



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

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Report on
Místa mezi místy: pomezí americké poezie
Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 2015
submitted by Mariana Machová
for her habilitation

Mariana Machová's study of three U.S. poets is a persuasive and insightful book. In my view it meets all necessary requirements for a habilitation text, and her application should now go forward to the next stage in the habilitation process at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. In what follows I will explain why I think this work fulfills the requirements for this academic rank and why more generally Machová is an important scholar.

The work devotes a chapter each to Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Thom Gunn, poets whose careers overlapped in the twentieth century. As her controlling idea Machová takes *meze* (margins, boundaries limits), demonstrating how such figures play through poems in thematic and formal variations. Her main method is close reading: substantial sections of each chapter are devoted to detailed analysis of poems – line by line, rhyme by rhyme – as Machová balances her general argument with granular textual observation. It is at all times illuminating to follow her as she gazes into the intricate mechanisms of these verbal devices, adeptly showing their internal relations as well as how they exist within larger and longer traditions. As a hermeneutics, close reading is approaching its centenary in anglophone criticism. From the 1970s to the 2000s it fell out of fashion, marginalized by contextual approaches like New Historicism and Cultural Studies, or critical practices inflected by poststructuralism. Our period now is often referred to as post-theoretical, and while this is largely inaccurate, it nonetheless indicates how critical theory has ceded at least enough scope to allow close reading the opportunity to return. And return it has, in the work of leading scholars, especially among those who deal with poetry. Machová's criticism is rooted solidly in this advance guard.

Also, her idea of *meze* (margins, boundaries) is expertly threaded through her readings of poems, revealing surprising and original readings. To take the two ends of her spectrum, Moore and Gunn: I was struck repeatedly by the commonalities of attitude and execution that Machová revealed between these two different poets. In a winsome anecdote, Gunn once



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recollected how he found himself passing a joint between Freewheelin' Frank of Hells Angels and Elizabeth Bishop, opining that this also characterized his place in the literary firmament. In Machová's study we find Frank removed by Marianne Moore, who sits down on Bishop's other side. Thus, Machová's very choice of three poets is instructive, as it precipitates new associations and approaches. She chooses a tactic which might be called, at its base, moral, as she shows how these poets *respect* the objects, animals, and humans that they encounter in their texts. They attempt – through their formal, tonal, and lexical choices – to deal with them discreetly and discerningly, while still disclosing their essential attributes. In connection with Moore, this is a critical commonplace, but Machová's discussion of her poems shows how such concerns open up new paths through the work of her chosen poets. By following such morals of *meze* we also follow the joint – to go back to the initial anecdote – as it goes from Moore, past Bishop to Gunn, as we watch the moral tact with which he deals with, say, the people he elegized in *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992). We were previously, perhaps, too distracted by the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll of Gunn's *oeuvre* to see how on this ethical level (one cannot say *deeper* level), he is germane to Moore and Bishop. This is a genuine revelation of his work.

It is also worth dwelling on the American aspect of these issues mentioned in the book's title. As Machová acknowledges, it is not uncontested in the case of Gunn (he was a self-described Anglo-American poet); and Bishop and Moore also stand at an angle to the US literary tradition that was codified in mid-twentieth century criticism. For Bishop, this is due to her birthplace and sojourns abroad; but also, along with Moore, she cannot be indisputably inducted into a literary pantheon so gendered that has an "American Adam" standing guard at the entrance. Machová hardly engages with more recent ideas of the US literary tradition – not those inflected by New Historicism, Transnationalism, and race and sexual identity (though she does engage with feminist readings). Rather, she feminizes and expands the older conception of US literature, placing an American Eve beside the longstanding Adam. In this sense her readings go against the current, as only residual traces of that older framework remain in contemporary criticism. (Indeed, at certain points I felt that she put too much strain on the work of Tony Tanner, as he was frequently cited as touchstone for this older approach – although this pays off in the chapter on Gunn, where Machová adduces their friendship, emphasized by Tanner's dedication to Gunn of one of his studies.)

A further aspect of the work that will strike the reader is that it is in Czech. This choice connects on several levels with the nature of the study itself. First, it indicates the orientation of the critic, that is, Machová is primarily addressing the Czech literary-critical context and not the anglophone one. If she had addressed the latter, she would have been part of debates that have continued about U.S. poetry for as long as this tradition has putatively existed; also, there is already a substantial secondary literature on these three poets, especially on the first two. As evidenced by her activities, she is more than able to contribute to those debates, and is a valued voice in that international community of critics. Second, by turning to the Czech context, she takes a risk. These poets are not well-known in this country, so her work must be, in part, of an introductory nature – explaining biographies, contexts, as well as formal and thematic trajectories – in short, the material that is normally covered by encyclopedia entries. However, while indeed she has *introduced* these poets, Machová has



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also, with great finesse, engaged with their *oeuvres* in a profound manner (see above, and below). This is an uncommon accomplishment.

A third felicitous consequence of her choice of language is that it draws attention to the issue of translation. Machová is known for her outstanding translations of Bishop, and she has also translated from Spanish and Old English. She knows how to cross the boundary between one language and another, and is thus alert to this dynamic *within* the poems themselves. Here she draws on and develops her *Elizabeth Bishop and Translation* (2016), and the idea compels further comment here. When reading a poem, Machová will frequently comment on how one passage or another might be translated into Czech. At first, the reader might ask: who cares? Why should issues of translation into a minor European language be salient to readings of an anglophone poet? Yet, we become aware that behind such a translational approach is a sophisticated hermeneutics of reading, one that complements that of “close reading” mentioned above. This allows her to come even closer to the pulse of the poem; and because translation is, as I’ve indicated above, about crossing boundaries, what she finds there harmonizes with the overarching theme of her study. It is a striking and rare example of concord between method and subject matter.

My only complaint about the book is that there is not more of it. I would have liked to hear how Machová extended such ideas into considerations of other poets. I would also be curious if such issues were really “American,” and whether we might not find them in other anglophone poets outside the US. (My suspicion is that a foxed exceptionalism is at work here.) Machová’s idea of *meze*, implemented with such *sprezzatura* here, might be profitably used to consider other poets. At the least, a substantial conclusion might have sketched out some of those prospects beyond the three poets (and national tradition) discussed.

This reservation will, I hope, be viewed for what it fundamentally is – a compliment. Machová is an outstanding critic, from whom I have already learnt much and want to learn more.



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