

# Introduction

## Like What We Imagine Knowledge to Be

In the spring of 1982, I was promoted to associate professor with tenure in Pitt's English department. That fall, I began a year as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature at the University of Deusto, in Bilbao, Spain. I had trained as a Victorianist, and I had just spent six years at Pitt teaching freshman composition. I didn't hide any of this when I wrote the application for a position in American Literature.

In the application, I said that I had been teaching contemporary American literature for the past six years, which I had, teaching it both as literature and as writing. (I took time to explain what that distinction meant to me.)

And I said that I had been working on the front lines of American literacy, preparing courses for thousands of students, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, semester after semester, including a substantial number of first-generation college students, mostly working class, some African American, but all of them learning to be writers in America in the mid-1970s, early 1980s, even though these were writers for whom the label *writer* had a difficult or tenuous hold. I knew it was a stretch, but this was an argument I believed in, and so it was easy to write.

I may have used a line from Raymond Williams' essay "Culture is Ordinary." It was hard for me then, as it is hard for me now, to write anything without quoting or channeling Williams. Here is the section of that essay that has had abiding importance for me: "Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land."

He goes on: "A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings." The common, the known, the ordinary—these labels came easily. It is harder for Williams to name what is poised outside: the "creative," the "new," the "the finest individual meanings," the institutions of the arts and learning.

I had been taking the first-year writing course as a primary site of contact and debate and would sometimes label this other arena of knowledge as "academic," a decision I often regret. Williams's point was, however, that "what we imagine knowledge to be" is a product of the meeting of diverse practices and expectations and not the erasure of one by the other. No one of them was, he said, sufficiently articulate.

My dissertation was shaped by his account of Thomas Hardy. In "Notes on English Prose: 1780–1950," Williams locates the debate between ordinary common meanings and "the finest individual meanings" in the differences between narrative language and reported speech, the diverse voices in, say, the novels of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot. Hardy, however, served (as my students have served me) to embody these moments of

contact, these active and fundamental debates, within the work of a single writer:

But Hardy as writer was mainly concerned with the interaction between . . . the educated and the customary: not just as the characteristics of social groups, but as ways of seeing and feeling, within a single mind. And then neither established language would serve to express this tension and disturbance. Neither, in fact, was sufficiently articulate. An educated style, as it had developed in a particular and exclusive group, could be dumb in intensity and limited in humanity. A customary style, while carrying the voice of feeling, could be still thwarted by ignorance and complacent in repetition and habit. Hardy veered between them.

I don't have a copy of my Fulbright application, but whatever it is I wrote, it worked.

Now, in applying for the Fulbright lectureship, I was fulfilling a promise Joyce and I had made to each other when we married, in 1969, a promise that we would use the opportunities of an academic career to live and teach abroad. We wanted our children to learn their Spanish on the streets and on the playgrounds, from the ground up. Joyce, a Spanish teacher, had spent a considerable amount of time studying outside the United States—a summer at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico and a junior year (1967–68) at Complutense, the University of Madrid. I knew if I wanted to keep this beautiful woman in my life, I'd better get with the program. And so I did.

In the fall of 1967, I was working as a waiter at Bunn's Restaurant in Delaware, Ohio, the home of Ohio Wesleyan University. I saved my money. At Thanksgiving I told my parents that I wouldn't be home for the three-week Christmas break, that I was going to Spain to visit Joyce. We had plans to travel south to Granada and Cordoba and then north to ski in Andorra. My father said, "You can't go to

Europe. I've never been to Europe." My mother cried and bought me a raincoat, a trench coat. I lived in Akron, Ohio. I had never been on an airplane, and I had never traveled farther than my parents' hometown, Winona, Minnesota. The trip to Spain changed my life. It's that simple.

In 1982, when I told my senior colleagues what I was doing, that I had been awarded a Fulbright to teach in Bilbao, there was some considerable skepticism. Why would I take a year in Spain? Spain, the Spanish language, Spanish literature, the Basque country—these weren't my "subjects." I wasn't working in that field.

Bob Whitman was the most senior of the seniors. He had a 1956 Harvard PhD. His wife, Marina von Neumann Whitman, was a well-known economist, later a member of Richard Nixon's Council of Economic Advisers. Bob joined Pitt's English department in 1960 as an assistant professor and was promoted to professor in 1967. And in 1967, he became department chair, a post he held until 1973, with a year or two off in Washington, DC. Whitman's subject was drama. He was concerned that I might lose my focus and lose my discipline, that I might fall out of sight.

And I thought, *Well, yeah, that sounds like a plan*. I was eager for breathing room and thinking room. I didn't want to keep doing the same thing over and over again. (At this point in my career, my "subject" was error analysis.)

