

Reading the Williams(-Amaral) Translations of Latin American Poetry: How to Appreciate the “Carlos” Personae of the Late Years

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ABSTRACT | This article focuses on the inter-American friendship turned partnership between William Carlos Williams and José Vázquez-Amaral, and provides a comparative analysis of three translations they worked on together—Álvaro Figueredo’s “Naked”; Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Laziness”; and Silvino Ocampo’s “The Infinite Horses.” The article defines Williams’s translation poetics, with special attention given to his commitment to using the American idiom and its prosody, and demonstrates the debt owed to Vázquez-Amaral for his contribution. It further demonstrates the importance of both translation and the Spanish literary tradition to Williams.

KEYWORDS | William Carlos Williams, translation studies, Latin American poetry, Álvaro Figueredo, Pablo Neruda, Silvina Ocampo, José Vázquez-Amaral, inter-American literature

“Don’t just read for meaning, but for language too; appreciate the formal features of the translation.”

— Lawrence Venuti, “How to Read a Translation”

William Carlos Williams produced an impressive number of 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.¹ Many of these translations were published in his collections of poetry and/or in little magazines, while others remained in manuscript until published with the rest gathered in *By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959*. Williams's translation work includes magnificent poems that demonstrate the force of his creative effort to bring Spanish-language poetry into American (Anglo) literature and to expand its bounds. Concerning form, he believed one good influence that Spanish could "have on us who speak a derivative of English in North America" was "to shake us free for a reconsideration of the poetic line," as he stressed in his talk at the First Inter-American Writers' Conference held in Puerto Rico in 1941 ("Informal Discussion" 43). As a translator, Williams 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 him this language was not "English," that is, the language of England, but the language spoken in the United States, which he famously called the American idiom.² 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" (CP2 499).

Williams grew up in a Spanish-speaking home that clearly influenced his interest in translating Spanish poetry and fiction. He thought of himself sometimes as "half-Spanish" (IWWP 19). In his autobiography, in the chapter titled "Translations," he describes his ambition:

I have always wanted to do some translations from 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 to 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. (A 349)

Williams elaborates by saying “this independence, this lack of integration with our British past gives us an opportunity, facing Spanish literature, 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 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).

Although Spanish was Williams’s first language, he never really mastered it in terms of native fluency or sophistication—“My Spanish wasn’t so hot” (A 73)—and so, in order for him to fulfill his desire to translate from Spanish, he needed to work with an informant fluent in Spanish. These informants during his career included his father, William George Williams, with whom he translated poetry and fiction during the First World War; Spanish professor M. J. Benardete, co-editor with Rolfe Humphries of *And Spain Sings*, to which Williams contributed verse translations; his mother, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb Williams, with whom he worked on his translation of the Golden Age Spanish novella, *The Dog and the Fever*, during the Spanish Civil War and following it; and, lastly, José Vázquez-Amaral, a Spanish professor at Rutgers University (and the Spanish translator of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*).³ It was Vázquez-Amaral—or simply Amaral, as he was known in various Anglo spaces—who in the spring of 1958 took his dialogue with Williams to the next level and invited him to translate together a group of poems by contemporary Latin American poets; namely, Jorge Carrera Andrade (Ecuador), Alí Chumacero (Mexico), Álvaro Figueredo (Uruguay), Eugenio Florit (Cuba), Ernesto Mejía Sánchez (Nicaragua), Pablo Neruda (Chile), Silvina Ocampo (Argentina), and Nicanor Parra (Chile).

Williams and Vázquez-Amaral had been corresponding 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]: ‘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). Williams responded positively, and a literary friendship developed. Although the decade of the Second World War had seen a flourishing of translations of Latin American poetry, the dominant formalist New Criticism and the Cold War conspired to limit widespread appreciation of them. Finally, in 1956, 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. The work of cultural interpenetration between English and Spanish America seems to have arrived” (1 Feb. 1956). Two years later, Vázquez-Amaral 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*⁴ (volume/issue 14; to be published in Dec. 1958, titled “New Writing from Latin America”) was part of this project, for which he turned to Williams for translations of the poets named above.⁵

Vázquez-Amaral (1913–87) was born in born in Los Reyes, Jalisco, Mexico. He grew up in California in the San Joaquin Valley, in the small farming town of Corcoran, fifty miles south of Fresno. He was called Chicano in that world, in the sense of the word with its negative connotation before its transformation of meaning during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. When he lived in Corcoran, certain businesses and the public restrooms in the town park had signs saying “NO DOGS | NEGROS | MEXICANS.” An outsider in the dominant Anglo community there, Vázquez-Amaral worked as a teenager on local farms, picking vegetables. He also excelled in school, graduating as valedictorian of his high school—to the dismay of the white town. His English teacher had recognized his intelligence and took him under her wing, giving him literary classics to read on his own, and pointing him in the direction of higher education (Amaral). He subsequently received two baccalaureates in Mexico in 1935, one in philosophy and the other in literature, and then joined the faculty as an English professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City. He also studied law in Mexico and was admitted to the bar there in 1939. With the heightened interest in Latin American

