

An Early Effect of Wyndham Lewis' Pituitary Tumour on his Art: An Inquiry Prompted by a Note in *The World Through Blunted Sight*

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Summary

An avenue of research suggested by Patrick Trevor-Roper's 'inquiry into the influence of defective vision on art and character' provides a possible solution to an art-historical problem. It is proposed that questions raised by Percy Wyndham Lewis' red portraits of 1937 can be answered in terms of his intracranial tumour.

The World Through Blunted Sight was published at an interesting moment in the development of modern art-historical theory.¹ The traditional view, which regarded the visual appearance of a work of art as significantly determined by some relationship between the individual artist's will and previous artistic styles, was under attack. An alternative, competing theory saw this appearance as determined more by the social, political and economic conditions surrounding its production. Different initial assumptions could now lead to different forms of inquiry into, and thus to different interpretative conclusions about, a given work of art. In this atmosphere an artist's biographical details tended to be treated by the traditionalists as relevant to his work only to the extent that they supported assumptions about the meaning and value of his work, while social historians of art regarded them as pertinent only insofar as they upheld assumptions about the determining effect of basic external conditions. Trevor-Roper's book may be seen as a corrective to both positions in that he showed that an artist's medical biography could have a determining effect upon his work. Another aspect of the book's

continuing influence lies in the areas of inquiry which it suggests to the medical art-historian.

A case in point concerns Percy Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), the prime mover of Vorticism, an *avant-garde* art movement in England which was influenced by both Cubism and Futurism. Interest in Lewis was encouraged by the Exhibition *British Art in the Twentieth Century* at the Royal Academy, London, in 1987 which afforded an opportunity to view his work in considerable number.

Art-historians seek to establish, *inter alia*, why paintings look as they do and two of the many portraits of his wife, Anne, which Lewis painted in the 1930s appear particularly to invite the question. Entitled *Red Portrait*, 1937, (Fig. 1) and *Froanna – Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, 1937, (Fig. 2) they are remarkable for their pervading rich red colouration. Equally remarkable perhaps is the fact that little attempt appears to have been made hitherto to explain their unusual appearance.

Michel, in his monograph on Lewis, accepts *Red Portrait's* (Fig. 1) monochrome simply as part of the work's stylistic appeal

while his reference to *Froanna's* (Fig. 2) 'restraint' is surprising in view of its chromatic extremism.² In his biography of the artist Myers makes no comment on the predominant colour in his account of *Froanna* (Fig. 2) and regards *Red Portrait* (Fig. 1) as reflecting the glowing coals in the painted fireplace.³ He thereby relates the colour to the most obviously naturally red component of the composition and engages with its visual impact, but he falls short of explaining why Lewis painted it as he did by eschewing critical art-historical analysis in favour of retinal fact.

In addition to such fact, and often in its absence in the case of abstract works, high art communicates ideas, thoughts, emotions, concepts and concerns. This it achieves by a variety of representational means. Like printed pages works of art must be read and not just looked at if their content is to be

understood. Interpretation of print is facilitated by the use of a conventionally agreed symbol-system but the key to a work of art is often less readily to hand. We are, however, culturally conditioned to expect a conventional form of realistic representation in portraiture and in the works under consideration our expectations are effectively fulfilled in terms of both line and form. But in the matter of colour these expectations are denied and frustrated and we have difficulty in assessing the significance of the almost unrelieved red.

Attempts to interpret the colour as a metaphor bring us no closer to a solution: concepts such as fire, danger, anger or even menstruation might conceivably be denoted by such surfeit of red but are belied by the calm of the sitter's pose. Equally the question of dawn or sunset seems irrelevant in the interior settings, while red as an indicator of political radicalism is biographically inappropriate to both subject and artist.

A possible alternative starting point in the search for an explanation of Lewis' deep concern with red in 1937 is suggested by Trevor-



Fig. 1. Wyndham Lewis: *Red Portrait*. 1937. Reproduced by permission of Rutland Gallery, London. Copyright: Estate of Mrs G. A. Wyndham Lewis. By permission.



Fig. 2. Wyndham Lewis: *Froanna – Portrait of the Artist's Wife*. 1937. Reproduced by permission of Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries. Copyright: Estate of Mrs G. A. Wyndham Lewis. By permission.

Roper's reference to the artist's brain, preserved with its tumour in the Pathological Museum at Westminster Hospital, London.⁴

The unusually large chromophobe adenoma was found at autopsy to have destroyed the sella turcica and invaded the underlying sphenoidal sinus. The museum specimen consists of a saggital section of the artist's brain (Figs. 3 and 4) which shows the tumour pressing upon the posterior aspect of the optic chiasma, stretching it to the thinness of paper and sparing very few neurofibres. Lewis was found to have the classical bitemporal hemianopia associated with this tumour just before World War II⁵ but the clinical notes accompanying his preserved brain date the beginnings of his visual problems to some twenty years before his death, i.e. to about 1937, when Figures 1 and 2 were painted.

