What Were Red Duet?

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Why is the Design for Red Duet (M 204) dated 1915, when Red Duet itself (M 170) is dated 1914? (The dates are inscribed by Lewis himself.) One answer might be that Lewis gave the Design its date when he reproduced it in Blast, No. 2, to make it look like recent work. While this is certainly possible, the fact that he retained a 1912 date on the Design for Programme Cover — Kermesse (M 52) suggests that he was not overridingly concerned with reproducing only his most recent work. Besides, comparison of Red Duet with the design suggests that the sketch played no part in the construction of the 1914 gouache. Even so, the fact that the design is far less removed from representation than Red Duet itself might lead an unwary commentator to assume that it must predate that picture. (An opposite assumption is more likely to be correct.) There are further facts to take into account: Design for Red Duet was also reproduced in the catalogue of the Vorticism exhibition held at the Doré Gallery, and was exhibited in the 'Drawings' section of the show. One of Lewis's four exhibits in the 'Pictures' section was Red Duet itself. The identity of that 'picture' depends partly on the meaning of this designation. Walter Michel, in his study of Lewis's painting, remarks that it is not clear whether the term 'drawing' was applied solely to monochrome drawings, or whether 'pictures' referred solely to oil paintings, excluding coloured pictures in other media.¹ This is true, but one of Lewis's 'pictures' is known to have been an oil (Workshop, M P19), while another (Democratic Composition) is likely to have been the oil now known as The Crowd (M P18). One of Edward Wadsworth's 'drawings', on the other hand, Enclosure, survives. It is a brightly-coloured gouache. So the 'pictures' were very probably oils, while the 'drawings' were works on paper, coloured or not.

One other piece of evidence should be noted. Design for Red Duet was coloured by Lewis (in the very un-red colours blue and yellow) some time after the block was made for its reproduction. This gouache and wash colouring was also added after the design had at some point been squared up for transfer to a canvas (some pencilled remnants of this can be seen on the drawing).² What this suggests is that the 'picture', Red
Duet, exhibited at the Vorticist Exhibition, was not the surviving gouache that was in the collection of Ezra Pound, but an oil painting that has not survived, based on the Design for Red Duet. None of this evidence is compelling, and I would not bother with it were it not for having noticed a resemblance between the lost Vorticist canvas in Alvin Langdon Coburn’s photo of Lewis (taken on 25 February 1916) and the Design for Red Duet. Behind Lewis’s left knee (and visible to the right of the photo above his left hand) is a ‘figure’ somewhat similar to the right-hand figure in the Design. It is squarer in its internal construction, but compensates for that by leaning at a slight diagonal, whereas the equivalent figure in the design is more upright, but with stronger diagonal thrusts in some of its members. The row of broad white verticals to the right (for the viewer) of Lewis’s upper arm is an equivalent of the white interstices between the thick vertical ink lines in the diagonal strip in the centre of the design. But the closest similarity is with the ‘head’ of the figure in the design. As with its twin, to its left, this figure has a facial profile wittily created by a zigzagging line that forms three triangles by its juxtaposition with a vertical. The ‘figure’ in the lost oil takes over this feature almost intact, its face appearing in the photo at the same height as Lewis’s, like a spectral double of its creator. Most of what I take to be the other half of the ‘duet’ is hidden behind Lewis.

Before considering what lay behind Lewis’s interest in ‘duets’, I ought to acknowledge that I do not consider this identification of the lost oil absolutely certain. If the design was squared up for a painting (this one) why does it differ so greatly? Why should the oil not be some other lost painting; the Two Shafts: Man and Woman also exhibited by Lewis in the Vorticist exhibition, for example? Without answering these questions, I would simply say that, given Lewis’s preoccupation with the idea of the ‘duet’ at this time (‘You must be a duet in everything’) it seems quite likely that he would devote a painting of the scale and ambition of the one in the photograph to this theme.

