

EXTRACT: KATE BRIGGS

To begin with were the small-scale portraits of friends, acquaintances, his wife. Among them, Lady Ottoline Morrel. She mentions him in the first volume of her memoirs: ‘Simon Bussy, the French painter, a brother-in-law of Lytton Strachey, came to do a pastel sketch of me. Unfortunately, he found it impossible to accomplish and had to give it up.’ Did he? The Tate holds a painting of his (not on display): oil on canvas, dated 1920. Lady Ottoline Morrel in extraordinary profile, her glorious globe of a chin jutting and her mouth parted pink magenta against bright turquoise. A black throat-strap – a ribbon? – holds the green scarf about her hair in place like a helmet. Her one eye is the unworldly palest of pale light blues. ‘But we both enjoyed the sittings,’ the Lady wrote. ‘He is an acute, rather mordant observer of life, with a queer subterranean mocking laugh.’ From there, he moved on to animals, to birds and the occasional plant. *From Gentry to the Zoo*, is the title of the catalogue accompanying a minor retrospective in the mid-1990s, because he would often work from observation at the zoo. A mordant observer observing in thick pastels the motley life of the London zoo. Meanwhile, in France, and at a much later point in their lives together, his wife Dorothy would write a novel. A book! Yes. Though ‘a very short one’ is how she would describe it; ‘a little adventure’. The story of a girl going away to school, and falling hotly and lastingly in love with one of her headmistresses. Pressing her hands. Urgent and tingling for her favours: a long-promised midnight visit. She would publish it anonymously: *Olivia* by Olivia. Tens of small paintings, among them the pastel compositions. One little novel (plus many translations). All of it made in a shared married space, talking over the days, observing each other work. She did not know how to begin thinking about this. To start with, she had no idea what small meant in either case. 308 by 290 millimeters for the oil painting, she noted on the Tate’s website, and tried measuring the rectangle out for herself with a stout Perspex ruler. Some one hundred or so pages. She read in the introduction to a book called *Painting and the Novel* that, unlike painting, the novel is a linear art but she could stare for a long time at a short sentence and zip past a painting. Or the other way around. Then again, nothing tilted her forward in a painting – where else was there to go? A warm owl, smudgy at the edges, locking her into its bewildered depth-stare. A bird’s swollen breast commands her stillness. A clown-fish gulps momentarily (permanently) at the upper-right-hand corner of its frame. The short book, on the other hand, she moved through it. Or it moved through her. A pattern of something like worded feeling emerging over a succession of early nights. The precious transitional lull of bedtime reading: holding the book too close to her own nose, shoulders warm as she breathed into its pages. She thought that she could not do a Google Image search to refresh what mattered to her about her novel. And she was yet to understand and thus felt very far from being capable of describing and as a consequence was nowhere near getting over her sense of the difference this made.