culture during the Second World War, he returned in 1942 to the United States for a one-year teaching position at Tulane University as a visiting professor of Latin American literature. He then took another position as a Latin Americanist at Swarthmore College. In 1947, he joined the Romance languages faculty at Rutgers, where he lived not far from Williams in Rutherford. In addition, he continued to hold a faculty appointment at UNAM, and spent summers in Mexico City (“Professor Amaral”). There, he was part of literary circles that included the leading poets and novelists of the day. He presented himself as Mexican in the United States. His Pan-American spirit motivated him to pursue literary translation—both English to Spanish, and Spanish to English—to help build bridges between the Americas to facilitate mutual understanding and appreciation of their different cultures.

For the Latin American feature of *New World Writing* of which he was co-editor with Francisco Aguilera,⁶ Vázquez-Amaral sent Williams the Spanish texts of verse he had selected, along with literal translations he had made “to save [Williams] some useless trouble” (15 Apr. 1958). Williams’s job was to “make them into poems,” as Vázquez-Amaral later stated (14 Oct. 1958). Williams met the task with determination, telling 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 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 since *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), he explored the use of real speech, in keeping with the language used by the poets he was translating. 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 his American idiom. He worked at giving each poet's voice the quality of natural American speech, and at re-creating the tonal shifts and movement of the poems. Above all, he aimed to produce poems of the same poetic excellence as the authors' verse, and to convey the implications of their words.

Although Vázquez-Amaral functioned in large measure as co-author of these translations, the decision was made that authorial credit for them in *New World Writing* would be given to Williams alone. This was Vázquez-Amaral's promotional strategy: to use Williams's name and talent as a well-established poet to attract readers to the work of the Latin American authors.⁷ Comparative analysis of the literal translations of three poems and their respective final versions that were published in the magazine, as exemplars, reveals two important aspects of the Williams-Amaral translations: 1) the debt of authorship owed to Vázquez-Amaral and 2) the degree to which Williams exercised poetic creativity in producing translations as poems in their own right in the American idiom.

The first poem is "Ode to Laziness" by Pablo Neruda (1904–73). The most famous Latin American poet of the twentieth century and a Nobel laureate, Neruda exerted a tremendous influence on North American poets during the 1960s and '70s through his image-driven poetics. He produced his odes to ordinary things—his elemental odes—in the early 1950s. Vázquez-Amaral and Williams translated "Oda a la pereza" ("Ode to Laziness") and also "Oda a los calcetines" ("Ode to My Socks"), originally published in Neruda's *Odas elementales* (1954; "Elemental Odes") and *Nuevas odas elementales* (1956; "New Elemental Odes"), respectively. John Felstiner, a leading scholar in the area of Neruda translation in English, observes that in "Ode to Laziness" Williams was "translating quite closely while still moving to his own deft measure" (22). Williams's translation of this poem appears in several anthologies of Latin American poetry, of course attributed to him alone. The "deft measure" of it actually owes more to Vázquez-Amaral than Williams, as demonstrated by comparison of the literal translation and the published translation. Here is the original Spanish of the opening section of the sixty-nine-line poem:

Ayer sentí que la oda
no subía del suelo.
Era hora, debía

por lo menos
 mostrar una hoja verde.
 Rasqué la tierra: “Sube,
 hermana oda
 —le dije—
 te tengo prometida,
 no me tengas miedo,
 no voy a triturarte,
 oda de cuatro hojas,
 oda de cuatro manos,
 tomarás té conmigo.
 Sube,
 te voy a coronar entre las odas,
 saldremos juntos, por la orilla
 del mar, en bicicleta.”
 Fue inútil. (Neruda 161)

Here is the literal translation of these lines made by Vázquez-Amaral:

Yesterday I felt that the ode
 would not leave the floor.
 It was time, I ought
 at least
 show a green leaf.
 I scratched the earth: “Arise,
 sister ode
 —I said to her—
 I have promised you,
 do not be afraid of me,
 I am not going to crush you,
 four-leaf ode,
 four-hand ode,
 you shall have tea with me.
 Arise,
 I am going to crown you among the odes,
 We shall go out together over the shore
 of the sea, on a bicycle.”
 It was no use. (Neruda, “Ode to Laziness” np)

Williams's version, when compared with the literal, is very close to it. He changed only five of nineteen lines, which appear in boldface here:

**Yesterday I felt this ode
would not get off the floor.**

It was time, I ought
at least
show a green leaf.

**I scratch the earth: "Arise,
sister ode
—said to her—**

I have promised you,
do not be afraid of me,
I am not going to crush you,
four-leaf ode,
four-hand ode,
you shall have tea with me.

