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By Word of Mouth: A Review Essay

Peter Schmidt

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

***By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959.* William Carlos Williams.** Compiled and Edited by Jonathan Cohen. Foreword by Julio Marzán. New York: New Directions, 2011. 167 pp. \$16.95 (cloth).

SUPERBLY compiled, edited, and annotated by Jonathan Cohen, and with a stimulating preface by Julio Marzán, the bilingual anthology *By Word of Mouth* is the most important addition to the Williams canon since Christopher MacGowan's edition of *Paterson*.¹ Yes, some of Williams's translations from the Spanish (and poems in other languages too, such as Chinese) were included in *The Collected Poems* volumes I and II. But it turns out that those selections of Williams's Spanish translations were incomplete; the 1916 *Others* translations were missing, and so were some of Williams's best translations from the Spanish done in the 1950s, when he focused on contemporary work by Latin American poets. Every admirer of Williams's work should own this volume. It does not gather pieces of secondary interest. Rather, Williams's poems from the Spanish are not just well worth reading in their own right; they will also enhance how we understand Williams's original English-language poetry and his evolution as a writer. Our notion of Williams's work in "the American idiom" should be forever broadened and changed because of *By Word of Mouth*.

Here's just one introductory instance of the revelations that *By Word of Mouth* has in store. Most Williams aficionados agree that his idea of necessary "contact" with the New World was perhaps the single most important idea Williams had that spurred his breakthroughs of 1916–1925, the period in which Williams published *Al Que Quiere!*, *Kora in Hell*, *Sour Grapes*, *Spring and All*, *The Great American Novel*, and *In the American Grain*. These works's daring immediately placed

Williams in the vanguard of US modernists. Williams's "contact" concept was perhaps most memorably captured by the opening prose manifesto and the first poem in *Spring and All*:

There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa, —all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon. (l 88)

Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken (l 96)

Was there another key source for these moments, aside from Emerson in *Nature* (1836) declaring in frustration that, "Our age is retrospective. . . . The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes," or John Dewey's essay "Americanism and Localism"?² Well, Williams indicated one by quoting it as an epigraph at the opening of his first really original volume of poems, *Al Que Quiere!* But that source, Rafael Arévalo Martínez, a Guatemalan, wrote in Spanish, and Williams did not translate the Spanish when he cited it. The result? Arévalo Martínez's passage is hardly ever mentioned by Williams critics, much less carefully discussed, as a primary source for Williams, though Williams himself highlighted its importance. He gave Arévalo Martínez to us at the start of *Al Que Quiere!*, whose title means "to him who wants it!," but it appears that not enough of us wanted it—it was in a "foreign" language.

Yet Williams also gave us an English translation of Arévalo Martínez on "contact" —and most of us have ignored that too, even though both the original Spanish epigraph (with typographical errors corrected) and Williams's translation appeared in Christopher MacGowan's notes to *Collected Poems I* in 1986 (480–81). Here is the key passage from the epigraph in question:

I had been an adventurous shrub which prolongs its filaments until it finds the necessary humus in new earth. And how I fed! (CPI 481; Cohen 136)

Arévalo Martínez's words come from a story that was published in Spanish in 1915 and is now recognized as one of the best Latin American short stories of the

twentieth century. Its title may be rendered in English as “The Man Who Resembled a Horse.” William Carlos’s translation of this story, which he excerpted for *Al Que Quiere!*’s epigraph, was a labor of love shared with his father, William George, who was fluent in Spanish and for whom Arévalo Martínez was a favorite author. Williams initiated the project to help distract William George while he was dying of cancer. But the son received a gift from Arévalo Martínez that was of incalculable value for him as he was trying to find his own poetic voice and destiny. Williams arranged for the translation to be published in *The Little Review* in December 1918. So between *Al Que Quiere!* and this well known little magazine we can hardly say that Arévalo Martínez has been hidden from Williams scholars—only under-used.

Long ago, in 1994, of course, Julio Marzán in *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* first made the case that Williams criticism needed to be much more educated about Williams’s Spanish and Caribbean literary and cultural heritage as sources of inspiration for his writing. He cited Williams’s use of Arévalo Martínez’s story for *Al Que Quiere!* and discussed its importance. The William Carlos Williams Society sponsored a panel at the MLA to honor Marzán’s book soon after its publication. But little did we know how many more of Williams’s translations from the Spanish remained to be discovered. *By Word of Mouth* includes translations from the Spanish not known to Marzán and not included in Christopher MacGowan’s *Collected Poems* Volumes I and II. Regarding the issue of Williams’s Spanish influences, Marzán’s *Spanish American Roots* represents a monumental first effort of recovery and reinterpretation, for which all Williams’s readers must be grateful, and it proved to be a key resource and inspiration for Jonathan Cohen’s own efforts, which began in 2008, finally to give us the definitive edition of Williams’s mature translations of Spanish and Latin American poetry.³

At Cohen’s request, Marzán has provided a fine foreword for *By Word of Mouth* that valuably condenses and elaborates the main ideas of his book. For Marzán, Williams’s “Carlos” persona, his identity as a Latino American writer, was as important as “Bill,” the Whitmanian poetic persona he created that celebrated American English and a non-Puritanic American culture of mixed identities, mixed literary forms, and continual re-invention. Indeed, Marzán suggested that we cannot fully appreciate Williams’s innovations and evolution—including his identity split—without understanding his immigrant roots and biculturalism. (“Bill” Williams also, sadly, sometimes disparaged or downplayed his “Carlos” half, for reasons Marzán and Cohen explain.) Yet one of *By Word of Mouth*’s most valuable contributions will be to urge us to move beyond any simple dichotomy

between such supposed “Carlos” and “Bill” identities. It definitively shows us that Williams’s Spanish self actually spoke in a *variety* of voices, tones, and styles. These Spanish voices in Williams held a life-long conversation—and argument—with his English-speaking personae.

