**BOOK REVIEW**

## *Fourteen Poems by C.P. Cavafy,* Chosen and illustrated by David Hockney, Translated by Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender. Editions Alecto, London, 1966-7.

## Between 1966 and 1967 Editions Alecto published *Fourteen Poems by C.P. Cavafy, Chosen and illustrated by David Hockney, Translated by Nikos Stangos and Stephen Spender.* Hockney had initiated the project and commissioned new translations of Cavafy’s poems from Stangos and Spender. The final book was designed in collaboration between Hockney and Stangos and published as a bound book in two limited editions, A and B, each of 250 books. Unbound suites of etchings and etchings with poems were also published in editions C to comprising fifty, twenty-five and twenty-five prints respectively. (Sidey 2003)

There are a number of accounts of Hockney’s working process: How he went to Beirut rather than Alexandria to make a series of location drawings; how on his return to London he drew his own friends and used these as reference for a number of images (Lloyd 2014: 14-15); how he worked from photos in men’s magazines from the 1950s and 60s such as Mizer’s pulp magazine and *Physique Pictorial[[1]](#footnote-2)* (Kinsman 2011: 145-149); how he made the images without the poems beside him (Livingstone 2017: 87); and finally how the images were assigned to the poems after they’d been completed, a process Stangos described as 'illustration in reverse' (Livingstone 1988:11).

The contents page lists fourteen poems by Cavafy, and twelve or thirteen etchings by Hockney depending on the edition. Edition A, which I’ve studied in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge includes the thirteenth loose etching[[2]](#footnote-3).

The first poem, ‘Caesarion’ has no corresponding image, while the second poem ‘Mirror at the Entrance’ is paired with the etching ‘Portrait of Cavafy in Alexan’dria’. Thereafter the titles for poems and etchings coincide until the final poem, ‘Painted, which is paired with ‘Portrait of Cavafy II’.

The first of the spreads pairing poem and image with same title is ‘Two boys aged 23 or 24’. Taken in isolation the double page ‘Two boys aged 23 or 24’ might appear to have conventional correspondence of ‘anchorage’[[3]](#footnote-4): the image of two men naked in bed corresponding with the title and final stanza of the poem: ‘they took a bedroom ... and… gave themselves to love.’

This anchorage is more explicit in the second pairing of poem and etching ‘He enquired after the quality’. The image corresponds to the two young men touching hands among the handkerchiefs as described in the poem.

Thereafter in the sequence, the correspondence between poems and images changes – an etching of a man emerging from a dry-cleaners bears little relation to setting ‘[o]ne or one-thirty after midnight in the corner of the wineshop’ for the poem ‘To remain’.

For ‘According to prescriptions of ancient magicians*’*, the image of two male lovers and a bed could correspond to ‘my lover in his twenty second year – his love his beauty’. Livingstone points out that this image is derived from a drawing Hockney had made in 1964, attesting to the fact that Hockney had 'observed and participated in similar situations himself'(Livingstone 2017: 86).

‘The Shop Window of a Tobacco Store’ is cited as one of only two images which depict a particular place or scene (Lloyd 2014: 15), but the shop, with its sign *His Master’s Voice* in English and Arabic is obviously not 'the bright shop window of a tobacconist'

The poem ‘In an old book’ begins 'I found in an old book – about a hundred years old – forgotten pressed among its pages, a water-colour without any signature'. Across the double page an etching of naked man with his arms behind his head 'derived from a standard body-builder's pose found in photographs which pepper the issues of *Physique Pictorial* (Kinsman 2011:145).

‘In the dull village’, ‘The beginning’, ‘One night’, ‘In Despair’ - each has an image of two young men either in bed or about to get into bed. There is no obvious compositional difference between the images which correspond to first person poems or those which correspond to third person poems; and through the complete series, although five of the poems are first person narratives, there is no sense of Hockney trying to create an identifiable Cavafy figure in the pairs of men. Cavafy in his early 20s would place many of the first person narrative poems in 1880s. Photographs of him from that time show him sporting a moustache, but all the men are clean-shaven. In addition, there is further anachronism in the hairstyles, underwear and furniture in the etchings which are clearly mid-twentieth century; and ’Beautiful and white flowers’, the last pairing of poem and image sharing a title, is a poem of regret describing the funeral of a lover which shows two clothed male figures, one standing, the other reclining, both in modern clothes.

The final poem, ‘Painted’, has no direct, corresponding image. In the contents list for edition A of the book, ‘Portrait of Cavafy II’ is included in the contents and the book as a loose image corresponding to ‘Painted’, whereas in edition B, the image is not included at all. This inclusion of a loose print is a common commercial practice, often referred to as a *tirage de tête* (literally ‘head print’)in order to create a more exclusive and expensive edition. ‘Portrait of Cavafy II’ depicts the poet in front of an architectural setting copied from a drawing Hockney made of a Beirut police station, with a modern car in the foreground.

Considering the book as a whole, what can be said about the relationship between text and image? Firstly, looking at Barthes’ terms *relay* and *anchorage* (Barthes 1977: 38)[[4]](#footnote-5), there is no sense of sequential progression of (narrative) meaning, passing from text to image and back to text characteristic of relay. That is not to deny that text and image are acting in a complimentary way as fragments contributing to an overall meaning. At an individual level, varying degrees of anchorage exist. Of the eleven images which correspond directly to a poem, six of etchings show two men naked or in underwear, either in bed or about to get into bed. There is no specific place or scene in any of these poems which might uniquely anchor a particular image to that poem. Instead these images are interchangeable, anonymous even, corresponding to Cavafy’s impersonal pronouns 'he' and 'they' in place of any lovers’ names.

