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The Illustration of Classics for the Folio Society

It is a privilege to be invited to contribute to a publication devoted entirely to the subject of literary illustration, not least one as scholarly and wide-ranging as this. Perhaps I do not need to apologise for the fact that my observations are not scholarly: they are for the most part informal and anecdotal and some of them may be anecdotal in ways that are more or less irrelevant to the venture in hand. They are, however, direct from the drawing table. I would be grateful if you could think of all this as offering some of the insights of a visit to the studio.

The first set of illustrations commissioned from me by the Folio Society was for a centenary edition of Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* which appeared in 1976. It may have been thanks to an awareness of my work for children’s books that I was invited; at any rate *The Hunting of the Snark* was illustrated not as a book for children but like a book for children insofar as it was designed, so to speak, by the illustrations, through which the text made its way. This was unusual for a Folio Society publication at the time, the normal requirement was for something like ten pages worth of pictures, often full-page plates, which might sometimes be lithographs or etchings. My subsequent commissions, between 1975 and 1990, proceeded on this basis and comprised books which had a certain 20th century classic status; *Cold Comfort Farm, Scoop, Black Mischief, Animal Farm*. What I felt to be a change took place when – it must have been 1989 – I approached the society with a book of my own suggestion, *Voyages to the Sun and Moon* by Cyrano de Bergerac, in the translation by Richard Aldington.

There had certainly been a change at the Folio Society since I first began to work for them, because in 1982 it had been bought by Bob Gavron. There came the sense that well produced books might not preclude a liberal and innovative approach; my Cyrano would not have been possible ten years earlier. It was followed by a handful of other classics, in the choice of each of which I had some element of participation. They were *Don Quixote, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Candide*, and *Fifty Fables of La Fontaine*. It is these works that I would like to write about here.

Perhaps before doing so it might not be out of place to make one or two general observations about the task of illustration. None of the contributors to this issue of *Anglistik*, and probably none of its readers, will be among the large number of people who have little notion about the problems and aspirations of literary illustration. One aspect which makes it of unfailing interest to me is that in the mind of the artist at work there are a number of activities going on at the same time. I can only give my own version of this, but I imagine some version, with varying emphases, will generally exist. You start from your reading of the text, and then you are thinking about, for instance, its mood and substance, and the *mise-en-scène*; what the characters look like; the size and shape and disposition of the illustrations, for appearance, rhythm, suspense; what the appropriate materials are to draw with; which moments lend themselves to illustration and which are best left to the words. For a young audience there may be occasions when you might want to be less dark or less explicit, but once you are addressing an independent reader he or she is no longer someone you have to think about specifically.
To return to Cyrano. I have said that you start from your reading of the text, and the way in that it serves as your guide and handbook; after that comes the establishing of the relationship between the nature of the artist and the nature of the book. In the depiction of these voyages I hope that the illustrations do reflect the spirit of the text – in the mercurial shifts, for instance, of tone and mood – but at the same time I can admit that, of the books under discussion here, this is the one where I perhaps most had an eye to my own advantage. I came upon the book first as a French paperback, many years ago, and I was attracted (illustration doing its work) by the engraving on the cover of Cyrano rising into the air. *Voyages to the Moon and the Sun* anticipates *Gulliver's Travels* in fantasy, change of scale, and satirical interest. But its intention is not simply satirical – Cyrano was genuinely interested in the scientific ideas as well as the manners and customs of his time, and engages with them in a provocative and dynamic way.

As I read it I found it full of things that invited drawings. The differences of scale are an immediate pleasure, and the inhabitants of the moon wear no clothes. There are many invitations to instant life-drawing and a range of gesture. The possibilities of all kinds of activity are manifold, as when the royal monkey-trainer thinks Cyrano is another variant of his charges and attempts to train him (figure 1); or when, in his cage, he is admired by one of the Queen's ladies in waiting (figure 2). Or when, found guilty

![Figure 1](image1.png) ![Figure 2](image2.png)

in the land of birds of the crime of being human, he is carried to the place of the Sad Death on the back of a black ostrich (figure 3). There are also all kinds of opportunities – it is characteristic of the book – to find visual versions of fantastic notions not necessarily part of the narrative but brought before us for speculation. There are mobile homes, for
instance, and the 17th-century audio-book. It hangs on your ear (figure 4), and I feel it would be a shame not to quote at least a little of the text:

When someone wishes to read he winds up the machine with a large number of all sorts of keys; then he turns the pointer towards the chapter he wishes to hear, and immediately, as if from a man's mouth or musical instrument, the machine gives out all the distinct and different sounds which serve as the expression of speech between the noble Moon-dwellers.