In *Spanish American Roots* Marzán also argued that Williams turned to translating Spanish when he felt his own writing in English had become stale. Williams translated because he was fascinated with these writers for their own sake, but he also translated to find new ideas for *form* in English poetry. Cohen’s volume provides much support for Marzán’s claim. Consider, for instance, the following assertion Williams made to his audience (and himself) in the speech he gave to the Inter-American Writers’ Conference at the University of Puerto Rico in 1941:

What influence can Spanish have on us who speak a derivative of English in North America? To shake us free for a reconsideration of the poetic line. . . . It looks as though our salvation may come not from within ourselves but from the outside.

Williams was always questing for what he called in the same speech a new “nascent form” (Cohen xxxvi)—and he learned early on that working with Spanish poetry was indispensable for that quest.

One other insight of Marzán’s is worth stressing here, for it is directly relevant for appreciating Williams’s translations in *By Word of Mouth*. We cannot fully understand Williams’s ideas about why New World writing is different unless we engage with Williams’s understanding of Spain and Latin America, for it was through their literary and cultural traditions that Williams achieved the necessary distance to think critically about the US’s Puritan heritage and its effects. “In the American Grain” for Williams meant in the grain of *all* the Americas, not just the Puritan north. In Marzán’s words,

[t]he Spanish, as he interpreted in *In the American Grain*, came to baptize and “touch” the natives and, consequently, arrived prepared to consume and be consumed by America. That included rape but also marriage. As a consequence, for all its evils, the Spanish conquest produced something “greater than the gold” they extracted, what Williams called “the mingling.” In contrast, the “squeamish” Puritans came neither to touch nor be touched by American nature or its natives, and therefore had “nothing to do with America.” (Marzán, “Foreword,” Cohen xi-xii)

*

In what follows I assess the importance of *By Word of Mouth* in three ways. First, by looking at what the volume tells us of Williams's actual practice of translation. I will also build on Marzán's and Cohen's suggestions and focus on some examples of how translating Spanish and Latin American poets affected Williams's own writing in English, continually giving him new sources of inspiration. Last but not least, I will consider the important issue of how Williams's work with Spanish should be understood as part of a much larger but still unwritten history of the role translation played in revolutionizing English-language poetry in the US in the twentieth century and making it (some of it anyway) more transnational and multilingual in outlook and in form. The huge influence on US poets of Pablo Neruda and others after the 1950s is well known, of course, but *By Word of Mouth* allows us to begin to construct a robust history of transnational interchange between Latin American and US-based poetry that begins earlier in the century, before it reached a kind of "Boom" in the 1960s and 1970s. When the story is fully told of how US poetry in English in the twentieth century became, to its benefit, less Anglo-centric, Williams will have to be recognized as a figure of some importance in that narrative.

My comments on all three of these topics will necessarily be preliminary. For such are the treasures of *By Word of Mouth* that Williams's readers are just beginning a long and rich conversation on all of these subjects and more.

*

So, first: Williams the translator. How good was he? In general, the answer is easy: he was superb. And he got better as he aged. *By Word of Mouth* demonstrates again and again that Williams put all his considerable verbal resources first in the service of another author's voice, not his own. He had help, as many translators do: just about all his translation projects (including the Spanish as well as his late Chinese translations) were collaborative. Williams will never be seen as matching Pound in importance as a translator. But *By Word of Mouth* shows that when we compare Williams to the other great modernist poets, including Hughes (who also knew Spanish) and even Eliot, what becomes immediately obvious is that of all the modernists only Williams rivaled Pound for drawing on non-English writers regularly throughout his career in order to inspire his own poetry in English. Further, Williams's respect for Spanish and Latin American poetry is all the more important because Pound so disparaged the Spanish-language literary tradition as decadent and imitative, antithetical to modernist virtues. If we want to think seri-

ously about the key role that translation played in international modernism from, say, 1910 through the 1950s, Williams now has to be recognized as a major player.

Pound had given Williams his first translation project, including selected “El Romancero” ballads from old Spain completed in 1913 (CPI 12–14; see also Cohen 129, 141–42). Even as Pound lent those texts to Williams, Pound himself had come to believe that the real gold lay elsewhere; he largely dropped any interest in Spanish language writers and turned to French and Italian and Chinese and other traditions. In part perhaps just to prove Pound wrong, Williams returned to Spanish for inspiration at key moments throughout his own career: his Romancero translations were just the start. In each of these cases, we can see Williams using Spanish translations to continue his long-running argument against, and friendly poetic competition with, Pound. Williams next engagement with Spanish came in 1916, when inspired by his father he used the little magazine *Others* to publish the first English translations of Latin American writers; then in the 1930s, in support of the Spanish Republic assaulted by fascism; then again in the 1940s and 1950s, when Williams turned to translating a wide range of voices and visions from the Caribbean and Latin America while Pound was incarcerated in St. Elizabeth’s hospital near Washington, DC. Pound could take some credit for Williams’s last round of Spanish translations, as well as his first, as Jonathan Cohen explains. For it was Pound who told a Rutgers professor of Spanish and Portuguese named José Vázquez-Amaral—who had translated some of Pound’s *Cantos* into Spanish and ultimately would translate all of them (Cohen 133)—that he should look up a certain doctor-poet living nearby. That contact led to Williams’s translation project involving contemporary Latin American poetry, which occupied him in the late 1950s and gave him new ideas important for *Pictures from Brueghel*.

It’s not as if Williams were a flawless translator. His Spanish was decent but not fluent, a situation fairly characteristic of many second-generation immigrants where Spanish may be spoken in the home but it becomes clear to the children that English is the language of the schools and the public world of power. In undertaking his translations, as I’ve said, Williams always worked in collaboration with more fluent speakers—first his father, William George, then his mother Elena (a 1930s project to translate a rowdy early modern Spanish novella, *The Dog and the Fever*, a new edition of which Cohen and New Directions will publish in 2013), and then in the 1950s José Vázquez-Amaral. Williams relied on Vázquez-Amaral for a “literal” first translation and for consultation, but Cohen’s notes point out a number of instances in which Williams ignored his accurate glosses—choosing “legended sirens” rather than “ancient sirens” for “sirenas antiguas,” for instance, while working on Silvina Ocampo’s “Infinite Horses” (92–93). But mostly

Williams the translator carefully followed the advice that he got. He usually chose to go his own way only to make the English as clear and forceful as possible, and when he found a chance to balance fidelity to the Spanish with radiant musical invention in English. The results are often nothing short of astonishing.

