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*Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese*

# COGNITIVE POETIC READINGS IN ELIZABETH BISHOP

PORTRAIT OF A MIND THINKING

APPLICATIONS OF  
COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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# Cognitive Poetic Readings in Elizabeth Bishop

Portrait of a Mind Thinking

*by*

Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese



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## Acknowledgements

Among the poems I chose to discuss during the first poetry course I taught was Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art". Its linguistic discipline, emotional reticence and ironic admonition "*(Write it!)*" seemed to undermine the consensus of the American critics I had read that the poem's speaker should be identified with its author. To my students and to myself, raised in the Polish hermeneutic tradition, such an identification sounded risky. Nevertheless, we did feel compelled to speculate about the person speaking in Bishop's poem.

Looking for a reading that would reconcile the subjectivity of the voice heard in the poem and the objectivity of the poem's language, I turned to cognitive linguistics. Within this theoretical framework, individual poetic thought and expression are considered to develop from the cognitive constructs of the human mind. The poet and the reader are two conceptualizers whose imaginative writing and reading depend on the same mental faculties. I have been resorting to cognitive linguistics, and specifically to cognitive poetics, in my attempts to understand readings of poetry performed by critics, students and myself.

This book records one such attempt: relying on the cognitive science of the human mind reflected in language, I present my thoughts on eight poems composed by Elizabeth Bishop and examined by her scholars. The presented readings of the poems and their drafts reveal myself as their conceptualizer, even though the academic convention favours the use of the plural "we" in relating literary interpretations.

I would like to thank Elżbieta Tabakowska for introducing me to the lively community of literary scholars interested in cognitive poetics, whose passionate readings have been my constant inspiration. My special thanks go to Marta Gibińska-Marzec and Margaret Freeman, whose pertinent comments have shaped this book.

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Finally, I am grateful to Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC, for their permission to quote both from Elizabeth Bishop's published work and her unpublished manuscripts held at Vassar Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection on behalf of the Estate of Elizabeth Bishop. Copyright © 2010 by Alice Helen Methfessel.

# Table of contents

Acknowledgements .....	v
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## Part one

### *Introduction*

The making of poetic convention: Elizabeth Bishop's poetics and cognitive poetics .....	3
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### *Chapter one*

Six dimensions of imaginative apprehension .....	18
1. Categorization .....	26
2. Image schemas .....	32
3. Conceptual metaphors and image metaphors .....	35
4. Conceptual integration .....	40
5. Metonymies .....	46
6. Narrative structure .....	50

### *Chapter two*

Three of Elizabeth Bishop's licensing stories .....	57
1. Looking .....	58
2. Exploration .....	64
3. Seascape .....	69

## Part two

### *Introduction*

The splendid particularity of an individual poem: Cognitive poetics and genetic criticism .....	79
---	----

### *Case studies*

Eight cognitive readings in Elizabeth Bishop	
1. Books of travel under a powerful reading-glass ("Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance"; metonymy) .....	93
2. Conceptual correspondences between the bight and the desk ("The Bight"; conceptual integration) .....	115
3. Elizabeth Bishop's idea of "knowledge" ("At the Fishhouses"; VERTICALITY image schema) .....	136
4. Pointing out Santos ("Arrival at Santos"; POINTING-OUT idealized cognitive model) .....	159

5. Mapping travel and its images (“Questions of Travel”; image metaphor) . . . . .	179
6. Understanding as sandpiper’s seeing (“Sandpiper”; SEEING conceptual schema) . . . . .	199
7. The simple path of a life’s journey and its story (“The Moose”; inheritance hierarchy based on the PATH image schema) . . . . .	218
8. Patterning the walk of the mind (“The End of March”; cultural model of the walk poem) . . . . .	243
 <b>Epilogue</b>	
Portrait of a mind reading . . . . .	265
 <b>Appendices</b>	
1. Elizabeth Bishop: Chronology . . . . .	273
2. The MIND-AS-BODY system . . . . .	275
3. The THINKER IS A MOVER AND MANIPULATOR metaphor . . . . .	278
 <b>Primary sources</b>	
1. Elizabeth Bishop manuscripts . . . . .	279
2. Elizabeth Bishop publications . . . . .	280
3. Elizabeth Bishop interviews . . . . .	281
 <b>Works consulted</b>	
1. Elizabeth Bishop criticism . . . . .	283
2. Cognitive linguistics . . . . .	291
3. Cognitive poetics . . . . .	302
4. Genetic criticism . . . . .	306
5. Miscellaneous . . . . .	307
6. Dictionaries . . . . .	311
 <b>Index</b> . . . . .	 313

