

**Into the American Idiom: William Carlos  
Williams' Translation of Jorge Carrera  
Andrade's "Dictado por el agua"**

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## Into the American Idiom: William Carlos Williams' Translation of Jorge Carrera Andrade's "Dictado por el agua"

Jonathan Cohen

*Tain't what a man sez, but wot he means that the traducer has got to bring over.*

EZRA POUND

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) produced many translations of both Spanish and Latin American poetry during the course of his literary career, starting in the decade of the First World War and continuing through his final years in the late 1950s. Many of these verse translations were published in his collections of poetry and in little magazines, while others remain in manuscript form as hidden treasures in library archives. They include magnificent poems that demonstrate the force of his efforts to broaden the scope of U.S. writing by bringing in Spanish-language poetry. He recognized that “a translation into another language involves in the first place a choice of the language into which the translation is to be made” (“Robert Lowell’s Verse Translation”). For Williams, this language was not “English,” but the language of the “local American way of speaking,” which he famously called the American idiom. On this point he was emphatic, as he says in the note to *Sappho*, his folio translation: “I don’t speak English, but the American idiom. I don’t know how to write anything else, and I refuse to learn. [...] I have been as accurate as the meaning of the words permitted—always with a sense of our own American idiom to instruct me.”

Williams grew up in a Spanish-speaking home that clearly influenced his interest in translating Spanish. He thought of himself sometimes as “half-Spanish” (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 19). In his autobiography, in the chapter titled “Translations,” he describes his ambition: “I have always wanted to do some translations from the Spanish. It was my mother’s native language [she was Puerto Rican] as well as one which my father [English West Indian] spoke from childhood. But more than that the language has a strong appeal for me, temperamentally, as a relief from the classic mood of both French and Italian. Spanish is not,

in the sense to which I refer, a literary language. It has a place of its own, an independent place very sympathetic to the New World.” Williams elaborates by saying “this independence, this lack of integration with our British past gives us an opportunity, facing Spanish literature [including Latin American], to make new appraisals, especially in attempting translations, which should permit us to use our language with unlimited freshness.” This “freshness” for him was always central to his aspirations as a poet in the modernist MAKE IT NEW tradition, and Williams approached making verse translations from the Spanish as a way to extend the range and capacity of American poetry. “In such attempts,” he explains, “we will not have to follow precedent but can branch off into a new diction, adapting new forms, even discovering new forms in our attempts to find accurate equivalents” (349).

Williams was introduced to the poetry of Jorge Carrera Andrade by Muna Lee, the leading U.S. translator and advocate of Latin American poetry during the first half of the twentieth century. They had met in April 1941 at the First Inter-American Writers’ Conference of the University of Puerto Rico, of which she was one of the principal organizers. The following year she sent him a group of her translations of Carrera Andrade’s poems (which would soon appear in *New Directions’* landmark *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry*), and he responded enthusiastically: “Let me tell you how much pleasure you gave me by your translations of the work of our Ecuadorean poet [...]. I don’t know when I have had so clear a pleasure, so unaffected by the torments of mind which are today our daily bread. The images are as you say so extraordinarily clear, so related to the primitive that I think I am seeing as an aborigine saw and sharing that lost view of the world. It’s a sad pleasure but a great one.” Earlier in 1942, in *Poetry*, Williams had read Lee’s review of Carrera Andrade’s anthology *Registro del mundo* [Record of the World], about which she said: “All his poetry has its own accent, its own freshness; and most of its images—it blooms profusely with images—are set down with the shrewdness and the sagacity of a peasant or a child. [...] Sometimes intricately patterned, sometimes simple as folksong, his poems are usually brief, terse, imagistic—always with a lovely play of echoes for the eye as well as for the ear—and they frequently show a most un-Latin delight in scents and sounds and textures of the countryside. Essentially vigorous, vivacious, and authentic, they not only reveal but impart a freshened vision of the world” (279–280).