H. R. Hays, the editor of *12 Spanish American Poets*, once said, “when you translate, you ought to let your readers know what the poet says. A lot of translators don’t believe in this approach: they prefer to put down what they think the poet ought to have said” (Cohen, “Discovering Neruda”). By Hays’s criteria, Williams was usually a first-rate translator. Yet there’s a fascinating paradox here worth pondering. By so subordinating his own developing “voice” to the service of other poets, Williams in fact radically transformed his own poetry—a point Julio Marzán made almost two decades ago but one that bears repeating here.

Williams’s seven *Others* translations from 1916 make for fascinating reading. Note that these have not been gathered and fully annotated until *By Word of Mouth*: they are not in the *Collected Poems*. Though still learning how to translate, Williams proved adept at rendering into English both the heady romanticism of Rafael Arévalo Martínez and the wry sarcasm of Luis Carlos López. Arévalo Martínez’s “Fragmentos de ‘Las imposibles’” dates from 1914 and is dedicated to the students of Honduras and Nicaragua. It speaks as a muse of optimism and ambition to inspire the new generation to prevail against setbacks: “I am that golden-haired school girl / who, with a kiss which she left on your mouth, / pinned a wing to your shoulders / and put the sun in your hearts” (5). With López, from Colombia, Williams captured the exact meaning of most of the adjectives while also getting the sardonic tone right, as in the final tercet of this sonnet: “mientras te cantan, en cualquier cantina, / neurasténicos bardos melenudos / y piojosos, que juegan dominó” (“while there sing to you from a drunken brawl / long-haired, neurasthenic bards, / and lousy creatures who play dominos”). Williams’s only real liberty here is to suggest that “drunken brawl” is equivalent to “cantina.” Learning to handle both romantic and sardonic tonal flavors was crucial to Williams’s breakthrough volume, *Al Que Quiere!*, which appeared within a year after the *Others* translation project, in 1917.

Via the *Others* translation of the Peruvian José Santos Chocano’s “La canción del camino” (1908), “The Song of the Road,” Williams also found a way to engage with but separate himself from Whitman, a key early influence. Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” has many marvelous moments, such as “I think heroic deeds were all conceiv’d in the open air, and all free poems also.” But it also often succumbs to a somewhat forced ebullience that represents Whitman at his most imperiously optimistic. This problem is especially true in the poem’s over-inflated middle, so full of stanzas beginning with “Allons!” and peppered with exclama-

tion points. It's the kind of poem that spawned a thousand bad Whitman imitations, and Williams was certainly not immune. But Santos Chocano's song is dark and tempestuous in ways that Whitman's "Open Road" rarely is, as signaled by its opening lines: "It was a black road. / The night was mad with lightnings. I was riding / my wild colt / over the Andean range." Santos Chocano's lines are also sparked with fatigue and cynicism, hallucinatory imagery and despairing wit, and the poem ends portraying love not as transcendental but as a roadside inn of low repute through which lovers temporarily pass. Translating this lyric with his father proved to be a bracing antidote to Williams's own vestiges of romanticism, and like his other *Others* work sparked Williams's breakthroughs in *Al Que Quiere!* and after. To drive home how modern Williams's Santos Chocano is, Cohen helpfully provides us with a much more Victorian version of the Peruvian's poem that appeared in *Poetry* in 1918 (137–38).

The Spanish translations Williams completed in the late 1930s were only incompletely represented in *Collected Poems*, which included five pieces from Williams's 1935 volume *Adam & Eve & the City* (CPI 426–29). Cohen's compilation includes three of these (de Argensola's "The tired workman" plus the anonymous songs "Tears that still lacked power" and "Poplars of the meadow") with more extensive notes. *By Word of Mouth* adds other incidental translation work from this middle period in Williams's career, including his renditions of two witty short pieces by Quevedo that Cohen unearthed from an unpublished essay at Yale that was meant to accompany Williams's *The Dog and the Fever* translation started in 1936 (143), and an undated and anonymous Spanish love lyric that Williams discovered during research for his Lorca essay published in *The Kenyon Review* in 1939 (146–47). Most important of all, gathered together here are three translations of ballads by modern Spanish poets writing in support of the Spanish Republic: Miguel Hernández, Rafael Beltrán Logroño, and Mariano del Alcázar. These three appeared in *And Spain Sings: Fifty Loyalist Ballads Adapted by American Poets*, edited by M. J. Benardete and Rolfe Humphries (1937), as part of an effort by US writers to raise funds and raise consciousness in support of Republican Spain, but were unavoidably printed separately in the *Collected Poems* because they were rediscovered while those volumes were in preparation. These fine translations are now richly annotated by Cohen.

Williams intended his contributions to *And Spain Sings* to complement his work as chair of the Bergen County Medical Board to Aid Spanish Democracy, which raised medical supplies. Helping heal wounds and giving voice: such a combination was quintessential Williams. So too was the implicit rebuke of Pound (who supported fascism).⁴ These poems to rally support for the Spanish Republic have a plain-spoken dignity appropriate for their cause. Williams's Republican

martyrs speak with honor and reticence against impossible odds. Williams also rightly loved the fact that in order to address contemporary concerns, many Spanish poets turned to one of the most ancient of “literary” forms, the oral ballad. “Life is drunk over and over / and death is one swallow only”: these are the most famous lines from Miguel Hernández’s “Viento del Pueblo,” eloquently rendered by Williams. (The poem’s title, Cohen’s notes helpfully inform us, means both wind from a village and wind from the people themselves.) Here’s another sample: “The guitar remains unheard, / over the jar-shelf on the wall, / its purple ribbons weeping, / choked where it’s hung” (from Mariano del Alcázar, “Juan Montoya”). Such moving translations should become part of the story when we chronicle the turn in the 1930s to proletarian themes made by many US-based artists and authors, inspired by Latin American and European, including Russian, figures. Williams’s translations and volunteer work should also not be forgotten when we chronicle the international support for Spanish democracy that came together and then tragically failed in the dark hours before World War II.