## **Part one**





# Introduction

## The making of poetic convention

*to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking*<sup>1</sup>

*The human mind is linguistic and literary.*<sup>2</sup>

In October 1933, Elizabeth Bishop, then a twenty-two-year-old senior student at Vassar College, writes her first letter to Donald E. Stanford, himself an aspiring poet.<sup>3</sup> The exchange records a rare occasion: approximating, clarifying, explaining, defending, defining one's own poetics. What makes the occasion even rarer is Bishop's unusual outspokenness, although her more typical reticence in discussing "poetic craft" should not be mistaken for shyness. She admits she has been writing poetry professionally for only two years; she can acknowledge a fault in composition; but, when convinced otherwise, she would firmly argue for her choices. Hence the letter dated November 20, 1933, opens with her defence of poetry "which is in action, within itself" (*One Art* 11). To clarify her distinction into "poetry at rest" (endorsed, she thought, by Stanford) and poetry in action, to which she aspired, Bishop quotes extensively from Morris W. Croll's essay on "The Baroque style in prose". She rounds off the quotations with a focusing remark:

But the best part, which perfectly describes the sort of poetic convention I would like to make for myself (and which explains, I think, something of Hopkins), is this: "Their purpose (the writers of Baroque prose) was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking ... They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth" (*One Art* 12).

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1. Morris W. Croll, *The Baroque style in prose*, *Studies in English Philology in Honor of Frederick Klaeber*, edited by Kemp Malone and Martin B. Ruud (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1929). Reprinted in *Modern Essays in Criticism: Seventeenth Century Prose*, ed. Stanley Fish (Oxford UP, 1971) 29.
  2. Mark Turner, *Reading Minds. The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton UP: 1991) vii.
  3. Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art. The Selected Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, and London: Chatto, 1994) 9–11. Henceforth references in the main text to *One Art*. Giroux explains the exchange was suggested by Yvor Winters, editor of the *Hound & Horn*, where Bishop's poems received honourable mention.

Four months later, in February 1934, *Vassar Review* publishes Bishop's essay "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry",<sup>4</sup> where she contemplates one mind thinking, the mind whose motions she has been trying to comprehend and creatively transpose into her own poetry. Encouraged by Croll's discussion of the Baroque "struggle between a fixed pattern and an energetic forward movement",<sup>5</sup> she suggests a notion of timing as an analytical strategy that might account for the (reader's) differentiation between poetry at rest and poetry in action. She denies the apparent inadequacy of the term. True, it refers primarily to physical motion; however, "poetry considered in a very simple way is motion too: the releasing, checking, timing, and repeating of the movement of the mind according to ordered systems" (in Schwartz and Estess 1983: 273). Outside an individual poem, correct timing qualifies the very process of poetic composition – just as a moving marksman hits a moving target, the poet "grasps" the poem: "The poem, unique and perfect seems to be separate from the conscious mind, deliberately avoiding it, while the conscious mind takes difficult steps toward it" (in Schwartz and Estess 1983: 274–275). Bishop's evocation of the conscious mind approaching the elusive poem echoes Croll's description of the Baroque curt style: "there is a progress of imaginative apprehension, a revolving and upward motion of the mind as it rises in energy, and views the same point from new levels".<sup>6</sup>

Difficult steps of the mind towards imaginative apprehension of a point, idea, poem lead to particular compositional decisions. For example, a question about the use of the grammatical tense becomes "a question how poetry is written".<sup>7</sup> To justify her employment of the present tense in "At the Fishhouses", a poem from her second volume, Elizabeth Bishop summons Croll's argument "that baroque sermons (Donne's for instance) attempted to dramatize the mind in action rather than in repose" – thirty-three years after she had read the essay. A recognized poet by now, with three well-received collections and prestigious awards to her name,<sup>8</sup> she still finds Croll's analysis essential to the discussion

4. Reprinted in Schwartz and Estess 1983: 273–275; see also Case Study 2.

5. Another quotation from Croll's essay to be found in Bishop's reading notes. Vassar Rare Books and Manuscripts, The Elizabeth Bishop Papers, Folder 54.21.

6. The passage Bishop included in her reading notes (Folder 54.21) and quoted in her letter to Stanford (*One Art* 12).

7. Elizabeth Bishop interviewed by Ashley Brown. *Shenandoah*, 17 (winter 1966) 3–19, reprinted in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. George Monteiro (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996) 26. Further references in the main text to *Conversations*.

