

FOREWORD

In the Everyday Idiom of Spain

The Dog and the Fever is a fantastic piece of work, and I can see many reasons why William Carlos Williams was taken by it, especially by the sense of the language that Pedro Espinosa got down on the page. It is Williams himself listening to the living language around him there in Rutherford or Paterson or Manhattan and then working to get what he heard—the music of it!—likewise down on the page. Both men heard not the courtly or academic but the living vulgate, and the poetry intrinsic to that. What's also fascinating about Williams's translation is the way he tries to find the modern idiomatic equivalent for a language harking back three hundred years and more, then transmuted through Caribbean idioms, where it was picked up by his mother, who in the 1930s, in her eighties, transmitted the living Spanish idiom to her son with the pithy, vibrant language of her Puerto Rican background.

It becomes increasingly clear with the passing of time that, to more fully understand Williams's achievement as an American poet, we must understand just how deeply his Spanish heritage and the Spanish language enter into our understanding of what he himself called the American idiom, both the North and the South of it. And what Williams has given us in his translation of *The Dog and the Fever*—written in the wake of the Spanish Civil

War—is a fresh, crisp sense of Spain at the height of the Spanish Empire. It’s especially striking that he should find in this text an example of *conceptismo* and its use of the slangy, everyday idiom of Spain—the language as it was actually spoken—that reinforced the very thing he himself was attempting to do in his own epic of America, *Paterson*.

The satire of *The Dog and the Fever* is heady, hilarious, witty, scathing, and ironic, and it captures something of the language that the average citizen of New York City, say, needs, to survive. Williams found words in the African-American idiom and the everyday language of Italian Americans that he introduced into his epic: interwoven strands of the river of language gathering above the Passaic Falls. By adding Williams’s own comments from his letters and *Autobiography* as well as comments he added to the manuscript drafts of the novella, Jonathan Cohen has given us a much better sense of how Williams’s Spanish heritage and his lifelong interest in Spanish and Latin American poetry enter into his complex epic. And that’s the point: to more fully understand Williams’s achievement as perhaps the foremost twentieth-century poet writing in the American grain.

When I read my own poems and spoke on Williams for the anniversary of the founding of Paterson back in the 1990s, alongside Allen Ginsberg, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Sonia Sanchez, Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Fay Chiang, all of us accompanied by Black Jazz as we overlooked those falls, I was struck by just how deep the American idiom really goes. Williams’s *The Dog and the Fever* offers an intimate

gaze into the workings of his mind, as he listened to what the Spanish satirists Espinosa and Francisco de Quevedo had in common with the experimental prose of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce in the early twentieth century. So, ladies and gents, get ready for a roller coaster of a ride in the pages to follow that will leave your head spinning.

—PAUL MARIANI—