But it is Williams’s translations from the last two decades of his life that are the most revelatory. After his trip to Puerto Rico in 1941, Williams took on a most difficult job, the translation of Luis Palés Matos’s rough and swinging “Preludio en Boricua,” written largely in Puerto Rican slang, from his revolutionary volume *Tuntún de pasa y grifería: poemas afroantillanos* of 1937. As Julio Marzán first discussed, Palés Matos’s mix of “low” and “high” diction greatly appealed to Williams, the instigator of his own kinds of hybridity in which (as in carnival) “low” and “high” not only change places but become transformed and merged. There was no US poet at the time, not even Langston Hughes or Melvin B. Tolson, concocting such an exhilarating linguistic callaloo in English as we can find in Williams’s “Prelude in Boricua” translation of 1942. The closest parallel to what Palés Matos was attempting would perhaps be in the work of a fellow Antillean, the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, who, inspired by Hughes’s use of the blues, was ringing changes on the *son*, the most important Cuban popular song form. Tellingly, when Williams was consulted as to which poets should be included in New Directions’s 1942 anthology of contemporary Latin American poetry, Palés Matos and Guillén were at the top of his list (Cohen xxxix).

“Boricua” gave Williams fits. When *Tuntún* was recently translated and published in full in Puerto Rico, Palés Matos’s breakthrough volume’s title was rendered as *Tom-Toms of Kinky Hair and All Things Black*, acknowledging the ways in which this poet in the 1940s opened the way for puertorriqueños in the 1960s and 1970s to honor their African roots (think of bomba then boogaloo and salsa; think of the musicians Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera, among many). That transliteration of the title is accurate enough, but it doesn’t reveal that *grifería* literally

refers to bathroom faucets—a bit of non-Frenchified surrealism and humor—nor that *tuntún* not only onomatopoeically imitates the sound of drums but also signifies and celebrates what's random, unpredictable, even dangerous. Pales Matos's joke is that what is seen as senseless and even gross proves to be vital, full of intelligence, an antidote to all that is self-hating, whitening, and Eurocentric in Puerto Rican culture. Williams translated *tuntún* as "mixup," which is hardly exact but can be defended because it makes unavoidable the poem's celebration of racial as well as cultural mixture: "kinkhead and high yaller / and other bigtime mixups" (55). Writing like this in English was shocking in 1942; it's a bit as if the good doctor from Rutherford were strutting around in a zoot suit.

Palés Matos's funky and witty español was worlds away from the classical Spanish Williams's father prided himself in speaking. Yet, as Julio Marzán has said, "Williams immediately grasped that Palés had written a poetry that uses local talk and humor with utmost seriousness" (*Numinous Site*; quoted in Cohen 149).

Con cacareo de maraca
y sordo gruñido de gongo,
el telón isleño destaca
una aristocracia macaca
a base de funche y mondongo.

This second stanza of the poem in Spanish orchestrates a cacophony of alliteration in counterpoint, especially the c's and g's—just the kind of musical effects that drive translators to despair. Williams, smartly, keeps what g and c alliteration is possible in English, but turns to other sound effects, especially off-rhyme ("on," "corn," and "pone") plus the patter of p's in his stanza's last line:

With crowing of the maraca
And heavy grunt of the gongo
The island curtain goes up on
An aristocracy macaca
Based in trip and corn pone.

"Macaca," a reference to the macaque monkey, here has no racist negativity; or rather, it takes that racist cliché and turns it on its head, giving it swing and sass, celebrating blackness rather than denigrating it (pun intended). Cohen's notes—always worth consulting—allow us to see an additional witticism in Williams's English: "mondongo" is tripe, commonly served with "funche," boiled corn meal, but Cohen suggests that Williams's "trip" instead of "tripe" is possibly not a typo

but Williams's attempt to introduce current African-American slang into his translation in a way wholly consistent with Palés Matos's own linguistic borrowings (149).

In a note accompanying its publication in 1942, Williams disparagingly called his effort "no more than an approximate translation which makes no attempt to give the musical sense of the original" (148). But caveat lector. I'd agree with Cohen and Marzán that Williams's version not only decently captures the *substance* of Palés Matos's revolutionary poem, giving high status and importance to Puerto Rican poor people's food and music and verbal wit. "Prelude in Boricua" also recreates in recalcitrant English at least some of the poem's sassy *form* and style—just as important, as Williams well knew, for a poem's meaning. Williams also superbly captures in English the poem's satiric bite, its criticism of Puerto Rico's misapprehension of itself as well as its celebration of its possibilities: "you bleat like a roast goat," with "Little really lived / And much pretension and hearsay."

Julio Marzán argued in *Spanish American Roots* that Williams's encounter with Palés Matos's Boricua (both the language and the place) proved crucial to his breakthrough in conceiving *Paterson*—for after being stalled, Williams made significant progress on the poem in 1941 and 1942. I would second Marzán's point. Williams's exploration of Palés Matos's poetry allows us to understand in new ways the importance of African American and other working-class voices in *Paterson*. (I'd suggest, for instance, that the African American spiritual "This little light of mine" [P 128, 172] should be thought of as *Paterson's* theme song, as well as its most important musical allusion.) Further, Palés Matos helps us evaluate Williams's collage or mash-up aesthetic, the links Williams repeatedly makes between his epic's linguistic and formal *mestizaje* (mixture) and the tempestuous energies driving US culture itself.