‘Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1: Art Vortex’ begins with the resounding slogan, Be Thyself, almost as if its author were unaware of the demonstration in ‘Enemy of the Stars’ of the futility of attempting any such thing. Arghol, in that ‘play’, is obsessed with being himself alone, and is dissatisfied with the condition of being ‘always à deux’. But Arghol only receives unqualified endorsement by the narrator when he
goes against his principles of asceticism and anti-action by using his fists to defend himself against an assault by Hanp. And it is not the pugnacity, but the inconsistency that the narrator applauds:

To break vows and spoil continuity of instinctive behaviour, lose a prize that would only be a trophy tankard never drunk from, is always fine.⁴

The sense of this appears to be that principles derive much of their value for an individual from being occasionally repudiated (a view quite at odds with Arghol's own). Lewis in fact tends to consider principles solely in a psychological context: hence Arghol’s lapse from principle is described as a violation of ‘instinctive behaviour’. One would have expected that principle and instinct would be considered as opposed terms instead of being identified. To a certain extent in Enemy of the Stars they are; Arghol represents principle, and Hanp instinct. But if Hanp and Arghol are ‘always à deux’, any opposition between the two terms can only be relative. Another example of this can be seen in the more-or-less contemporary ‘Inferior Religions’, where Lewis puts forward the idea of changing principle (in this case religious principle). Again he endorses a deliberate lack of consistency:

All religion has the mechanism of the celestial bodies, has a dance. When we wish to renew our idols, or break up the rhythm of our naïveté, the effort postulates a respect which is the summit of devoutness.⁵

Looked at from the point of Enemy of the Stars, Lewis’s metaphor reverses things again. Arghol is the enemy of the stars, and he rebels against them for the sake of a principle which seems religious. But, in ‘Inferior Religions’, the ‘mechanism of the celestial bodies’ (the stars) is itself an image of religious principle.

Such paradoxes show the extent to which Lewis was working within a Nietzschean framework. Nietzsche commented on the traditional opposition of ascetic priestly principle and ‘life’, but, like Lewis, saw their opposition as relative. Even an asceticism like Arghol’s, in the end, serves life:

It must be a necessity of the first order which makes this species, hostile, as it is, to life, always grow again and always thrive again.—Life itself must certainly have an interest in the continuance of such a type of self-contradiction. For an ascetic life is a self-contradiction . . .⁶

It should not, then, be surprising that, having exhorted the reader of ‘Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1’ to ‘be thyself’, Lewis goes on to ask rhetorically, ‘Why try and give the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?’ The blatant inconsistency is intentional, and the inconsistency is only relative. Hanp and Arghol, the two ‘selves’ that ‘Thou’ must be, are ultimately on the same side:

We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes.

We discharge ourselves on both sides.

We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours.⁷

But if such a duality is only relative, what prevents it from collapsing into what Lewis later called a ‘grey mixture, that is in reality nothing at all?’ He does not explain, but nevertheless insists on the importance of avoiding such a collapse: ‘You must catch the clearness and logic in the midst of contradictions: not settle down and snooze on an acquired, easily possessed and mastered, satisfying shape.’ Lewis assumes his readers are male, and his image for such complacent collapse is marriage
(no doubt because in his bohemian gender-politics the 'female' partner — of whatever sex — was stereotyped as passive and complaisant). So he continues, 'We artists do not provide wives for you. You have too many as it is.'

'Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1' is a difficult and esoteric document. It is comprehensive in scope, for it recommends its doctrine 'in everything'. The 'satisfying shape' that one might too easily settle into is both the shape of one's self — round peg in round hole — and the shape a visual artist creates in his dealings with the 'Exterior World' — literally the shapes he creates on his canvas: 'There is Yourself: and there is the Exterior World, that fat mass you browse on'. Looked at from this artistic (visual) point of view, the doctrine of being a duet can be legitimately be interpreted as transposing to a level of form or technique the opposition between an anti-life principle and life. In Wilhelm Worthinger's anthropology of visual style, which is built round such an opposition, this anti-life principle is abstraction (its opposite is empathy). Lewis knew of Worthinger's ideas through T. E. Hulme. He did not entirely accept Hulme's exclusive exaltation of the 'religious' anti-life principle, however (no doubt because of the Nietzscheanism I have sketched). In 'Futurism, Magic and Life', making use of the same digestive metaphor as in 'Art Vortex No. 1', he writes of the necessary balance between the opposing terms:

It is all a matter of most delicate adjustment between voracity of Art and digestive quality of Life.

