

THAT RED

WHEELBARROW

SELECTED LITERARY ESSAYS BY

ROBERT

COLES

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Wheelbarrow 独轮车, 手推车

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ESSAYS BY

ROBERT COLES

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That Red Wheelbarrow

To Alex Harris

The Red Wheelbarrow

*so much depends
upon*

*a red wheel
barrow*

*glazed with rain
water*

*beside the white
chickens.*

From Paterson, Book One

*The sun
winding the yellow bindweed about a
bush; worms and gnats, life under a stone.
The pitiful snake with its mosaic skin
and frantic tongue. The horse, the bull
the whole din of fracturing thought
as it falls tinnily to nothing upon the streets
and the absurd dignity of a locomotive
hauling freight—*

*Pithy philosophies of
daily exits and entrances, with books
propping up one end of the shaky table—
The vague accuracies of events dancing two
and two with language which they
forever surpass—and dawns
tangled in darkness—*

—William Carlos Williams

Introduction

When I started applying to medical schools, I slipped into a black mood of considerable tenacity. I had not intended to be a physician, never mind a psychiatrist. I had majored in English and had written what for me was a major essay on William Carlos Williams. He (poor soul) got to see what I had done, and kindly as he was, he wrote and said I should “drop by.” I did, pronto. He immediately took me to Paterson, the city where he did much of his work: making medical visits, mostly to poor families. I became taken not only with him—for his wonderful vitality, his eager embrace of America’s working people and *their* vitality—but also with the work he did with his stethoscope during the day before he tried the typewriter at night. Soon enough, I was taking premedical courses, looking at the catalogs of medical schools, and finally seeking entry into a batch of them.

I was turned down by most, though, for not very good grades in “organic chemistry” and such; hence I felt a growing despair. But Dr. Williams and I had become friends, and he was tough in his insistence that I stay hopeful about my medical school prospects and also, as he kept saying, about life. He could be terse and blunt in that regard: “Don’t confuse what you are with what some chemistry professor says about your grades in his damn tests.” Such common sense, obviously, does not always arrive at one’s doorstep, nor does it stay. I kept expressing my doubts and worries, and Dr. Williams kept telling me to persevere—and to read novels and think about what I had read. Once he handed me a list of four or five written on one of his prescriptions slips—books by George Eliot, Hawthorne, Melville, and Tolstoy. He was usually interested in recommending young, relatively unknown poets, but he must have known I needed the moral perspective those four novelists have by now provided many generations of readers. A week later, he asked how I was doing with respect to his recommendations and suggested I write down

some of my responses to the reading I'd begun to do: "Better to pour yourself into a novel, and then come up with some thoughts about it, than letting yourself go to ruin over a few college courses, or anything else." I still remember him, tapping his neurological hammer on his knee as he spoke those words. Now, decades later, I realize I've never wanted to forget his advice.

I did manage to get into a medical school—and out (just barely.) I started in pediatrics, still in mindful awe of Doc Williams, who by then was ailing but still a wonderful friend to me. I would go to see him, from time to time, to hear his blunt, tough talk and to feel the sweetness, the kindness he was reluctant to acknowledge directly. When I moved over to psychiatry and child psychiatry, when I became all taken with psychoanalytic training, he was more than a little skeptical but still a great one to visit—warm, gracious, robustly amused by the jargon I was picking up: "Hey, you're talking about *folks*, so come down from that abstract high horse and walk with us, talk with us, be with us!"

When I found myself in the South, first running an Air Force psychiatric hospital in Mississippi (under the old doctor's draft, which mandated two years of military service for all of us physicians) and then (after discharge) studying school desegregation and working with the Civil Rights movement, I tried to stay in touch with a phone call, a Northern visit. But he was getting sicker and sicker, and soon he was eighty, and soon, in 1963, he was dead. The last time I spoke to him, in 1962, he listened intently as I talked of certain black children I was getting to know in New Orleans and Atlanta and of some white people who were going through their own crisis, as the region that had steadfastly been saying *never* to integration now began to yield. I was beginning to pick up a new vocabulary—the talk of sociologists and "race relations specialists," as some in the South then called themselves. Dr. Williams was, yet again, unimpressed: "Lord, that's heavy, heavy talk." I realized later that I had used certain phrases in order to hear them dismissed, mocked by someone who could spot cant and double-talk, pretense and self-importance, a mile away. As I left I got another warning, if not a reprimand: "Watch your words—and every once in a while pick up a novel or read a poem and see what others are doing with words and with people!"

I tried hard to do as told—even back then, with all the excitement

of rapid social change in the region I was trying hard to understand. I began, upon his urging, to write in "plain, unaffected, ordinary language" about the children I was meeting; and I began trying to figure out what their parents and teachers were thinking and to render their sentiments, also, in everyday words as opposed to social science phrases. As I did so, I found myself thinking of his poems, his short stories, his novels, his literary criticism, and his personal remarks, made in letters and, of course, in his autobiography. I remembered, too, his enthusiasms—the novels and poems he liked; and often I'd return to them or to some of my own favorites from college days. Nor was such recourse to American, English, or Russian novelists or poets unconnected to my work, I gradually began to realize. It was a novelist, after all, Margaret Long, then editor of *New South*, who in 1962 first got me to write about my work through the telling of stories—what I'd seen and heard, what the children had to say about their lives and, indeed, about life itself. Moreover, when I met the extraordinarily accomplished Southern historian, C. Vann Woodward, in the early 1960s, he made clear, right off, not only his enjoyment of novelists such as Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy but also their importance to someone like me—and *not* as interpreters of a region but rather as keen observers of the world-at-large, the human scene.