Paterson meditates on the pressures for assimilation and homogeneity that drive both "American" culture and capitalist economics—memorably embodied, for instance, in Alexander Hamilton. (Hamilton, curiously, was raised in the West Indies, a fact Williams chose not to explore, perhaps because Hamilton did whatever he could to repress his background as he sought to ascend to power in the States.) But Williams's epic also repeatedly enacts the *de*-centralizing, heterogeneous forces at work in US cultural history, including what Randolph Bourne in 1916 named "Trans-National America." Bourne's conception was perhaps most memorably rendered in *Paterson* Book I via Williams's suggestion that central to the importance of *Paterson*, and, by implication, to the US itself, was the story of the mixed-race "Jackson Whites," their history in New Jersey and Barbados (P 12–13). Marzán just briefly touched on the topic of *Paterson's* treatment of the Jackson Whites in *Spanish American Roots* (218). But the importance of racial

mixture for a nation's culture—in this case, that of Spain as well as Puerto Rico for the US—was stressed in Williams's Puerto Rico talk, where Williams had Góngora and Quevedo as well as Palés Matos in mind: "We in the United States are climactically 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" (quoted in Mariani 447). Readers of *Paterson* will find no little inspiration in *By Word of Mouth*, and reading it will make them want to return to Marzán's book too.

Williams's translations from the late 1950s contain many miracles. As I've said, as a translator Williams got better as he aged. The history of US/Latin American relations, particularly in the 1950s, of course, stands in sobering contrast to Williams's interactions with Latin America during this period—and readers of Williams's translations need to keep this darker history in mind to appreciate the radiance of what Williams has done. Ernesto Mejía Sánchez provides one example. Mejía Sánchez was a contemporary of Ernesto Cardenal, part of the "Generation of 1940," but he left his native Nicaragua for exile in Mexico. Mejía Sánchez shared none of the optimism of being a student in Nicaragua that animated Arévalo Martínez's poetry almost half a century earlier. No doubt some of his bitterness was fueled by the history of US interventions in Nicaragua—first by US Marines from 1909 to 1933, then after that by US government and corporate alliances with Nicaragua's Somoza family, who from the 1930s through the 1970s controlled cozy arrangements profiting both Nicaraguan elites and US corporate interests growing and selling commodities such as pine lumber products, cotton, and beef for fast-food chains and pet food.

In 1958 Williams at Vázquez-Amaral's suggestion translated for *New World Writing* a poem by Mejía Sánchez published just the year before. Williams's effort, sadly, wasn't printed then and did not appear until 2011. According to Cohen, Mejía Sánchez "never knew he'd been translated by the great North American poet [William Carlos Williams]." That would have thrilled him, added Cardenal.⁵ Entitled "Desvelos," or "Vigils" (*desvelos* can also mean "sleepless nights" or "anxieties"), the poem is a stoic but sad chronicle of the loss of dreams: "Vacant days, what shall become / of me" are the opening lines in Williams's English. The poem makes no direct reference to the cause of the speaker's despair, but it does say (in Williams's version) that it is spoken "with the pride of one who gives / all that of himself that may be / given by a free man, / uncursed if it may be—, / knowing that I am here / today, and tomorrow . . . no where" (97; ellipses Mejía Sánchez's and Williams's).

The Spanish has a lovely, somber music that is anything but static:

Al borde de la luz
 más repentina y ácida, arena
 envanecida por el rayo, como
 la espuma al filo de las
 olas iba mi corazón entre
 vaivenes, de tumbo en tumbo
 hacia la estrella. (98)

Superb internal rhymes like “entina,” “ácida,” and “arena,” as well as “como” and “tumbo,” plus the play of o’s and v’s in these lines, literally give us the beating of a distressed heart and its yearning. Always alert to dance rhythms, Williams exchanges assonance for sibilant alliteration and, inspired by *corazón entre vaivenes* (literally, the heart between swings or beats), plays with rhymes suggested by the heart’s sistole and diastole:

Bordered by a light
 acid and sudden, sand
 made vain by a lightning, like
 foam at the edges of waves
 to my heart’s thumps
 swinging from bump to bump
 toward a star. (99)

Not only does this swing; it is inexpressibly poignant, the voice of Williams the heart-attack and stroke victim affirming that he stubbornly yet lives and still aspires to the stars. Once again Williams found himself via poetry in Spanish, yet his translation places itself first entirely at the service of another author.

And how can I not quote the ending Williams gives “Vigils” as well? Williams surely found a soul-mate in these lines too:

Pain does not point
 either to movement or
 movelessness. Thus
 sway dancing between
 the hurt and the joy
 so that I no longer know
 whether I live
 or swoon. Let me spin
 if I would persist. (103)

This brings tears to my eyes. When the English and Spanish are read together we can listen to them dance contrapuntally. From now on, when we teach the splendors of “late Williams,” we should consider including some of his translations from the Spanish, for Williams’s most important themes and modes show up unforgettably there, not just in his “own” poems in English.⁶

Two more instances of Williams’s brilliant late translations, from the Cuban Eugenio Florit and the Mexican Octavio Paz. This work too gives us new insights into Williams’s great English poems from the 1950s. Paz’s “Himno entre ruinos” (“Hymn Among the Ruins”) is rather self-consciously austere and visionary. Williams used the opportunity to follow Paz and synthesize in English the rhetorical heritage both Paz and Williams received from the two great poets (and also personal enemies) of the Spanish Golden Age, Góngora and Quevedo. As both Marzán and Cohen explain, Góngora’s Spanish was baroque and extravagant; Paz indicates his poem’s ambition to absorb that style by quoting Góngora as its epigraph (“Where foams the Sicilian sea” in English). Yet both Paz’s Spanish and Williams’s English also contain much of Quevedo’s concision and earthiness, providing a necessary counter-balance and tension: “Eyes see, hands touch. / Here a few things suffice: / prickly pear, coral, and thorny planet” (65). There are even moments when Williams follows Paz as he echoes Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (“New York, London, Moscow. / Shadow covers the plain with its phantom ivy”). What courage translating such a passage must have required of Williams, who stubbornly maintained his disgust with Eliot throughout the 1950s, the decade in which Eliot’s reputation was never higher, especially in academia. Or perhaps, shrewdly, this Paz translation was Williams’s witty way of *answering* Eliot the would-be Anglican royalist, by way of the most cosmopolitan of Mexicans and Spain’s Siglo de Oro. I could make this point better in Spanish, for the verb “to answer” is “contestar,” and Williams’s relations with Eliot were never less than contestatory.