There is often an element of contradiction between text and image. This occurs mainly where Hockney has chosen a contemporary image either from magazines or his drawings as reference. This type of word-image relationship is termed *décalage* by Quentin Blake '… pleasure in noticing the disparities between the text and the image. The French have a useful word for this effect: *décalage* – the way two things don’t fit together.'(Blake 2000:152)*.* The two portraits of Cavafy which bookend the sequence are also interesting here – the first contains the title 'C. P. CAVAFY IN ALEXANDRIA', anchoring the image as a portrait of Cavafy in late middle age and is based on a photograph from 1930. (Cavafy died, aged 70, in 1933.) The second portrait is based on a 1924 photograph but anachronistically contains a car from Hockney’s 1965 drawing, thereby bringing Cavafy, or his ghost, into the present.

It is also interesting to consider the Hockney’s stylistic approach to the etchings. He had previously made etchings which related directly to Cavafy’s poems, ‘Kaisarion with all His Beauty’[[5]](#footnote-6) and ‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall’[[6]](#footnote-7) (both 1961). The prints are characterised by a very prominent use of aquatint to provide tone and texture, a wide variety of marks, partial inking in colour, and the inclusion of text within the image. The same is true of his most ambitious suite of etchings before this date, *A Rake’s Progress (*1961–63)*[[7]](#footnote-8)* . By contrast, the Cavafy etchings rely on very controlled lines delineating figures and space and in some cases, very controlled areas of aquatint. Text, in Roman and Arabic letters, is used far more sparingly and appears in the context of shop signs in two of the images, and as a title 'C.P. CAVAFY IN ALEXANDRIA' in the first portrait. Lloyd comments on linear nature of the etchings 'The effects of this are apparent in the Cavafy prints, whose sparse, accurate lines perfectly match the clarity and simplicity of the poet’s voice.' (Lloyd p.15) Within the book, the quality of Hockney’s clean, unmodulated line is also echoed in the choice of Adrian Frutiger’s 1957 typeface Univers for the poems.

Livingstone describes the prints not as illustration but 'a visual equivalent to the mood and theme of all Cavafy's homoerotic poetry:

The Cavafy images create an almost musical sequence in their variations on the theme of two men, the deliberate repetition of the pairings conveying the the sense of ritualized action at which the poet hints: the endless pick-ups in anonymous settings, the urgent need to relate to another human'(Livingstone, 2017: 87).

I think it is worth noting here that while the poems are nostalgic for the furtive liaisons of Cavafy’s youth, Hockney’s lovers mainly look frankly and directly at the viewer – there no sense of nostalgia or furtiveness in the compositions, a point emphasized by the art historian Anne H. Hoy (Kelly et al 2011: 105)

Taking the book as a whole, the variety of word-image relationships can be seen as addressing something beyond the poet’s specific experience or words. In doing so it becomes more a dialogue between poems and images about nostalgia for homosexual love in 1920s Eygpt and the reality of 1960s Britain. According to Livingstone '[t]he images, like the English texts which they accompany, are conceived as a translation into a language in current use' (Livingstone 2017: 86) The use of anachronistic visualisation might be considered analogous to staging a Shakespeare play in modern dress. I am particularly drawn to the idea that designing the sequence of spaces of a book is in many ways similar to staging a play.

I think there are certain elements here which might correspond to the sort of relationship required for what Peyré terms '*un livre de dialogue*' (a book of dialogue) (Peyré 2001). The poems and images do have a direct correspondence, but in the main, specific anchorage is carefully avoided. Certain lines in the poems are echoed rather than literally depicted in the images, a relationship Peyré describes as a '*jeu d’echo'*(play of echoes) (Peyré 2001:6). *Décalage* is used to emphasise the difference between what the poems and the images are saying, so that the spaces of the book become a place for an exchange of ideas; visual repetition is used not just to give visual or stylistic coherence, but to emphasise the relation between images across the complete book beyond the relation to a given poem. In terms of a dialogue, I think it’s important that neither Stangos’ translations nor Hockney’s poems exert control, but instead that the two are given equal weighting and validity. This seems to me to be similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas around dialogue and polyphony. For Bakhtin a polyphonic approach, exemplified by Dostoevsky’s novels, is 'a decentered authorial stance that grants validity to all voices' (Emerson, 2019).

There is a further aspect here which is worth considering – the physical and material qualities of the book. *Fourteen Poems* is typical of twentieth century *livres d’artiste* in its large format – the pages are larger than A3 at 46.7 x 32.8 cm, the paper a 250 gsm handmade paper. The is not merely a question of luxury or extravagance; the size and weight slow the reader down – the book is quite cumbersome to manipulate. The design, also typical, with poem on the verso (left hand page), image on the recto has the effect of the image arresting the reader once he completes a poem, causing him to pause before turning the page.

*Fourteen Poems* can be found in many public collections of artists’ books. Among these are the National Art Library at the V&A and The British Museum in London, Oxford’s Bodleian Library, Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum, The Whitworth Gallery in Manchester and leading international collections of artists’ books such MOMA in New York and the Bavarian State Library in Munich. Though not normally on public display, you can arrange to see (and handle) this and other artists’ books by contacting the institution directly in advance.

References

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1. See: https://store.bobmizerfoundation.org/collections/physique-pictorial [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The complete set of twelve etchings as per Editions B, C and D poems can be viewed on the website of *The David Hockney Foundation* https://thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/series/illustrations-for-fourteen-poems-from-cp-cavafy [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See page n of this journal [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See also page N of this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-kaisarion-and-all-his-beauty-p11376 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-mirror-mirror-on-the-wall-p11377 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See: www.hockney.com/index.php/works/graphics/rakes-progress-etchings. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)