On my sabbatical, I wrote "Inventing the University," a much-traveled essay that was initially unreadable to my editor (and good friend), Mike Rose, who couldn't figure out why I didn't write what I was supposed to write for a volume on cognitive approaches to writer's block. I started it on the third floor of an old stone house in the old port, the Puerto Viejo, in Algorta, a small town on the coast north of Bilbao. As the weather improved, I moved out onto a balcony cut into the red tile roof, where I could watch the fishing boats as they came in and out, following the rhythm of their workday.



Bilbao is an old industrial city on the north coast of the Iberian Peninsula, on the southern edge of the Bay of Biscay. It is, in fact, Pittsburgh's sister city. I taught American literature at the University of Deusto, a Jesuit school and one of the few private universities in Spain. In 1982, Deusto was across the river from an abandoned shipyard—rusted oil drums and cranes like giant praying mantises. If you stand at that spot now, you will see the iconic Richard Gehry Guggenheim Museum and, all around it, green parks, landmarks restored, and new skyscrapers.

In 1982, the river was filthy and stunk of sewage and dead fish. Now the river is clean, and you can see both small racing shells and the larger *traineras*, the oceangoing shells with a crew of thirteen that are raced in bays and harbors, or from island to island, in towns and villages along the coast.

The river is the Rio Nervión, which in English is pronounced *Monongahela*. It is the home of *Altos Hornos de Vizcaya*, the high ovens where steel was made for pre- and postwar Europe. In 1982,

Romano Salvatori, a Westinghouse engineer and the husband of my dear colleague Mariolina, hooked us up with Leroy Sauter, an engineer with US Steel, who was serving as a consultant to Altos Hornos as these mills, like the Pittsburgh mills, were shutting down. Leroy and his wife, Lillian, put us up while we looked for a place to live.

Joyce and I (and, for a while, our children) have returned to Bilbao and to Deusto every sabbatical year, for a year, from 1989 to 2018, eight years total, with many side trips in between and with time spent hosting Spanish kids studying abroad and Spanish scholars on sabbatical leave. In 2000, we bought a flat in the town of Algorta, once a fishing village to the north of Bilbao, now a bedroom community. We live in a 1960s-style building on a cliff above the rocky coast of the Bay of Biscay, which we see from our windows and balcony. I retired from teaching in August 2018, and we now do our best to split our year between there and here (or here and there).

I give this brief bit of biography to provide some context to the essays that follow. All are about reading and writing, literacy. Most take as their subject the teaching of writing in required composition courses. But there is also an essay on the Spanish author Ramiro Pinilla (whom I met and interviewed at his home in Algorta). And there are a series of essays on travel writing. I'll have more to say about travel and travel writing later. But, for now, let me give just a brief account of how I understand the lived connection between the genres.

I was formed as a teacher and a scholar within the traditions of Cambridge English, where the key question to ask—to ask as a reader, a writer, or a teacher—went something like this: *Where*, with this text, do you locate yourself? Or, *Where*, within this text, might you find yourself?

When you read, write, and teach, in other words, you locate yourself (or not) in relation to a discursive environment: ways of reading, structures of feeling, cultural contexts, local history, new languages, the work of knowing. The problems of finding one's way as a reader or

writer come quickly to focus when you are also trying to find your way around a major city, like Beijing, in a language you don't understand, like Mandarin. For me, as a teacher (and writer), I was lost and found in Spain, Argentina, South Africa, Ecuador, Brazil, China, India, Cuba, and (not surprisingly) England.

The title of this book comes from a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses." The poem is set in Nova Scotia, and not Algorta, but I find it easy to bridge the gap, since much of the writing here was done at a desk that looks across to Santurce, where the fishing boats tie up at the fishhouses, and where we go to eat fresh sardines cooked over a wood fire.

I often use this poem in my composition courses. It is, I say, an exercise in (and a defense of) attention to detail. And it has something important to say about the relationship between examples and conclusions.

### AT THE FISHHOUSES

Although it is a cold evening,  
down by one of the fishhouses  
an old man sits netting,  
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible  
a dark purple-brown,  
and his shuttle worn and polished.  
The air smells so strong of codfish  
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.  
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs  
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up  
to storerooms in the gables  
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.

All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,  
 swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,  
 is opaque, but the silver of the benches,  
 the lobster pots, and masts, scattered  
 among the wild jagged rocks,  
 is of an apparent translucence  
 like the small old buildings with an emerald moss  
 growing on their shoreward walls.  
 The big fish tubs are completely lined  
 with layers of beautiful herring scales  
 and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered  
 with creamy iridescent coats of mail,  
 with small iridescent flies crawling on them.  
 Up on the little slope behind the houses,  
 set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,  
 is an ancient wooden capstan,  
 cracked, with two long bleached handles  
 and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,  
 where the ironwork has rusted.  
 The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.  
 He was a friend of my grandfather.  
 We talk of the decline in the population  
 and of codfish and herring  
 while he waits for a herring boat to come in.  
 There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.  
 He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,  
 from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,  
 the blade of which is almost worn away.

