SOMETHING URGENT I HAVE TO SAY TO YOU: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
HERBERT LEIBOWITZ
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William Carlos Williams, along with TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, was one of the great modernist poets of the century which America claimed for itself with the construction of the Panama Canal exactly a hundred years ago. Unlike the other three, as his latest biographer Herbert Leibowitz remarks, Williams was the only one who, although he had no party allegiance, stayed left-liberal in his opinions. At a time when the strength of the dollar made it easy for US writers to expatriate themselves, Williams spent nearly all his life in the town in which he was born in 1883 — Rutherford, New Jersey — in earshot of the 'infinite variety' of US voices that he wanted to bring into poetry.

This he did, by trial and error, devising a punchy, humane, casual-sounding diction that went on to become influential, peopling his poems with the demotic of *'nurses and prostitutes, policemen and religious fanatics, farmers and fish peddlers, drunkards ... blues singers and barbers'*. He broke down the poetic line, abandoning the rhythms of the ear for the cubist lines of the eye. *'No ideas but in things'* he wrote; and it became a kind of mantra. It was a plea for candour after the vague abstractions of the previous century: the focus was on objects rather than concepts. Typography and spacing became important, and Williams found a way of syncopating US speech rhythms with line breaks, tonal gradations, and staggered repetitions. One robustly delicate 'haiku' of 1923, written under the impress of the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, is often regarded as his signature work:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Writing poems about rain-glazed hardware was what he did at night, and sometimes on the prescription pad between house calls, for William Carlos Williams was also Dr Williams, hard-working family doctor. For 40 years Williams was privy to a very raw and physical side of US life, and to aspects of the national life that completely escaped his Europe-idolising compatriots. He trained as a physician at a time when being a doctor had become one of the most respected professions (the American Medical Association revamped its charter in 1901, imposing much stricter licensing requirements). Many of the details are related in the autobiography he published in 1951, the year in which he suffered the first of the strokes that complicated the late work on his epic collage *Paterson,* an ambitious account of 'the local' — the history and people of a particular place:

'I have never had a money practice; it would have been impossible for me. But the actual calling on people, at all times and under all conditions, the coming to grips with the intimate condition of their lives, when they were being born, when they were dying, watching them get well when they were ill, has always absorbed me.'

Williams was no parish recluse though, travelling from Pennsylvania Medical School to study medicine in Leipzig for a semester in 1909; and nor was he cut off from the gallery talk of Manhattan. Leibowitz details his dealings with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray and a host of minor avant-gardists: Williams was an active participant in the New York cultural scene in the 1910s. Although he had little inclination for Whitman's 'barbaric yawp', Williams sensed there was something visceral in the US situation only he could render. And given that Williams, in his role as family doctor, delivered so many children, it is altogether appropriate that Leibowitz's biography gives a keen sense of the parturient mess out of which poems emerge: most artists' lives are muddled and cluttered until they are over, and biographers are always prone to the historian's fallacy — a kind of outcome bias. Williams' judgement was wobbly at times, not least in his dealings with his long-suffering wife Floss; he made false starts in his search for the US aesthetic, and when he abandoned his 'open forms' he was, quite frankly, a disappointing writer. There are also voyeuristic moments, where we have the impression of being exposed to things better left in the safe keeping of the doctor–patient relationship. Leibowitz makes a penetrating observation when he says, in relation to Williams' key poem *By The Road To The Contagious Hospital*, that he was listening *'to the acoustic properties of words with the same care and skill he devoted to the beating of a patient's heart.'* Medicine, in other words, fed the poetry, and not merely the Williams' family.

In fact, Leibowitz makes a good case for Williams' prose too, and calls *In the American Grain*, his series of prose sketches of the country's founders 'his masterpiece.' Some of the doctor–patient dramas published as *The Doctor Stories* have been widely anthologised too. His short story *Old Doc Rivers* describes the decline of a charismatic country doctor who starts out as a brilliant diagnostician, becomes a 'dope' addict, and ends up endangering his patients. Doc Rivers helps anyone in need; he is above commerce, and that is why he is worshipped — 'a local shrine'. Even as he oils the town's scandal-mill he still enjoys the respect of a core of appreciative patients. His prestige derives from something beyond medicine. Williams too seemed to have bags of sympathy. In a profession still dominated by men, he developed a rare solicitude for the fate of immigrant and working-class women — *'hemmed in by poverty, religious beliefs, ironclad gender roles'* — who managed to hold families together in spite of violent lovers and husbands. At times he lets rip, understandably, with a kind of front-line cynicism. Then he talks of a moment of illumination *'when that underground current can be tapped and the secret spring of all our lives will send up his pure water'*. He is talking about patients: as oracles.

