

## INTRODUCTION

### William Carlos Williams and His Clever Dog

#### CONCEPTISMO WITH A NEW JERSEY TWIST

Pedro Espinosa's novella *El perro y la calentura*—*The Dog and the Fever*—was originally published in Spain in 1625 during the height of the Golden Age of Spanish literature. It is a satire on court and church circles, and a minor classic among the great literary masterpieces of that so-called early modern period. As a poet and prose author, Espinosa (1578–1650) has been largely overshadowed by the giants of his day: Miguel de Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Luis de Góngora, and Francisco de Quevedo, to name the biggest. He and Quevedo were friends, according to some scholars. Espinosa compiled the celebrated 1605 anthology of contemporary poets, called *Las flores de poetas ilustres de España* (Flowers of Spain's Illustrious Poets), in which Quevedo's poetry first appeared in print. That was also the year of *Don Quixote's* publication. A nobleman, politician, and sometime-exile from the royal court in Madrid, Quevedo became not only one of the most prominent poets of the early seventeenth century but a leading prose author and satirist, dubbed the Jonathan Swift of Spanish literature. The story of *The Dog and the Fever*, both the tale itself and the novella's long misattribution to Quevedo, puts

him in the spotlight. Centuries after the book's debut, Quevedo through Espinosa and, at the same time, Espinosa through Quevedo captivated William Carlos Williams and his imagination.

Williams believed he was translating Quevedo, when in the fall of 1936, a few months after the start of the Spanish Civil War that deeply roused his personal Spanish identity, he set about to bring this novella into English with the help of his mother. She then was in her late eighties, bedridden, and living in his home. They accepted the stated authorship in their old edition of the book, published in 1736. Indeed, from the mid-seventeenth century until the mid-twentieth century, the author of the novella was generally considered to be Quevedo, who, according to the title page, “published it under the name of Pedro Espinosa.”

The translation project was Williams's idea. He wanted to “amuse” his mother with it, as he had done to entertain his father with poetry translation during his final years, and also to use it as a subterfuge for extracting from her the story of her life growing up in Puerto Rico. She didn't want to talk about that. His “personal record” of her, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1959), was the ultimate result, parts of which appear in his introduction to the first edition of their translation of the novella that came out in 1954 from Shoe String Press.\* But the translation itself became a

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\* Williams's friendship with Norman Holmes Pearson, an Americanist and literature professor at Yale, led to the publication of the novella by Shoe String Press, a now-defunct small press (1949–2004) that was located in Hamden, Connecticut. Pearson had asked Williams for a possible submission on behalf of the press, which was started as a private venture by two librarians at Yale. Williams took the opportunity to publish his translation, along with a new introductory essay.

work of extreme importance to Williams for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the marked influence its baroque style of satire, its *conceptismo*, had on his composition of *Paterson*, which followed it in the mid-1940s.

When it came to translating Spanish, Williams always needed the help of an informant because his command of Spanish, though his first language as a boy growing up in Rutherford, New Jersey, “wasn’t so hot,” as he says in his *Autobiography*. In an early version of his introduction to *The Dog and the Fever*, he explains, “My mother, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb de Williams, . . . confined to her bed, did most of the work of translation.” Of course, he is the one who completed the task and brought the meaning of the Spanish text that she gave him into well-crafted American speech, with his impeccable ear for the poetry of it. The manuscript of the translation went through multiple drafts—several of which include his mother’s comments about individual words and phrases, together with the personal reminiscences they triggered of her childhood and early years. The first complete draft of their translation is dated May 23, 1944.

*The Dog and the Fever* led Williams to Quevedo’s prose, at the New York Public Library, specifically to Charles Duff’s collection of translations, titled *Quevedo: The Choice Humorous and Satirical Works* (1926). Williams spent a lot of time reading this anthology, plus Duff’s biographical essay. He even translated the book’s epigraph, taken from one of Quevedo’s poems, which neatly demonstrates the style of *conceptismo* with the directness, everyday language, witty metaphor, and wordplay that attracted him to it: “I give you truths in chemises / (he said) / Not far from

naked.” Double entendre conveyed in a concise manner distinguishes this style, of which Quevedo is the most famous Castilian practitioner. Williams came to like Quevedo and his work so much that, in one of his handwritten notes that never found its way into print, he says, “Quevedo was a great good American!” This wild idea must be understood in the context of something Williams said publicly on more than one occasion: “In many ways sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain and Spaniards are nearer to us in the United States today than, perhaps, England ever was. . . . We in the United States are climatically as by latitude and weather much nearer Spain than England, as also in the volatility of our spirits, in racial mixture—much more like Gothic and Moorish Spain.”