Meadows has pointed out that colour perception is a very sensitive indicator of partial

damage to the visual pathway associated with lesions at any site between the eye and the occipital lobes⁶ and the Colour Rule referred to by Kestenbaum reminds us that red-green perception is particularly vulnerable in nerve-fibre lesions while blue-yellow vision tends to be more affected in retinal conditions.⁷ The term 'disproportion' was given to the excess of red-green deficit over that for white in conduction defects by Roenne in 1911⁸ and Traquair's observation that in chiasmal lesions defects for colour are often found before those for white has been confirmed by Walsh and Hoyt.⁹ The importance of colour perimetry in elucidating the ocular signs of pituitary tumours has been emphasised by Lyle and Clover¹⁰ and by Alexander, who also noted that the subtlest degrees of colour-field loss occur with expanding lesions at chiasmal level.¹¹ Patients with pressured ocular pathways are more likely to be aware of dyschromatopia if

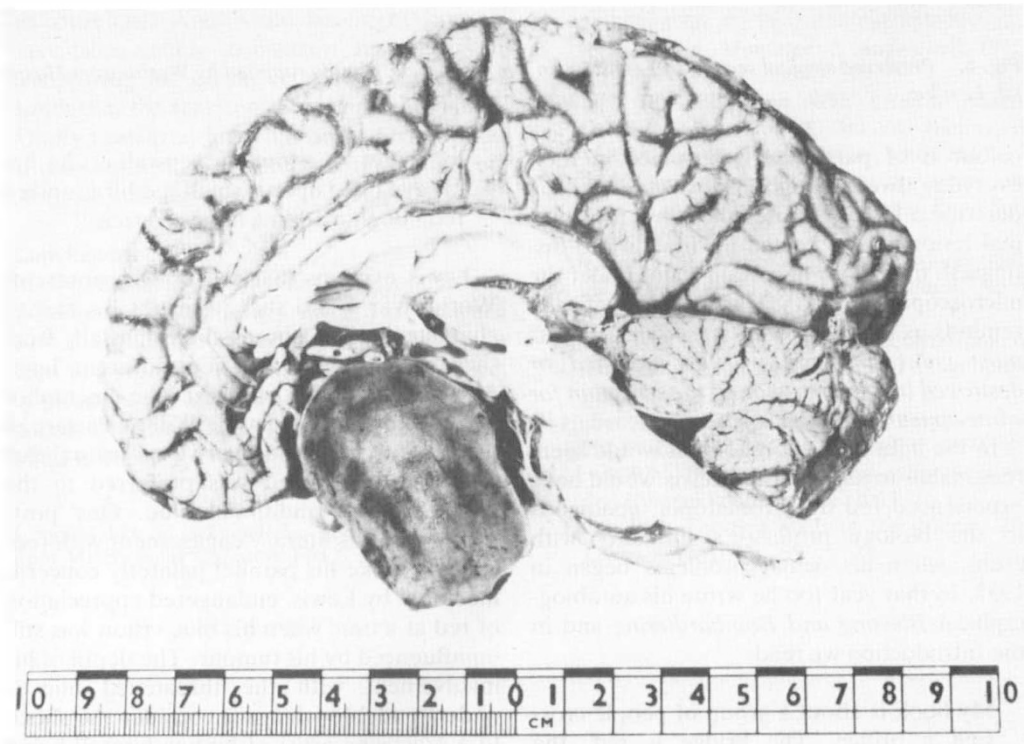


Fig. 3. Preserved saggital section of Lewis' brain – lateral view. Kindly supplied by Westminster Hospital, London.

