

THIS VOICE WE CALL WILLIAMS

A poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being.

—W. C. Williams, *Kora in Hell*

As William Carlos Williams told Marianne Moore in a letter:

I want to call my book:

A Book of Poems:

AL QUE QUIERE!

—which means: To him who wants it—but I like the Spanish just as I like a Chinese image cut out of stone: it is decorative and has a certain integral charm. But such a title is not democratic—does not truly represent the contents of the book, so I have added:

A Book of Poems:

AL QUE QUIERE!

or

THE PLEASURES OF DEMOCRACY.

Now I like this conglomerate title! It is nearly a perfect image of my own grinning mug (seen from the inside), but my publisher objects—and I shake and wobble.

This was in February 1917. When the book was finally published later that year in November, the title was simply *Al Que Quiere!* No “conglomerate” title. It was Williams’s third book of poems, but most important, it was his first book to present the voice we call Williams—free verse at once modern and

subtly baroque, colloquial, imagistic, distinctly American in its language. No other poet sounded like him.

Al Que Quiere! contains fifty-two poems, the number suggesting not only the number of weeks in the solar year but the number of sections in Walt Whitman's signature poem, "Song of Myself." Several of Williams's poems here are among his most well-known work: "Tract," "Apology," "El Hombre," "Smell!," "Danse Russe," and "January Morning." The poems are set against a background of small town life; that is, Williams's life as family man, physician, and citizen in his hometown Rutherford, New Jersey, across the river from the great metropolis of New York. The long final poem, "The Wanderer," is his early Whitmanesque vision of the poet in a modern industrialized landscape, where "the filthy Passaic" enters the poet's "heart." This poem in its local subject anticipates his epic masterpiece, *Paterson*.

The publisher of the book was Edmund Brown of Boston-based Four Seas Press. Brown was also an early publisher of William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, and Conrad Aiken, among other notable authors. Brown had good taste, and published a good deal of poetry as well as fiction. He told Williams: "Most of the booksellers are still dead and always will be dead. We are doing our dam[n] best to prod them, however.... I'm still an optimist. There are 110,000,000 people in the United States, and you can sell them 150 copies of a good book of poetry in three years. Now I'm publishing a beauty parlor journal, and expect to make a million." Brown would publish Williams's next two books, *Kora in Hell* (1920) and *Sour Grapes* (1921).

With *Al Que Quiere!* Williams had come a long way from the conventional poetics of his Keatsian *Poems* (1909). In that self-published book which later he preferred to deny ("the poems are obviously young, obviously bad"), he was trying to

sound like English Romantic John Keats. As he says in his *Autobiography*: “Keats, during the years at medical school, was my God. . . . I copied Keats’s style religiously, starting my magnum opus of those days on the pattern of *Endymion*.” The poems of his second book, *The Tempers* (1913), published in London and with an introductory note by his friend Ezra Pound who had arranged for the book’s publication, show Williams maturing and advancing poetically. He was quitting rhyme, for one thing. As he explains in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*: “I was beginning to turn away from the romantic. It may have been my studies in medicine; it may have been my intense feeling of Americanism; anyhow I knew that I wanted reality in my poetry and I began to try to let it speak.”

Another modern transformation seen in *Al Que Quiere!*—in all but “The Wanderer”—is Williams’s abandonment of the conventional typography used for poetry, where the initial word of each line was capitalized. Not appreciated by readers now is how radical, even shocking, this feature of the layout of his poems was at the time of the book’s appearance.

The same year *Al Que Quiere!* came out, T. S. Eliot published his *Prufrock and Other Observations*, the total opposite of Williams. In an essay on “The New Poetry” appearing in the June 1918 issue of *The Future*, Pound greeted both books enthusiastically, while recognizing their differences: “Distinct and as different as possible from the orderly statements of Eliot . . . are the poems of Carlos Williams, represented . . . in a new book of his own, *Al Que Quiere*, ‘To Whom It May Concern.’ If the sinuosities and mental quirks of Misses Moore and [Mina] Loy are difficult to follow I do not know what is to be said for Mr. Williams’ ramifications and abruptnesses. I do not pretend to follow all of his volts, jerks, sulks, balks, outbursts and jump-overs; but for all his roughness there remains with me the conviction that there is nothing meaningless in his book, not a

To Whom It May Concern!