Quevedo dueled with Góngora in the literary controversy between *conceptismo* and *culteranismo*, also called *gongorismo*, since Góngora was its leading practitioner. *Culteranismo* is characterized by an ostentatious vocabulary, complex syntactic order, and overabundance of complicated metaphors. For Góngora, for instance, spring is “the flowering season of the year / when Europa’s false-hearted abductor / —a half moon the weapons on his brow, / the Sun’s rays all the strands of his hair— / oh bright glory of heaven, / grazes on stars in fields of sapphire blue; / when one who could pour the wine for Jupiter / better than the comely lad of Ida” (from *The Solitudes*, translated by Edith Grossman). The controversy was at times furious as a sword fight to the death, much like Williams’s literary duels with T. S. Eliot over language and style. Williams also recognized that Wallace

Stevens was a modern American culteranist. In his 1937 review of Stevens's *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, he praised his poetry, but he also poked at his *culteranismo*, describing his language as "a language, God knows what it is! certainly nothing anybody alive today could ever recognize." Góngora's language could be described just the same way. Like Quevedo, Williams was after the more straightforward style, using direct spoken language.

In his introduction to the Shoe String edition of *The Dog and the Fever*, Williams opens with this comment about Quevedo, followed by the note about the origin of the translation:

The difficulty with morals, as far as the artist is concerned, is that they tend to distract him from his labors in the arts. Anything that distracts the artist from his work or that forms a substitute for it or that rivals it in any way—a wife, politics, revenge, even the lures of fame—is for him immoral; and morals are among those defects.

Had Quevedo retired to his country estate and devoted himself to the practice of writing, as his talents seemed to invite him to do, he would, we say, have been the greatest genius of Spain if not of the world in his time. But he was too impatient of his fate—tho' he did not marry until the age of 52. Stupidity, sycophancy, torpor infuriated him to such a pitch that he could not hold back, and his attack was direct and immediate. So alas were the repercussions: jail, wasting disease, and death, along with a small body of writing unworthy of so great a talent.

He was, to be sure, born to flourish, if he flourished, during a decadence of national prestige, a falling away immediately following the Golden Age of Spanish literature. . . .

When Mother and I began to translate *The Dog and the Fever*, I knew no more of Quevedo than the bawdy retorts reputed to him which had come down the two hundred years after his death even to Mayagüez [in Puerto Rico, where Williams's mother grew up] and so on to me. That's a rather long life for casual retorts, since the time of Shakespeare; many a man would be happy with far less fame. I'm sure Mother knew no more than I of the man, though it was his name which attracted us to the book which we finally took up and began to work on. It was something Ezra Pound had left in the house during one of his passages; I always wanted to know what the man meant by such a title, *The Dog and the Fever*. So we began to translate.

In his *Autobiography* Williams offers more of the backstory of the translation project, and there he says, "Someday I hope to make it attractive by doing a running commentary to accompany and interpret the text." The present edition does just that, to fulfill his desire at long last. I have added the commentary he wrote in the spring of 1949, which I found among his papers at Yale's Beinecke Library, placing it where he suggests it belongs and editing it slightly to adapt it to the present situation—now that we know the novella's true author, that is, the principal author.

The reason *The Dog and the Fever* was ascribed to Quevedo for so long is that the first edition of it was printed together with Quevedo's work, *Cartas del caballero de la Tenaza* (Letters of Sir Tightwad). Subsequently, as publishing was a very different, less controlled business back in the seventeenth century (despite the licensing of books), *The Dog and the Fever* was deemed to be a satire by Quevedo, included in collections of his work and also published as a separate volume under his name. That Quevedo was a "brand name" author whose books sold especially well was a factor too. A Spanish poet-historian, however, in the middle of the nineteenth century credited the novella to Espinosa, and later scholars supported his claim with additional proof. Despite that, even well into the twentieth century, the catalogs of many large collections continued to ascribe the work to Quevedo. Espinosa's use of a large chunk of Quevedo's own writing—pages taken nearly word for word from his famous "Sueño de la muerte" (Vision of Death)—further added to the confusion. In Espinosa's day, his immediate readers knew what he was doing with that intercalation, because they knew Quevedo. The long debate about the authorship finally ended with the definitive work of both Espinosa and Quevedo scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Espinosa is an enigmatic figure in the history of Spanish literature. Details about his life are sketchy. The son of a family that was apparently middle-class, he was born and raised in southern Spain in the medieval town of Antequera, which in the early sixteenth century became known as "The Heart of Andalusia"