Cohen’s notes on Paz’s poem give us all we need to know to appreciate both the poem and Williams’s act of translation, including its complicated publication history and the sad fact that Williams felt he needed to neglect to translate three lines from Paz so as not to repeat the McCarthyist nightmare that he’d lived through almost a decade earlier (151–52). Regarding Williams’s rendering of the poem’s famous concluding line, Cohen correctly notes that it “does not conform to the literal”; instead, Williams “transforms it in a distinctive manner” (152). So that you may see the truth of Cohen’s point, here are the final six lines in Paz’s Spanish and then Williams’s English. The poem’s uncanny mix of Platonic and Aztec/Mayan prophecy presented the translator with a formidable challenge:

La inteligencia al fin encarna,
 se reconcilian las dos mitades enemigas
 y la conciencia-espejo se licúa,
 vuelve a ser fuente, manantial de fábulas:
 Hombre, árbol de imágenes,
 palabras que son flores que son frutos que son actos.

Mind embodies in forms,
 the two hostile become one,
 the conscience-mirror liquefies,
 once more a fountain of legends:
 man, tree of images,
 words which are flowers become fruits which are deeds. (66–67)

Like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Paz's "Ruins" chronicles a sense of cultural futility, all creativity desiccated, before it moves via water imagery to a vision of renewed life. In this excerpt, Williams's English version is supremely careful until the last line, when he makes a daring choice: he shifts the given syntax in order to stress not just metaphorical equivalence among the three nouns but a *cause and effect* relationship. All his life Williams, like Whitman, believed words to be alive; what we say shapes what we can do; words are world-making. It's the signature move of a master, putting his own stamp on Paz. The translation so delighted Paz when he read it that he immediately resolved to meet his translator, and Cohen's notes and commentary movingly detail what occurred when the future Nobel prize-winner journeyed to 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford (Cohen 150–51). Williams's little *milagro* in English wouldn't see print until *New Directions* reissued Paz's *Early Poems* in 1973, well after Williams's death. It's a treasure to have it available again in *By Word of Mouth*.

Eugenio Florit's "Conversación a mi padre," on which Williams was working at approximately the same time, couldn't offer us a more different poetic than Paz's "Ruinas." As Cohen explains, Williams received a literal rendering of the poem from José Vázquez-Amaral in 1958, as part of a batch by various Latin American authors to translate for the *New World Writing* project they'd agreed to do together. But his translation was not chosen for publication in 1958 and remained buried in the Williams collection at Yale until publication in *By Word of Mouth*. When reading this poem, the author of "Asphodel" and "The Sparrow" (which Williams dedicated to his long-dead father, celebrating his immigrant adaptability by comparing it to that of the English sparrow) must have been astonished at the

ways in which Florit's work, which dates from 1948, addressed many subjects that Williams himself had taken up in his "triadic"-line poems of the 1950s—including the atomic bomb, the sad comedy of violence in human history, and memory's hauntings. Williams also surely could not have missed the ways in which Florit's casual and chatty Spanish and ironic humor mirrored Williams's own 1950s experiments with a more relaxed and conversational style, full of memory's digressions and sudden swerves.

Williams adapted his English to make Florit sound like Florit, not like Paz or anyone else. Florit's poem speaks directly to the author's dead father, as if the author were writing him a letter. It ambles through a list of the pleasures of the world the father once enjoyed so that he may experience them again vicariously. As he does so, Florit also lovingly remembers his father's traits and quirks. (In this one feature the poem is superior to Williams's "The Sparrow," which captures the bird's habits as indelibly as Dürer might have done, but only indirectly portrays the William George Williams to whom it is dedicated.)

And we say: he liked this dessert,
and used to walk here, always in a hurry,
and once shaved off his moustache
and at once let it grow again. (113)

The poem's tone darkens considerably as it contemplates the Spanish Civil War and its grisly aftermath, broadening its subject to include history and politics, not just personal memories. (Florit's father was born in Spain but raised a family in Cuba). Here Williams's casual syntax, full of appositives, well captures Florit's almost medieval dance of death, including his comic touches as well as his sense of doom:

and how the war ended
and how the people's mania followed it
bent on destruction, killing
as if all the maceration of flesh were not enough.
And we learn nothing.

.

What [humankind] wants is to follow
this overwhelming dance of death
which is not your death nor mine
—that is to say, death as it may happen
about the house, one that is met in slippers

or at most in the open country
 or in clear water,
 without the other, heaped up mountainous
 in stinking fields and foul waters,
 death which drops from the air
 and comes from hiding
 to crush bodies as if they were nuts
 reap them as if they were heads of wheat. (115)

For line four above, Vázquez-Amaral had provided “the divided flesh” as a literal translation, but Williams’s audacious choice, “maceration,” gives this catalogue a Homeric touch out of the *Iliad*, as do the austere concluding lines above. “Death which drops from the air” alludes to the aerial bombing of civilian targets (such as the town of Guernica depicted in Picasso’s famous painting) —a deadly but effective new military strategy that would be adopted by all sides during World War II.

The poem’s ending is moving and magnificent, not because Florit goes for the grand statement but rather because, like Williams, he is a self-deprecatory master of litotes (the rhetoric of understatement and double negatives):

It is late. You know I never leave you;
 that to stop talking is not to quit you,
 I take myself off, but still listening,
 I am with you when I leave you . . .
 I mean . . . that I do not go, leaving;
 but let me finish this letter
 though I am seated beside you forever.
 For when I stop talking to you, I continue to talk.
 Well, I am making a botch of it, but you
 understand. (121; ellipses are Florit’s and WCW’s)

This seems to me not just a moving passage in its own right, but a kind of commentary on the translation process itself, at least how Williams practiced it. Williams was always listening to his father’s (and mother’s) native tongue. Spanish was always “there” even when to some of us Williams seemed to be thinking and writing entirely in English. And, no, he didn’t make a botch of it at all.

