

## WHAT AN ESSAY CAN BE

Robert Hass. *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination, and the Natural World*. Ecco Press. New York, 2012.

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With the possible exception of Seamus Heaney, Robert Hass is the most richly rewarding literary essayist of any living poet who has produced major work of his own. *What Light Can Do* is a worthy successor to his brilliant collection of critical prose on poetry in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, the winner of the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award. This new book of essays, written over a period of about twenty-five years, includes a wider variety of subjects: beyond focusing on a variety of particular authors and particular works, Hass addresses broad ambitious topics such as literature and war, poetry and spirituality, as well as more than one essay on nature and the environment. He also extends himself beyond literary genres with several pieces on landscape photography. In fact, it is photography and the human faculty of vision that serves as the book's unifying motif. According to Hass in his introduction, "An essay, like a photograph, is an inquiry, a search...it is the act of attention itself, trying to see what's there, what light can do."

What makes Hass's essays special goes beyond their critical intelligence and lyrical precision: he often succeeds in conveying the personal, phenomenal experience of reading or viewing without taking focus away from the work itself or from the larger issues and ideas under consideration. In some ways, he is the Montaigne of literary essay writing—a representative man of common sense, but of uncommon intelligence and perspicacity, drawing wisdom from his own experience.

But instead of occasional personal reflections on topics like "On Friendship," or "Of Age," he produces equally profound meditations on an array of experiences having to do with the imaginative life: how we might receive and value a youthful elegy on Lenin by Louis Zukofsky, or the images of silence and change in the photography of Robert Adams, or the bleak, epic beauty of Cormac McCarthy's fiction, or the meaning of a lost oak grove at a university. The artistic work under Hass's attention—like any other phenomenal experience in life, from eating, to mourning, to working to making love—is the central point of reference and focus, important in itself, but also as a touchstone or a prism for discussion about relevant human experiences outside the formal scope of the work. Somewhere beyond New Criti-

cal claustrophobia and ideological or theoretical etherization lies the genre of the Hassian critical appreciation—sometimes un-programmatic, impressionistic, and often anecdotal, but always learned, precisely evidentiary, and frequently yielding original insights.

In this light, Hass's early essay on "Lowell's Graveyard" in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*—one of the great essays in English on a single poem—is paradigmatic. As a young graduate student in the late 70's, aching for revelations about both literature and life—and like Hass in his retrospective self-characterization, "living down a Catholic boyhood"—I picked up the essay, which first appeared in the journal *Salmagundi*, in the periodical reading room at the University of Virginia, where I was employed as a work-study student. Immediately riveted, I read the essay straight through with the kind of excitement that greets the rare literary epiphany, a new revelation about what a literary essay could be and could do. At one point in his essay, Hass puzzles over the significance of the prayer which culminates section five of "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," 'Hide/Our steel, Jonas Messias, in they side'; and inviting the reader to follow his personalized associations on religion and theology—and remembering a Biblical line from his boyhood, "In my father's house there are many mansions..."—he writes the following:

that phrase came back to me as a way through the door of polytheism and into myth.... If Pound could resurrect the goddesses, there was a place for a temple of Christ, god of sorrows, desire of savior, restingplace of violence. I could have the memory of incense and the flickering candles and the battered figure on the cross with the infinitely sad and gentle face and have Aphrodite as well....

All of this works up to Hass's understanding of the Lowell line and the meaning—that is, a coherent reading—of the poem as a whole, but just his aside about "polytheism into myth" jolted me into a whole new way of trying to reconcile my own Catholic heritage with new learning and new enthusiasms. Later, exploring the sexual imagery of the line, he writes,

the Puritan solution, hidden but real in the history of the imagination whether in Rome or the Enlightenment, was to turn sex into and instrument of will, of the conscious cruelty which flowered in the writings of Sade. It is there in our history and Lowell is right to connect it with the annihilative rage of capitalism. Flesh is languor...but it is also rage. It marries us to the world and the world is full of violence and cruelty.