because it was located at the crossroads of Málaga, Granada, Córdoba, and Seville. He is honored in his hometown as one of its great luminaries. Prosperous in his day, Antequera was a meeting place for important Renaissance writers and scholars. There a school of poets arose in which Espinosa became a leading member. He showed his prowess as a poet at an early age. Virtually all the major poets of the early sixteenth century are represented in his 1605 anthology of contemporary poets, which he compiled while in Antequera, attesting to his keen aesthetic judgment. His education included both theology and canon law, possibly in Seville, and also the literary arts in Antequera and then at the university in Granada, where he fell in love with a woman, a fellow student, who rejected him and, consequently, broke his heart. Soon after, he retreated to live in a hermitage outside of Antequera for a few years, changing his name to Pedro de Jesús. That led to his ordination as a priest around 1613–14—something a man without independent means might do to survive, or else become a civil servant to earn a living, among other things.

In 1618 Espinosa entered the service of the eighth Duke of Medina Sidonia, Juan Manuel Pérez de Guzmán y Silva—to whom he would dedicate *The Dog and the Fever*. That year Espinosa moved to Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a seaside town in the Cádiz province in Andalusia, where he spent the rest of his life. He was given the position of chaplain in the ducal household and also rector of San Ildefonso School, which trained poor children in Spanish and Latin letters. The duke was one of the outstanding literary patrons in Spain. Espinosa wrote the novella to amuse him, and it contains references to people and

places in and around Sanlúcar, including the duke's garden and the milldam, which was not far from Espinosa's own house. The duke was a very rich nobleman, the son of the commander of the Spanish Armada. In fact, at the time his family was the most prominent wealthy family of the Andalusian region. While in his court, Espinosa benefited from his long support, both financial and literary.

The town of Antequera honored Espinosa in 1998 as a distinguished native son, erecting a large bronze statue of him standing with an open book in hand, in front of the Real Colegiata de Santa María la Mayor (Royal Collegiate Church of Saint Mary the Great), the first Renaissance church to be built in Andalusia. It was in this church that a grammar faculty was founded that gave rise to the Antequera school of poetry, which fostered Espinosa's career as a writer.

Espinosa modeled *The Dog and the Fever*, in part, on a quasi-picaresque novella by Cervantes titled *El coloquio de los perros* (*The Dialogue of the Dogs*), published in 1613 in a collection of twelve stories. Cervantes was the first to write novellas in Spanish—short stories in the Italian manner—both romance-based stories and realistic ones. *The Dialogue of the Dogs* may well be Cervantes's most profound and original creation, next to *Don Quixote*. Espinosa took the imaginary canine characterization a step further by disguising a public figure as a dog. Certainly, the talking dog, Chorumbo—the central character in Espinosa's novella—can be viewed as Quevedo himself. Espinosa's immediate audience must have laughed out loud at this portrayal of Quevedo. Williams was quick to perceive Chorumbo as a pro-

jection of Quevedo, who in 1620 had been driven from the court in Madrid and forced to live “in exile” for a time at his country place in Torre de Juan Abad, whose fiefdom his mother had purchased for him.

In an early draft of his once-planned introduction, Williams insists on the modernity of *The Dog and the Fever* and its image-driven narrative style: “There is a modern quality about it that is rather startling when the realization first strikes the eye, very much a literary collage, to tell directly a hidden story, if you will, without other explanation; almost a contemporary pastiche of words, proverbs, and phrases piled up often with very little reference to syntax. . . . Apart from a sort of atomic bombardment of words as words, each carrying its own unrelated particle contributing to the meaning (while remaining themselves uninflected—a nice point), the practice represented speed. And it is speed that characterizes our contemporary scene.” He says the work “must be given a high place in ingenious literature.” (The unpublished manuscript, which includes the statements quoted here as well as the running commentary on the novella, is available in the Williams section at [wesleyan.edu/wespress/readerscompanions](http://wesleyan.edu/wespress/readerscompanions).)

The influence of the novella’s satiric style—its rapid-fire *conceptismo*—on Williams’s composition of his *Paterson* has yet to be fully appreciated. In Book I, put together in the mid-1940s when he was also finishing his translation and writing about *The Dog and the Fever*, Williams provided the satiric bedrock for his epic masterpiece. His later thought to credit Quevedo’s

“double entendre and bravura” in Books III and IV was based on his experience with the novella, for the early drafts of these books contained the lines: “At least these / are the words I prefer or / as Quevedo said: / like this you should never / write—and went on / from there.” Indeed, the later books of *Paterson* include satiric elements presented through what he called “double talk”: satiric jabs and parodic echoes that derive their force from baroque technique and accumulate meaning in accord with the foundation laid down in Book I. The many images of dogs in *Paterson* also connect it to the novella. As Williams told Horace Gregory, in describing the composition of Book IV, “dogs run all through the poem and will continue to do so from first to last. . . . Here the tail has tried to wag the dog.” The most famous dog in the entire poem appears in the preface of Book I, and is the poet himself “sniffing the trees, / just another dog / among a lot of dogs.”