When I had reflected on this miraculous invention in bookmaking I was no longer surprised that the young men of that country possessed more knowledge at sixteen or eighteen than greybeards in our world. Since they know how to read as soon as they speak, they are never without reading. Indoors, out of doors, in town, travelling, on foot, or on horseback, they can have in their pockets or hanging on their saddle-bows as many as thirty of these books, and they have only to wind up a spring to hear a chapter, or several chapters, if they are in the mood to hear a whole book. In this way you have continually about you all great men, living or dead, and you hear them viva voce. (Voyages to the Moon and the Sun, 147)

There were so many things I was eager to draw that I came to a special arrangement with the Folio Society which was that they would pay me the best version of the fee available for such a book, and I would be allowed as many pictures (within reason) as I liked. There are just over a hundred.

Nothing so direct as a straightforward suggestion initiated the three following books. Encouraged by the acceptance of Cyrano, I went to the Folio Society with the anonymous Spanish tale The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes, which seemed to me to call out for illustration (reading it again recently, I still feel the same). However the Folio reaction was: "If we are to do a Spanish book, it must be the big Spanish book," and so I found myself face to face with Don Quixote de la Mancha. It was something of a
daunting prospect, both from the length of the book and the distinction of the artists who had gone before me. Though he never settled down to illustrate the book, there are those haunting images of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the paintings of Dau-
mier; and the prolific energy and imagination of Gustave Doré seemed to have acti-
vated him to illustrate every incident of the narrative (one is almost tempted to say "and more") in his extraordinary rich version. There was no prospect of my vying with that achievement, and nor was it what the Folio Society would have wished. To get the illustrations evenly distributed through the text we settled on sixteen drawings and a frontispiece, as well as vignettes at the head of each new book. The problem becomes immediately the choice of suitable moments. Some almost choose themselves, such as Don Quixote tilting at windmills; but there were others that had their own appeal – three in particular occur in Book three: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza expressing their essential natures as one keeps a nocturnal vigil on horseback while the other responds to the demands of nature (figure 5); and then Don Quixote cavorting in nothing but his shirt (to the embarrassment of Sancho) (figure 6) and, not least, Sancho Panza tossed in a blanket (figure 7). I have drawn characters launched into mid-air on several occasions. The special interest for me, I suppose, is that this is something that only illustration can do. Any other form has some narrative sequence, but if in revisiting the book we go back to Sancho, he is still there, in effect forever. The most evocative image, however, is the one that I had the advantage of using both as the frontispiece and the final vignette of the book – Don Quixote and Sancho riding off forever into their place in European Literature (figure 8).
The route of the commissioning of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was, in a different way, equally indirect. The Folio Society invited me to illustrate yet more Evelyn Waugh titles. I had enjoyed the two previous ones, and researched them in the pages of *Punch* and the drawings of Pont.1 There is, however, an element of inhibition in taking on Waugh in that the effects almost without exception belong to the writer. The characters call out for depiction but, that done, the illustrator finds himself standing around wondering what he could usefully do. To excuse myself I offered a more simple explanation. I had had enough of all those suits, and what would appeal to me would be something with more exotic period costume like, … (seizing a name out of the air) *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*? This was not intended as a serious suggestion, and I had never read the Hugo; nevertheless within 24 hours, in the response of the Folio Society, it had become one. I settled down to read, and to get to know the book. I knew something about Quasimodo already but the book proved to be more complex than I had envisaged in that Hugo was aware of the contrasts between his own era and that of the cathedrals in a way that, say, Dumas might not have been.