Arise,

I am going to crown you among the odes,

**we shall go out together along the shores
of the sea, on a bicycle."**

It was no use. (CP2 352)

Williams's changes reflect his commitment to American colloquial speech, which naturalizes the poem in English in a manner quite faithful to the diction of the original Spanish. His use of present tense instead of past in line 6 ("I scratch") is an enhancement, adding to the immediacy of the direct address. It should be noted that the subject of the verb *debía* (ought) in line 3 can be either first or third person. Williams used Vázquez-Amaral's translation: "It was time, I ought." Whether the first-person pronoun is an error here is debatable. In the context of the poem, it appears to be an odd interpretation; subsequent translators have used the third-person pronoun referring to the ode itself (e.g., Margaret Sayers Peden, W. S. Merwin).

The majority of lines in the published translation of "Ode to Laziness" are by Vázquez-Amaral without change. Williams altered only about one third of the entire poem (i.e., twenty-four of sixty-nine lines). Beyond the opening section (lines 1–19), he made the following changes in the rest of the poem: "successive catastrophes of foam" became "successive catastrophes

of the foam” (CP2 353); “Alone on the sand / a ray opened / a corolla” became “Alone on the sand / spread wide / its corolla”; “nailed on the rocks” became “nailed to the rocks”; “I freed a bee / that was agonizing in a spider veil” became “I released a bee / that was agonizing in a spider’s net”; “smooth / like the breast of a bird” became “smooth / as the breast of a bird”; “sun and mist fought” became “sun struggled with mist”; “I pulled off my shoes” became “I pull off my shoes” (354); and—the most rigorous change—“At times / the mist was steeped / in light / like a topaz, / at other times there fell / a ray of the moist sun / letting fall yellow drops” became “At times / the mist was steeped / in thought, / topaz-like, / at others fell / a ray from the moist sun / distilling yellow drops”⁸ (353-54).

Comparison of the two translations in their entirety shows the remarkable degree of Vázquez-Amaral’s contribution to the authorship of the published translation. It also shows the creative liberties taken by Williams in crafting the poem in colloquial American English. Curiously, *luz* meaning light became “thought” for Williams; “light” is Vázquez-Amaral’s translation. Williams’s rendering of the image of the “topaz-like” mist is, as a result, surprisingly abstract, verging on surreal, which, though, still fits Neruda’s poetics. How mist “steeped / in thought” resembles topaz is another question altogether. Another curious alteration is Williams’s “black creases” based on Vázquez-Amaral’s rendering of “cruces negras” as “black crosses,” in Neruda’s naturalistic image of cormorants sunning themselves (353). One wonders if Williams even considered the Spanish, or if he simply misread Vázquez-Amaral’s translation.

The second poem is “Naked” by Álvaro Figueredo (1907–66), an Uruguayan poet, essayist, and educator. During his lifetime, he published two books of poetry, *Desvío de la estrella* (1936; “Detour by the Star”) and *Mundo a la vez* (1956; “World at Once”), the latter of which is the source of the text that Vázquez-Amaral and Williams brought into English. Figueredo’s work has only recently begun to be more widely studied internationally. He is regarded as one of the major poets of Uruguay. Vázquez-Amaral thought he was “the [Uruguayan] poet most likely to follow the main stream of Hispanic lyric if he steps beyond the slight bonds of surrealism” (“Tradition and Innovation” 214). Williams’s translation pleased Figueredo, whose son relates: “My father was quite satisfied by that work by an American poet” (Williams, *By Word of Mouth* 155). Here is the original Spanish of the poem, titled “Desnudo”:

La azul la benemérita
de su cauce de alondras o de espuma

naciendo sin cesar
 latiendo marmolísima
 allí donde el ombligo
 mediterráneo impone
 su majestad y lanza
 a la mejilla al pie círculos de oro
 avanza Sirio entre ambos senos que
 imparten dudas órdenes al viento
 dormida está la azul apacentando
 la lentitud del eco entre sus muslos
 ahora que abro la siesta para verla
 horizontal estricta gobernando
 los enjambres las fraguas los viñedos
 la embelesada flauta los glaciares
 azulazul los gallos
 de las veletas cuando
 su noble vientre aísla
 el curso del océano
 dormida está la joven cazadora
 y un abedul germina en su rodilla. (Figueredo, *Mundo a la vez* 41)

Here is the literal translation of the poem made by Vázquez-Amaral, which he titled “Nude”:

The blue one the benefactress
 of her channel of skylarks or foam
 ceaselessly being born
 beating in extreme marble
 there where the mediterranean
 navel imposes
 its majesty and casts
 precious blows of gold upon the cheeks
 Sirius advances between two breasts that
 give hard commands to the wind
 asleep in the blue one shepherding
 the slowness of the echo between her thighs
 now that I opne [sic] the siesta to see her
 strict horizontal ruling

swarms forges vineyards
 instantaneous shadows the glaciers
 blueblue the cocks
 of the weathervanes when
 their noble bellies isolate
 the course of the ocean
 the young huntress is asleep
 and a birch germinates upon her knees. (Figueredo, "Nude" np)