Concerning the actual making of the translation here, Williams approached the task in much the same way he approached translating Spanish poetry—“using word of mouth and no literary English” (see his *By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959*). He aimed to bring the meaning of the Spanish text into the English spoken in the United States, what he famously called the American idiom. He was committed to using real speech with its distinctive rhythms and colorations. To add Golden Age Spanish flavor to the translation, he artfully seasoned it with occasional archaic language; he also included Spanish words, now and then, usually with his English ren-

dering beside them. Overall, his efforts with his mother were aimed at finding accurate equivalents in English (paraphrase) and recreating the force of the original style. That force, he felt, was lost in the only other English translation of the novella, published in London in 1707 (“whoever did it didn’t at all get the feeling,” says Williams in his *Autobiography*).\* That British translation is a domesticated version that strips the original of its foreignness and omits numerous passages, including the entire slang-heavy final pages. The Williams translation is decidedly more faithful than its eighteenth-century predecessor. Beyond that, it is a remarkable achievement in itself. It presents our poet’s genius with American language, together with Espinosa’s and Quevedo’s dazzling *conceptismo*.

The fabled nitpicker Professor Horrendo, who can’t see the forest for the trees, certainly could find occasional words and phrases at variance with the original Spanish. He would pounce on the translation of this passage, for example: “Perro soy. . . . Dios me libre de rabiar. . . . Y porque dije de rabia, no la habrá en el mundo hasta que haya Saludador.” Williams rendered it this way: “I am a dog. . . . God save me from madness. . . . And since I speak of madness, there shall be none in the world till the Savior come.” The literal meaning of the Spanish is “I am a

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\* John Stevens, the translator, “missed the entire point of the whole book, its double entendre” (William Carlos Williams to James Laughlin, 1944). See Stevens’s translation in the Williams section at [wesleyan.edu/wespress/readers](http://wesleyan.edu/wespress/readers) companions.

dog. . . . God save me from getting rabies. . . . And since I speak of rabies, it shall not exist in the world till there is a *Saludador*.” The fact is, a rabies-healer—*saludador* (now generally understood to mean quack doctor)—was an actual occupation that existed in early modern Spain, and Espinosa was not talking about Jesus Christ. The 1736 edition of the novella used by Williams, however, contains a typo and says “Salvador” (Savior), adding to his apparent mistranslation of *rabiar/rabia* and the rest of the passage. Specialists in early modern Spain might catch the textual error. Other editions, including the first, say “Saludador.”

