
Are the thirty-two translations of Spanish-language poems by William Carlos Williams in *By Word of Mouth,* some appearing for the first time in print, truly “portals to understanding Williams as a poet” (xv) as Julio Marzán suggests in his lucid foreword to this intriguing collection? Marzán rightly points out translation’s vital role in bridging the Spanish-American divide in the first decades of the twentieth century and the ways in which this cultural project allowed Williams, the American-born son of Spanish-speaking Caribbeans, to challenge the “resistant ethnocentrism” (xii) of his day. Indeed, the “ethnocentric barricade” (xiii) thrown up by the American literary establishment of the time would be hard to overestimate. Ezra Pound, for example, referred to by both Marzán and Jonathan Cohen as Williams’s “friend,” considered him a “foreigner,” called Spanish literature “Dago Lit,” and thought of Hispanic writers as “just savages” (xi). For Williams—who could play up his ethnic heritage as readily as he could play it down—translation served as a kind of self-discovery, a pendant activity to his original writing, and a source of enrichment for his English-language poetics. Taken with Spanish’s predominantly syllabic metrics, Williams “even advocated that American poets should count syllables and not the traditional meters” (xiv), occasionally opting in his own poetry for the eight-syllable line found throughout the Spanish-language canon.

More importantly—and this is Cohen’s primary thesis—Williams used translation as an extension of his program to “create a modern poetics based on American speech, thought, and experience” (xxii), what he dubbed “the American idiom.” As he wrote in a letter: “All this fits well into my scheme. I don’t care how I say what I must say. If I do original work all well and good. But if I can say it (the matter of form I mean) by translating the work of others that also is valuable. What difference does it make?” (xxii). Williams, thus, was less concerned with establishing a translational methodology than with popularizing an Americanized diction, and Cohen does well not to sing his praises as a translator per se. By maintaining a historical focus on Williams’s place in the nascent Pan-Americanism of the early twentieth
century, Cohen’s worthy editorial effort here is reminiscent of his previous volume, *A Pan-American Life: Selected Poetry and Prose of Muna Lee* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), which contains a short biography of this central figure in the movement as well as samples of her original verse, her translations of Latin American poetry, and her prose. Cohen’s contextualized perspective allows him to provide a cogent, objective assessment of Williams’s tendencies as a translator, which even described in schematic form do not bode well for the pieces to come:

Williams usually translated line by line, and in the sense-for-sense manner, often working with a prosaic literal translation provided by someone else. Occasionally, however, in a line here and there he did alter the sense, but not the verbal texture and tone… he explored the use of real speech with its distinctive rhythms and colorations. He aimed for lines that offered poetic equivalence (always an approximation at best) in the American idiom. Beyond the literal meaning of words, Williams wanted to instill the language of his translations with the character of “American”… He wanted to make living poems whose lines used cadences true to real speech; that is, the spoken measure and the intonational phrasing of the American idiom. (xxv-xxvi)

Cohen’s useful division of Williams’s translations into three sections, as well as his extraordinarily helpful “Annotations” on the pieces chosen, facilitate the reader’s evaluation of just how successful the implementation of the poet-translator’s agenda was. The reviews in that regard are decidedly mixed.

The first section, “Others / 1916,” consists of seven poems by as many Latin American poets published in *Others*, a journal dedicated to the Modernist enterprise for which Williams served as associate editor, “the first little magazine in the twentieth century to devote a special issue to Latin American poets in translation” (xxvii). Most interesting here is that all the pieces are attributed to Williams’s father William George Williams, although both internal and biographical evidence indicates a likely collaboration between the two. These fledgling efforts are among the weakest in the collection, appearing before Williams had reached full maturity as an American poet. They are plagued by lexical matching, rigid lineation, and outright misprisions, although Cohen notes that
English-language cribs accompanying later commissioned translations sometimes induced the infelicities that made their way into Williams's definitive renderings. The reader is struck by the semantic literality of these versions at the expense of form and the cavalier way in which meter and rhyme, subordinated to the concerns of natural speech, are slighted to a fault. Is “un desalentamiento de la vida” of which a patient complains to his doctor in José Asunción Silva’s “El mal del siglo” / “The Disease of the Century” well served by “a discouragement of life” (22, 23)? Even the poem’s title seems stilted. The close adherence to syntax makes some lines sound unpoetic, perhaps the greatest shortcoming in poetry translation, like “who, with a kiss which she left on your mouth” for “que con un beso que os dejó en la boca” in Rafael Arévalo Martínez’s “Fragmento de ‘Las imposibles’” / “Fragments of ‘Las imposibles’” (4, 5). Other lines are downright embarrassing, such as “Her love moistened me” for “Me humedeció su amor” (6, 7).