Down at the water's edge, at the place  
 where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp  
 descending into the water, thin silver  
 tree trunks are laid horizontally  
 across the gray stones, down and down  
 at intervals of four or five feet.



And then, at this point in the poem, there are gestures toward the kinds of meanings poems are supposed to have, big statements, but these don't take. They are quickly dismissed, or the speaker is distracted, again, by detail:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,  
element bearable to no mortal,  
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly  
I have seen here evening after evening.  
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;  
like me a believer in total immersion,  
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.  
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."  
He stood up in the water and regarded me  
steadily, moving his head a little.  
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge  
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug  
as if it were against his better judgment.  
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,  
the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,  
the dignified tall firs begin.  
Bluish, associating with their shadows,  
a million Christmas trees stand  
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended  
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.

Colm Toibín is one of the best readers I know of Elizabeth Bishop's poems. I learned much from his lovely, short book, *On Elizabeth Bishop*, part of the Princeton University Press series *Writers on Writing*. I read his book as I was revising this manuscript. Since I was using "At the Fishhouses" in my introduction (and for my title), and as I had written about Toibín in my last chapter, I was curious to see what he had said about this poem.

Toibín noticed what I think most readers would notice—that at about this point in the poem, the tone begins to change. From detail and everyday language, Bishop begins to use a tone, he says, “rich in cadence and lifted language.”

“Lifted language.” I find this phrase particularly useful for the ways it combines theft with transcendence. As a writer or speaker, you get out by breaking in. That is what I am thinking when I read this. And, tellingly, Toibín then turns to Seamus Heaney (and Heaney’s essay on Bishop in the collection *Finders Keepers*) to let Heaney say what he (Toibín) is now prepared to say. That is, he uses Heaney’s words in place of his own to describe this moment in the poem. (Why does he do this? I don’t believe it is because he lacks, or worries he lacks, the authority to speak for himself. I think he values the company.) He says, “What we have been offered, among other things, is the slow-motion spectacle of a well-disciplined poetic imagination being tempted to dare a big leap, hesitating, and then with powerful sureness actually taking the leap.”

Here are the concluding lines of the poem. This is where the leap is taken:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,  
 slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,  
 icily free above the stones,  
 above the stones and then the world.  
 If you should dip your hand in,  
 your wrist would ache immediately,  
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn  
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire  
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.  
 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,  
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue.  
 It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

It is *like* what we imagine knowledge to be. Bishop leaves us two steps away from what knowledge *is*. The line says that the cold saltwater or taste of the water (or this, this precise act of description, becoming metaphor) is “like what we imagine knowledge to be.”

That is how I would sum up my career. Semester after semester, and week by week, I have worked closely with first-year students, reading their sentences, suggesting revisions both large and small, trying to find a way of saying: *Well, yes, I think this is it—this is like what we imagine knowledge to be. Yes. Interesting.*

Most of the essays in this book were efforts to describe how I organize such a course and what, over time, I have learned to do as a teacher of writing. What is the point of the required first-year writing course? Where do you begin? Where do you end? What do you do along the way?

Here is a long passage from *On Elizabeth Bishop*, where Toibín is providing a general description of Bishop’s work as a writer. I find it to be a useful laying out of terms, perfect for this introduction. The key terms for me are *little* and *much*, *irony* and *futility*, *precise* and *exact*, *essence*, *stability*, and *resonance*, *limits* and *failures*, *odd delights*. Here is the pivot: *A word was a tentative form of control. Grammar was an enactment of how things stood.*

She began with the idea that little is known and that much is puzzling. The effort, then, to make a true statement in poetry

—to claim that something *is* something, or *does* something—required a hushed, solitary concentration. A true statement for her carried with it, buried in its rhythm, considerable degrees of irony because it was oddly futile; it was either too simple or too loaded to mean a great deal. It did not do anything much, other than distract or briefly please the reader. Nonetheless, it was essential for Elizabeth Bishop that words in a statement be precise and exact. “Since we do float on an unknown sea,” she wrote to Robert Lowell, “I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way carefully; who knows what might depend on it.” . . .

A word was a tentative form of control. Grammar was an enactment of how things stood. But nothing was stable, so words and their structures could lift and have resonance, could move out, take in essences as a sponge soaks in water. Thus language became gesture in spite of itself; it was rooted in simple description, and then it bloomed or withered; it was suggestive, had a funny shape, or some flourishes, or a tone and texture that had odd delights, but it had all sorts of limits and failures.