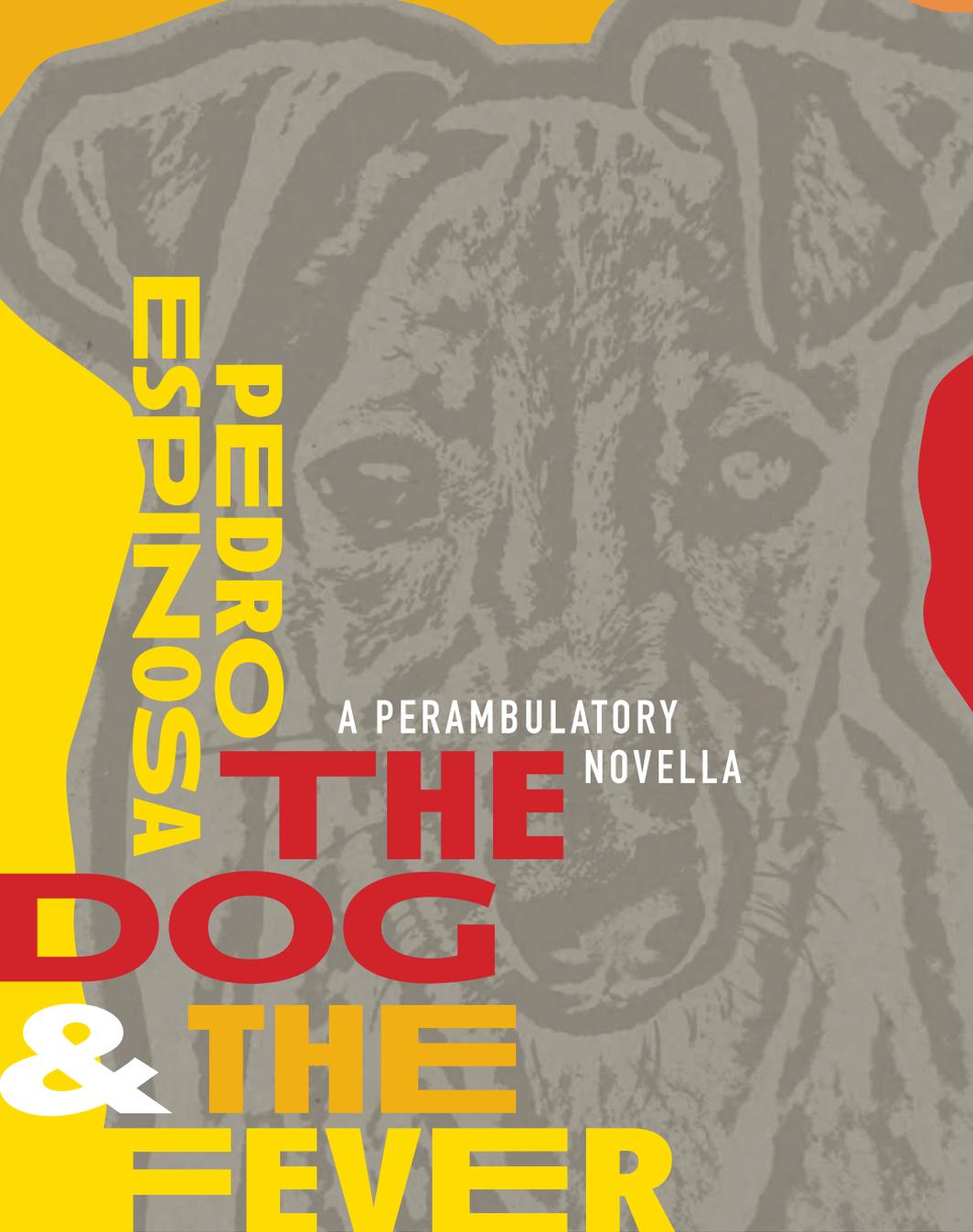
Faced with the faulty text, how was Williams—a far cry from a specialist in early modern Spain and its culture and language—to fully comprehend Espinosa here? Thus, his deviation from the strict literal meaning of Espinosa’s actual Spanish. He did, though, achieve a perfectly reasonable rendering of the passage before him. It works. Rabies does cause madness in dogs (in fact, *madness* is an archaic term for rabies, which is the Latin word for it), and a rabies-healer could be a kind of savior, as the 1736 typesetter saw it. But all this is really beside the point: dictionaries don’t make real translations. Williams succeeded in producing an essentially accurate translation of the novella as a whole, with its *conceptismo*’s fury of words. Ultimately, the translation is more about him and his own agenda in terms of his modernist experiment with language. The same is true of Williams’s translations in general, both poetry and fiction, where occasionally he is inclined toward imitation to give them his personal stamp.

For help to finish translating the novella, Williams reached

out in 1940 to Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, then teaching at Johns Hopkins, with questions about some of the unknown old words and slang in the original. “I confess mother and I were stumped by the four or five last pages, though they intrigued us immeasurably,” he says in his commentary about it. He sent Salinas a letter, his first correspondence with him, also to thank him for a book of poems that Salinas had just published in translation. “But,” as Williams later recounts, “he returned the script untouched, saying, ‘This is written in early seventeenth-century slang, no one knows what it means now. Furthermore, the text is impure; the printers of those days made many mistakes. Some words, such for instance as *tablaoa*, are certainly not Spanish.’” Williams had to figure out himself how to deal with those challenging final pages, and he did, creatively.

The opening paragraph of that letter Williams sent to Salinas reveals much about himself and his attitude toward Spanish literature and our need to translate it: “In spite of my middle name I am not Spanish but more French and English than anything else. Yet, in another way I am very Spanish, due to childhood influences. I love the language and feel strongly for the Spanish tradition which is tremendously significant—and much neglected here. I think also that Spanish literature is a mine where we here in America might profitably dig for gold, the real gold of the world.” Williams recognized *The Dog and the Fever* as a fabulous nugget of this literature. And here, of course, he himself shines with it.

— JONATHAN COHEN —



**PEDRO  
ESPINOSA**

A PERAMBULATORY  
NOVELLA

**DOG  
& THE  
FEVER**

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

*Edited and with an Introduction by Jonathan Cohen*