

It is, therefore, not surprising that many artists, even those whose primary commitment is to other media, have been attracted to engraving. It would, indeed, be surprising if this were not case: the attraction – and marriage – of opposites is not a paradox but as necessary and desirable to art as it is to life.

The line, moreover, has a fascination in itself. It is in itself a cipher, almost an idea, an airy nothing with extension but often with almost no dimension, and is in a very real sense an abstraction bearing no direct relation to the objective world. And yet it is a formal abstraction – whether figurative or not – which is able if desired to delineate and suggest all and, as with its cognate letter forms, to register the unique and individual

character of its creator. The engraved line, moreover, whether an image upon wood or a graffito on a wall, demands effort and hence deliberation. Such a line cannot be inscribed as easily as can a line on paper or on the specially prepared surfaces used in etching or lithography: it is never wholly wayward or inspirational and its felicity is and always must be determined and achieved. Precisely because the mark cannot be made easily it is premeditated, pondered, and never unsought and unintended. For the artist, however, this very difficulty, the quarrel with a refractory medium, is, in fact, an advantage since the image cannot be freely and spontaneously sketched but must be slowly and, indeed, laboriously educed. The artist has, therefore, to concentrate and drill his vision and his eye so that each line, though never free, may be fully weighed and considered. Such a discipline with its insistence upon a deliberate and meditated rather than upon an instinctive and spontaneous art is salutary for the artist even although he may work primarily in other media, rather as the discipline of tempera is desirable for the painter in oils or that of a new language for a linguist. It is a conscious and premeditated art, a making and not a happening. The line and in particular its engraved form are, therefore, valuable both for their economy and for the patient and judged labour of their creation.

Over the centuries many different kinds of engraving have been developed, each of which has its own particular qualities and merits. Some of these, however, such as etching and copper-plate engraving, can be and normally are used to convey the

illusion of tone so that the primary effect of the dominant line is lessened. Work in wood, however, whether in woodcut or engraving, tends traditionally and inevitably to be more emphatic in its treatment of line, even though box wood engraved against the grain enables very fine and numerous incisions which can create the effect of tone. Wood does, therefore, most readily and fully satisfy the impulse to line and, at a more primitive level, to incise since the artist works directly and wholly with the medium and not partly through other agents such as acid.

It is also the medium which is most satisfactory for the illustration of printed books and which alone, in the form of the woodcut, was used for this purpose during the infancy of printing. It is technically appropriate and hence economical since it too is a relief process. The wood block and the type can, therefore, be printed together so that the paper does not need to be printed twice in the press, as is necessary for intaglio processes such as etching. Furthermore, this method of illustration is visually harmonious since its strong lines and planes match the effect of the massed types on the printed page. Consequently, in both production and in aesthetic effect the traditional and desirable medium for the illustration of the letterpress book has been that of wood.

During the sixteenth century work in wood was supplemented by that in copper and subsequently by other processes such as etching and lithography. It was never, however, an autographic medium attracting artists of the first

rank but instead essentially a reproductive process for rendering original work by others. In the late eighteenth century Bewick revived and popularised wood engraving. However, despite much fine creative work by him and some others, the wood engraving like the earlier woodcut proved likewise to be in practice a reprographic process, despite the technical skill and even brilliance of its craftsmen. In the late nineteenth century the medium declined and was nearly eliminated by the advent of photo-mechanical reproductive processes. With such scientific and, more recently, mass-industrial methods wood engraving as a craft process could not compete either in cost or verisimilitude.

In its death, however, there was a rebirth for with the loss of its role as a reprographic process there arose a new interest by artists in the possibilities of the medium both in itself and for creative book illustration. The past century, indeed, both in this country and abroad, has witnessed a renaissance in this skill as an art and not as a craft, not only in the traditional woodcut but also in the white line technique perfected by Bewick in the late eighteenth century.

One should not, therefore, regard wood engraving, even although it has been largely supplanted by other forms of illustration and latterly as a means of reproduction by photo-mechanical processes, as outmoded or superseded or in any way primitive. On the contrary, it is as effective for the book today as it was five centuries ago and it remains for the artist the most satisfying mode of seeking to realise and to celebrate line and the stark contrast of black and white, the fundamental antinomy of

darkness and light, night and day.

