

Staking Out New Earth: The Spanish Epigraph of *Al Que Quiere!*

Jonathan Cohen, Stony Brook University

William Carlos Williams's *Al Que Quiere!*, published in 1917, was the auspicious debut volume of his mature poetic voice—free verse at once modern and subtly baroque, colloquial, imagistic, distinctly American in its language and prosody. Not only did he give this collection a Spanish title, he gave it an epigraph in Spanish taken from the fiction of a contemporary Spanish-American writer, namely, Rafael Arévalo Martínez of Guatemala. In keeping with the tradition of authors providing an epigraph intended to serve as a key to their works to help readers enter them and appreciate them, Williams did precisely this, but in a strikingly indirect way in *Al Que Quiere!*, for he provided no English translation of the text, thereby confronting readers with the core foreignness (i.e., “Carlos”) of his poetry. My presentation will elucidate the significance of the epigraph in terms of Williams's modernist poetics demonstrated in *Al Que Quiere!* It will provide an orientation to Arévalo Martínez and his fiction, as well as his poetry that Williams had translated with his father. Special attention will be paid to the translation they made of the short story, “The Man Who Resembled a Horse,” from which the epigraph was taken, and which Williams subsequently published in 1918 in *The Little Review* (and later revised for publication in the 1944 ND anthology, *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*). The presentation will further include my analysis of what Williams implied by the epigraph's image of himself as “an adventurous shrub” who had found “the necessary humus” on which he “fed with the joy of tremulous leaves of chlorophyll that spread themselves to the sun; with the joy with which a root encounters a decomposing corpse; with the joy with which convalescents take their vacillating steps in the light-flooded mornings of spring.” Ultimately, my presentation will define the “new earth” that Williams claimed by means of the epigraph to constitute the source of sustenance for his modernist American poetic flowering, and will clarify how the epigraph anticipates the centrality the Spanish literary tradition assumed in his canon.

Jonathan Cohen is an award-winning scholar in the fields of modernist American poetry and translation studies. He compiled and edited William Carlos Williams's By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959 (New Directions). He is editor of the Centennial Edition of Williams's Al Que Quiere!, forthcoming from New Directions in the fall of 2017, and editor of Williams's translation of the Spanish Golden Age novella, The Dog & The Fever, forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press in the spring of 2018. Also an active translator of contemporary Latin American poetry, Cohen is author of translations of work by Chilean Enrique Lihn (The Dark Room and Other Poems) and Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal (Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems), both published by New Directions to wide acclaim. His translation of Countersong to Walt Whitman and Other Poems by Pedro Mir, the Dominican Republic's late poet laureate, is being republished by Peepal Tree Press in the fall of 2017.

A BOOK OF POEMS
AL QUE QUIERE!



WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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 . Help me O leading light of the Sex of the Future .

Yours

W. C. Williams

WCW to Marianne Moore (Feb. 21, 1917)

Había sido un arbusto desmedrado que prolonga sus filamentos hasta encontrar el humus necesario en una tierra neuva. Y cómo me nutría! Me nutría con la beatitud con que las hojas trémulas de clorófila se extienden al sol; con la beatitud con que una raíz encuentra un cadáver en descomposición; con la beatitud con que los convalecientes dan sus pasos vacilantes en las mañanas de primivera, bañadas de luz;...

RAFAEL ARÉVALO MARTÍNEZ

Epigraph of AL QUE QUIERE!

“Rafael Arévalo Martínez, (born July 25, 1884, Guatemala City, Guatemala—died June 12, 1975, Guatemala City), novelist, short-story writer, poet, diplomat, and director of Guatemala’s national library for more than 20 years. Though Arévalo Martínez’s fame has waned, **he is still considered important because of his short stories, one in particular.**”—*Encyclopedia Britannica*



EL HOMBRE OVE PARECIA VN CABALLO.
RAFAEL AREVALO MARTINEZ.