Sixteen years later, Williams was invited to translate Carrera Andrade's "Dictado por el agua" [Dictated by the Water], along with a group of other poems written in Spanish, for an edition of *New World Writing* (Dec. 1958) that would feature contemporary poetry and prose from Latin America. Once published, Williams' translations of poems by Pablo Neruda (Chile), Alí Chumacero (Mexico), Nicanor Parra (Chile), Álvaro Figueredo (Uruguay), and Silvina Ocampo (Argentina) were included, but not his translation of Carrera Andrade's poem, for the simple reason of space limitations. It has not been published until now.

The poetry editor of the special feature, José Vázquez-Amaral (translator of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* into Spanish as well as poems by Williams) had been corresponding with Williams since the early 1950s. In his first letter to the poet, in which he introduced himself and stated his desire to meet with him to discuss ways to advance inter-American literary exchange, Vázquez-Amaral said: "I have received the following 'anonymous communication' [i.e., from Pound, with whom he was in contact]: 'Dr. W. Carlos Williams is near you, at 9 Ridge Rd, Rutherford, N.J. An honest man, who has spent most of his life in Rutherford, he is part spanish, and has for 50 years been meaning to translate MORE spanish into north-american. J.V.A. would do well to call on him, and Old Bill might help to stir up some enthusiasm at Rutgers'" (13 Dec. 1951). Vázquez-Amaral would eventually become the founding chairman of the Spanish and Portuguese Department at Rutgers, only after his long struggle at the university to gain greater respect for Spanish, which until 1971 existed as the orphan of French and Italian in the Romance Languages Department. Meantime, he found his translation projects more rewarding than the academic struggle. And Williams was receptive to talking with him.

Although the decade of the Second World War had seen a flourishing of translations of Latin American poetry, including Carrera Andrade's *Secret Country* (1946), the dominant formalist New Criticism and the Cold War conspired to limit widespread appreciation of them. It was, finally, in 1956 that Vázquez-Amaral told Williams: "The time is now ripe, I believe, for the pioneering work you mentioned to me in your letter of December 17, 1951.<sup>1</sup> The work of cultural interpenetration between English and Spanish America seems to have arrived" (1 Feb. 1956). Two years later, he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to pursue his dream, and one of its prime objectives, as he explained in a

letter to Williams, was “to encourage translations from Latin American literature by eminently qualified people like yourself. Only in this way do I feel that the cause of better knowledge of Latin American literature is served” (17 Apr. 1958). The Latin American feature in *New World Writing* was part of this project, for which he turned to Williams for translations.

Ecuador’s preeminent poet of the twentieth century, Carrera Andrade (1902–1978) began his poetic career writing in a style that echoed Spanish *modernismo*, the transplanted symbolist movement in Latin America. He had disciplined himself in French literature, like many of his generation, and his earliest poems show the influence of Baudelaire and Francis Jammes. But his mature style was largely shaped by the avant-garde poetics of the short-lived, early-twentieth-century Spanish movement known as *ultraísmo* (later called *vanguardismo* in its incarnation in Latin America), whose adherents opposed the mannerisms and opulence—the “ornamental artifacts,” as Borges put it—of *modernismo*. They stressed the use of the metaphor and unusual comparisons in terms of the synthesis of two or more images into one, as well as the elimination of rhyme and the avoidance of the farfetched nebulousity they associated with *modernismo*. Indeed, Carrera Andrade centered his mature work on the metaphor as his basic unit of composition. His poetry is characterized by objective yet emotional descriptions of physical objects, simple vocabulary, earthiness, and brilliant metaphorical images. These qualities drew Williams to his work like a magnet.

Carrera Andrade published “Dictado por el agua” in his collection *Familia de la noche* [Family of Night, 1953]. Taking the poem from this book, Vázquez-Amaral included it in the group of poems he sent to Williams in the spring of 1958, once the poet had accepted the invitation to contribute to the Latin American feature to be published in *New World Writing*. Vázquez-Amaral sent him the Spanish texts, along with literal translations he himself had made “to save [Williams] some useless trouble” (15 Apr. 1958); and Williams’ job was to “make them into poems” (14 Oct. 1958). Williams met the task with determination, as he told Galway Kinnell in a letter: “I have been handed a job which I let myself in for without suspecting how hard it would be, the translation of about twelve longish poems from Spanish into English. It has me nailed to the mast. [...] [S]ome difficult passages I can spend the whole day on before I can find a solution.” By “nailed to the mast” he meant, among

other possibilities of meaning, that like those captains of sailing ships who fought battles at sea with their colors nailed to the mast to tell their opponent they wouldn't yield or surrender, he was engaged in a creative struggle with poetry that he wouldn't abandon.