The convergence of quick-cut insights in these passages is dizzying—from prayer to sex to the history of ideas and economic politics and finally back to the line in the poem. The revealed light is half Lowell and half Hass,

or in Wordsworth's formulation from *Tintern Abbey*, "what they half create/ And and what perceive." Entranced as I had become in these meditations, it is no wonder I was eventually transferred out of the periodical room (fired) by a matronly supervisor who would probably never read a poem or essay by Robert Hass.

The anecdotal, contemplative "I" continues to be part of Hass's signature as a literary essayist in *What Light Can Do*. Perhaps this style should only be emulated by the preternaturally gifted, because very few literary critics are capable of casually tossing off profundities in the manner of a laid-back California Buddhist. For example, quoting from Robinson Jeffers' final poem of his final book, Hass writes,

Does he begin to sound like a preacher? His father was a Presbyterian minister and a Calvinist theologian. It seems to be the fate of American poets to reinvent the religions of their childhood in their poetry.

The pithy notion about poets is no less true for Hass's own poetry, and even more than other poet-critics, Hass's comments on other poets reflect predilections and preoccupations in his own creative work. But the larger point is that Hass brings something special to the discussion beyond his scholarly qualifications (a Stanford PhD. who studied with Yvor Winters among others) and talent as an exacting literary historian and critic: the authority of a poet who is producing major work of his own and who understands something about the process of making art.

Beyond that, one gets the sense that the human being behind the keystrokes is disarmingly open, candid and generous.

Beyond the Lowell essay, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Pleasures* contained major essays on a wide range of modern and contemporary poets. While *What Light Can Do* includes several strong essays on poets and poetry, it is clearly a more eclectic and diffuse collection of subjects and occasions, unified by Hass's personal interests—as a human being and as a writer—and perhaps pitched at a less specialized audience. The book is divided into eight sections, probably three or four too many, as Hass's summary of his own themes suggests:

a fascination with how poetry is made and what it does...an interest in understanding the violence of the century I have spent my life in; an interest in the writers of my place; an interest in photography, and in landscape....

Perhaps he could have added the category of religion and literature, but just as Hass erases the line between personal reflection and more formal modes of criticism, such as *explication de texte*, these thematic categories tend to

blur as well. While this book is well worth reading carefully in its entirety—even the rough patches hide little gems—the most powerful essays reflect the degree of Hass’s own conflicted admiration or problematic identification with the subjects. Though he might wrestle with the aesthetic luxuriance of Wallace Stevens, the political contradictions of Jack London or the youthful excesses of early Zukofsky, the essays are all, in one way or another, critical appreciations. Since Hass previously published a whole collection of his syndicated “Poet’s Choice” columns in *Now and Then* (2008), even the pieces in *What Light Can Do* that appeared originally as reviews assume the merit of the writer’s special attention.

But first to the less ambitious fare, the rough patches and the little gems. Invitations to conferences in Korea, China and the Baltic gave Hass the opportunity to reflect on particular world poets in the context of the repressive conditions of their societies; and as an American poet measuring the value of their work and opening himself up to their influence, he is an ideal cultural emissary. Intended as introductions rather than full-fledged critiques, his brief impressions of the courageous Korean dissident poet Ko Un and the Chinese poets Yu Jian and Xi Chuan, comprise a rare and valuable form of cultural journalism. In the conclusion to the essay “A Bruised Sky: Two Chinese Poets,” (2010) he writes

The Chinese poets of my generation—the Misty Poets—had made a break with official literary culture by claiming inwardness and subjectivity. They had practiced the politics of anti-politics. This generation wanted that freedom and they wanted to proclaim the right to register—to find the idioms in which to register—the social reality they were living in. They seem to be a generation for whom all things were up for grabs. That was the excitement I was hearing in Beijing that evening.