*

Another virtue of *By Word of Mouth* is to allow us to reconstruct key pieces of the history of how poetry in Spanish from Spain and Latin America, including the

Caribbean, began influencing US poets in the twentieth century. The full story of this turn in the history of US poetry has not yet been told, including the role played in the 1970s by a new generation of Latino/a poets fluent in both Spanish and English and at home in multiple arenas, including the beginnings of the spoken word scene. But to understand this crucial historical moment—at least as it concerns the English-Spanish connection—we need to look more carefully at what exchanges occurred in the 1940s and 1950s—and it is here that *By Word of Mouth* provides yet another major contribution to US literary history.

By Word of Mouth definitely demonstrates that the story of Spanish's influence on predominately English-language poetry, at least in the US, begins much earlier than the 1960s. In fact, it begins in part with William Carlos Williams, both the 1916 special issue of *Others* devoted to Latin American Poetry—the first little magazine issue ever published focusing on English translations from Latin America—and with Williams's translations of poets of the Spanish Republic during the 1930s, plus his fine essay on Lorca, also from that decade. Williams also figured in developments in the 1940s and 1950s that laid the groundwork for the “boom” in Latin American poetry translations published in the 1960s and 1970s that paralleled the Boom itself—that is, the sudden rise in the world-wide reputation of Latin American writers. (Sadly, Williams, who died in 1963, never lived to see either “boom” occur, but he surely would have been happy with them, and *By Word of Mouth* shows that as far as translation is concerned Williams certainly helped light the fuse.)

A brief summary of some facts assembled in this volume will help demonstrate that the Boom in the US had a long foreground. 1942 saw the publication of New Directions's *Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry* edited by Dudley Fitts—whose selection of poets and poems, Cohen informs us, was influenced by Williams's suggestions (xxxix). That same year, Williams, inspired by his visit to Puerto Rico the previous year, published his translation of Puerto Rico's Luis Palés Matos's “Prelude in Boricua” in *American Prefaces: A Journal of Critical and Imaginative Literature* published out of Iowa City, Iowa. (I'll have more to say about *American Prefaces* in a moment.) In 1943, H. R. Hays's *12 Spanish American Poets* appeared from Yale, followed by Muna Lee's book of translations of the Ecuadorean poet Jorge Carrera Andrade, *Secret Country*, in 1946. Williams had first published Lee in 1916 in *Others*, and she returned the favor decades later by being one of the organizers of the Puerto Rico conference that invited Williams to make his first (and only) visit to his mother's homeland. It was Lee who introduced Williams to Andrade's work (xxxvii). And it was Hays's anthology, discovered in the New York Public Library reading room in the 1950s, that set Robert Bly on his crusade to reinvigorate US poetry by getting our English-only poets to read what

was going on in the other Americas—an event movingly chronicled in 1977 by Bly's essay "H. R. Hays as a Mountain Pass," written for a special issue of *Street* magazine in honor of Hays and edited by Jonathan Cohen.⁷ (Hays also published the first English translation of Neruda's "Heights of Macchu Picchu," and the first English translation of a Jorge Luis Borges story, "The Babylon Lottery," both in *The Tiger's Eye* journal, 1948 [Cohen, "Discovering Neruda," 7].)

Anthologies such as *12 Spanish American Poets* attracted a small but highly influential readership, and the decade of the 1950s rapidly saw further developments. Once again Williams keeps showing up at the heart of the action. J. M. Cohen (no relation to Jonathan Cohen) published the *Penguin Book of Spanish Verse* in 1956; Carlos Lozano published prose translations of *The Elementary Odes of Pablo Neruda* in three successive volumes in 1954, 1956, and 1957, followed by Williams's own superb translations of two of Neruda's best odes—the one on laziness and the one celebrating wool socks—for *New World Writing's* 1958 Latin American poetry issue edited by Vázquez-Amaral. Only one of Williams's Neruda translations saw the light of day, but *By Word of Mouth* now allows us to enjoy both translations together and reflect on this historical conjunction of two of the best living poets in the Americas. Ben Belitt's controversial *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda* came later, in 1963, as did the Bly/Wright/St. Martin translations of Neruda that were published in the 1960s to refute Belitt's way of making Neruda sound English and even Victorian. These were collected in *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, edited by Robert Bly from Beacon Press, 1971. Beacon also re-issued Hay's *12 Spanish American Poets* in 1972, due to the demand in the US.⁸

The elemental virtues in Neruda's odes were instantly recognized by Williams, whom Octavio Paz called the least affected of any poet he had ever met, "[j]ust the opposite of an oracle" (Cohen 151). That a short poetic line, when supplely handled, could be just as rhythmically and tonally inventive as the long line was not news to Williams, of course. But working to render two of Neruda's odes into English got Williams excited by the short line all over again—and the result was *Pictures from Brueghel*, also marked by short lines, witty rhythms, utmost economy and humor, not to mention a view of the world that looks lovingly at the commonplace and discovers the miraculous. "Ode to Laziness" was published in 1958 and made it into Williams's *Collected Poems*, and also into recent anthologies such as Stephen Tapscott's *Twentieth Century Latin American Poetry* (219). But Williams's "Ode to My Socks" has not seen the light of day until now.⁹

In 1959, the year before he published his hugely influential anthology *The New American Poetry*, Donald Allen wrote to Williams requesting that he translate Paz's "Hymn Among the Ruins" for possible publication in *The Evergreen*

Review that year. The *New World Writing* and *Evergreen Review* special issues from the late 1950s celebrating Latin American poetry published Williams's translations of a number of other contemporary figures, including Alí Chumacero (Mexico), Nicanor Parra (Chile), Álvaro Figueredo (Uruguay), Silvina Ocampo (Argentina). Those translations that appeared in *New World Writing* made it into *Collected Poems*, Volume II, but other published and unpublished translations from the Spanish did not. These "others" from Williams's 1950s Spanish projects—including lyrics by Jorge Carrera Andrade, Neruda, Paz, Florit, Mejía Sánchez, Eunice Odio, and Williams's mother, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb Williams, the only poem she ever wrote—never were published in Williams's lifetime, for various reasons that Cohen's notes explain. But we finally have all of Williams's Latin American translations from the 1940s and 1950s together now, with immensely helpful notes and commentary.