THIS book is a collection of poems by William Carlos Williams. You, gentle reader, will probably not like it, because it is brutally powerful and scornfully crude. Fortunately, neither the author nor the publishers care much whether you like it or not. The author has done his work, and if you *do* read the book you will agree that he doesn't give a damn for your opinion. His opinion of you is more important than your opinion of him. And we, the publishers, don't much care whether you buy the book or not. It only costs a dollar, so that we can't make much profit out of it. But we have the satisfaction of offering that which will outweigh, in spite of its eighty small pages, a dozen volumes of pretty lyrics. We have the profound satisfaction of publishing a book in which, we venture to predict, the poets of the future will dig for material as the poets of today dig in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

A BOOK OF POEMS
AL QUE QUIERE!
By WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Front of dust jacket, 1917 edition

line.... He is rooted. He is at times almost inarticulate, but he is never dry, never without sap in abundance.”

As *Al Que Quiere!* was going to press in the fall of 1917, Pound had encouraged Williams in a letter: “You thank your bloomin gawd you’ve got enough spanish blood to muddy up your mind, and prevent the current American ideation from going through it like a blighted collander. The thing that saves your work is *opacity*, and dont you forget it. Opacity is NOT an American quality. Fizz, swish, gabble of verbiage, these are echt Amerikanisch [truly American].”

The bold statement printed on the dust jacket of the original 1917 edition of the book (see facing page) was clearly both satiric and prophetic, alluding in its defiant pose to Whitman and his “barbaric yawp.” Reviewers latched onto it, how the poetry “is brutally powerful and scornfully crude,” and how the author “doesn’t give a damn” for the reader’s opinion; how the author and publisher “have the profound satisfaction of publishing a book in which, [they] venture to predict, the poets of the future will dig for material as the poets of today dig in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.” How true, as time would prove! Whitman had since Williams’s college days been a model of poetic daring and Americanism, from the subjects of his poems to his use of the language spoken in the United States, not “English” but American, as Williams liked to call it: “the American idiom.”

Not surprisingly, the book’s critical reception among the literary establishment—what little it received—was mixed. Modernism was still at odds with the conventional. Nineteen seventeen was a big year for Edna St. Vincent Millay and her first book, which by and large critics loved; while a very modern woman, her poetry was formal, rhymed, and metered, using archaic “poetic” diction and phrase inversions. The review of *Al Que Quiere!* published in *Poetry* stated: “As preface to these

poems the publishers have been, I think, foolish in dealing the 'gentle reader,' as they are pleased to call him, a kind of blow over the head. . . . One would expect to find in *Al Que Quiere*, despite its brief number of pages, a veritable *tour de force*, a kind of poetic Woolworth Building, massing magnificently on the horizon, but to the closer eye perhaps inexpressive, harsh, from sheer neglect of detail. One looks in vain, however, for enormous violent shapes, and finds instead poetry of the sparer, more meticulous sort—at its best fibrous, marvelously observant, delicate, haunting; then at moments stilted, confused, obtuse."

An essay in *The Yale Review*, titled "New Poets in a New Age," had this negative take: "A recent book of free verse is recommended to the public by the following publisher's note: 'You, gentle reader, will probably not like it, because it is brutally powerful and scornfully crude. . . . The author has done his work, and . . . doesn't give a damn for your opinion.' Because certain keen minds have revolted against excesses of public prudishness, therefore weaker imitators must serve up the garbage of human thought as mental nourishment. We deplore frankly the reign in poetry of a canting secretiveness; but there is one thing in literature which is worse than conventional morality, and that is conventional immorality. Thanks to the greatness of Whitman . . . that is precisely what we are getting to-day." Were Whitman still alive, he surely could sympathize with Williams over such an attack, as, for instance, *The New York Times* said the author of the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* "roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts."