Compared with Williams's relatively minimal reworking of Vázquez-Amaral's translation of "Ode to Laziness," his effort to poetize the literal of "Desnudo" is strikingly different. "Nude" becomes "Naked," and he retains only four of twenty-two lines of the literal (his are in boldface):

The azure yielder
of the skylark's way or the foam
ceaselessly re-created
made into ultimate marble
 there where the mediterranean
 navel imposes
 its majesty and casts
precious strokes of gold upon cheeks
advanced by Sirius between
two breasts that give
hard commands to the wind
asleep in the blue shepherding
slowness between her thighs
now that I part them a siesta to see her
strictly disciplined horizontals
crowds forges vineyard country
instant shadows glaciers
blueblue cocks
of weather vanes when
 their noble bellies isolate
the flow of the ocean as
the young huntress sleeps
and a birch tree quickens upon her knees. (CP2 350)

Williams invested considerable energy to make the translation a living poem in his own terms, transforming both the language and the cadences of the literal into highly crafted verse, like the poem in its original Spanish.

Williams's rendering of the title of the poem as "Naked" is the first occurrence of his use of the American language. *Nude* is a work of fine art that has as its primary subject the unclothed human body, forming a subject genre of art. It is a traditional title of paintings, as in Pablo Picasso's *Desnudo azul* (*Blue Nude*). It most likely is what Figueredo had in mind; that is, his poem is part of this subject genre. *Desnudo* in Spanish can function as either noun or adjective, as *nude* does in English. Williams's rendering transforms the painterly art title, making it less abstract and more physical. *Naked* in English is only an adjective. Most important, *naked* for Williams is the more everyday American word, compared with *nude*, as the former derives from the "vulgar" (i.e., popular) Old English *nacod*, whereas *nude* is purely Latinate, deriving from *nudus* in Latin, the language of the elite in England following the Norman Conquest, together with French. *Naked* is American, not the "English" Williams rejected as "the language used among cultured Englishmen" (Williams/Norse 144). And *naked* conforms to his "choice of the language into which the translation is to be made" ("Robert Lowell's Verse Translation"); namely, his American idiom.

Compared with the literal, Williams's translation of the body of the poem is much more sensuous and sexual in its tonality, again like the original. He took creative liberties to ensure its vibrance. The poetic quality in the measure of the speech of the opening and closing lines of the translation are just two examples of Williams's artistry in the service of Figueredo: "The azure yielder / of the skylark's way or the foam" and "the young huntress sleeps / and a birch tree quickens upon her knees." His choice of "quickens" over Vázquez-Amaral's literal "germinates" (for *germina*) heightens the sexual overtones of the original. It deviates from the literal meaning of the Spanish and alters the image conjured by the line, but not its erotic intent.

Another effective creative liberty is seen in Williams's breaking a line in the poem. He felt—heard—the need to break line 9; in the original ("avanza Sirio entre ambos senos que") and in the literal translation ("Sirius advances between two breasts that"). The resulting rhythm Williams thus gives the poem in this passage is a rhythm distinctly his: "advanced by Sirius between / two breasts that give." It is a captivating rhythm heard in his own poetry. It elevates the language. Williams's effort here to poetize

the literal clearly compelled him to apply his genius, while giving him the opportunity to advance his own poetic agenda and line.

Further comment on Williams's artistry exhibited in the translation's opening two lines, as representative, is warranted. Their formal features distinguish them, conveying the lyric quality of the verse. Fidelity to literal meaning must be secondary to form in this instance. The lines provided by Vázquez-Amaral—"The blue one the benefactress / of her channel of skylarks or foam"—are not only vague but wooden and graceless. The Spanish is pure song. In attempting to put these lines into equivalent English with accuracy, the translator faces the challenge presented by the subjectivity of Figueredo's image-driven symbolist poetics. Multiple possibilities of interpretation and translation are possible. Williams's solution of compressing the "blue one" and "benefactress" into the single "azure yielder" preserves the poem's tone and movement. By not allowing word-for-word meaning to determine the opening lines, he successfully re-created the poem's essential lyric dimension. Not only that, he made the opening image suggestive of sea merged with sky, true to Figueredo. Indeed, he succeeded at giving the translation as a whole the mysterious opacity of Figueredo's poem. Pound had told Williams early in his career: "The thing that saves your work is *opacity*, and dont you forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality" (31). In "Naked," while using the American idiom to his advantage, Williams did not domesticate the poem; he artfully conveyed its foreignness, together with its imagery and formal lyricism.