The finest Art is not pure Abstraction, nor is it unorganised life. In 'A Review of Contemporary Art', written about a year later, he has sorted out his ideas about the hermeneutics of visual art sufficiently to be able to assert that painting always represents: 'it is impossible . . . to avoid representation in one form or another'. Ascetic abstraction and representation ('life') coexist in painting, therefore. They are one of the duets that Lewis insists on.

If this exposition of this aspect of Lewis's thought about duets is correct, then Red Duet (or at least the surviving Design for Red Duet) is, esoterically, a self-referential painting. Its machine-like figures ('you must become a machine') form a duet, but, also, each figure hovers between pure abstraction and representation. The viewer's perception of them is subject to the same kind of reversal that occurs before one of the well-known gestalt cartoons of rabbit-duck or old-young woman. A reading of the image never quite settles down into an 'easily possessed and mastered, satisfying shape'. Principle and instinct, abstraction and representation, blue and yellow (or, in the oil, scarlet and black?) are some of the duets embedded in this image. Lewis's aesthetic, as Michael Durman and Alan Munton have rightly insisted, is the opposite of Bergson's 'radically unifying' theory (though all his oppositions remain relative). Instead, his aesthetic is radically disjunctive and pluralistic.

This esoteric reading of the picture is, I am aware, on the face of it at odds with the interpretation that I briefly advanced in Wyndham Lewis: Art and War. There I related the drawing to the views Lewis puts forward in 'The New Egos':

We all, to-day, (possibly with a coldness reminiscent of the insect-world) are in each other's vitals—overlap, intersect, and are Siamese to any extent. Promiscuity is normal; such separating things as love, hatred, friendship are superseded by a more realistic and logical passion . . .

Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World. In this context, the drawing (and the painting) would be a visual encapsulation of
this mechanical disruption of the human personality consequent on the development of technology, urban structures and infra-structures. This would be an ‘anthropological’ reading of the image, and one that I still believe to be correct. ‘The New Egos’ is an essay in which Lewis develops and modifies the version of Worringer’s ideas that he heard from Hulme, and Design for Red Duet seems to be an almost programmatic exemplification of its theory. A Marxist interpretation of what I have called the ‘esoteric’ dimension of ‘Art Vortex No. 1’, however, might want to explain its concepts of dissociated personality and epistemologies by ascribing them to precisely the material conditions that Lewis identifies as affecting consciousness in ‘The New Egos’. There are enough verbal similarities between the two essays to show that Lewis himself was conscious of this link: ‘You can establish yourself ... as a Machine of two similar fraternal surfaces overlapping’. This echoes the earlier essay’s use of the word ‘fraternal’ and its description of personalities overlapping and intersecting. The image of the machine in ‘Art Vortex No. 1’ also evokes modernity. The two interpretations of this picture, therefore, are two sides of a single coin, or two opposing halves of an imperfectly separate duet.

To return, finally, to speculation. If the painting before which Lewis was sitting when Coburn photographed him was Red Duet, the photographer’s placing of the figure could not be more appropriate. Here we have a figure of ‘life’ or nature (Lewis himself) paired with a figure of art or abstraction (in the painting beside him). It is virtually the image proposed in ‘Art Vortex No. 1’: ‘... the relationship of object and its shadow [as] your two selves’. Coburn was by temperament attracted to the esoteric; it would not surprise me if he framed his double portrait of the painter and his work deliberately as an example of one of Lewis’s duets.

Notes

2 Unless the squaring, of which only the numbering on the co-ordinates remains, was used to transfer the design to the paper from an earlier sketch. This doesn’t seem likely, but it is possible.
4 Enemy of the Stars, Blast, No. 1, p.74.
7 Manifesto’, Blast, No. 1, p. 30.
8 Preface to Book Two of Time and Western Man, p. 132.
10 Blast, No. 1, p.134.
11 Blast, No. 2, p. 43.
13 Blast, No. 1, p. 141.
14 See Mike Weaver, Alein Langdon Coburn: Man of Mark 1882–1966 (Bath: The Royal Photographic Society, 1982).