For Williams, the important reviews came in letters of praise and encouragement written by fellow poets like Moore, Pound, and Wallace Stevens, poets he respected and whose opinions meant a lot to him. Moore told him: "Your compression makes one feel that the Japanese haven't the field to themselves." Her

future review of *Kora in Hell* that would appear in *Contact* praised his poetic skills to the hilt: “Compression, color, speed, accuracy and that restraining of instinctive craftsmanship which precludes anything dowdy or labored—it is essentially these qualities that we have in his work.” Stevens praised “El Hombre” in particular, using it as the epigraph of one of his own poems, and he told him: “What strikes me most about the poems themselves is their casual character.” Noting that “a book of poems is a damned serious affair,” he encouraged Williams to carry his “particular quality . . . to a communicable extreme, in intensity and volume.”

Al Que Quiere! is the culmination of an experimental period of poetry writing that included Williams’s translations from Spanish. As he told his brother Edgar in 1910, on returning to the United States after his yearlong pediatrics fellowship in Germany: “I’m going to begin work on a translation from the Spanish in another month. The work is from [Fernando de] Herrera, a lyric poet and a contemporary of Shakespeare’s. He has never been done into English but is nevertheless one of the world’s masters as Pound assures me. . . . No kind of practice is better than just such translating work.” He included a sequence of anonymous ballads called “Translations from the Spanish” in *The Tempers*. After that, he worked on translating Lope de Vega’s Golden Age verse drama, *El nuevo mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* (*The New World Discovered by Christopher Columbus*). His translation is evidently lost, but his praise of Lope’s line as “shorter, swifter” than blank verse is on record—“more acceptable to our temperament, manner of thought and speech.”

Williams’s collaboration with his father, William George Williams, translating the work of several contemporary Latin American poets took place in 1916. Their translations formed the “Spanish-American Number” of *Others*, published in

August of that year. These translations not only functioned as Hispanic personae for Williams—for the “Carlos” in him—they also expanded his experimentation with free verse and lines of varying length shaped by patterns of speech. Beyond that, by using Spanish for the title of his book of poems, Williams would celebrate the “Spanish” (Puerto Rican) part of his identity. It was a dramatic departure from the title he was considering for the book during the summer of 1916, namely, *Pagan Promises*. Four poems in the book have Spanish titles, too.

Al Que Quiere! has an epigraph in Spanish taken from “El hombre que parecía un caballo,” a short story by the Guatemalan author Rafael Arévalo Martínez published in 1915. Williams’s translation of the story, made with the help of his father, was published in *The Little Review* in 1918 under the title “The Man Who Resembled a Horse.” In his translation, the epigraph begins this way: “I had been an adventurous shrub which prolongs its filaments until it finds the necessary humus in new earth. And how I fed!” The spelling errors in the Spanish text due to a careless transcription angered Williams’s father, who, though an Englishman, had grown up in the West Indies and was as fluent in Spanish as the poet’s Puerto Rican mother (*nueva* was misspelled as “neuva,” *beatitud* as “beautitud,” and *descomposición* as “descompositión”). Despite these typos, this epigraph pointed smartly to Williams’s experience with the new American poetry in both English and Spanish and to other avant-garde arts he encountered in New York leading up to the poems of *Al Que Quiere!* It provides a key to the poetry here.

The present edition includes Williams’s translation of the fabulous story in its entirety. Arévalo Martínez published several books of poetry during his lifetime, but is remembered more for his fiction, in particular his “psychozoological” short stories. “The Man Who Resembled a Horse” is deemed his most famous work in this vein. In fact, the story has been called the

would be helpful to share what he told his audience before a poetry reading he gave at UCLA: “If you don’t know what I am talking about ... just remember that I didn’t ask you to understand anything, only to listen.”

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AL QUE QUIERE!

The Centennial Edition

by

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

with an afterword by the author

Edited and with an introduction

by Jonathan Cohen



A NEW DIRECTIONS PAPERBOOK