In these translations, as Williams had been doing all along with his own poetry, he explored the use of real speech. He aimed for lines that offered poetic equivalence in the American idiom—the way English is spoken in America, what he deemed “one of the greatest of modern languages waiting only for a genius of its intrinsic poetry to appear” (Williams/Norse 39–40). Beyond the literal meaning of words, he wanted to instill the language of his translations with the character of “American,” which he defined in terms of its measure: “It is in the measure of our speech, in its prosody, that our idiom is distinctive” (Williams/Norse 40). He wanted to make translations that were living poems whose lines used cadences true to real speech; that is, the spoken measure and the intonational phrasing of the American idiom. In translating “Dictado por el agua,” Williams worked at giving Carrera Andrade's voice the quality of natural American speech and at recreating the poem's tonal shifts and movement. Above all, he aimed to produce a poem of the same poetic excellence as the author's verse, to convey the implications of his words, and to use language charged with real feeling. He based his translation on both Carrera Andrade's Spanish and Vázquez-Amaral's literal translation of it, as shown here together:

Aire de soledad, dios transparente  
 que en secreto edificas tu morada  
 ¿en pilares de vidrio de qué flores?  
 ¿sobre la galería iluminada  
 de qué río, qué fuente?  
 Tu santuario es la gruta de colores.  
 Lengua de resplandores  
 hablas, dios escondido,  
 al ojo y al oído.  
 Sólo en la planta, el agua, el polvo asomas  
 con tu vestido de alas de palomas  
 despertando el frescor y el movimiento.  
 En tu cabello azul van los aromas.<sup>2</sup>  
 Soledad convertida en elemento.

Air of solitude, transparent god  
 who in secret builds his dwelling  
 on the glass pillars of what flowers,  
 on the illuminated gallery  
 of what river, what fountain?  
 Your sanctuary is the grotto of colors.  
 Tongue of radiances  
 you speak, hidden god  
 to the eye and the ear.  
 Only in the plant, water, you show dust  
 with your dress of dove wings  
 awakening freshness and movement.  
 Aromas travel on your blue hair.  
 Solitude transformed into element.

Successful translation for Williams, in general, meant a poetic “paraphrase” of the author’s Spanish, as defined by John Dryden: “translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered” (6). However, in a few lines he did alter the sense, but not the verbal texture and tone, of the author’s language. Sometimes he apparently mistranslated words in error (for example, his “where you flower” for “*de qué flores*” in the second line); at other times, he seems to have willfully moved far from the literal, almost making the poem his own, as in the poem’s opening line, which he translated as “Solitude, transparent god,” deleting the word “air” in the Spanish phrase “*Aire de soledad*.” Still, in the very first draft of this line, when his failing eyesight led him to mistake “*dios transparente*” for “*días transparente*” and to translate this as “transparent days,” he then corrected himself. Ultimately, his translation as a whole is never fully an “imitation,” in Dryden’s view, in which the translator “assumes the liberty, not only to vary words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases” (6). Williams didn’t go that far, as, for instance, Pound did in his “Homage to Sextus Propertius” and Lowell did in his *Imitations*. Williams followed Carrera Andrade’s poem line by line, generally in a sense-for-sense manner, and he made a translation intended to present the Ecuadorian’s work. Its few blemishes

are nothing more than beauty marks. Whether they determine it to be a failed translation or an independent poem not to be judged as a translation becomes a matter of debate. Williams himself probably would have had little interest in that; he had done his job.