If *By Word of Mouth* allows us to begin to construct a thick description of the role that translation from the Spanish played in changing US poetry in the mid-twentieth century—and to see Williams's rightful place in this story—a closer examination of some of the small-press journals involved opens another "mountain pass" as we try to reconstruct the literary history of US print culture during this period. There's room here to look at just one such little magazine from this period, one that figures in Williams's story. I choose *American Prefaces*, a modestly named journal with an ambitious subheading announcing its focus on "critical and imaginative literature." It was published out of the University of Iowa from 1935–1943, lasting 53 issues—a remarkably long run for a little magazine, no doubt a tribute to its intrepid editors Wilbur Schramm and Paul Engle, among others. It was to Iowa City that Williams chose to send his startling Palés Matos translation, "Prelude in Boricua." Williams's choice of venue is less startling when we consider the roster of authors young and old who were published in *American Prefaces*. Of the older modernists, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Williams, Jolas, and (in translation) Neruda appeared there. What's just as striking, though, is how many of a new generation of US poets and fiction-writers appeared in this journal, authors who within a decade or so would be famous, including Muriel Rukeyser, Paul Bowles, Theodore Roethke, Mona Van Duyn, William Stafford, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, and Wallace Stegner. Williams perhaps hoped that a readership that would be interested in Stevens's, Roethke's, Welty's, or Neruda's work would be intelligent enough to be curious about Palés Matos too. But another conclusion I draw from Williams's brief encounter with *American Prefaces* is this: we need to interweave the story of little magazines and translation work (including how it was commissioned and where it appeared) when we undertake to do a fine-grained history of how US writers "make it new." *By Word of Mouth* will prove indispensable for

any such history, at least as it involves US poetry in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

*

So get *By Word of Mouth* and make contact with it. It's an important event for all of us, for which we have New Directions, Julio Marzán, and, especially, Jonathan Cohen to thank. For those who teach Williams, try assigning a few of Williams's translations from the Spanish along with poems he wrote in English and exploring with your students what connections you may discover. Vaya bien, William Carlos, y gracias.

Notes

1. For a slightly longer version of this essay, see http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/pschmid1/?page_id=487. This online version contains more analysis of how *By Word of Mouth* might enlarge our sense of the importance of Latin American poetry in Spanish to the development of US English-language poetry in the twentieth century.

2. For John Dewey as a source for Williams's concept of "contact," see Weaver 32–34.

3. *By Word of Mouth* cites in a note some of the very early Romancero ballad translations printed and annotated in CP1 (Cohen 141–42). These were done when Williams was just learning his craft.

4. Pound was hardly a fan of Franco, preferring Mussolini. Both he and Eliot voted "neutral" when Nancy Cunard in 1937 polled writers as to whether they supported Republican Spain or Franco. But Pound also ranted to her in a letter that supporting Republican Spain was an "emotional luxury for a gang of sap-headed dilettantes," and that Spain itself represented merely "barbarism" (Wilhelm 124).

5. Cohen's author note on Mejía Sánchez, *Words Without Borders* website: <http://wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/ernesto-mejia-sanchez>. Accessed 15 April 2012.

6. The power of Williams's invention translating the conclusion of "Vigils" becomes even clearer when we look at Vázquez-Amaral's English gloss provided to Williams as his starting-point:

Pain does not mean
 movement nor pleasure
 immobility. So quietly
 do and oscillate between the
 hurt and joy that
 I no longer know if I live
 or swoon. Make me
 spin or persist. (Cohen "On William Carlos Williams" para. 8)

For more on Williams' translation of "Vigils," including this Vázquez-Amaral passage, see Cohen's essay in a recent online issue of *Words Without Borders*, as well as his notes in *By Word of Mouth* (156). Cohen has said to me that he hopes eventually to place online all of the available manuscripts of Vázquez-Amaral's so that we may compare Vázquez-Amaral's source drafts and Williams's final versions.

7. Soon after *By Word of Mouth* was published, Bly received a copy from Cohen. As Cohen emailed me when I queried him about this, "Bly told me last December [2011] he was amazed at the number of poems Williams translated, many of which were new to him. He said he thought Williams did a fine translation of [Neruda's] "Ode to My Socks," and that he probably wouldn't have done it himself if he had seen it." (JC email to PS, 31 March 2012).

8. Cohen has said to me that Hardie St. Martin was the uncredited figure behind translations from the Spanish that were published solely under Bly's name. According to Cohen, St. Martin was bilingual and an expert translator of Spanish-language literature, both poetry and prose; he had selflessly provided Bly (not fluent in Spanish) with editorial support to aid in the cause of promoting Latin American poets in the United States, as well as poets of Spain (see St. Martin's *Roots and Wings*). JC email to PS, 31 March 2012.

9. Regarding Williams and Neruda, see also Williams's late poem "Tribute to Neruda Poet Collector of Seashells" (CPII 357, 500), published posthumously after *Pictures from Brueghel*. It's also worth noting here that in *Pictures from Brueghel* Williams included his translations of work by three anonymous Nahuatl poets from the Aztec era in Mexico. As Cohen notes, "[m]ost of the songs in this codex were composed during the immediate post-Conquest period, but surely have roots in the much older oral tradition and, as some scholars believe, likely derive from songs by kings and other nobility" (149). Williams worked with Spanish translations of the Nahuatl originally done in the sixteenth-century. His work was to be published in the *Evergreen Review* in 1959 but was not; it did appear in *The Muse in Mexico: A Mid-Century Miscellany* (University of Texas Press, 1959) and then in *Pictures from Brueghel* in 1962. See *By Word of Mouth* 58–61, 149–50. Thus in *Pictures from Brueghel* Williams signaled that poetry in the grain of the Americas had a deep history indeed, with roots going back to the time before contact with Europe.

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