The highlight of the section is undoubtedly the short study Cohen makes of the Williamses’ translation of José Santos Chocano’s “La canción del camino” / “The Song of the Road,” which is compared to John Pierrepont Rice’s version published in Poetry two years later. The Williamses strip down Santos Chocano’s discourse in heptasyllabic, hendecasyllabic, and longer lines into a natural-sounding English, preserving only an occasional flourish of the conventionally poetic. The poem’s first stanza and their English version of it read as follows:

Era un camino negro.  
La noche estaba loca de relámpagos.  Yo iba  
en mi potro salvaje  
por la montaña andina.  
Los chasquidos alegres de los cascos,  
como masticaciones de monstruosas mandíbulas  
destrozaban los vidrios invisibles  
de las charcas dormidas.  
Tres millones de insectos  
formaban una como rabiosa inarmonía.

It was a black road.  
The night was mad with lightnings.  I was riding  
my wild colt  
over the Andean range.  
The cheery strokes of the hoofs
like the chewing of monstrous jaws
shattered the invisible glass
of the sleeping pools.
Three million insects
made seemingly a mad discord. (10, 11)

Only the phrases “mad with lightnings” and “seemingly a mad discord” stand out as heightened poeticisms here, but even they sound like the American idiom compared to Rice’s antiquated Victorian diction, the very vogue Williams was struggling to overturn. If Williams (and, apparently, his father) can be critiqued for the subordination of form to content, Rice may likewise be impugned for his conversion of a modern poem into a nineteenth-century artifact, replete with a formal meter and rhyme not present in the source text, not to mention archaisms, strained syntax, and considerable padding. His version reads:

The way was black,
The night was mad with lightning; I bestrode
My wild young colt, upon a mountain road.
And, crunching onward, like a monster’s jaws,
His ringing hoof-beats their glad rhythm kept,
Breaking the glassy surface of the pools,
Where hidden waters slept.
A million buzzing insects in the air
On droning wing made sullen discord there. (137)

Nowhere else in *By Word of Mouth* is the importance of Williams’s modernizing agenda so clearly displayed, however disappointing some of his renderings may be. It would still be a decade or so before Pound’s *logopoeia* and the rise of free-verse poetics consigned such musty conventions to the curio shop of the past.

“And Spain Sings / 1930s,” the second section of Williams’s translations, comprises some of the fifteenth-century romances and Civil War poems (for which they served as models) that were commissioned for a volume of the same name subtitled “Fifty Loyalist Ballads Adapted by American Poets” and edited by Rolphe Humphries. A labor of love as well as of ideological commitment, these translations were an outgrowth of Williams’s anti-fascist sympathies and, at times, showcase his limited skill with tight metrical forms. (Interestingly, the collection contains in Williams’s rendering the first translation into English of
Miguel Hernández.) Williams’s translation of Francisco de Quevedo’s octasyllabic “Muchos dicen mal de mí” (“Many Speak Ill of Me”), for example, reveals the degree of “approximation at best” to which Cohen earlier refers:

Muchos dicen mal de mí,  
Y yo digo mal de muchos;  
Mi decir es más valiente,  
Por ser tantos, y ser uno.  

Many speak ill of me  
And I of many a one.  
My speech is the braver  
They are many, I’m alone.

Glimpses of excerpts from the drafts of two poems here show Williams both tightening and naturalizing lines, as in “Poplars of the Meadow” (Sp. “Álamos del prado,” anonymous), where the earlier “With good right I may wonder / For that at my last leaving / The plants with sighs heaving / And the waters in tears were” (142) becomes “Justly may I wonder / Since at my leaving / The plants with sighs were heaving / And all tears the waters” (31). It is difficult not to conclude, however, that Williams’s grand design for Spanish-language works to appear in idiomatic English would have been better served by stronger efforts on his own part. In a passage ultimately omitted from an essay on Federico García Lorca, Williams wrote: “If more of the Spanish were better translated—more in the spirit of modern American letters, using word of mouth and no literary english [sic]—most of the principles which have been so hard won, the directness, the immediacy, the reality of our present day writing in verse and prose would be vitally strengthened. Our efforts away from vaguely derived, nostalgic effects so deleterious to the mind would be replaced by the directness and objectivity we so painfully seek” (xxxv). Clarity of diction is only one aspect of successful poetry translation and, as the examples above illustrate, needs to be employed with other techniques to produce accomplished renderings.

