

## Behind the Curtain: Virginia Woolf, Walter Sickert, and the Narrative of Trauma

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What did Virginia Woolf see in Walter Sickert? At first glance there would seem to be little in common with Sickert and the painters who surrounded Woolf—Roger Fry, Duncan Grant and her sister, Vanessa Bell. Their palettes, influenced by the French Impressionists, are the opposite of his. Yet Bell could write to her daughter Angelica as late as 1946 from Dieppe, “The color of everything is curiously lovely. One can see how well it suited Sickert, all these subtle greys and dingy greens and reds—nearly every street makes one want to paint it” (Bell V., 507). Quentin Bell would remember that his mother was “very fond of Walter Sickert” (Bell, Q., 2, 174), whose early enthusiasm had “increased her confidence and momentarily aligned her work with his,” (Shone, p.61), and that she encouraged Virginia to write about him. Roger Fry, as Woolf notes in her biography of him, would “single out” the works of Sickert, among others of his period, “for examination and praise” (*RF*, 94), although Sickert, she suspected, was “bitter though against all Rogers and Clives [and] says they don’t know a picture from a triangle” (*L5*, 282). Sickert publicly, if ambivalently, returned Fry’s esteem, praising him as “a highly gifted and progressing painter” even as he censured him for the “obscurantism” of his criticism (quoted in Scholes, 58). Despite these differences, the painters of Bloomsbury welcomed Sickert as a comrade in the project of Modernism, one who did much to introduce the British public to the ferment of the French art scene and, more specifically, to the work of Edgar Degas, even as he advanced a social (neo)realism absent from British painting at that time. Emphasizing their shared endeavor, Robert Scholes has written that “Like her close friend Roger Fry, and her sister Vanessa, Virginia Woolf never adopted the extreme or geometric Modernism of Joyce or Stein but remained something of a Post-Impressionist to the end.” “Which is one more reason,”

Scholes adds, “why we need to see the literature and art of Modernism in a way that does not exclude everything that is not extreme or abstract” (Scholes, 59-60).

As a writer, Woolf responded to the strongly narrative aspects of Sickert’s paintings. Inviting her to review his work, Sickert noted that he had “always been a literary painter.” “Do you think,” Woolf asked Quentin, that “one could treat his paintings like novels?” (*L* 5: 253.) Woolf answered her own question, not only in the essay on Sickert that she would write, but also in *The Years*, which she was drafting at the same time. (Hermione Lee, for one, concludes that Sickert “was one of the great influences of *The Years*” (*TY* 633)). But it is not simply the qualities of his art that attracts Woolf to Sickert. He is, Woolf claims in her essay, “the best of biographers,” avoiding in his paintings “the three or four hundred pages of compromise, evasion, understatement, overstatement, irrelevance, and downright falsehood which we call biography” (*WS*, 23). A biographer is, at best, a witness, and the characteristics that Woolf gives to Sickert are the same ones that Susan Brison states an “understanding listener” brings to the trauma survivor to help heal her of her consequences of her abuse. Objecting to Cathy Carruth’s theory of trauma which rejects the speech act as falsifying the traumatic experience, Brison likens it to arguing “that an eloquent art critic cannot possibly enhance our understanding of painting because the symbol systems used in painting and language are incommensurable . . . . It doesn’t follow from this that silence before a painting is the only authentically (and ethically defensible) response” (71). In her essay, Woolf, writing as an art critic, engages Sickert in what can be characterized as a self-healing conversation—Sickert, she notes, “never goes far beyond the sound of the human voice” (*WS* 31). Writing to Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell extolled the comfort she found in talking with Sickert: “I liked him better than I have ever done before and was impressed by the ease with which I can . . . get onto intimate terms with a man at once” (Bell, V.

102). For both sisters, I would argue, Sickert came to resemble a “good enough” father, an intervening interlocutor who in his paintings suggested the psychological reality of their incestuous childhood. Far from producing the silent response to abuse that Brison criticizes, Sickert, as we shall see, provoked the memories and associations of Woolf’s abuse that allowed her to address them in *The Years* with more specificity than she had before.

