

1995

Two Small Canvases

Peter LaSalle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

LaSalle, Peter. "Two Small Canvases." *The Iowa Review* 25.1 (1995): 132-136. Web.
Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol25/iss1/24>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Two Small Canvases · *Peter LaSalle*

1. IN THIS ONE is painted a paperback copy of *To the Lighthouse*. It is an edition popular in the sixties, what adapts the original cover design, done by Woolf's sister Vanessa. It is white, with sea-blue lettering on the spine. There is a block of the same sea-blue on the top half of the front, with the title and author's name in yellow script. Around the edges of the block, in yellow and blue, is a pattern that alternates a simple seagull—a flattened “W”—and a simple cockleshell—the ridged fan of it on the top, the level edge of the bottom. The book is shown lying on the ledge of a window, off from the center a bit, and the window's two mullioned halves are open in the sunshine of what appears to be a fine spring afternoon. The room itself appears to be that of a women's college dormitory, and with the configuration of the painting one can see the trappings of just that to either side of the window. The room's walls are yellow, and it must be on a top floor, or at least the highest in a gabled wing, because the ceiling beams above slope. There is, on the left side, the edge of a winged chair, the type that was maybe once common in dormitory rooms, called a “butterfly chair”; one can see about half of the black wrought-iron frame of it, and the worn black canvas of the sling of it. Beside the chair is a small oaken table, probably part of the dormitory furniture, bearing a couple of spiral-bound notebooks, a glass of what might be iced coffee, and a single pencil showing at one end one of those pink eraser nubs put over a pencil's original eraser when it wears. Moving from the left, to the center and at the bottom of the painting, is a slice of the throw rug on the planked floor; the rug is a cheap Mexican thing, red, with a zigzagging print of black and white, and in the painting a good sense emerges of its flimsiness—not much more than a blanket, really, some bunching of it up by the end where the fringe is as dirty as old string. After that, there in the center too and below the window ledge, is a long cast-iron radiator. The radiator is painted silver, and the detailing is such that one can see, underneath the rocket-shaped steam valve on one end, a squiggly trail of rust that has dripped down the first slab of the radiator's louvers where the valve has leaked some over the years. There is, on the right side of the painting, a low bookcase with a stereo on it. The record player consists of a turntable under a plastic hood, clear, and two relatively small speakers, each the size of a shoebox set upright; there is

brownish tweed over the front of each, and in the corner of each a little chrome insignia reading “KLH.” The stereo sits on the middle shelf of the bookcase, which is more of the standard dormitory fare of that era, made of pine boards and gray cinderblocks probably purchased at a building supply in town. On the bottom shelf are a couple of uneven stacks of record albums, and on the top shelf, about the height of the window ledge, is a large straw sun hat; it has a domed crown, wide brim, and a band of black ribbon trailing in twin strands, notched, at the back. But, again, all of that—what is on either side, or what is below—seems only so much focusing, and what the viewer’s eye returns to are the two mullioned slabs of the window, hinged at the sides, thrown open to the day, the paperback on the ledge. Into the room pours honeyed sunlight, and it renders the colors of the scene—the walls’ yellow, the rug’s red, even the satiny lustrous black of the ribbons on the sun hat—so vibrant. And, as mentioned, there is the feeling of being high up, as that seen beyond becomes what is commonly called a “vista,” giving way, which it does, from the smallness of the room, cosy, to the largeness of the nature depicted: in this case, a break of trees at the edge of a stone-paved courtyard of a Gothic dormitory hall indeed—a New England college—and then the plane of a small lake, and then the purplish low hills fading. It all conveys very much the texture of spring, the first warm day when one wears a sun hat when one maybe doesn’t really need a sun hat. The trees show fragile lime-green spangles, the first budding before the fleshy leaves will emerge and gradually darken, and the lake still shows a suggestion of its winter coldness, the hue more of a slate than a warmer blue; the color emphasizes that it was certainly frozen hard only a couple of months before, and that suggests more than anything exactly how fragile this kind of late-April warmth is, how wonderfully welcome it is too. And, still, one goes back to the book proper, the way it has been left there on the ledge, the precise detailing of the spine and then the cover, with its script lettering for the title and author, then the seashells and the gulls. And what *is* there about a book left sitting next to an open window? Is it just the easy idea of how comfortable it surely is for a college girl in her cheery room of maybe 1967 or 1968—judging from the stereo and the butterfly chair, plus the edition of the book—how comfortable it is to be reading a novel like *To the Lighthouse*? Or could it be something larger? And with the book positioned before the panorama of the landscape, it can make the viewer think more of

what was earlier sensed: that maybe the viewer has this all reversed, and it isn't the book and then the fullness of nature beyond it outside, but it could easily as well be all of nature giving way to, coming together in, the much larger world of the book and the essence of the life portrayed therein. The canvas is in a frame of simple black, and it is twelve-by-eighteen inches, not very large.