The third poem is "The Infinite Horses" by Silvina Ocampo (1903–93), the well-known Argentinian poet, artist, short-story writer, and translator. Her first books of poetry, published in the early 1940s, won acclaim throughout Latin America. The magic realism of her prose, marked by the coexistence of cruelty and innocence, tests the limits of what people think they know about the world. The original poem, "Los caballos infinitos," appears in Ocampo's *Espacios métricos* (1945; "Metrical Spaces"). Here is the Spanish text:

Los he visto dormidos sobre el pasto,
 repetirse acostados en los campos;
 furiosos los he visto, arrodillados,
 como dioses altivos, todos blancos,
 vestidos y con cintas, y salvajes
 con crines como el pelo desatado
 de sirenas antiguas en las playas.
 Las víboras con ellos han soñado,

los juncos y las madres acostadas
 los temían debajo de las palmas.
 Trémulos anunciaban las batallas,
 anunciaban el miedo y la constancia,
 como el redoble del tambor trotaban,
 como un aplauso en un profundo teatro.
 Vieron sangrar heridas en el barro,
 murieron entre flores, en los charcos,
 visitados por aves y gusanos.
 Se acercaban trayendo hombres amados,
 se acercaban con hórridos tiranos,
 revestidos de púrpura y de sangre.
 Recordaré caballos implacables:
 los tarpanes de Rusia; los Przewalski;
 los ciento veinte nombres de caballos
 que hay en Roma, grabados en un mármol;
 en el Olimpo de Dionisio de Argos,
 con un duro pentámetro en el flanco,
 de bronce afrodisíaco, el caballo
 cuyo amor cautivaba a los caballos
 que acudían al Altis; el que amaba
 tanto Semíramis, la reina de Asia;
 los que probaron con fruición arcana—
 mucho antes que los chinos las probaran—
 del té las verdes hojas inspiradas;
 construido por Virgilio ese caballo
 cuya sombra virtuosa tan amable
 conseguía sanar a los caballos.
 Recordaré en un cielo anaranjado
 caballos en la sombra iluminados,
 uniendo ansiosamente a los amantes
 en grutas apacibles de distancia. (Ocampo, *Espacios métricos* 41-43)

Here is Vázquez-Amaral's rendering:

I have seen them asleep on the grass,
 repeat themselves lying on the fields;
 I have seen them furious, kneeling,

like the haughty gods, all white,
 dressed and with ribbons, savage
 with manes like loose hair
 of ancient sirens on the sands.
 Snakes have dreamed about them,
 reeds and mothers in bed
 had them under the palms of their hands.
 Trembling they heralded battles,
 they announced fear and steadfastness,
 like the beating of a drum they trotted,
 like plaudits in a deep theater.
 They saw wounds bleed upon the clay,
 died among flowers, in the puddles,
 visited by birds and vermin.
 They approached bearing armed men,
 approached with horrid tyrants,
 dressed in blood and purple.
 I shall remember implacable horses:
 the tarpans of Russia, the Przhevalsky;
 the hundred and twenty names of the horses
 found in Rome, engraved in marble;
 in the Olympus of Dionysus or Argus,
 with a hard pentameter on the flank
 of aphrodisiac bronze, the horse
 whose love captivated the horses
 that came to Altis; the one so beloved
 by Semiramis, queen of Asia;
 those that tasted with secret enjoyment—
 long before the Chinese tasted them—
 the green inspired leaves of tea;
 that horse built by Virgil
 whose virtuous shadow so benign
 was capable of healing horses.
 I shall remember in an orange sky
 horses lit in shadow,
 anxiously uniting lovers
 in grottoes peaceful with the distance. (Ocampo, “The Infinite
 Horses” np)

As with “Naked,” Williams transformed the literal translation into a poetic re-creation of the original poem in Spanish. He reworked most of the lines translated by Vázquez-Amaral (indicated in boldface):

I have seen them asleep on the grass,
mirroring themselves in the fields;
seen them furious, on their knees,
like haughty gods, all white,
dressed in ribbons, savage
with manes flying like the loose hair
of legended sirens on the shores.
Vile vipers have dreamt of them,
reeds and bedded mothers
keep them closed in the palms.
Trembling they foretell battles,
like the beat of their trotting hoofs,
like applause thundering in a vast theater.
They have seen wounds bleeding into the clay,
died among flowers, in the mire,
intimates of birds and vermin.
They draw near bearing armed men,
approach on their backs vile tyrants,
 dressed in blood and purple.

I shall remember implacable horses:

Russian trappings; the Przewalski;
the names of the hundred and twenty
Roman horses, chiseled in marble;
at the Olympus of Dionus of Argus,
with a hard penumbra aphrodisiac on
their bronze flanks, the horse
most favored by the others
was that of Altis; he who was so loved
by Semiramis, the queen of Asia;
those who tasted with blessed transports—
 long before the Chinese tasted them—
green tea from those inspired leaves;
that horse created by Virgil
whose benign and virtuous shadow was gifted

with the power to heal all horses.