These modest essays have the additional virtues of conciseness and brevity. Still, it is important to cite anomalies: while the piece entitled “Tomaž Šalamun: An Introduction,” (1998) discerningly places an original but neglected Slovene poet within a post-war generation of Easter European writers, the mixture of anecdote and commentary here is irritatingly digressive for such a short essay, as if Hass had patched together a series of notes, thus demonstrating the ragged edge of a relaxed, offhand style. On the other end of the spectrum, Hass’s essay “Edward Taylor: How American Poetry Got Started,” is too long to justify the detailed discussions of some very rough and rocky early-American literary terrain; even so, the diligent reader is rewarded with original insights about the roots of American poetry, where the Puritan mind struggles against the limitations of an inhumane

doctrine and a deforming isolation. Taylor considered his prayerful, unpublished meditations, written a century and a half before Emily Dickinson, as imaginative offerings to God, and Hass—ever sympathetic to religious sensibilities—carefully explores them as “an early instance of the solitariness, self-sufficiency, and peculiarity of the American imagination.” Because Hass’s own writing is so full of praise for natural delights, so antithetical to Calvinistic distrust or despair, his main insights here tend to be radical and penetrating—as when he defends Taylor’s Baroque oddities, metaphorical slippages and homely specifics as a way of allowing that poet to “celebrate a world he was bound in conscience to deplore.” While it is fun to watch Hass try to understand the near nonsense line, “Let conscience bible with it in her bill,” Taylor as a poet is not sufficiently strong or worthy of emulation to elicit Hass’s full talent for appreciative illumination.

## II.

Hass’s shorter literary subjects—Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Chekhov’s short stories, the poetry of George Oppen and Ernesto Cardenal—as well as two brief occasional homage to his colleague Czeslaw Milosz, much of whose poetry he translated—all convey the fresh, vivid excitement of a fellow writer paying tribute to what is unique about their contributions. By situating these writers in their sociopolitical contexts, Hass is able to delineate how the texts reflect the intersection of personal motive and social critique. Whether it is George Oppen’s turn from an early flirtation with Communism to a fierce ethical commitment to the act of language, or Chekhov’s evolution from supporting his family with humorous journalistic sketches to becoming the representative chronicler of consciousness in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Czarist Russia, or how Ernesto Cardenal’s early historical poetry led to the more simplistic anti-aesthetic of a Christian Marxist—Hass treats literary texts as personal crucibles which resonate with larger social meaning. In this way, Hass explains the furious power behind Ginsberg’s *Howl* as “a kind of exploded, hallucinatory autobiography”:

Carl Solomon came to stand for a whole generation of idealistic, crypto-mystical lost souls. In the private logic of the poem, all the angelheaded hipsters become Carl Solomon—recommitted to a mental hospital at the time when Ginsberg was writing the poem—and Solomon, in the most astonishing and affecting moment in the poem, blurs into the figure of its secret subject, mad sad Naomi (Ginsberg’s schizophrenic, lobotomized mother)...it turns out that the wild text of a wild new generation is about a son’s acceptance of his mother’s madness and of the sadness of her life, like a yellow paper rose on a coat hanger in an empty room. And about a man’s acceptance of his own sexuality and about the shame of the punishing, warmongering, body-hating, and money grubbing

forces in what is supposed to be a free and generous republic. And about the power of love and the way that suffering teaches us tenderness.

Since this commentary is based on evidence in the poem, it is illuminating as close textual criticism, but by connecting the poem to its social moment, it also qualifies as a very high order of cultural history, a kind of anthropological psychogenesis.

The lead essay in the book, “Wallace Stevens in the World” (1985) is one of the strongest in *What Light Can Do* if only because it demonstrates what is uniquely valuable about Hass’s literary essays. By using anecdotal personal narratives that illustrate his interpretive assimilations, Hass creates a seamless interplay between the poems and his own life as a representative reader. Personal history and specific memory are relevant as images of a poem’s particular quality or influential power. Recounting a giddy college dorm session, he writes,

I had never heard the poem (“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”) before and it seemed to me supremely delicious. It was March in California, high spring, the hills still green, with grazing cattle in them, plum trees in blossom, the olive trees around the campus whitening whenever a breeze shook them, and after a while a group of us was marching through the field full of mustard flowers and wild radish in the back of the dormitory, banging on pans with spoons and strumming tennis rackets and chanting out the poem, or at least the first stanza of it...

His initial reception of the Stevens poem eventually leads into a judgmental position about the relation of aesthetics and politics:

The country we were growing up into, its racism, the violence it was unleashing in Asia, what seemed in those early years the absolute acquiescence of our elders in that violence, changed the tenor of my thinking about literature and made Wallace Stevens seem much less attractive as a model....He felt to me like he needed to be resisted, as if he were a luxury, like ice cream, that was not to be indulged in.