The translations in “Sweated Blood / 1940s & ’50s,” far and away the most compelling in By Word of Mouth, owe their relative success not only to their having been produced at the height of Williams’s poetic powers, but to the marked narrativity of their exclusively Latin American originals (including three Aztec poems transcribed into Spanish from Nahuatl). Many of the pieces here were made at the prompting of José Vásquez-Amaral, an academic engaged in enhancing the visibility of Hispanic writers in the United States. Williams’s “Prelude in Boricua,” made upon his return from Puerto Rico, comes close to being a virtuosic
rendering of Luis Palés Matos’s “Preludio en boricua”: “Mixup of kinkhead and high yaller / And other big time mixups. / Messaround of voodoo chatter,” Williams translates the work’s opening lines, “Tuntún de pasa y grifería / y otros parejeros tuntunes. / Bochinche de ñañiguería” (55, 54), clearly reveling in their indigenous rhythms and lexicon without slavish concern for the nine-syllable lines. The concluding stanza to his rendering of Pablo Neruda’s “Oda a los calcetines” / “Ode to My Socks” is no less pleasing: “And this is / the moral of my ode: / twice beautiful / is beauty / and what is good is twice / good / when it is two socks / made of wool / in winter” (79). Undoubtedly, the source texts that tend toward prose utterance fare best in Williams’s hands.

This peculiar quality of modern Latin American verse may have drawn Williams to these poems in the first place. As Cohen writes of Williams’s reaction to one Ecuadorian poet brought to his attention by Lee: “Not only did he find in [Jorge] Carrera Andrade’s work a genuine American voice, he found what had become most important to him as a poet—his lifelong quest—namely, the chance ‘to get a form without deforming the language’ (I Wanted to Write a Poem). He found the work of a poet who had mastered the use of images presented by means of direct colloquial speech” (xxxvii). Never mind that Carrera Andrade’s “Dictado por el agua” / “Dictated by the Water” is written, like Santos Chocano’s “La canción del camino” and so many other twentieth-century Latin American poems, in a strict syllabic meter that does little to undercut its narrative thrust, or that Williams mistranslates the first three lines “Aire de soledad, dios transparente / que en secreto edificas tu morada / ¿en pilares de vidrio de qué flores?” as “Solitude, transparent god / who in secret keep your abode / among pillars of glass where you flower?” (104, 105). At least some of the hendecasyllables of Silvina Ocampo’s “Los caballos infinitos” / “The Infinite Horses” emerge at intervals in the kind of eight-beat English line Williams elsewhere advocated: “with manes flying like the loose hair”; “like the beat of their trotting hoofs”; “died among flowers, in the mire”; “intimates of birds and vermin,” etc.

Cohen’s By Word of Mouth joins a handful of (relatively) recent titles focusing on the translational activities of writer-translators, including Timothy Webb’s The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation (Oxford University Press, 1977) and such works on the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges as Efraín Kristal’s Invisible Work: Borges and Translation (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002) and Sergio Waisman’s Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery (Bucknell University Press, 2005). Unlike these primarily academic studies, By
Word of Mouth, as well as Cohen’s A Pan-American Life, strive to place the translations of Williams and Lee front and center, allowing the works of these influential figures to speak for themselves as the primary focus of these volumes. Translation Studies could use more such endeavors as it enters a synthesizing phase in which historical foci will play an increasingly important role. Scholarly volumes contextualizing the work of twentieth-century translators, such as Jeremy Munday’s Style and Ideology in Translation: Latin American Writing in English (Routledge, 2008) and María Constanza Guzmán’s Gregory Rabassa’s Latin American Literature: A Translator’s Visible Legacy (Bucknell University Press, 2011), might well complement these foundational efforts.