### **The Iron Bedstead**

In her monograph on Walter Sickert, Anna Gruetzner Robins discusses the influence of Degas on the younger artist. In his drawing, *The Artist’s Home in New Orleans*, Sickert imagined Degas’s journey to the United States to visit his relations. That journey, Robins suggests, “marked a turning point in [Degas’s] depiction of everyday activities in ordinary spaces, where furniture and everyday objects begin to play an active role in determining the meaning of an image” (*Drawings*, 16). Although the mantelpiece, the couch, the mirror, and the print on the wall of the *Artist’s Home*, are frequently employed studio props, Sickert’s drawing demonstrated his growing realization that “a room exists as a holding space for social intercourse and personal inclination and temperament, and that interior space enables us to identify a personality, an individual mood and identity” (17). Woolf, too, noticed the same effect in Sickert’s work: “Hence the intimacy that seems to exist in Sickert’s pictures between his people and their rooms. The bed, the chest of drawers, the one picture and the vase of the mantelpiece are all expressive of its owner” (*WS*, 27). Similarly, Woolf sought to link the furniture of Abercorn Terrace to its inhabitants. “The room was full of furniture,” Woolf writes of its front drawing room. “Opposite them stood a Dutch cabinet with blue china on the shelves; the sun of the April evening made a bright stain here and there on the glass. Over the fireplace the portrait

of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers smiled down on them” (TY 10). Indeed, the young woman’s portrait in Sickert’s 1907, *The Mantelpiece* could be that of any of the Pargiter young daughters with its mood of easy “easy intimacy,” as Robins points out, not found in many of Sickert’s more mature models (Robins and Thomson, 193). Robins also connects this painting to yet a third painter, Vuillard, who once claimed, “I don’t paint portraits, I paint people in their homes” (193).

One of Sickert’s favored props was an iron bedstead. It appeared repetitively in many of his paintings, like *La Coiffure* and *Nuit d’Amour*, where he would place a woman sitting at its edge half naked, or lying across it in a variety of poses. “The bed,” Woolf writes, “a cheap iron bed, is tousled and tumbled; [the woman] has to face the day, to get her breakfast, to see about the rent” (WS, 25). But Sickert’s iron bedstead also suggests a more sinister scenario, one closer to Woolf’s home. As we can see in several of his drawings—*Persuasion*, *A Consultation*, *Attack and Defense*, for example—Sickert stages on the bed a number of conversations whose content can only be guessed at, but whose ambiguity, coercion and threat are palpable. These works clearly bring to mind the family plot that Woolf would reveal only to her closest friends—the nightly assaults of her half-brother George, which she endured through her late adolescence, and which rendered her as physically naked and socially defenseless as the models that Sickert painted. Hermione Lee suggestively links Sickert to “copulation,” a word Woolf daringly uses among her other thoughts of “diamonds and countesses, copulations, the dialogues of Plato, Mad Dick Popham and ‘The Light of the World’” (MB 155) that she entertains before sleep at 22 Hyde Park Gate, when Lee joins Woolf’s meeting a “workmanlike” Sickert at a party to her being wakened later that night by Mary Hutchinson’s orgasmic cries, which Lee posits Woolf was meant to overhear (Lee, 460). Night after night, after Virginia had taken off her “beautiful

white satin dress,” slipped off her petticoats in “a confused whirlpool of sensation” and hung her “white stockings over the back of a chair,” and before she would begin to fall asleep, with “many different things whirling around in [her] mind,” George would enter stealthily, and fling himself on her bed (*MB* 155), importuning her. I suspect that Sickert’s 1909 painting *L’Affaire de Camden Town*, with its barely visible shirt-sleeved male adult looking down from the left at the prostrate body of a nude young woman, held the content of a situation that Woolf would recognize as emotionally her own. That *Camden Town* references the murder of a prostitute only underscores the shame and vulnerability that Woolf would have felt in her own bedroom.

