

May 31, 2011

To the Doctoral Committee:

I have read with pleasure the dissertation Elizabeth Bishop: Translation as Poetics by Mariana Machova. The dissertation makes an important, original contribution to the study of this major 20th century poet. It is beautifully written and demonstrates careful, creative scholarship, theoretical sophistication, and sensitive, illuminating close reading. I highly recommend this dissertation to the authorities granting the doctoral degree.

The topic of this dissertation is itself a mark of Mariana's critical originality. As she points out, while many Bishop commentators have noted the poet's penchant for translation, and have found local affinities between her translated work and her original poetry, no one has studied Bishop's translation work as a whole. Given Bishop's importance as a poet who imagines the world in a transnational way, and whose reach of influence has become increasingly global, the topic is apt and timely. Mariana has carefully researched the topic, locating all of Bishop's translations and comments on translation, as well as all the critical remarks relevant to this endeavor. Even more important, she has pointed out and corrected mistakes in the published record of Bishop's translations. (She notes a particularly troubling case in which the Library of America has perpetuated the error of printing an early version of a translation, when Bishop had in her lifetime published a revision, in response to an author's revision in the original language.) But this is so much more than a compendium or editorial contribution. Mariana carefully considers the local arguments of other readers, and takes her own stand—without polemics, but with a thoughtful, informed perspective. I have been writing about Bishop and reading Bishop criticism throughout my career, yet there was a significant amount of information in Part I that was new to me, especially about Bishop's interest in Max Jacob, and her translation of popular Brazilian songs. Mariana has not only studied Bishop's translations, she has studied the writers she translates, so that her discussion of Bishop's work brings a full reserve of knowledge about the writers and their backgrounds. As the dissertation makes clear, the types of works and the circumstances of translation differ considerably. Mariana manages to make important claims about Bishop's approach to translation as a whole, while remaining sensitive to these differences. She also shows that what Bishop chooses to translate can tell us as much about the poet as the approach she takes in the actual translations. We are reminded how important humor is for this poet even as she approaches tragic or frightening subjects. Mariana does not make inflated claims for Bishop as a translator, but she clearly admires the poet's efforts to bring these works to contemporary, English speaking audiences without entirely imposing contemporary English language models on foreign materials. Bishop's "creative principle" of translation involved, the dissertation argues, a respect for "the other" and a sense that translation can never and should never master its object. This argument provides a clear explanation for Bishop's tendency to leave foreign

words in her translations, or to create awkward translations that remind us we are not reading the original.

I am particularly impressed by how this practical focus on translation makes room for new insight into so many central themes and formal considerations of Bishop's work—her relational view of other cultures, her exploration of various forms (folk forms and more traditional and elevated forms), her tendency to make rethinking part of the poem, not just a step toward its perfection. Mariana is certainly right to see "translation as poetics," not just as a circumscribed part of Bishop's practice. In Part II of the dissertation Mariana convincingly turns from discussing Bishop's work as a translator, to arguing for its importance to her work as a poet. Here the dissertation widens to appreciate the poet's sensibility as she approaches the natural world, other cultures, and other perspectives. Rather than reducing her vision to a monologic, or even a dialectical one, Bishop reveals her own perspective and its limits, while opening out to other possibilities. Mariana is of course not the first to notice this quality in Bishop's work, and this section of the dissertation would have benefited from a bit more conversation with other critics (such as she conducted in such an exemplary way in Part I). But she brings something new to our understanding by associating this quality with translation as an activity that trains the imagination to an open and relational rather than objectifying and mastering view of the world. The poems selected to exemplify "translation as poetics" all contain metaphors or references that can be directly associated with translation, so the grouping is convincing in its relevance. The close readings are beautiful, engaging, and nuanced, demonstrating that Mariana herself practices as a critic the same principle of "translation poetics" that she admires in Bishop as a poet.

This dissertation was a pleasure to read from beginning to end. I encourage the author to seek a publisher for this important work.

Sincerely,

Bonnie Costello
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