I think student writers take in essences as sponges soak up water. “Little is known and much is puzzling”—a student’s command of that pairing falls quite short of ours and our expectations for serious work. Student writers want conclusions and they want to get to them as quickly (and easily) as possible. This is one of the ways the written language of these writers becomes gesture in spite of itself. I think student writers can learn to apply terms like these to all that is happening in their sentences. I believe that grammar matters and must be taught. I have learned that such invitations to revision or rewriting are necessary lessons; they can define the stages of a writer’s education (and may define the structure of a syllabus). I know that student writing can produce odd (and significant) delights, even in the midst

of its limits and failures. It has been my job to help my students to see this, and to insist that they act on the basis of such understanding.

On April 25, 1983, almost thirty-five years ago to the day before my retirement, Raymond Williams presented one of four lectures on the occasion of *his*. It was titled “Cambridge English, Past and Present” and published first in *The London Review of Books*, later collected in *Writing in Society*. The lecture is a tribute to the work of a Cambridge faculty committed to a redefinition of English as a school subject. It is also elegiac, lamenting the passing of Cambridge English and regretting its failures along the way, the most recent being the very public sacking of my good friend and colleague, Colin MacCabe.

For my conclusion, I want to read aloud (so to speak) a passage from this essay. It comes at an interesting moment toward the end, one where Williams struggles to find the words for what Cambridge English might have been—and for what we have lost in its undoing. You’ll hear the language falter, collapse, and then draw itself back together. It is a telling moment—for me, unforgettable. And a bit scary. He has reached his limits as a writer and teacher. The grammar enacts how things stood.

What is English’s proper subject, he asks?

Language in history: that full field. Even within a more specialized emphasis, language produced in works through conventions and institutions which, properly examined, are the really active society. Not a background to be produced for annotation where on a private reading—naked reader before naked text—it appears to be relevant and required. Instead, the kind of reading in which the conditions of production, in the fullest sense, can be understood in relation to both writer and reader, actual reading and actual writing. A newly active

social sense of writing and reading, through the social and material historical realities of language, in a world in which it is closely and precisely known, in every act of writing and reading, that these practices connect with, are inseparable from, the whole set of social practices and relationships which define writers and readers as active human beings, as distinct from the idealized and projected “authors” and “trained readers” who are assumed to float, on a guarded privilege, above the rough, divisive and diverse world of which yet, by some alchemy, they possess the essential secret.

What is our subject? He asks such a seemingly easy question and then struggles to compose an answer that doesn’t fall back on cliché, on standard terms. Still, around midparagraph, as he works toward a possible reformulation, he turns to such surprisingly common terms: “actual” and “active.” Actual readers actively reading; actual writers actively writing. *That* is our subject, he says, as though perhaps he was closer now, here at the end of his career, to finding a way of saying what he wants to say. He is trying to make these ordinary words make uncommon sense. It is such an odd and dramatic moment.

And then at the end of the paragraph, he brings himself back to form as he characterizes those professionals who don’t get it (some his colleagues), the trained readers who float on guarded privilege and who enforce the borders between literature and the rough, divisive, and diverse world where students are partners in the struggle to read and to write—here and now, week after week, moving toward the end of term.

As always, I choose to read this as though I had written it. It says, this is your job. Pay close attention to students’ sentences as they are being written. This is what we do. And the “we” here means student and teacher. And it says: think of this writing as like what we imagine knowledge to be, what we might imagine knowledge to be right here and right now, in this place and at this moment, and for this actual,

active writer and this actual, active reader. Do this for now. Next week we'll be somewhere else.

And then, because knowledge is not just repetition, and because revision is the only way to engage writers with their writing, as a teacher I think hard, I try again to imagine where we are and where we might go next, and I begin to write comments to direct revision, and I begin to write out the assignments that will shape the work of the following few weeks. That is the big leap.

This book collects a set of essays I wrote over the last decade of my career. I completed the manuscript and submitted it to the university press in mid-September 2019, when our Pittsburgh campus was truly an international meeting place, and when our study abroad program was booming, developing both new courses and new sites.

I could never have imagined the Pittsburgh campus now, under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic. It is early summer 2020. I am at my desk preparing the manuscript for production, while my university struggles to make plans for the upcoming academic year. Although students will be coming to campus in August, it seems certain that there will be far, far fewer international students. It will be a different place. Our study abroad programs for the fall semester have been already canceled. Students will travel less and less widely.

With the 2016 general election, our national politics had already begun to isolate us from the rest of the world, despite the best efforts of those in opposition. Now, with the pandemic, it will be some time, I suspect, before we can again present convincing arguments to reengage. I believe that we must, and I hope that we can, and it is in that hope that I send this book out into the world.