OVEZALTEMANGO
MCMXV

THE MAN WHO RESEMBLED A HORSE

Rafael Arevalo Martinez

(translated from the Spanish by William Carlos Williams)

AT THE time we were presented he was at one end of the apartment, his head on one side, as horses are accustomed to stand, with an air as if unconscious of all going on round him. He had long, stiff and dried out limbs, strangely put together, like those of one of the characters in an english illustration to Gulliver's Travels. But my impression that the man in some mysterious way resembled a horse was not obtained then, except in a subconscious manner,



Colombian poet Porfirio Barba Jacob

I received the knowledge of the soul of senor de Aretal. Thus I became aware of many things unknown before. Through aerial routes — what else are the fingers, or velvety leaves, for what else but aerial routes are the leaves—I received something from that man which had been lacking me till that time. I had been an adventurous shrub which prolongs its filiments until it finds the necessary humus in new earth. And how I fed! I fed with the joy of tremulous leaves of chlorafile that spread themselves to the sun; with the joy with which a root encounters a decomposing corpse; with the joy with which convalescents take their vascillating steps in the light-flooded mornings of spring; with the joy with which a child clings to the nutritious breast and afterward, being full, smiles in his dreams at the vision of a snowy udder. Bah! all things which complete themselves have had that joy. God, some day, will be nothing more than a food for us: something needed for our life. Thus smile children and the young when they feel themselves gratified by nutrition.

What does “new earth” signify for Williams and what does it imply about the poetry of *Al Que Quiere*!?



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OTHERS

A MAGAZINE *of the* NEW VERSE

JULY 1915

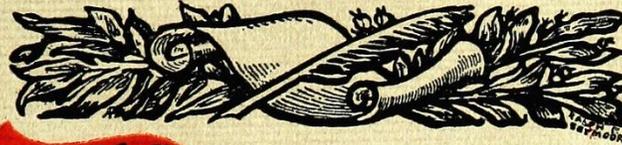
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Poetry
A Magazine of
Verse

CONTENTS

The Silent House	- - -	Agnes Lee
Two Poems	- -	Edmund Kemper Broadus
Santa Barbara Beach	-	Ridgely Torrence
Maternity	- - -	Alice Meynell
Three Poems	- -	Fannie Stearns Davis
Four Poems	- - -	Samuel McCoy
"The Hill Flowers"	- - -	Alfred Noyes

Editorial Comment

The Servian Epic—Imagisme—A Few Don'ts by
an Imagiste

Notes and Announcements

543 Cass Street, Chicago

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MARCH MCMXIII

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

splendidly expressed in some classic (and the school musters altogether a most formidable erudition).

2. They re-wrote his verses before his eyes, using about ten words to his fifty.

Even their opponents admit of them—ruefully—
“At least they do keep bad poets from writing!”

I found among them an earnestness that is amazing to one accustomed to the usual London air of poetic dilettantism. They consider that Art is all science, all religion, philosophy and metaphysic. It is true that *snobisme* may be urged against them; but it is at least *snobisme* in its most dynamic form, with a great deal of sound sense and energy behind it; and they are stricter with themselves than with any outsider.

F. S. Flint

 A FEW DON'TS BY AN IMAGISTE

An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term “complex” rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application.

It is the presentation of such a “complex” instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that

whether the group itself knew anything about the "movement." I gleaned these facts.

The *imagistes* admitted that they were contemporaries of the Post Impressionists and the Futurists; but they had nothing in common with these schools. They had not published a manifesto. They were not a revolutionary school; their only endeavor was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time,—in Sappho, Catullus, Villon. They seemed to be absolutely intolerant of all poetry that was not written in such endeavor, ignorance of the best tradition forming no excuse. They had a few rules, drawn up for their own satisfaction only, and they had not published them. They were:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

By these standards they judged all poetry, and found most of it wanting. They held also a certain 'Doctrine of the Image,' which they had not committed to writing; they said that it did not concern the public, and would provoke useless discussion.