But a rehearing of the poem later undercuts his youthful resistance to what he supposed was its tone of careless hedonism. A more experienced Hass hears something pitiless and dark about the homely actualities of death in the poem’s concluding stanza:

If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.

This re-reading of tone in “The Emperor of Ice Cream” causes him to con-

nect it with another memory of a college friend who threatened to jump out of a window after quoting the line, “the nothing that is” from Stevens’ “The Snowman.”

which makes for a very different poem (“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”) from the one that those college boys thought they were chanting thirty years ago as they waded through wet hillside grass in the early spring and brings it nearer to the nothingness of which Zach had spoken...

All of this serves Hass’s articulated purpose for his essay as

one image of the way poems happen in a life when they are lived with, rather than systematically studied. Or alternately studied and lived with, and in that way endlessly reconceived...

In turn, this essay on Stevens typifies Hass’s achievement in conveying not just an “interpretation” of a poem, as if such exists as a static repository of meaning, but also a sense of its evolutionary dynamic in a particular life—what it *does*, as in the volume’s title *What Light Can Do*.

### III.

For Hass, what literature *can* do is limited, but still enormously valuable, and in this sense defies Auden’s caustic formulation that “poetry makes nothing happen.” In that light, several of the most ambitious essays in this volume concern the relation of literature to politics and war. Asked for an international literary conference to address the idea of “perpetual peace” in 2005, Hass is initially humbled by the topic, especially in the recent wake of America’s inexorable march toward an elective invasion of Iraq. But inspired by Kant’s essay “On Perpetual Peace,” Hass turns toward the daunting task in his essay “Study War No More,” (2007) offering three ways in which literature has resisted the “the imagination’s love of war”:

The first, though not the earliest in the history of literature, is by imagining peace. The second is through laughter. The third is through witness.

Hass ransacks cultural history—from the literature of classical Greece, to the poetry of Basho and Yeats, to the nonviolent philosophies of Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi and King—for examples of “imagining peace” and closes the section with a testament to religion as an essential source of non-violent movements:

the imagination of peace in literature has almost always derived from religious traditions, perhaps because religion as a set of practices and beliefs, reaches deep into the daily life of peoples and into their private, as well as their public, culture.

As he wrote in his earlier Lowell essay, “. . . a political criticism of any social order implies that a saner one can be imagined and the hope or conviction that it can be achieved.” In this context, I honestly think that the reprise of the brief Basho haiku and Yeats’s “Lake Isle of Innisfree” make Hass’s point more forcefully than the rest of his expository prose on “imagining peace.” Likewise, his second point about how “laughter” subverts the ideal of the warrior ethos through the incongruity of satire and the rejuvenation of comedy is relevant and valuable, but quick allusive reference and an explanation of Freudian theory seem anemic without first-hand illustrations of work that might evoke laughter itself. The stronger third section on “witness” underlines this truth about language by extensively quoting poems by Czeslaw Milosz, one of the great moral witnesses of our time, who dedicates himself to the uniqueness and singularity of every human life:

Just as it flickers, it vanishes. Innumerable lives  
 Unremembered. Cities on maps only.  
 Without that face in the window, on the first floor, by the market,  
 Without those two in the bushes near the gas plant.  
 (from “Six Lectures,” 1985)

Because human beings have difficulty understanding their normal experience, much less the horrors of war, Hass credits Milosz for insisting on the necessity—and simultaneous inadequacy—of language to meet that task: “The true enemy of man is generalization,” writes Milosz (“Six Lectures”). I don’t think it is an unfair criticism of the noble quixotic effort of this essay to say that some of Hass’s best poetry—most recently “Bush’s War” (in *Time and Materials*, 2007)—covers much of the same ground more memorably.