I shall remember in an orange sky,

horses so left in shadow,**concernedly bringing lovers together****in peaceful grottoes from a distance.** (CP2 351-52)

Williams's rendering of *temían* (line 10; literally, feared) as "keep" is based on Vázquez-Amaral's translation of the line as "*had* them under the palms of their hands." That Williams followed Vázquez-Amaral's apparent misreading of *temían* as *tenían* (literally, had) suggests he was not working closely with the Spanish text but instead with the literal alone.⁹ However, Williams's construction of this line must be appreciated—rather, heard—in association with the preceding line, "reeds and bedded mothers," to recognize how through their internal rhyme the result is artfully crafted verse on par with Ocampo. Another curious error or deviation is Williams's omission of a translation of line 12, rendered as "they announced fear and steadfastness" by Vázquez-Amaral, who let the omission stand.

Even more striking is what occurs in line 21 of Williams's version. The *tarpanes* in the Spanish text (line 22) are horses; specifically, the extinct subspecies of wild horse called tarpan. It is followed by Przewalski, the name of another breed of wild horse. How Williams arrived at "Russian trappings" is limited to speculation. Perhaps it resulted from his failing vision (due to his stroke history) and misreading of Vázquez-Amaral's "tarpanes." Why Vázquez-Amaral did not correct the poet is probably rooted in their shared translation poetics. Like Williams's "thought" for "light" and "creases" for "crosses" in "Ode to Laziness," his "trappings" for "tarpanes" cannot be easily explained. But this mistranslated word, whether accidental or deliberate, doesn't represent the translation as a whole, for it is a masterful poem in English that is largely faithful to the structure, imagery, and tonal movement of Ocampo's poem.

Williams's praise of Robert Lowell's *Imitations*, just after the period of his work with Vázquez-Amaral, is illuminating with regard to the matter of fidelity to literal meaning versus poetic quality: "Here is a poet who knows what he is doing, devoted to the best in his language, with courage to go ahead with his own tasks, and a cultured addiction to his native way of speaking" ("Robert Lowell's Verse Translation"). Lowell himself, in the Introduction to this collection, says: "I believe that poetic translation—I

would call it an imitation [cf. Dryden's definition of *imitation* in "Preface Concerning Ovid's Epistles"]—must be expert and inspired," and in keeping with "something equivalent to the fire and finish of the originals" (xi–xii). He argues that poetry must be translated freely—"reckless with literal meaning"—in order to get the right tone and "that in poetry tone is everything." He says he aimed "to write alive English and to do what [his] authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America" (xi). Pursuing his poetic goal, he "dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered meter and intent." The translation poetics that Lowell describes here are similar to what Williams follows, but Williams is much more literal compared with Lowell, and he generally avoids altering structure, images, and intent. Pound approached poetry translation more like Lowell, and he encouraged Vázquez-Amaral to take creative liberties in translating his *Cantos*. Not surprisingly, the Williams-Amaral translations are free translations that occasionally deviate completely from literal meaning but not from the poetic quality of the originals. The poet's principal mode in his work with Vázquez-Amaral is paraphrase, not imitation: it is, as Dryden states, "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" (6–7).

All told, the translations of Latin American poetry examined here are representative of the collaborative "pioneering work" that Williams did with Vázquez-Amaral to achieve their shared goal of "cultural interpenetration between English and Spanish America." The translations demonstrate that when Williams departed from the language of Vázquez-Amaral's literal renderings, as done to varying degrees, he displayed his skills as a poet with an impeccable ear for American speech and its distinctive rhythms. Although he might have changed relatively few lines in certain translations, he was in all cases presiding over the poem as a whole. The translations show the work of the poet listening to discover the right measure, or cadence, in the language itself for each poem ("always with a sense of our own American idiom to instruct me"). These translations, moreover, served as Hispanic personae for Williams—dramatic masks he wore in the performance of poetry—allowing the "Carlos" in him to come to the fore in his exploration of the language and transnational experience of the New World. At the same time, they functioned as his importations from Spanish to help "shake us free for a reconsideration of the poetic line," among other things. Vázquez-Amaral knew the poems he asked Williams to do were a good fit,

in view of his particular modernist poetics. Williams's sympathetic attitude toward Neruda and his poetry, for instance, is articulated in his "Tribute to Neruda the Poet Collector of Seashells," in which he says the "changeless beauty of / seashells, like the / sea itself, gave / his lines the variable pitch / which modern verse requires" (CP2 358).¹⁰

When in April 1958 Vázquez-Amaral visited Williams at his home in Rutherford to pick up the translations he had poetized for *New World Writing*, of which only five appeared,¹¹ the poet told him he had "sweated blood" to make "Vigils" by Mejía Sánchez (Mariani 5). Williams viewed poetry translation as a critical and creative endeavor, as he had told Nicholas Calas during the period in the early 1940s when he was translating Calas's poetry from 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 the same day is even more revealing of Williams's 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. It meant re-creation in American English. Translating gave him the chance to pursue his own poetic agenda, and during a period of challenges related to his frustration over form, Vázquez-Amaral aided and abetted him with his translation project, which helped to sustain the poet during his late-career renaissance (as did his roughly concurrent, sporadic Chinese poetry translation project).¹² The translations they made together, it must also be emphasized, further demonstrate the centrality of the Spanish literary tradition to Williams.¹³

Looking back on Williams's 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" ("Williams' Poem" 23). Williams's translations made with Vázquez-Amaral certainly contributed a good measure to the influence that the image-driven language of these poets was having on North American poetry during the Boom years.¹⁴ Now, through the lens of the translation process, they offer a new way to appreciate his poetic aspirations and achievement.