8. See Appendix 1 for the chronology of Bishop's life. For a concise presentation of Bishop's personal and professional life, see Giroux's introduction to *One Art*; for a detailed biography, Millier 1993.

of her own poetics and craft: “the use of the present tense helps to convey this sense of the mind in action (...) switching tenses always gives effects of depth, space, foreground, background, and so on” (*Conversations* 26).

To appreciate Bishop’s career-long discipline in dramatizing the mind in action, to investigate the sort of poetic convention she was consistently making for herself, I wish to adopt an interpretative strategy which puts equal emphasis on the mind thinking. To trace the movement of the mind in the language of Bishop’s poems, I want to view her compositional choices as reflecting dynamic cognitive processes. I argue, therefore, that such a congenial critical framework can be offered by **cognitive poetics**, a theory of literature grounded in cognitive linguistics as it has developed since the late 1970s: Ronald Langacker’s theory of meaning as conceptualization and grammar as construal; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s work on metaphor as well as Günter Radden and Zoltán Kövácse’s research on metonymy as pervasive modes of thinking; Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s study of mental spaces and the process of conceptual integration.<sup>9</sup> Within this framework (which I present briefly in Chapter One and detail in Case Studies), literature is understood as “the most dramatic and textured expression of the human mind” (Turner 1991: 16). Hence, literary criticism of cognitive persuasion relies on the systematic analysis of language supported by the interdisciplinary analysis of the mind – studies conducted in neuroscience, connectionism, cognitive psychology, or cognitive anthropology. Adequate knowledge of our conceptual apparatus, which for the most part remains unconscious, can help us to understand the workings of everyday language, and – by extension – the composition and explication of a literary text. As Margaret Freeman, a pioneering cognitive poetician, aptly formulated it in her 2000 article entitled “Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Towards a cognitive theory of literature”: “[L]iterary texts are the products of cognizing minds and their interpretations the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and are read” (253).

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9. See Works Consulted for more details. The term *cognitive poetics* was first used by Reuven Tsur; nowadays it refers more generally to “recent cognitive linguistic research, especially that being done in conceptual integration, blending, and metaphor” (Margaret Freeman 2000: 278). Mark Turner (1991) speaks of *cognitive rhetoric*; a recent volume of essays on literature in the cognitive perspective is entitled *Cognitive Stylistics*. For the ever growing lists of publications in the field, consult annotated bibliographies available at, e.g., the Literature, Cognition and the Brain website: <http://www2.bc.edu/~richard/lcb/home.html> and the website of the coglit discussion group: <http://palimpsest.lss.edu/~danaher/coglit/publications.html>. See also Stockwell 2002 as well as Gavins and Steen 2003.

Let me come back to Elizabeth Bishop's concept of the poetic mind progressing in "imaginative apprehension". What characteristics of this progress are vital to Bishop's poetics? How can cognitive poetics assist me as a cognizing mind in my readings of her poems? How can I take advantage of cognitive linguistics to examine both Bishop's deployment of language and her thinking about poetic composition? To briefly introduce the basic assumptions of cognitive poetics – which will be elaborated throughout the whole book – I will look now at those particularly relevant to Bishop's writing.

## Embodiment

According to Elizabeth Bishop, the "imaginative apprehension" should not distance the apprehender from the apprehended. This ideal holds true within cognitive poetics: as meaning is anchored in experience, an idea is not separated from the act of experiencing it. It cannot be, since "experience is the result of embodied sensorimotor and cognitive structures that generate meaning in and through our ongoing interactions with our changing environments" (Johnson and Lakoff 2002: 248).<sup>10</sup> These interactions of the human person (or "brain-in-body"<sup>11</sup>) with the physical, social, cultural environments, and with other people, give rise to radial categories centred around prototypes, image schemas, conceptual metaphors, blends, metonymies, cognitive and cultural models. Such dynamic cognitive constructs structure meaning; they pattern the ways we think and speak. Therefore, they allow for similarities in thinking and expression, because all of us, as human beings, share certain features. Furthermore, they can explain differences caused by our social and cultural conditioning.

## The cognitive unconscious

One of our most basic interactions with the physical environment is movement through space: we traverse a physical surface, we follow a route from its starting

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10. Cf. Mark Johnson's influential book, with its telling title: *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1978); also Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1999. For the notion of "extended embodiment", postulating the socio-cultural grounding of language, which complements its bodily basis, see Sinha and Jensen de López 2000, Sinha 2002.