During the course of his career, Williams translated poetry not only from Spanish but also from French, in which he was fairly fluent, as well as from Chinese and Greek, in which he was helped by others who knew those languages. He viewed poetry translation as a critical and creative endeavor. As he told Nicholas Calas during the period in the early 1940s when he was translating Calas' poetry from the French: "It is a *fascinating problem* to try to put [the] *exact meaning* into an *equivalent English*. I enjoy such work." The second letter Williams sent Calas that same day is even more revealing of Williams' attitude toward poetry translation: "All this fits well into my scheme. I don't care how I say what I must say. If I do original work all well and good. But if I can say it (the matter of form I mean) by translating the work of others that also is valuable. What difference does it make?" Translation for Williams was, above all, an act of poetry. Translating Carrera Andrade gave him the chance to pursue his own preoccupation with objects and with conceptualizing sensuous experience. Not only did he find in Carrera Andrade's work a genuine American voice, he found what always was most important to him as a poet—his lifelong quest—namely, the chance "to get a form without deforming the language" (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 23). He found the work of a poet who had mastered the use of images presented by means of direct colloquial speech—the work of a fellow American who defined himself in terms of the things he saw in the world around him.

Looking back on Williams' contribution to Latin American poetry in translation, from the height of the first decade of the *Boom Latinoamericano*, in 1967, Vázquez-Amaral observed: "It is to him that Pablo Neruda and other Latin American poets are indebted for their best presentation to the English-speaking world" (Introduction). Williams' published translations certainly contributed to the influence their image-driven language was then having on U.S. poetry. Now, at last, the translation he made on behalf of Carrera Andrade can be appreciated for its poetic achievement in American speech and for its lyrical, well-crafted rendering of the voice of this master poet from the "other" America.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The month prior to the referenced letter, in November 1951, Williams corresponded with Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, giving him permission and encouragement to publish a selection of his prose and poetry, translated into Spanish by Cardenal and José Coronel Urtecho, in a literary magazine. Cardenal had described to Williams his plan also to publish a slim volume of Williams' poems in translation in a series he initiated to feature North and South American poets (30 Oct. 1951)—to which Williams responded with enthusiasm.
- <sup>2</sup> The Spanish text used by Williams, from the poem's first publication in the author's book *Familia de la noche* (1953), contains an interesting typographical error—or, perhaps, a deliberate early word choice—in this line: the word *cabello* [hair] in subsequent collections that include the poem is instead *caballo* [horse].

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**Dictado por el agua\***

By Jorge Carrera Andrade

**I**

Aire de soledad, dios transparente  
que en secreto edificas tu morada  
¿en pilares de vidrio de qué flores?  
¿sobre la galería iluminada  
de qué río, qué fuente?  
Tu santuario es la gruta de colores.  
Lengua de resplandores  
hablas, dios escondido,  
al ojo y al oído.  
Sólo en la planta, el agua, el polvo asomas  
con tu vestido de alas de palomas  
despertando el frescor y el movimiento.  
En tu cabello azul van los aromas.  
Soledad convertida en elemento.

**II**

Fortuna de cristal, cielo en monedas,  
agua, con tu memoria de la altura,  
por los bosques y prados  
viajas con tus alforjas de frescura  
que guardan por igual las arboledas  
y las hierbas, las nubes y ganados.  
Con tus pasos mojados  
y tu piel de inocencia  
señalas tu presencia  
hecha toda de lágrimas iguales,  
agua de soledades celestiales.  
Tus peces son tus ángeles menores  
que custodian tesoros eternos  
en tus frías bodegas interiores.

\* *From Jorge Carrera Andrade's* Familia de la noche; poemas.  
*Paris: Librería Española de Ediciones, 1953.*

**Dictated by the Water**

Translated by William Carlos Williams

**I**

Solitude, transparent god  
 who in secret keep your abode  
 among pillars of glass where you flower?  
 in the radiant galleries  
 of what river, what fountain?  
 Your sanctuary is a grotto of colors.  
 Brilliant tongue  
 which speaks in private  
 to the eye and the ear.  
 Alone in what plant, water, dust, you go  
 clothed in wings of a dove  
 strewn with freshness and alert.  
 In your blue hair ride sweet odors.  
 Solitude turned elemental.

**II**

Crystalline riches, coined clouds,  
 remembering water from a height,  
 over the forests and meadows  
 you travel with your knapsacks of freshness  
 packed at once by groves  
 and grasses, clouds and cattle.  
 With your wet feet  
 innocently treading barefoot  
 you point your presence  
 made wholly first and last of tears.  
 Water of celestial solitudes.  
 Your fish are your minor angels  
 who watch over everlasting treasures  
 in your frozen keeps.