The devices whereby they persuaded approaching poetasters to attend their instruction were:

1. They showed him his own thought already

“The poems are for the most part short, written in conversational language, as spoken, but rhythmical I think. The stanzas are short; I was searching for some formal arrangement of the lines, perhaps a stanzaic form. I have always had something to say and the sheer sense of what is spoken seemed to me all important, yet I knew the poem must have shape. From this time on you can see the struggle to get a form without deforming the language. In theme, the poems of *Al Que Quiere!* reflect things around me.”—*I Wanted to Write a Poem*

About *The Tempers* (1913) that preceded *Al Que Quiere!*: “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.”—*I Wanted to Write a Poem*





"Nude Descending a Staircase"

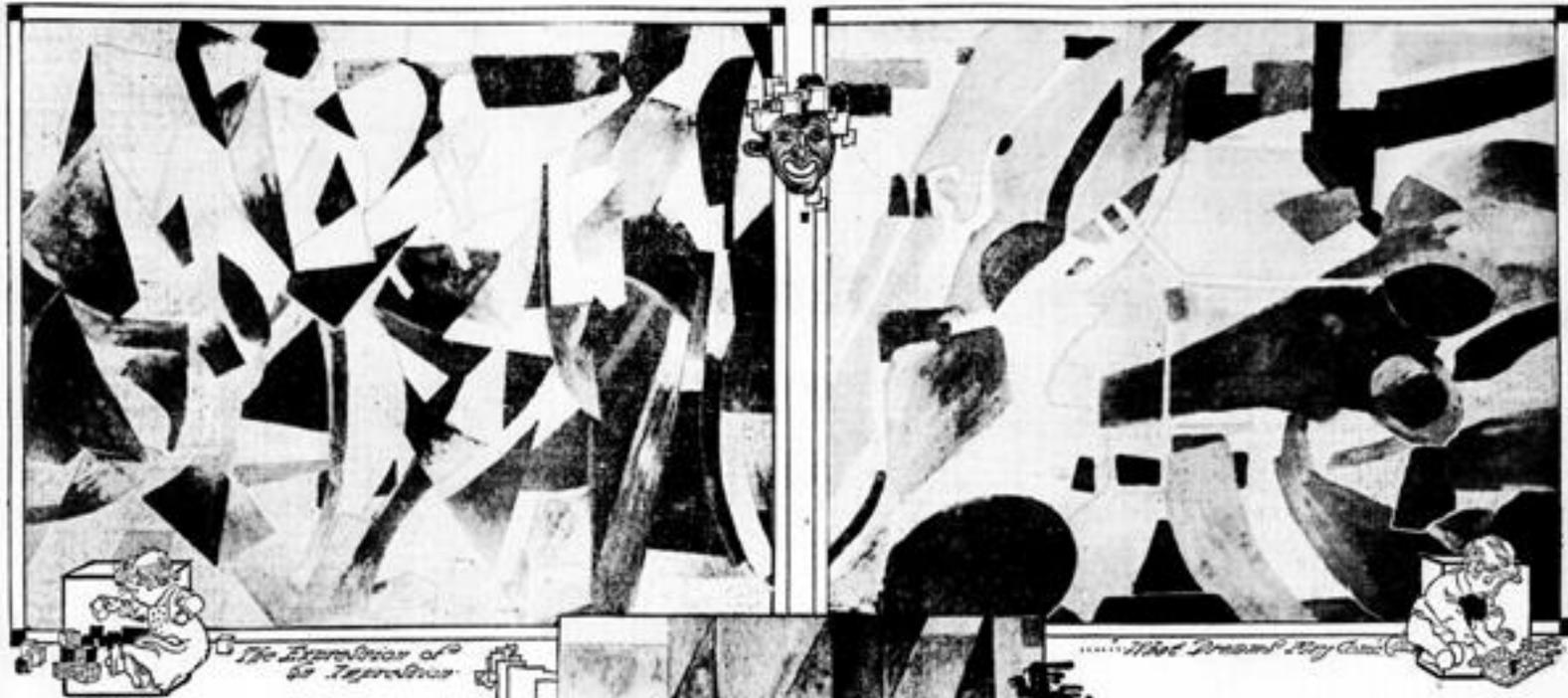
PART II
EIGHT PAGES.