11. Cf. Turner's cognitive re-definition of the human person as "patterns of activity in the brain", and of the body as "mappings in that brain" (1991: 151).

point, passing a sequence of locations on our way to an end point which we may or may not reach. All the instances of such movement share a recurrent preconceptual pattern: the PATH image schema.<sup>12</sup> Its internal structure (a source, a goal, a route from the source to the goal, a moving trajector, its position, direction, a trajectory of motion) assists our thinking about abstract concepts, such as time, states, events, causes, life, mind, creativity. Skeletal, dynamic and flexible, the PATH schema orders our knowledge of motion, organizes Elizabeth Bishop's experience of travels, underlies Croll's description of the Baroque style: "a revolving and upward motion of the mind as it rises in energy, and views the same point from new levels". Yet, hardly ever do we pause to consciously consider its workings. Like other schemas, it is used automatically, unconsciously, and therefore effortlessly, in our cognitive functioning.

### **Metaphorical thought**

When we focus on Croll's description of the Baroque style once again, we will notice that this instantiation of the PATH image schema is at the same time an elaboration of the conventionalized conceptual metaphor THINKING IS MOVING. It prompts us to use the more concrete domain of motion (with its imagery and language) to refer to the more abstract domain of thought. This conceptual correspondence has been entrenched in our culture and linguistic performance. Croll urges us to elaborate it, that is, to further detail one element: the manner of motion. In this way he invites us to regard the domain of the Baroque thought and style as similarly characterised by revolution, ascendancy and energy. Additionally, Croll's linguistic realization of the conventional THINKING-AS-MOVING metaphor builds on another conventional metaphor, THINKING IS PERCEIVING. The mind not only moves but also observes – it makes the most of the two basic capacities of the human body to actively organize our experience (cf. Johnson 1987: 20 on Neisser's discussion of schemas). These two capacities are chosen by Elizabeth Bishop to creatively structure her own poetic experience: she envisages her poetics as the motion of the observing mind. Rehearsed in numerous poems, it displays an astonishing artistic discipline, the discipline which owes a lot to the existence of the entire conceptual MIND-AS-BODY system (Sweetser 1990; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; see also Appendix 2). As the conventional way of reasoning about the mind, this system under-

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12. Following the accepted notation, conceptual structures (for example: image schemas, categories, conceptual metaphors and cognitive models) are written in small capitals.

pins Bishop's idiosyncratic understanding of poetry. Within the MIND-AS-BODY system, thinking, which includes composing a poem, is understood not only as moving and perceiving, but also as manipulating objects and eating<sup>13</sup> – the metaphors highlighting various aspects of the (poetic) mind's activity and thus guiding Bishop's steps toward the poem.

### **Categorization centred around prototypes**

Seen by Elizabeth Bishop as elusive and "separate from the conscious mind", the poem requires approaching and grasping – in other words or, rather, in one word: "apprehension". The etymology of this word reveals the history of a category formation: "*apprehend, apprehension* < L *apprehendere: ad* ("to, towards, in the direction of") + *prehendere* ("seize")" (cf. Jäkel 1995). Licensed by the MIND-AS-BODY system, this particular category embraces both thinking as movement and thinking as object manipulation. It can thus be distinguished from "comprehension", going back to Latin *comprehendere: cum* ("with") and *prehendere* ("seize"), which emphasizes object manipulation, strengthened by the instrumental *cum*. This etymological evidence shows that at some point in our mental functioning we needed these two categories to entertain the concept of understanding and express its varied senses.<sup>14</sup>

Within the cognitive framework, which regards categorization as fundamental to human cognition (Lakoff 1987; Taylor 1995), Bishop's fine differentiations can be considered attempts at establishing basic level categories that would secure her at least a passable functioning in the environment. And her expectations of this functioning are high, just as her perceptual demands on herself and the world are. The making of such fine distinctions testifies to a high degree of Bishop's expertise, as well as to the intensity of her observation.

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13. See Appendix 2 for details.

14. Compare Robert Potts's reflections on the development of the concept: "The movement of 'apprehension', as recorded in the *OED*, displays a spectrum between these opposite meanings ['a taking hold of, a clear perception of, an understanding' versus 'incomprehension and fear']. It means physical grip, or purchase; it means grasping with one's senses, perceiving rather than touching; it means grasping with one's mind – comprehension – rather than perceiving; it means sensing with one's mind, intuitively, rather than comprehending; and it means anticipating, expecting, predicting – generally fearfully. We have moved from a sure grasp to an anxious speculation. The word itself slips through our fingers, until it is hazy, indistinct. What started as physical possession has ended up as a haunting" (2002: 41).