NOTES

1. Portions of this article appeared in Williams, *By Word of Mouth*. They are reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. Pablo Neruda's poem is published here with the permission of Agencia Literaria Carmen Balcells: Pablo Neruda "Oda a la pereza," *Odas elementales* ©1954, Fundación Pablo Neruda. With thanks to Ernesto Montequin, permission to reproduce the poem "Los caballos infinitos" by Silvina Ocampo is granted under the Fair Use Act, and therefore restricted to nonprofit educational purposes. Álvaro Figueredo's poem "Desnudo" is reproduced here with the kind permission of Alvaro Tell Figueredo.

2. Williams defines the *American idiom* as follows: "The American idiom is the language we speak in the United States. It is characterized by certain differences from the language used among cultured Englishmen, being completely free from all influences which can be summed up as having to do with 'the Establishment.' This, pared to essentials, is the language which governed Walt Whitman in his choice of words. It constituted a revolution in the language" (Williams/Norse 144).

3. 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. He headed the Spanish and Portuguese Department until 1982 when he retired. He also translated Williams into Spanish, as well as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, among several other North American writers. His famous translation of Pound's *Cantos*, titled *Cantares completos, I–CXX*, was published in 1975. This publication was preceded by earlier translations of selected cantos, and his translation of essays by Pound, titled *El arte de la poesía* (1970; "The Art of Poetry"). Among his other books of importance are *México: Datos para su biografía* (1945; "Mexico: Facts for Its Biography"), *Los gringos* (1969), and *The Contemporary Latin American Narrative* (1970).

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Pedro Amaral, the son of Vázquez-Amaral, for information about his father.

4. *New World Writing* was a very significant paperback magazine that, as a literary anthology, showcased original and first appearance of stories, poems, essays, etc. of leading writers from around the world. It was published from 1951 until 1964.

5. Also during the spring of 1958, as part of Vázquez-Amaral's translation project, he asked Williams to make some translations of Mexican poetry for Barney Rosset and Donald Allen's *Evergreen Review*. They were preparing an issue that would feature work by writers and artists in a selective cross-section, to be called "The Eye of Mexico." This issue, planned for the fall of that year, finally came out in early 1959. It included Williams's translations of two poems by Alí Chumacero, both chosen by Vázquez-Amaral. Allen had hoped to include his translation of Octavio Paz's "Himno entre ruinas" ("Hymn Among the Ruins"), and asked him to make it, sending him a published literal prose rendering on which to base the verse translation

(i.e., J. M. Cohen's translation in his 1956 anthology, *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*). Paz himself was delighted by the prospect of Williams translating his poem. But the publication of Williams's translation of the poem did not take place in that magazine. It happened when *New Directions* published Paz's *Early Poems, 1935–1955* (1973).

Additionally, Vázquez-Amaral selected and provided Williams with the literal translations of three centuries-old “poems”—songs—that had been translated into Spanish from Nahuatl (Aztec). The Williams-Amaral translations were intended for publication in the Mexican issue of *Evergreen Review*, but ultimately were not included there, perhaps because the focus was on contemporary literature. They were, however, published in *The Muse in Mexico: A Mid-Century Miscellany* (1959; 90–91) under the title of “Three Náhuatl Poems” and, subsequently, in PB (59–60) under the title of “Three Nahuatl Poems” (minus accented vowel). Apparently, the literal translations are no longer extant.

Finally, in 1959, Vázquez-Amaral provided Williams with the literal translation of a poem written by Costa Rican poet Eunice Odio (Williams, *By Word of Mouth* 160–62), who Vázquez-Amaral had taken to Williams's home in September of that year to introduce her to the poet. Following her visit, she wrote an homage to him titled “Al poeta William Carlos Williams” (literally, “To the Poet William Carlos Williams”) that Williams translated as “To W.C.W.” He himself didn't publish this translation, which, unlike most of his translations, is more inclined toward imitation. It was published in *By Word of Mouth*, after its initial periodical publication in *The New Yorker* (4 Oct. 2010; 80–81).

6. Francisco Aguilera (1899–1979) was a specialist in Hispanic culture at the Library of Congress. In 1943, he founded its Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape to record on magnetic tape original voice recordings of selections of the writings of contemporary poets and prose writers.

7. The editors of *And Spain Sings*, to which Williams contributed three translations (including the first English translation of Miguel Hernández), used the very same strategy to attract attention to the Spanish poets presented in their book, which was published in 1937. The book through its translations aimed to gain public support for the Loyalists fighting General Francisco Franco.