### “Red Is Not a Colour”

“In the eyes of a motorist,” Woolf writes at the opening of *Walter Sickert*, “red is not a colour but simply a danger signal” (*WS*, 11). Red signals for Woolf a knowledge of female sexuality. In the fantasy that she spun of Sickert’s painting *Rose et Marie*, Woolf tells the “a grim, a complex, a moving and at the same time a heartening and rousing story” of two young women: Marie, “sobbing out some piteous plaint” of love betrayed, and Rose, standing before her in the “intimacy of undress, experienced, seasoned, as woman of the world” (*WS* 26). Marie can tolerate the “full impact” of Rose’s knowledge, “perhaps because the glow of the crimson petticoat, does not altogether wither her” (*WS* 26). I will not here explore the obvious link of the “seasoned” Rose presented in *Walter Sickert* with the child Rose of *The Years*, except to note the contrast between the “mute” child, unable to speak about her abuse to her sister Eleanor, and the implied healing sexual conversation portrayed between the two women in Woolf’s essay. Instead, I want to focus on the use of (rose) red in Sickert’s paintings to signal a complex array

of messages about the increasingly public discourse of female sexuality that surrounded Woolf as a young woman.

Sickert situated this discourse in the music hall, and embodied it in the figures of the young girls and women who stepped from behind the curtain to entertain the London public. As Robins notes, “The London music hall was a growing popular phenomenon,” which drew large crowds, and was “the subject of much middle class debate” (Robins, 17). Even years after the height of their success, Sickert could still draw “a horrified reaction” from Edith Sitwell with the gift of a small drawing of unaccompanied women sitting the back seats of a music hall (Robins, 19). Sickert carried a small notebook to these halls, in which he habitually produced a “vast quantity of sketches of the performers, the crowd, and even the architectural detail” of them (17). Sickert, Robins observes, had a “propensity for depicting female entertainers . . . . His habit of noting the lyrics of their songs . . . and his sensitivities to their idiosyncrasies . . . reflect the new phenomena” (Robins, 20). A number of these female performers emerge from the shadows of the stage in what can be called “crimson petticoats.” The diminutive performer, for example, portrayed in *The Oxford Music Hall* is barely perceptible in the dark brown depth of the theater except for the dim light of her rose dress. In *The P.S. Wings in the O.P. Mirror*, the singer, posed at the extreme right of the frame, is more prominent in her short red skirt. But it is Minnie Cunningham who most dramatically takes the stage in Sickert’s painting, *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford*. Seemingly a child in her short, glowing red dress, Minnie Cunningham was in fact “by definition a New Woman,” whose earnings, fanciful dress, and make up challenged conventional ideals of femininity” (Robins, as quoted in *eleutheria blog*), and whose identifying characteristics of tallness and thinness—Cunningham herself would complain that Sickert made her look too thin—confronted the Victorian ideal of fecundity. In his paintings of female

performers, frequently dressed in varying shades of red, Sickert explored the contradictory reactions that society held toward women who dared to place themselves in front of the (stage) curtain and before an appreciative audience in defiance of the strictures that entrapped women in their homes. It is to this complex trope of the curtain with its simultaneous invitation to rise and fall, to hide and disclose, that we now turn.