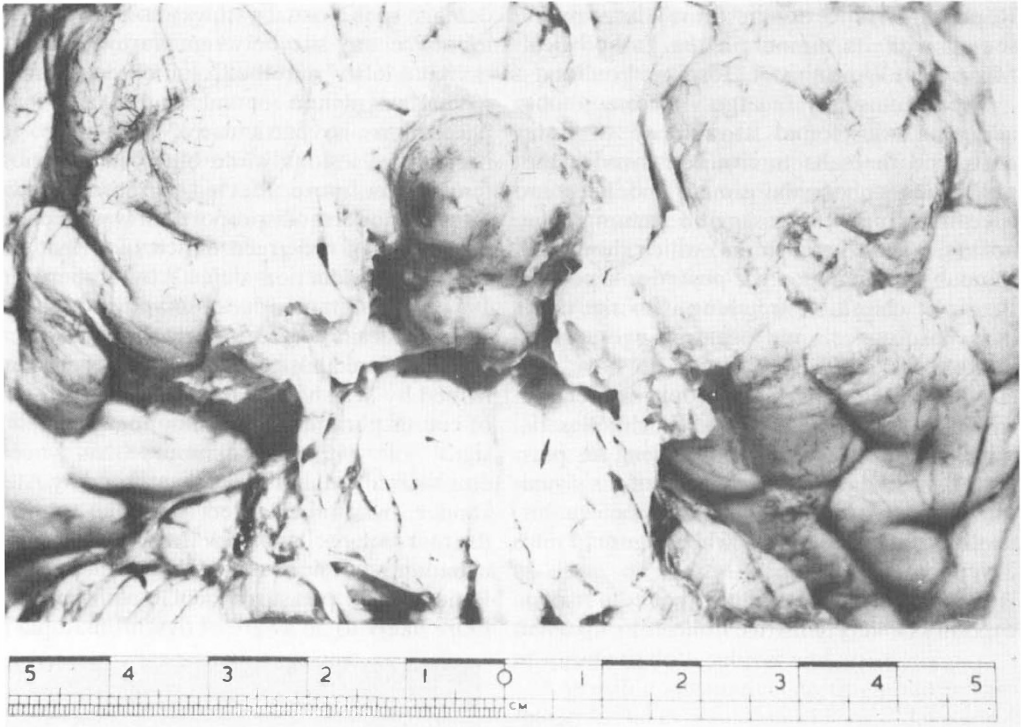


Fig. 4. Preserved sagittal section of Lewis' brain – inferior view. Kindly supplied by Westminster Hospital, London.

colour is of particular importance in their everyday lives. Knight, Hoyt and Wilson describe a biology professor with a prechiasmatal lesion who reported his inability to distinguish the colour of certain stains under the microscope.¹² And Huber emphatically reminds us that *the colour sensation for red is most vulnerable and will be modified or destroyed before alteration of the sensation for white appears* (his italics).¹³

In the light of the foregoing it would seem reasonable to suggest that Lewis would have experienced red dyschromatopia, analogous to the biology professor's difficulty with eosin, when his ocular problems began in 1937. In that year too he wrote his autobiographical *Blasting and Bombardiering* and in the Introduction we read:

My book is about a group of people crossing a bridge. The bridge is red, the people are red, the sky is red . . . [The principal figure] scarcely sees his compan-

ions. Yet he is not a sleepwalker: he has his eye fixed upon a small red bird, upon a red bough, within a large red tree.¹⁴

Lewis explains that the bridge represents World War I and that it carries his cast of characters, chief among them himself, from the pre-War world to a very different 'landscape'. From the context the metaphor appears to derive from the Willow Pattern of domestic crockery but there is no textual clue to indicate why red was preferred to the design's more traditional blue. One postulates that this literary engagement with redness was, like his parallel painterly concern, mediated by Lewis' endangered appreciation of red at a time when his blue vision was still uninfluenced by his tumour. The depth of his involvement with the threatened hue is understandable when we consider the shock to a practising artist of finding himself being deserted by his sense of a primary colour.

If we return to *Red Portrait* (Fig. 1) we can

see, *pace* Myers, that the artist has ensured that we concentrate on redness *as such* in this portrait rather than redness as a reflective glow from the fire. The sitter's head is placed lower and consequently closer to the centre of the composition than is usual in portraiture. This allows room to show the improbably red landscape above the mantelpiece whose projecting shelf physically precludes the derivation of the landscape's colour from the glowing coals and insists upon an alternative explanation.

The theory that both portraits represent not only his wife but also Lewis' efforts to rescue his sense of red appreciation from the pathological process which was disrupting it is reinforced by the fact that in *Froanna* (Fig. 2) he chose to depict Anne wearing *his* dressing-gown which he knew to be red and thereby disclosed his concern to manipulate effectively from labelled paint tubes, a pigment whose colour was, to him, no longer true. It was typical of Lewis' fortitude in adversity that he should so directly confront his problem. And while he might himself have been unable to measure his success in recapturing his errant red there can be no doubt that the reactions of others would have wholly reassured him that he had triumphed in reinstating it, if not on his retina, then certainly on canvas.

Conclusion:

In the absence of alternative explanations Wyndham Lewis' literary and artistic concern with the question of redness in 1937 may be seen as a vigorous response to the early effect of pituitary adenoma which was, as he has so poignantly described, to render him totally blind in 1951.¹⁵

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