The greater the expertise of the conceptualizer who creates categories as networks centred around prototypical, that is, representative members, the lower the level of categorization.

### Conceptualist and encyclopedic semantics

Such a fine-tuning of concepts and words that express them, in her own work and in the works of others, justifies Bishop's claim: "I like words very much and I love dictionaries". It also explains her wish: "My dream is to have a complete Webster, in 13 volumes. But it costs too much" (Bishop in 1977, *Conversations* 77–78). This dream came true towards the end of the poet's life. Her letter of June 30, 1979, opens with an extensive quote from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, volume viii: the definition of "rebarbative"; it proceeds to comment on the possible sources of her confusion about the concept and continues to confess: "I don't see how I am going to Maine (we start about 4 AM tomorrow morning) without these 13 volumes – or how I have lived without them all these years. – Or how, when I get home, I'll ever do anything more than read them" (Folder 33.9). Bishop's lexical passion has significant consequences for her poetics: "In poetry words are the most important things. All ideas are concentrated in them" (*Conversations* 50).

The poet's verbal choices and her attentiveness to ideas concentrated in them can be elegantly analysed within cognitive poetics, which posits a conceptualist semantics and the encyclopedic nature of linguistic meaning. Here meaning is identified with conceptualization, which Langacker defines "as encompassing any kind of mental experience: (i) both established and novel conceptions; (ii) not only abstract or intellectual 'concepts' but also immediate sensory, motor, kinesthetic, and emotive experience; (iii) conceptions that are not instantaneous but change or unfold through processing time; and (iv) full apprehension of the physical, linguistic, social and cultural context" (2007: 431).

The cognitive approach to semantics emphasizes one significant tenet of the poetic convention Elizabeth Bishop specified for herself with Croll's help: "The ardor of [the idea's] conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth". The conceptual fervour, which should distinguish poetic composition, can be experienced at the level of the poem's lexicon. Each lexical item can be observed in action: we can see how it "evokes a set of cognitive domains as the basis for its meaning", how it "ranks these domains: it accords them particular degrees of centrality" (Langacker 2000: 4–5). Thus, for instance, we may notice that the word "comprehension", whose etymology reveals the instrumental preposition used as the prefix, ranks more highly the domain of object manipulation than



the word “apprehension” does. The word “apprehension” evokes primarily the cognitive domain of motion (although we might agree that manipulation is a form of motion as well). As representing a complex category, any typical lexical item secures “access to indefinitely many conceptions and conceptual systems, which it evokes in a flexible, open-ended, context-dependent manner” (Langacker 2000: 4). In terms of encyclopedic semantics, any frequently used expression is generally polysemous – its varied though related senses are different ways of reaching the same domains of knowledge (cf. Langacker 2007: 432).

The analysis which takes into account the encyclopedic nature of linguistic meaning constantly sends the reader back to the dictionary, just as the poet constantly referred to it while composing the poem: to check all ideas concentrated in a word, because “lexicon represents a distillation of shared human experience” (Langacker 2000: 1). More importantly, however, the poet’s individual human experience urges questioning, elaborating, extending, adding ideas to a word. These cognitive acts ensure that “a lexical item takes on a subtly different value every time it is used, depending on which array of associated conceptions it happens to evoke on a given occasion, and the specific level of activation they achieve” (Langacker 2000: 377). Bishop’s associated conceptions can, in turn, be appreciated by her readers patient enough to observe how semantic information listed in the dictionary transforms into encyclopedic information.

Elizabeth Bishop’s eagerness to know thoroughly is recorded on every page of her diaries and journals, as well as in each of her poems. The ardour of her “lexical associating”, characteristic of her composition, accompanied also her poetry reading and influenced her judgements on other language users. The American poet Dana Gioia thus recollects Bishop teaching creative writing and poetry: “She rarely made an attempt to summarize any observations at the end of the discussions. She enjoyed pointing out the particulars of each poem, not generalizing about it, and she insisted that we understand every individual word, even if we had no idea what the poem was about as a whole. ‘Use the dictionary’, she said once. ‘It’s better than the critics’” (*Conversations* 142). Bishop’s teaching observations (she had to evaluate the MIT Writing Programs lecturers) demonstrate the same attentiveness to conceptual detail: the second of the observed teachers scored higher, because “her philological interests did lead her to comment on individual words or phrases here and there, and then the students got into several lively discussions about the use of certain words, meanings, derivations, mis-uses, etc” (Folder 71.7, page 3).

Bishop’s insistence, as a poet and poetry teacher, on the individual word, on the accurate word, does come across as exceptional, even though each verbal