The more I had to write, then, with respect to the children I was coming to know, the more reading of novels and poems I did; and soon enough, I was beginning to write about that reading, to respond to particular novelists or poets with the comments that an essayist or reviewer makes. Eventually, I began to realize that this aspect of my writing life was no mere diversion; I very much needed the help of certain novelists as I tried to figure out what I was observing and hearing in the course of my so-called fieldwork, all those visits to homes and schools. Moreover, my wife, an English teacher, only strengthened that growing reliance. Together we read James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia*. We began to think of such books as a "literary-documentary" tradition, one we found helpful and instructive, indeed, as we did our wandering work. Together we read and read again not only Flannery O'Connor but also younger writers we'd met, such as Cormac McCarthy; and, of course, we returned to

William Carlos Williams. We also tried to teach those writers and others in the classrooms we kept visiting.

No wonder I gradually wrote more and more so-called literary essays—though for us they were, I must emphasize, efforts at establishing a lifeline for ourselves, lest we drown in a torrent of all too contemporary journalism, not to mention the kind of social and psychological analysis people like me are so quick to offer a public not especially interested in *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House* but endlessly entranced with the theories of psychiatrists or sociologists. Dr. Williams knew how much I loved some of his poems, not least of which the brief, well-known yet still compelling “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Once I joked with him: now that I was beginning to do writing about my work in the South, I would toss the results in “your wheelbarrow.” He laughed and responded: “You can have it, you know. I’m sorting out everything, before I leave.” I never imagined then that twenty-five years later I would be thinking of him, of that moment between us, of that wheelbarrow, as I pulled together some essays, sought a title for them, and wrote a few words to explain their origin.

My debt to Dr. Williams is by now obvious. I hope the substantial portion of this book devoted to him and his work does at least some justice to the regard I still feel toward him, to the gratitude, acknowledged elsewhere in a couple of books and a dedication or two, for all he has come to mean to me. He was always urging me to explore, to “poke around,” a phrase he favored—to see the world as keenly as possible and then describe it as carefully as possible, but with “liveliness,” a word he used repeatedly. He admired James Agee’s and Walker Evans’ efforts to “poke around,” as given us in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I think he would admire, too, the documentary efforts of my friend Alex Harris, who as a matter of fact studied with Evans at Yale. Alex is a talented photographer; he is also a fine writer and has a great affinity with novelists, some of whom have responded to his respect by offering their own personal, childhood memories, which Alex edited and gathered into an extraordinarily compelling volume, *A World Unsuspected*. The title words are from Dr. Williams’ *Paterson*. I dedicate this book to Alex with admiration and with thanks and more thanks for all the help during all these past years. I also thank Jay Woodruff for his recent considerable help to me, a great source of strength. As always, speaking of sources of

strength, I mention my wife, Jane, whose literary interests have, over the years, become mine, and our three sons, Bob, Danny, and Mike, avid readers of some of the novelists and poets whom I so admire and try to praise for reasons I hope this book makes clear. The reasons make up my central theme, actually: they tell why the humanities ought matter to so many of us, still, no matter the contemporary preference of a secular society for science and social science.

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*Victorian Writers
and Viewpoints*

Charles Dickens and the Law

Some of the important details of the life of Charles Dickens are as familiar to many of us as the various qualities of mind and heart that we have come to associate with such memorable characters as David Copperfield and Philip Pirrip, otherwise known as Pip; or Esther Summerson and Little Dorrit; or yes, Vholes, Jaggers, and Stryver, three lawyers whose names suggest no strong authorial admiration. As a boy, Dickens knew poverty. His father was a clerk in England's Navy Pay Office; he was, as well, all too relaxed when it came to spending the modest salary he earned. When Dickens was twelve years old (in 1824), his father was sent to prison because he had accumulated debts and lacked the means of paying them. This prison, Marshalsea, figures prominently in *Little Dorrit*, even as it did in the life of the young Dickens, who spent time behind bars in accordance with prevailing custom: a debtor's family often accompanied him when he was locked up. As a child, Dickens also worked for extremely low wages in a shoe-blackening factory: he pasted labels on bottles. In his spare time he wandered the streets of London, a penniless lad curious to understand the teeming confusion of a great port city. It was only the death of his paternal grandmother that enabled his father to be released from prison. She left a small legacy to her son. The lesson would never be forgotten by the novelist, who was forever reminding his readers through the workings of one or another plot how arbitrary fate can be and how good can come of bad—or, of course, vice versa.

At fifteen Dickens was studying law as an attorney's apprentice. He mastered shorthand. He read legal texts long and hard. He also, in a matter of months, became bored. He loved the English language and dreamed of using it in one way or another. In 1829 he