I was also on the lookout for suitable subjects for illustrations. I was aware of two problems. One was where illustrations fall at fairly wide intervals in the text, to find enough images that had any sort of archetypal quality. In the event the two I found most satisfactory were that of the front of Notre Dame by night, with the Archdeacon Frollo and Quasimodo put in as tiny figures, just flicks of the pen, in the foreground (figure 9); and, not surprisingly, Quasimodo himself hanging on one of the bells of the cathedral (figure 10). (One additional technical problem is that he is depicted upside down, which proved to be an invitation to more than one helpful but mindless printer to make sure that he was the "right" way around by printing the drawing itself upside down…).

The other consideration was to suggest a pervading sense of darkness without making the drawings themselves extremely dark. As with *Don Quixote* I had a second colour at my disposal. I made it a sort of bluish-grey, and found (at least I hope I found) that to bleed it off the sides of the page increased its effect of shadow.

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1 Pont: pseudonym of Graham Laidler probably the most gifted artist to draw for Punch in the inter-war years.
It may be helpful if I put in here, as a kind of entr’acte between the first three books and the two more recent ones, some notes on the way that they were produced in the studio – a procedure that has not changed for me, at least as far as books are concerned, for many years. While the reading of a book is going on I make marks in the margins where there are possibilities for illustrations, or information about the characters that might be useful later; and they may be accompanied by visual notes as well. Before I begin work on the final drawings I will have made rough drawings of every illustration in the book. These roughs are made swiftly with a fibre-tipped pen, and they suggest the general disposition of the page, the expressions and gestures of those taking part. It is a way of visualising a mise-en-scène, and of starting to live the parts. It is possible, on revisiting these roughs at the stage of the final drawings, to discover that there are nuances of posture and expression that you had not even been conscious of at the time.

Some artists make very developed roughs that can look much like their finished version, but I prefer to leave enough to be spontaneously felt at the time of drawing. And even if the final images are to be in colour, the roughs are not. Each rough drawing goes on to a light box, and over that a sheet of watercolour paper (most usually Arches Fin) and frequently another sheet of paper so that the rough image is not too clearly visible. The importance of that is that I am not going to trace but, knowing where each element is disposed, draw spontaneously as if for the first time. If the drawing goes wrong, or if there is some aspect of it that I am not happy with, I can move on immediately to another sheet.

I use an old fashioned wooden penholder (short and cylindrical in shape, not long and tapering), and dip into a bottle of Indian ink alongside. All the drawings discussed here were done with something called a Waverly nib, no doubt originally used for
cursive writing, except for the Cyrano drawings which were done with a slightly harder nib (perhaps one called a J nib) which has an effect which is slightly more staccato, less sinuous. The Waverly nib is the one that I most frequently use because it is both very responsive and can handle any necessary detail, but in other situations (as for drawings to be reproduced in public spaces) I also use watercolour crayons, china markers, quills and reed pens.

To return to the sequence of books themselves, Candide came into view also by an indirect route. I was reminded of it by an article in the Times Literary Supplement, illustrated by a memorable 18th-century engraving by Moreau le Jeune, but my immediate use for it was ephemeral. There was to be a fundraising evening at the Royal College of Art for The House of Illustration, the new museum and centre for the art of illustration which will open in King's Cross in 2014. I was to carry out instant illustrations of a hasty kind to a reading by the actor Peter Capaldi, and I could see that Chapter One and the Tunter-ten-Tronckh family would provide suitable material. It was subsequent to that occasion that Joe Whitlock Blundell, one of the directors of the Folio Society, proposed that we might take the matter further. The society had recently had some success with limited de luxe editions, and he suggested that I might illustrate Candide as one of these. We quickly decided, however, that the tipped-in plates and decorative borders of that approach were not right for Voltaire; our more restrained approach nevertheless allowed the book to be bound in leather with a handwritten title in gold.

The main sequence of illustrations was to be full-page and in colour. There were fifteen of them, with accompanying vignettes in black and white, which meant that they established quite a strong visual presence in what is a relatively short book. There was no shortage of incident to be depicted, and where in Cervantes or Hugo the drawings punctuate the book, you could here have some sense of keeping pace with the work's brisk and diagrammatic narrative. What was particularly of interest to me was the marriage of the style and tone of the drawings to that of Voltaire's caricatural ap-
proach. At the time of its first publication such images would not have been felt appropriate, but now, with a different set of assumptions, the match could be made.