### **Behind the Curtain**

In *Paradoxy of Modernism*, Robert Scholes draws attention to Sickert's admiration of *Morgenstunde*, a painting by Moritz von Schwind which pictures "a little German girl in plaits . . . [who] throws open the casement of her bedroom to greet the sounds and scents of morning" (71). The painting is an example of what the Germans call *Fensterbilder*, "pictures in which people are shown gazing out of windows." Scholes claims that what Sickert admired in Schwind's painting was what he called "the everlasting matitudinal." (71). I suspect that he was as drawn to the shadowed interior of the bedroom with its curtained bed, dark chest of drawers, mirror, and chair—the same objects he so ambiguously employed in his own interiors—as he was its ostensible subject. In fact Sickert offers his own counter-image in *Girl at a Window*, *Little Rachel*. In his painting, Sickert depicted a young girl looking out from the gloom of her room onto a sunlit garden painted in muted tones, from which she is seemingly barred by the sash of the window and the iron grille beyond it. Vanessa Bell, too, offered her own constricted version of the *Fensterbilder* in her early painting *Apples: 46 Gordon Square*. Looking past its putative subject, Bell's painting showed a narrowly vertical view that is, like Sickert's, circumscribed by an iron railing directly outside the window, beyond which can be seen an iron fence enclosing the courtyard of the house. (The railing calls to mind Woolf's later description

of the one upon which Septimus Smith hurls himself, offering another commentary on the trope from the vantage of the trauma survivor.) The combination “of interior still life and view through a window,” Richard Sone observes (61), will remain a theme to which Bell returned throughout her life. In this early work of Bell’s, it contains a curious stasis of inside and outside or, to put it another way, “behind” and “beyond,” the invisible curtain which has removed from the window. Only later, when she is sufficiently distanced from the trauma of her childhood in 22 Hyde Park Gate, will Bell’s landscapes, often viewed from within an interior, open out to a sun-filled landscape of bright pinks, yellows, and greens.

In *The Years* Woolf wrote own her commentary on the motif of *Fensterbilder*, as it pertains to the “sexual lives” of women, the explicit goal of her novel. Pulling apart the muslin blind as if they were young girls behind the stage, Milly and her sister Delia watch a young man step out of a cab. “Don’t get caught looking,” they are admonished by their Eleanor, their older sister. “But for a moment,” Woolf writes, “the two girls stood looking into the street . . . . Above the roofs was one of those red and fitful London sunsets that make window after window burn gold. There was a wildness in the spring evening; even here in Abercorn Terrace the light was changing from gold to black, from black to gold.” Dropping the blind Delia exclaims in frustration and despair, “Oh, my God!” (TY 19). The brief crimson of the sunset, associated with a sexuality denied to the women of the house, is blotted out. Later Crosby, the maid, draws the curtains, and “soon the windows were obscured by thick sculptured folds of claret-coloured plush, plunging the drawing room into a “profound silence” (TY 20).

The life forbidden the inhabitants of Abercorn Terrace in “1880” will be dramatically claimed in the “Present Day,” at the end of the party that brings the generations of the Pargiters together again as a family. In a gesture of freedom undoing the one of despair decades before,



Delia jerks the curtains open and exclaims “‘The dawn!’” (TY 431). Standing at the open window, posed in their own collective, revelatory *Fensterbuilder*, which Woolf contrasts to the drawn blinds of the houses across the square, the Pargiters watch the sun rise: “The group in the window, the men in their black and white evening dress, the women in their crimsons, golds, and silvers, wore a statuesque look for a moment . . . . Then they moved; they changed their attitudes; they began to talk.” It is this quotidian conversation, marked by interruptions and ellipses, that signals the healing vision implied in the act of opening the curtains so long closed. In a description that recalls and rivals her sister’s landscapes, Woolf continues, “A breeze went through the square. In the stillness they could hear the branches rustle as they rose slightly, and fell, and shook a wave of green light through the air” (TY 434). Woolf describes the scene in an abundance of color, not the “claret plush” of Abercorn Terrace, but *gold*—“The windows were spotted with gold;” and *green-blue*—“the green-blue birds were shuffling about on the branches; and *blue*—“the sky was a faint blue; the roofs were tinged with purple against the blue;” and *red*—“the chimneys were a pure brick red.” “An air of ethereal calm and simplicity lay over everything” (TY 433-434), she writes. It is as if Woolf had finally freed herself from the palette of Walter Sickert, and the sexual trauma it suggested, to discover for herself the “everlasting multitudinal” he had promised.

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