2. This one is the same size. Painted, obviously, by the same artist. In it is depicted a paperback copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and it too is from that publisher's series of Woolf, the matching editions popular in the sixties; one is immediately struck by that. In this case the publisher employs the same motif, a design adapted from what one recognizes as the original Hogarth Press issuing. A white cover again, here with yellow lettering on the spine. And then a block of yellow on the front; the author's name and title are in red. Around the edges of this block, in red and yellow, the pattern alternates a drawn flower, a starburst design for the blossom, and then a squiggled "S" of scrolling, the same size. This time the book is seen left atop a medium-sized suitcase in what is obviously a large airport's waiting room, or, more specifically, a waiting nook with its rows of chairs, out on the leg of a concourse. It is artificial lighting, and it is very obviously night; the shadows cast have a certain weary texture. The angle of viewing itself is such that one is looking down at a row of seats, maybe while standing, and then the upright suitcase with the book placed on top. There is no view to the glass beyond that might show the accordionized connectors for boarding or the planes on the runway. The arrangement of the composition here has a row of chairs on one side and then, on the other, the check-in counter, which is a solid black slab and is approximately chest-high. The chairs are upholstered in reddish-maroon tweed, attached to each other and with chromium arms. The carpet is sturdy gray fare, what is maybe called "industrial," and the viewer can't help but be taken by the fact that there is *nobody* in the scene: no stewardesses or passengers, not even a worker with one of those dustpans on a long handle, brushing up litter at the end of the terminal's day. The check-in counter too is empty, and atop it is a microphone for paging; behind it are three sets of twin rails for inserting the blackboards with their white lettering: the top one says "Braniff 245," the middle one says "Dallas and Boston," and the third, for departure information, shows only the capital letters "DEP" but no time. If the entire

composition of the other painting worked to focus on the window and the book on the ledge, this one works to focus on, between the row of chairs on one side and the counter on the other, the suitcase and the book on top of that. The suitcase is very much an article of woman's luggage; it is a sturdy one, covered with red pebble-grain, a padded red handle on the top. The painting doesn't allow detailing so precise that the viewer might read the logo on the insignia below the handle, but it is the little escutcheon, red-blue-and-white, of the popular American Tourister brand. On the seat nearest to it is a spiral-bound notebook of that sort that has a brown cardboard cover, then the wire spiral itself along the side. It is, in fact, the same kind of notebook as seen in the other painting of the dormitory room, and, possibly, startled by that, the viewer cannot help but begin to make certain connections. Not merely the same notebooks in both paintings, but, certainly more significantly, the two matching Virginia Woolf books. Also, the viewer realizes that the unseen protagonist of this painting is probably the same college-age girl, and it is not only a matter of such a notebook to provide a student touch, but also the rather large identification tag hanging from a key chain on the handle of the suitcase; the tag shows four shaggy-topped young men with lapelless suit jackets and thin ties, haircuts that give them a fringe of bangs, and they are smiling. It is under clear plastic. The name and address for the girl must be on the other side, and it is probably something she had left over from school, as outright childish as a lunch box with a cartoon character on it, and now that she is older, but not that much older, she simply used the identification tag on the new—hopefully sophisticated—item of luggage. The tag speaks wonderfully of the “inbetweenness” of her age. Yes, obviously the paintings are very much intended to be hung together like this, in themselves as much of a pair as the two books, read, probably, for a Woolf seminar she is taking at the time, or for a Modern British Novel course where *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are inevitably assigned as the books that represent best that most major of British novelists. But in this second painting the atmosphere is anything but the easy innocence of the other scene: the forced artificial lighting and the strange shadows the suitcase casts and the check-in counter casts; the starkness of the chairs, the rug. And it is maybe the late sixties again—the tag with the rock group the give-away here, a single detail for such dating as strong in itself as the several others in the first painting—and, once more, the central object of the paperback on the suitcase can lead to

larger observation. Which is to say, here in the midst of the nowhere of an airport at night when a flight has been missed, or a connecting plane has been delayed, the book seems at first to be dwarfed by the whole concept of travel and the overwhelming truth of so many people everywhere going so many places everywhere in still more hissing jets in the essential hugeness of the empty night, *everywhere*; but could it be that the book itself is where the real travel takes place, that the other kind of travel is nothing in comparison? And what trip is greater, more significant, than just to be with Mrs. Dalloway in the course of her getting ready for her eventual dinner party that evening, what happens at the gathering when her old lover back from the colonial service shows up and she has to come to terms with those big issues in her life? (And what about the sheer triumph of construction in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay is the moving force, the Love, that binds together her large family that spends those several summer days at the rambling summer place in the Hebrides, the daughters wondering who will marry whom, her husband, the self-conscious famous professor of philosophy knowing nothing of Love, the central concept of any philosophy; he will learn of it only at the end of the novel when she is gone and he admits the Love she represented, the true light of the lighthouse's beam. The one *utter* achievement of that book might have been in a touch as simple as Mrs. Ramsay's death happening in parentheses, and possibly everything painful in life, so short, we do try to view as only parenthetical. Or maybe the way there was always somebody painting a picture in Woolf's novels, and how the viewer herself here, now that she is middle-aged, gets the feeling sometimes that all of what happened to her in her sophomore year at Wellesley could just as well be seen as two juxtaposed pictures in a gallery or museum. And she would come upon them as a viewer, trying to put together that time when she as a giggling, carefree college girl got word of her high school boyfriend, Stevie, being killed in an automobile accident back in Los Angeles, her going out there then and the long flight—more than alone—back to Boston.) One, concentrating on the second painting, does notice that the paperback has a fold across the cover, probably damaged from packing and unpacking in the course of the travel. It goes from approximately the middle of the top to two-thirds the way down the side and at an angle—a very careful detail.