One thing which perhaps doesn't get stressed enough in Leibowitz's biography is how US medicine had undergone another major shift — as in *Old Doc Rivers* — by the time Williams died. In the Truman–Eisenhower era, the American Medical Association discouraged doctors from making the house-calls that had provided Williams with so much of his raw material (and human contact): a public sense of alienation from the profession had begun, and would culminate in the 'medical

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Iain Bamforth
86 rue Kempf, 67000 Strasbourg, France.
E-mail: iainbamforth@orange.fr

nemesis' of the 1970s. Medicine, as some of Williams' writings suggest he feared it might, had lost its unforced altruism and become a commodity.

Iain Bamforth,
GP, Independent Scholar, Freelance Public Health Consultant, Strasbourg, France.

Further reading

Williams WC. *Selected Poems (Penguin Modern Classics)*. London: Penguin, 2005.

The Autobiography, The Doctor Stories, Revised Paterson, In the American Grain, and several other titles are all published by New Directions, New York (some are out-of-print).

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A personal recollection

I once taught *Old Doc Rivers* with a literature professor who didn't want to use it because she felt it was not a 'good' story, that is, it didn't meet the English professor's definition of whatever 'good' is — well constructed but soulless, I suppose. In any case, I prevailed, and the story continues to upset/challenge/reveal and humble all of us who have practiced for any period of time. One student said to me, *'I might THINK those things but I would NEVER say them'*. Williams did both and going on 90 years later, we still avert our eyes yet remain transfixed at the story of the enormously complex person that lies at the heart of the poor and despairing community who held Rivers to them because he was *'the beloved scapegoat of their own aberrant desires'*. Williams was fierce and tender — a tough combination. The book that contains the story is titled *The Knife of the Times*, a title which says everything.

John Frey

E-mail: John.Frey@FAMMED.WISC.EDU

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LUCIAN FREUD PORTRAITS
National Portrait Gallery
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The careers of artists who live to a great age are especially interesting, because they describe so many different arcs. Titian produced astonishing works in extreme old age, works that represent some his most profound and powerful painting. Then there are the artists whose career reaches a mid-point of exceptional brilliance before tailing off into mediocrity, such as Picasso. And finally there are those whose finest works come at or near the start of their careers, whose later works all represent decline. Among this last group stands Lucian Freud.

The early works on show here are quite brilliant. They are very flat, very cool, and absolutely convincing as portraits, even though they are far from 'realistic'. The pictures of his first wife, for instance, almost the first paintings you encounter at this exhibition, are compelling. As one moves on, however, things change. Now, Freud's mid and late pictures could not be by anyone else, they have that much distinction of style, but they seem to me to be technically and aesthetically — maybe even morally — flawed.

The figures themselves, often violently foreshortened or cropped, are powerful. Much of the power depends on the way Freud applies the paint, in huge thick smears done with a broad coarse brush. Everyone is also miserable and ugly, even people you know are not: the prime example being the Duchess of Devonshire. Her husband was looking at her portrait with a couple of other men. Finally one said to him, *'Who is that woman?'* He replied, *'That's my wife'*. *'Well, thank God she's not mine'*, came the reply. His pictures of children are especially unappealing, indeed, they would have to be characterised as actively bad.

One picture, much commented on as perhaps Freud's most ambitious piece, sums it up, the *Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)*. There are some brilliant aspects — the huge scented-leafed geranium that takes up much of the right hand side of the picture is exactly how these plants look if they are allowed to grow old. The figures are unconvincing, however, showing a wild variety of flesh tones that seems more about the artist's virtuosity than the people themselves. They are also set in a rather dubious perspective, and grouped on a metal framed bed that alters its aspect from one end to the other, such that the right hand figure appears to be being tipped off it. This failure to ground the figure can be seen also in a double portrait of two artists, *Two Men in the Studio*, where one man stands on the bedclothes beneath which the other lies. The relationship of the figures is impossible: only the fact that the man standing on top appears to have no weight prevents him from crushing the man asleep beneath him.

There are occasional highlights among the late works — the portrait of David Hockney, for instance — but the chief feeling one leaves with is that not all artistic development is for the better. What makes this show so fascinating is that one can follow this deterioration stage by stage.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Frank Minns
24/50 Blackheath Road, London, SE10 8DZ, UK.
E-mail: frank@c21gardens.com

Frank Minns,
Landscape Gardener, London.

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Large Interior, W11 (after Watteau), 1981–3
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