That element of caricature is one of the dosage of which, so to speak, I try to be in control, so that Candide inadvertently running through an important cleric with his sword is farcical (figure 11); while the garter-dropping marchioness has to be real enough to be seductive (figure 12), and the tortured slave real enough to speak to our feelings and justify the observation "[t]his is the price we pay for eating sugar" (figure 13).

It was rewarding to be able to devote the techniques often used to depict scenes of largely benevolent anarchy to something with a sharper bite; though even with a book bent on emphasising that all is definitely not for the best in the best of all possible worlds there are modulations of tone. Though the optimism of the title is there to be derided I found the last one or two drawings of the book naturally reflecting the guarded optimism with which Voltaire concludes his story.

Of this limited edition there were a thousand, signed, copies. The year of publication, 2012, was also the fortieth anniversary of the Gallimard paperback series (by coincidence also called Folio) which was celebrated by a sequence of specially-jacketed titles, and happily for me our Candide became one of them, with my illustrations, albeit much reduced, now alongside the French text for French readers.

As it happened the thousand copies of Candide sold out to the subscribers of the Folio Society within two or three weeks, with the result that I was approached to see if I was able to propose a similar venture by way of a sequel. In one sense I already had La Fontaine in mind since a few years previously I had discussed the possibility of a set of illustrations with my editor at Gallimard Jeunesse. However that version would have been for children and I was unable to resist the offer to undertake a similar project for adults. We decided on fifty fables and in my final list included many fables about humans as well as the familiar ones about animals. I hope that told the Folio readers that the selection was for them. So there were, (figure 14) the middle-aged Man and his two Mistresses, the Young Widow, and The Cat Metamorphosed into a
Woman ("unsuitable for us" observed my Gallimard editor later, "for two or three reasons") as well as Death and the Woodsman (figure 15).

Nevertheless, though for adults, what resulted was in effect a picture book, with frequent and fullpage illustrations opposite each poem. For Candide, as for Don Quixote, we had been fortunate in being able to use the 18th-century translations of Smollett – real language, with no awkwardnesses about it. For La Fontaine the problem was more difficult – even the best modern translations can be a little stiff in attempting to be faithful to the original – and La Fontaine in the original has no hint of that. We were fortunate to come across, and be able to use, the modern translation of the American academic Norman Shapiro. This is not a word for word translation, but fluent, relaxed, and at ease with itself. I could set about work with Shapiro’s version in one hand, so to speak, and the French in the other. There was one other significant advantage which was that Shapiro had translated all the fables, so that I had no restriction in my choice. The selection of fables I had settled on begins traditionally with "The Cricket and The Ant" and "The Crow and the Fox," but in general there is no commitment to the original sequence, and my arrangement moves from animal fables to those about humans and back again, reflecting at the same time some affinities of mood and significance. Though the fables are largely based on Aesop, and La Fontaine may make a general observation drawn from the situation, the expected "moral" is not the most important end. As Sarah Bakewell points out in her introduction to the Folio volume even in the very first fable of "The Cricket and The Ant" though the moral is clear, it is never stated and in fact seen to be unattractive (figure 16).
The Folio volume is tall enough in format to accept a complete fable in verse and as a consequence I decided to make use of a tall rectangle, hand-drawn, in which to dispose the elements of the drawing; disposing them appropriately was one of the interests of the task. To lend variety, and to accommodate certain longer poems, some of the drawings are vignettes, and some of those flow over two pages. Since one is constantly in the presence of illustrations I decided that, though everything is printed in full colour, what was needed was a reduced or restrained colour range which varies from picture to picture.

I hoped, as I came to the end of my fifty fables, that I had produced illustrations that at least to some extent matched both the lightness and seriousness that La Fontaine claimed for himself. I have mentioned earlier that in setting about the task of illustration one is on the lookout for what I think of as "moments." The fables of La Fontaine are all "moments" – of theatre, gesture, reaction, movement. What could be more enjoyable? I was sorry when I came to have to draw the milkmaid spilling her pot of milk as my last fable and then returned to the frontispiece and show her talking to our author: there was no chance at staying with La Fontaine any longer. At least for now.

Works Cited