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### III

Doncel de soledad, oh lirio armado  
por azules espadas defendido,  
gran señor con tu vara de fragancia,  
a los cuentos del aire das oído.  
A tu fiesta de nieve convidado  
el insecto aturdido de distancia  
licor de cielo escancia,  
maestro de embriagueces  
solitarias a veces.  
Mayúscula inicial de la blancura:  
De retazos de nube y agua pura  
está urdido su cándido atavío  
donde esplenden, nacidos de la altura  
huevecillos celestes de rocío.

### IV

Sueñas, magnolia casta, en ser paloma  
o nubecilla enana, suspendida  
sobre las hojas, luna fragmentada.  
Solitaria inocencia recogida  
en un nimbo de aroma.  
Santa de la blancura inmaculada.  
Soledad congelada  
hasta ser alabastro  
tumbal, lámpara o astro.  
Tu oronda frente que la luz ampara  
es del candor del mundo la alquitara  
donde esencia secreta extrae el cielo.  
En nido de hojas que el verdor prepara,  
esperas resignada el don del vuelo.

### III

Solitary young man, oh armored lily,  
defended by blue swords,  
great lord with your fragrant wand,  
lend an ear to these winds' tales.

Bidden to your snow feast  
the sipping insect dazed with distance  
sky-bred reveals himself  
drunken and at times alone.

Start with a blank anesthesia:  
from whiffs of cloud and clear water  
we weave our candid attire  
where shine, borne from above  
heavenly beads of dew.

### IV

You dream, chaste flower, of being a dove  
or a small cloud, hanging  
above the leaves, to a shredded moon.

Solitary innocence gathered into  
a basket of smells,  
sainthood of immaculate whiteness.

A solitude frozen  
till it turns to the alabaster  
of tombs, a lamp or a star.

Your great brow suffused in light  
is the world's candor, is the still  
from which a secret essence comes to us from the sky.

In a nest of green leaves  
resigned you await the gift of flight.

**V**

Flor de amor, flor de ángel, flor de abeja,  
 cuerpecillos medrosos, virginales  
 con pies de sombra, amortajados vivos,  
 ángeles en pañales.  
 El rostro de la dalia tras su reja,  
 los nardos que arden en su albura, altivos,  
 los jacintos cautivos  
 en su torre delgada  
 de aromas fabricada,  
 girasoles, del oro buscadores:  
 lenguas de soledad, todas las flores  
 niegan o asienten según habla el viento  
 y en la alquimia fugaz de los olores  
 preparan su fragante acabamiento.

**VI**

¡De murallas que viste el agua pura  
 y de cúpula de aves coronado  
 mundo de alas, prisión de transparencia  
 donde vivo encerrado!  
 Quiere entrar la verdura  
 por la ventana a pasos de paciencia,  
 y anuncias tu presencia  
 con tu cesta de frutas, lejanía.  
 Mas, cumplo cada día,  
 Capitán del color, antiguo amigo  
 de la tierra, mi límpido castigo.  
 Soy a la vez cautivo y carcelero  
 de esta celda de cal que anda conmigo,  
 de la que, oh muerte, guardas el llavero.

**V**

Flower of love, angel flower, bee's flower,  
small bodies, virginal  
with shadowy feet, dead alive,  
angels in swaddling clothes.  
The face of a dahlia behind her screen,  
spikenard burning in her whiteness, haughty,  
the captive hyacinths  
in their slender tower  
of sweet odors,  
sunflowers, prospectors for gold:  
solitude tasters, all the flowers  
denying or affirming the speech of the winds  
and in the fleeting alchemy of senses  
who prepare their fragrant ends.

**VI**

Of walls attired in purest water  
crowned by a dome of birds  
whom their wings contain, lucent prison  
where I live enclosed:  
Greenness would enter by the window  
with patient footsteps,  
when you announce your presence  
with your basket of fruits, remoteness.  
But, I bear each day,  
Color bearer, my old friend  
here on earth, my own clear punishment.  
I am at once prisoner and jailer  
of this lime cell that goes about with me,  
of which friend death you have the key.

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