Despite the limitations which traditional methods of book production have imposed and, when they are employed today, still impose upon artistic expression and the free and manifold coupling of text and image, there is a further inescapable challenge for the artist in book illustration – whatever its means of production – in that he is under an obligation to respond to and articulate another's expression and, furthermore, to represent ideas and words in a graphic and non-verbal medium. His work must, therefore, be assessed, in part at least, not merely as an aesthetic form but also as the illustration or imaginative re-creation in another medium of a specific text. The engraving as an independent work of art is, of course, under no such obligation and one must further assert the validity of an art work in its own terms which are not primarily nor essentially ideational. However, as a part of a book, an engraving has a necessary and functional relationship with a given text and its sequence of printed pages which cannot be ignored and which must be fulfilled if it is to succeed in its codical context. The artist, in short, is required not merely to think in formal terms of line and mass and composition but also of the representation of the thought and thought processes of another. The full interplay of word and image demands no less.

Book illustration does, therefore, pose a particular problem for the artist in that he must deny, in part at least, both his own personality and the nature of his chosen, non-verbal medium. To speak the illustrator must unsay himself, unsay his art. Such a

renunciation of creative autonomy, for all its fruits, is the more difficult in our own age with its emphasis upon the individuality and sensibility of the artist since he is in this enterprise required to realise not primarily his own insights and experience but those of another, to perform as it were in concert and to accompany and interpret another rather than to express himself alone. Like the translator of a literary text, the artist has to bend his own sensibility and experience and gifts to those of another. Indeed, he must be suffused, though not subdued, by another as the dyer's hand by the colours of the vat. Exceptionally, no doubt, when the artist is also a writer, he can body forth his vision in both a verbal and a visual language, in both word and line, as Blake did so notably in his illuminated books, and in such instances the integration of word and image can be peculiarly resonant and harmonious.

Normally, however, this is not the case and one must predicate and recognise an implicit (and frequently explicit) tension between the style and vision of the artist and that of the author whose text he is illustrating. There is in consequence generally – although not invariably – a *concordia discors* rather than a true and unforced harmony of like minds, an interpretation of the text which is necessarily independent and is more likely to contrast and complement than to render it exactly in a different medium, to speak with another voice and not one 'match'd in mouth like bells,/Each under each.' Disjunction and a want of sympathy or understanding are, regrettably, not uncommon with, in consequence, a mismatch between text and

image; there is a sword within the marriage bed.

This tension, however, with its inevitable problems in securing a proper harmony of text and illustration, is an opportunity as well as a challenge for the artist. By compelling him to explore and to realise the nature, experience and wisdom of another he thereby widens his own sympathies and extends the range of his own expressive skills. In so far as he is compelled to ignore or, at least, to moderate his own predilections and sensibility this is, at least in our culture, no disadvantage and in so far as he is further required to adapt his illustrations to the needs of the general reader and hence to lay attitudes to art rather than to the fashions of an informed minority, to seek comprehension and the measure of social responsibility which this implies, this also is surely to his advantage both as an artist and as a man.

The illustration of a book is, moreover, not merely a dual but also a corporate and, desirably, a co-operative process. In this respect it resembles the creation of the more elaborate illuminated medieval manuscripts from which it originally sprang. The author, the typographer, the printer, the binder and the artist are or should be all engaged. Such a process, therefore, is not similar to the highly individual and rather lonely creation commonly associated with the arts today but is instead closer to the nature of dramatic and musical performance or to the construction of the medieval cathedrals. It does, accordingly, to be successful require a measure of co-ordination and common purpose on the part of those who participate and some

corresponding subordination by each of purely personal whim and inclination. The artist for his part must be concerned, therefore, not only with the text but also with the overall design of the book and with such matters as the character of the type fount adopted, the binding, the paper and the ink. The book, in short, is or should be an organic and unified whole rather than a disparate assembly of independently created constituent parts and there must in consequence be a proper balance and integration of each element. It is not a singer but a choir that sings.

Such a co-operative and, ideally, symbiotic process does, of course, present difficulties to the artist as well as to the others engaged in it. There are, however, corresponding benefits in extending the functional use of art and its public and in widening and thereby strengthening the vision of the artist through an engagement with others. The texts, of course, and their readers also benefit from the illustrations with which they are thus enriched, but it is the general cultural influence and human implications of the illustrated book which are most important.