New-York  Tribune

MISCELLANY
AND ART.

NEW-YORK, SUNDAY, MARCH 9, 1913.

A POST-CUBIST'S IMPRESSIONS OF NEWYORK



M. Francois Picabia, of Paris, at The Tribune's invitation, fares forth into New York's highways and makes a mental collection of impressions of the great city of the Western World—The moods which these impressions cause he expresses here in line and form.

This leading painter of the newest of the new schools explains that the seeker for enlightenment must not seek for depiction or objective presentation in these or any other pictures which he makes—he will find many who will cordially agree with him.

Source of Spanish poems
WCW translated between
1910 and 1913.

ln

POESÍAS

SELECTAS CASTELLANAS

DESDO EL TIEMPO DE JUAN DE VENA
HASTA NUESTRO DÍA

REVISADAS Y REORDENADAS

POR D. MANUEL JOSEF QUINTANA.

BIBLIOTECA
D. S. L.

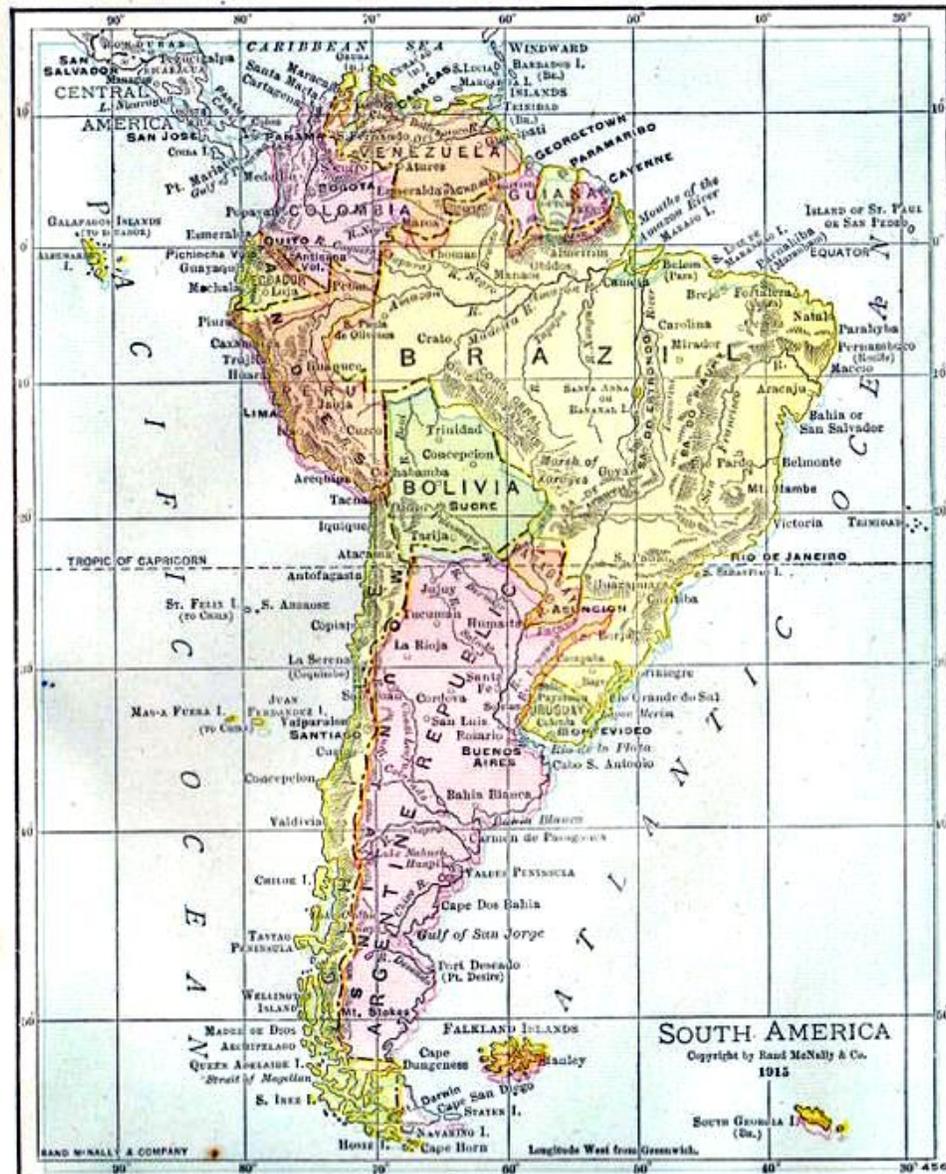
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M A D R I D:

POR GONZÁLEZ FERNÁNDEZ Y COMPAÑÍA.
1897.

“I’m going to begin work on a **translation from the Spanish** in another month. The work is from 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.**”—Letter to brother Edgar, 1910

SOUTH AMERICA



- Rafael Arévalo Martínez (Guatemala)
- José Santos Chocano (Peru)
- Alfonso Guillén Zelaya (Honduras)
- Luis Carlos López (Colombia)
- José Asunción Silva (Colombia)
- Juan Julián Lastra (Argentina)
- Leopoldo Díaz (Argentina)

OTHERS

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MY LIFE IS A MEMORY

When I met her I loved myself.
It was she who had my best singing,
she who set flame to my obscure youth,
she who raised my eyes toward heaven.

Her love moistened me, it was an essence.
I folded my heart like a handkerchief
and after I turned the key on my existence.

And thus it perfumes my soul
with a distant and subtle poetry.

**How does the Spanish element of Williams's
“new earth” reveal itself in *Al Que Quiere!*?**

1. Spanish title of book
2. Spanish epigraph of book
3. Spanish titles of four poems
4. Use of Spanish/Cuban place name (i.e., “Santiago Grove”) local to Rutherford
5. Symbolism like that found in Spanish Modernismo
6. Baroque wordplay of Spanish literary tradition

The Spanish American Roots of

WILLIAM
CARLOS
WILLIAMS

by Julio Marzán

“[Spanish] has a strong appeal to me, temperamentally, as a relief from the classic mood of both French and Italian. Spanish is not, in the sense to which I refer, a literary language. It has a place of its own, an independent place very sympathetic to the **New World**. This independence, this lack of integration with our British past gives us **an opportunity, facing Spanish literature, to make new appraisals**, especially in attempting translations, which should permit us to use our language with unlimited freshness. In such attempts we will not have to follow precedent but can branch off into a **new diction, adapting new forms, even discovering new forms**. . . .”—*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*

If more of the Spanish were better translated - more in the spirit of modern American letters, ~~###~~ using word of mouth and no literary english - 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.

“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 Amerikanish [truly American].”—Ezra Pound to WCW, in letter dated November 10, 1917—publication month of *Al Que Quiere!*

Había sido un arbusto desmedrado que prolonga sus filamentos hasta encontrar el humus necesario en una tierra nueva. Y cómo me nutría! Me nutría con la beatitud con que las hojas trémulas de clorófila se extienden al sol; con la beatitud con que una raíz encuentra un cadáver en descomposición; con la beatitud con que los convalecientes dan sus pasos vacilantes en las mañanas de primavera, bañadas de luz;...

RAFAEL ARÉVALO MARTÍNEZ

Tierra Nueva = Carlos Williams (“two bloods”)
+ Modernism/Imagism + Spanish Translation &
Modernismo + American Language & Place =

A BOOK OF POEMS
AL QUE QUIERE!



WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

**“I had been an adventurous
shrub which prolongs its
filaments until it finds the
necessary humus in new
earth. And how I fed! . . .”**