8. In the original typescript of Williams's translation, now in his papers at the Beinecke, the line “at others fell” appears as “at otherss [sic] there fell” (Neruda, “Ode to Laziness”). The word “there” is subsequently missing in the poem's first appearance in *New World Writing* (1958) and then in CP2 and finally in *By Word of Mouth*, and was perhaps an editorial decision taken by Amaral or Williams.

9. The word in Ocampo's 1945 book is *temían*, and the Spanish text (typed) that Vázquez-Amaral gave Williams contains *temían*. However, in some subsequent publications that include the poem, the word is *tenían*. Vázquez-Amaral, it appears, based his translation on the text of the poem in one of these publications. Therefore, in actuality, he did not mistranslate the word. His apparent misreading most likely derives from the typographical error. Commenting on this particular matter, Pedro Amaral

says, “I find it inconceivable that pop could have made an error in translation. Maybe from Latin or Greek, but from any ‘romance’ language, not a chance.”

10. Commenting on Williams’s “Tribute to Neruda the Poet Collector of Seashells” that he composed in the spring of 1960, Vázquez-Amaral says it “is an anthological poem not only because it is a mighty exemplar of what [Williams] called the ‘American grain’ but also for its deep understanding and fraternal feeling for another great poet of the New World” (“Williams’ Poem” 23). Williams gave the signed poem (typescript) to Vázquez-Amaral to give to Neruda, whom the poet called his “Chilean sidekick” (23). Vázquez-Amaral, in turn, gave the poem to Roderick Townley in 1972, charging him with the task of delivering the poem to Neruda at his April reading that year at the 92nd Street Y in New York. At the time, Townley was a doctoral student at Rutgers; his 1972 dissertation, “Form and Instinct in the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams,” was published three years later as *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*.

11. The following translations made by Williams with Vázquez-Amaral appeared in *New World Writing* 14 (Dec. 1958): “Green Eyes” by Chumacero; “Naked” by Álvaro Figueredo; “Piano Solo” by Nicanor Parra; “The Infinite Horses” by Silvina Ocampo; and “Ode to Laziness” by Pablo Neruda. Space limitation in the issue is the possible reason why only these five were published in it. The other four translations they made together for *New World Writing* remained in manuscript until their publication in *By Word of Mouth*: “Ode to My Socks” by Neruda; “Vigils” by Ernesto Mejía Sánchez; “Dictated by the Water” by Jorge Carrera Andrade; and “Conversation with My Father” by Eugenio Florit.

12. Like Williams’s collaboration with Vázquez-Amaral, his collaboration in the late 1950s with David Raphael Wang in making translations of Chinese poetry helped the poet during his struggle at the time to discover a workable form. For analysis of this collaboration with Wang, see Zhaoming Qian’s “William Carlos Williams, David Raphael Wang, and the Dynamic of East/West Collaboration” (*Modern Philology* 108.2 [Nov. 2010]: 304–21) and Stephen Field’s “‘The Cassia Tree’: A Chinese Macropoem” (*William Carlos Williams Review* 18.1 [Spring 1992]: 34–49). For analysis of the struggle that played a role in Williams’s turning to translation during this period, see Christopher MacGowan’s “Williams’ Last Decade: Bridging the Impasse” (*Twentieth Century Literature* 35. 3 [Autumn 1989]: 389–405). It should also be noted that another translation venture related to Williams’s efforts to bridge the impasse in his late years is his re-creation of Sappho’s “Fragment 31,” which he performed with the help of friends with knowledge of ancient Greek, and published as a folio in 1957 (Grabhorn P). His Chinese translations, under the title of “The Cassia Tree” and with the credit of “David Rafael Wang in collaboration with William Carlos Williams,” were published posthumously in *New Directions* 19 (1966; 211–30).

13. For the most in-depth analysis to date of the centrality of the Spanish literary tradition to Williams, see Julio Marzán’s *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (1994).

14. Commenting on new trends in contemporary U.S. poetry in the 1970s, William Meredith observed that Latin American poets were exerting a profound influence. He said “many [U.S.] poets [. . .] believe that major directions for poetry in our country will derive from the aesthetic innovations of [. . .] Latin American poets” (Meredith 15). Anne Sexton emphasized this point earlier that decade in an interview in 1970: “We [U.S. poets] are being influenced now by South American poets, Spanish poets, French poets. We are much more image-driven as a result. [. . .] Neruda is the great image-maker. The greatest colorist. [. . .] That’s why I say you have to start with Neruda” (Sexton 11–12).

Williams was nothing less than prophetic when, at the First Inter-American Writers’ Conference held in Puerto Rico in 1941, he observed in his talk that Spanish-language poetry had much to offer U.S. poets, who urgently needed to find new ways to use our language, and he said, “[i]t looks as though our salvation may come not from within ourselves but from the outside” (“Informal Discussion” 44).

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