In this respect one must note more particularly the limitations which letterpress books can impose upon free and unfettered artistic expression and the implications of these constraints for society as a whole and not just the artist. In the illuminated manuscript books of the medieval world it was technically feasible to integrate word and image when desired with a fullness and freedom which was no longer possible with

the letterpress book. The *raison d'être* of the printed book is type and the facility of freely and liberally interweaving decoration and illustration with the text has not until very recently been possible owing to the necessarily procrustean methods of production adopted. There has, in consequence, been a major sacrifice in sensibility for the particular benefits in the accurate transmission and multiplication of texts which printing has made possible: in strengthening the possibilities of the book as a means of verbal communication its possibilities as a work of art and hence for the transmission of a wider non-verbal meaning have been reduced. This dichotomy – and, indeed, antipathy – between various modes of knowledge and experience has been one consequence of the ascendancy of print in our culture and it is reflected most clearly in its vehicle, the book itself. The book is the type and a major agent of that 'single vision' of which Blake warned, of a linear, highly focused and cerebral as opposed to a unifying and imaginative mode of knowledge, and of that wider differentiation and dissociation of sensibility which has been noted by many commentators as a significant and disturbing feature of post-medieval western culture.

It is, therefore, desirable that books should regain their lost possibilities as vehicles for a knowledge and response which is not so predominantly verbal and intellectual, to recover not a lost innocence but a lost experience. Much of this former fullness and wholeness was admittedly never entirely lost, particularly in emblem and children's books and in certain classes of work in fine art and richly illustrated scientific studies. But it was

shadowed and overborne by the torrent of type and much that was achieved was partial and inevitably limited. Today, however, modern methods of book production, no longer tied to the printing process, enable the artist to express himself much more freely and fully than hitherto and so to overcome the limitations imposed by the invention of letterpress printing. As a consequence, there has been a new flowering of book illustration in the later twentieth century. If there has been a fall through man's ingenuity, there has also been a redemption or, at least, the possibility of one.

One of the essential tasks of the graphic artist today is to take advantage of these new possibilities for illustration in book production so as to engage with print and to promote thereby a fuller and richer apprehension by the reader since we think not only with words and other symbolic languages but also with and through images. Reading is not and should not be too narrowly interpreted as solely or inevitably the ingestion of information in verbal form but rather as a wider and more inclusive process of assimilation engaging the whole mind, an activity in which the medium is in a real sense, as McLuhan proclaims, the message. The illustrated book is, therefore, particularly in the arts and the humanities, not to be regarded as a luxury but rather and properly as a necessity and its 'reading' –if this is, indeed, the word – as a quickening response of the whole sensibility. The word married to the image affirms and celebrates a mind wedded to the eye, thought quickened by seeing and by sense and under-thought. It is for artists and writers as well as for

book-producers and publishers to bind up what has been unknit and forced apart, to heal what has become no longer whole, to redeem and to atone. It is our being as well as our knowledge which must be united and no longer divided. In this task the engraver in wood and other media adapted to the book is as necessary to us as the artist working in and through other processes. *E pluribus unum.*

KIRILL SOKOLOV AS ENGRAVER AND ARTIST OF THE BOOK

In the light of these general observations upon the nature of engraving and more specifically of wood engraving and its particular and symbiotic relationship to the printed word, it is possible to consider the work of a particular engraver.

Kirill Konstantinovich Sokolov was born in Moscow in 1930 and graduated from the Surikov Institute there in 1957. His education was in the Department of Graphic Art whose emphasis was upon engraving rather than upon painting. During the past century there has been a renaissance in wood engraving in the U.S.S.R. as in this country and it has been greatly encouraged there by the admirable official policy of supporting the illustration of books so that these may be attractive and hence more accessible to a large and very widely based reading public. The great figure in this revival has been Vladimir Favorsky, to whom Sokolov, who was brought up in his school, acknowledges and honours a particular debt. Despite his interest and training in engraving, however, Sokolov has also been committed to easel painting and since 1963 he has worked primarily as a painter, holding many exhibitions both in his own and in this country where he has made his home since 1975. During his years in the U.S.S.R., however, he illustrated books to earn a living and both then and subsequently he has illustrated many books published there and in Britain. As so

often, fate is a matter both of chance and choice: what is given or required may also be needed by the individual and subsequently may be chosen as well, despite its constraints. In his work the limitations imposed upon the imagination by letterpress printing have been overcome and a work of labour transmitted into an act of love.

It is not, as has been observed above, essential to predicate a close and necessary relationship between the engraved book illustrations of an artist and his graphic work in other media since he is in the former not engaged *in propria persona* and he may in any case adopt wood to express a matter and a manner to which other media are less hospitable. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose certain common characteristics which recur throughout, albeit in different forms. In the case of Sokolov, for example, it is interesting to observe the dark palette of many of his easel paintings and the emphasis upon simply rendered plane surfaces coupled with firmly moulded, sculpted lines. The composition, likewise, is generally sure and simple and like the drawing without either marked elaboration or distortion. There is, furthermore, a concern with an imaginatively perceived reality rather than with an inner reality transcribed in terms of shape and colour and, corresponding to and supporting this fundamental mode of approach, a commitment to the objective world which an evident interest in cubism and surrealism has modified but not radically transformed. The artist, in short, is very much his own man and a rugged though flexible individualist, consistent to himself and

consistently sensible in an age of violent innovation and sensational extremes in art as in life.

One factor which emerges clearly in all his book illustration is his own strong and highly individual style. There is a sure grasp upon the essential nature of wood engraving in the emphasis upon line and upon the robust contrast of black and white which the medium renders possible. The mode is figurative rather than abstract, but it is flexible and capable of accommodating the surreal and abstract as occasion requires. As in his paintings the composition is firm and simple without simplification and it is combined with an emphasis upon planes and masses, with shapes and their relationships. This solidity is three-dimensional in effect and recalls not only the sculptor which he also is but the traditional emphasis in Russian art upon forms in space against other properties of painting.

For such an independent artist, clearly, the illustration can never be wholly in harmony but must rather be a counterpoint to the text, a forceful and independent voice and not in any way a muted echo of another's. Yet it must not be thought that the artist is divorced from the writers whom he illustrates. On the contrary, these are particular illustrations to particular texts and there is a consistent and successful effort by him to respond to what is said and to integrate word and image in his book work. Indeed, his engagement with the text and with others in its presentation in a book exemplifies and fulfils his wider concern for the world in his art and life. This visual integration of an author’s text and of his images for it is realised in two ways.

In the first place, many illustrations, which need not be noted specifically, represent characters and events in the texts and interpret these clearly yet individually through the artist's own vision. In addition, there is a specific and precise symbolic reference in many engravings to the text. For example, a collection of poems by Shimkus entitled *Ul'i* [Hives] has a cover spread which is formed of hexagonal vignettes drawn from the life of the poet. In addition to this visual pun, a pair of scales above an open book implies the balance and integrity of this author's writings. Again, the binding design for *Podnyavshiy mech*, a narrative by Orlova of the struggles of John Brown to win freedom for the black slaves in the United States before the Civil War by violent means, represents a sword and broken shackles.

Secondly, the artist also expresses the meaning of a text less literally or symbolically but equally effectively in visual language. For example, in Kuznetsova's *Zaberegi* a recurring image is the wind and one observes how its force and freedom from earthly constraints are aptly suggested by the flowing and driving lines of the cartouches and larger engravings for this collection. Again, in the humourist Iskander's *Selected works* the piercing lines and heavy unrelieved black surfaces emphasise the sharp shadows cast by the narratives in their exploration of the darker and more tragic aspects of the human comedy. Again, one may note how the illustrations to *Andresovano v zhizn'* not only reflect the decorative character of Gettuyev but are also inspired by and suggest the highly decorative *niello* work of the

poet's native Georgia, a homage and reference which are both appropriate and illuminating.

It can be seen, therefore, that the artist is able both to illustrate a writer's work and also from his independent perspective to comment upon it: there is a dialogue and not a pair of monologues yoked forcibly together. Occasionally, it is possible for the illustrator to speak more freely and to express his own vision and preoccupations directly without the need to refer to another's text. Thus, in his covers for the literary journal *Stand* he adumbrates an ominous and even meaningless world in which human nature is confined, degraded and mutilated and its art and pleasures are seen as offering but a fitful illumination and illusory release. The comment is, of course, upon the human condition rather than upon any particular form of society and it is the more forceful and convincing from one who has lived in both the East and the West. In the words of Hamlet, 'there are many confines, wards and dungeons.'

In his book illustrations Sokolov prefers to work as an engraver and to realise and celebrate the resonant lines and rich depth of colour and strong contrast of black and white possible with this technique. He has, however, very occasionally adopted other methods of illustration such as that of the crayon drawings reproduced in Kravchenko's *Lyubov i gnev*. It is significant, however, that these illustrations conform to the general style of his work and share its bold, muscular simplicity and directness – characteristics peculiarly suited to the medium of wood. The

possibility of tonal gradation, for example, is largely eschewed and the emphasis is upon strong lines and flat planes. These are, in fact, essentially wood engravings rendered in crayon rather than drawings exploring the full tonal possibilities and character of crayon. In this respect, it is also significant that, although he has not infrequently in his book illustration engraved in lino rather than wood, his treatment of this rather similar but more easily worked material is essentially similar to that which he adopts in wood.

Wood engraving, is as has been noted, historically most commonly a monochrome rather than a polychrome process: the emphasis is upon the contrast of black and white rather than an exploration of the spectrum and play of colour, upon night and day and not upon the rainbow. In this also, no doubt in part from necessity but also certainly from choice, Sokolov is faithful to the nature of the material. Only very occasionally has he resorted to colour for effect and it is significant that when he does so, as in *Topsy-turvy world*, he has used a flat wash without marked gradations of tone in simple primary colours. This deliberate, indeed apparently naive, simplicity in the use of colour accords not only with the bold, straightforward character of the medium and a masculine style in keeping with this but is also simpler and therefore cheaper to reproduce: it is, in short, technically and economically advantageous as well as aesthetically functional.

The illustrated book is, as has been observed, essentially and necessarily an artefact created by a group and not by an individual. To succeed, therefore, it depends upon the co-

operation as well as upon the particular skills of its creators. Sokolov for his part is concerned not merely to illustrate a given text but also to ensure that his illustrations match the book in which that text is manifested so that they are neither too few nor too many, neither too large nor too small: the illustration may have its own melody, but it must accompany and not dominate the text. This concern for balance and harmony extends even to the type-face adopted and he will vary the thickness of his engraved strokes according to that of the fount's vertical ascenders.

In addition, he is concerned with the illustrations as they relate to each other as well as to the text and type. Considered as an art form, the appreciation of a book is a sequential rather than an instantaneous process: it is kin to an opera rather than to a painting which one can grasp (though not fully appreciate) at once. Indeed, the illustrated book is perhaps unique in that it must be considered and understood as an object in both space and time. It is, therefore, essential that the illustrations should not merely be individually well executed and appropriate but that they should also form a coherent sequence united in overall character and effect. His work amply displays his success in this objective and his ability to offer the reader an interesting and varied yet unified sequence of illustration. Sokolov, in short, is concerned to engage with the text in his images and with the presentation of both in the book.

Finally, one must note that, despite the distinctive character of his engravings, his work is firmly related to the texts which

he illustrates. It is, moreover, firmly rooted in a fundamental emphasis upon representation and communication in art. This is not to deny the possibilities of abstract and highly individual modes of artistic expression but rather to praise the broad intelligibility and functional value of his work and the firm societal commitment which this implies. In its seriousness and in its concern with communication as well as self-expression it is a salutary corrective to the superficial and self-seeking sensationalism and want of craft of too much contemporary Western art. In art as in literature and music we have much to learn from the example of artists such as Sokolov and from that of the Russian tradition of social responsibility in both the arts and letters in which they have been nurtured.

Art, despite its cultural and national dialects, is a universal language and a language that speaks to the heart as well as to the head. If men and women are to be brothers and sisters with each other and if we are to integrate the head with the heart, then it is through the image as much as through the word that we shall speak to one another and be one.

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The text of these two essays has been substantially revised and expanded from that forming part of *Wood and type*, a catalogue issued in 1977 to accompany an exhibition of books illustrated by Kirill Sokolov in Durham University Library.
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