Hass is especially good at writing essays about single poems because such efforts allow him to stay focused on specific issues of craft and language in the text and, at the same time, to take little flights of meditative association before returning to the touchstone work he is attending. Two of Hass’s best essays in the collection concern politically engaged poets and poems, “Zukofsky at the Outset,” (2004) and “Poetry and Terror: Some Notes on *Coming to Jakarta*” (1999). Given Hass’s own preoccupations as a poet, it is easy to understand why he is interested in Zukofsky’s *A*, whose subject is “a conflict between music and justice”; he chooses to look at one of Zukof-

sky's earliest poems, "Memory of V.I. Ulianov," from 1925—an elegy or an ode for the recently deceased Lenin—not just to explore the influences of a second-generation modernist, but also out of "political curiosity" about the roots of Zukofsky's later sympathy with Stalinism before his final turn away from representation altogether and toward the formal patterning of language and music. Hass is at his best here, holding single words ("Immemorial") and lines ("And flight of stirrings beating up the night") up to the light, trying to distinguish Zukofsky's personal vision and style from his personal assimilation of the canon—and more generally how the poem's form relates to its naïve and rhapsodic political content, where Lenin becomes an idealized "star":

The "strange hegira" of the young poet has really to do with a powerful, idealizing literary ambition, and imagination of self transformed by literary achievement. And so it is appropriate enough to hold the poem to a pretty high standard.

Because Zukofsky has attracted a new generation of readers who tend to account for his early ideological loyalty as an admirable concern for social justice, Hass holds the later Zukofsky to account: "...it seems a great burden to put on punning translations of Catullus or the play of music at the end of *A* to ask them to answer the millions of innocent people killed in the gulags." In turn, the interrogation of Zukofsky becomes an object lesson for "us", writers and readers of the information age who no longer have the luxury of ignoring political violence and especially state terrorism.

In "Poetry and Terror," his essay on the book-length poem *Coming to Jakarta* by the Canadian Peter Dale Scott, Hass delves deeper into the relationship of personal consciousness and terror. Lamenting how separate American poetry is from the country's political culture, Hass praises Scott's poem not only for its attempt to understand the nature of terror, but "to produce an aesthetic effect that might be called the sensation of understanding." Modeled in some way as a political poem on Pound's *Cantos*, *Coming to Jakarta* also invites comparison to Wordsworth's *Prelude* in that it is an autobiographical poem about the formation of the poet's imagination; in this light, Hass's essay examines the poem's ambition "to integrate the terrors and denials of both the private and the public worlds." By presenting a range of images from Scott's life—from childhood vacation resorts of an incestuous aristocracy to later elite schools, to think tanks and conferences and government positions—his poem explores the relationship of caste and ideology, and in a form evoking Dantean terza rima, how ideology seduces reason:

I was always going along  
 at first with whatever  
 sounded reasonable.

By presenting the insidious workings of ideology as good sense and good taste in an elite social and professional *milieu*, *Coming to Jakarta* is able to shed new light on how U.S. foreign policy perpetrated political violence in Central and South America as well as in Asia over the last half-century.

Scott's poem thus inspires one of Hass's best characteristics as an essayist and poet, a blending of passionate appreciation with lucid moral outrage:

Scott has likewise given us a description of the world that is tremendously convincing—a world driven by the disorder of desire, which is stored as money, stored as power; driven by fear that takes the form of secrecy; driven by class, which is the stylishness of power; driven by ideology, which is the desire to belong; driven by the warrior ethic, which is ancient in us, and by rape and hubris and the human appetite for destruction.

Hass's lyrical critical essays on politics and literature, by contrast with Scott's targets, serve as counter-testaments for a salutary use of reason when it is allied with disinterested moral purpose.

#### IV.

Hass's natural skepticism about political programs and ideologies must also be connected to his qualified sympathy for religious and spiritual traditions, especially apparent in his "Reflections on the Epistles of John" (1990) and "Notes on Poetry and Spirituality" (1992, 2011, first published in *NDR*). The first essay on John can be read as Hass's *agon* with the theological underpinnings of Christianity, and the second essay as a meditation on how spirituality can be defined and practiced apart from religious belief. While Hass locates his own apostasy from his boyhood Catholicism in the "world-and-flesh hatred at the root of Christianity," he finds an affinity for an essential meaning of the Incarnation elucidated in John's Epistles:

The Word that preexisted the world and will outlast it...  
 It not only saved souls; it made the physical world sacred by its  
 presence. It planted eternity her in the moment of human existence.

Hence, Hass values the Epistles as a revision of the Gnostic leanings of John's Gospel and the mainstream Church's "core of asceticism, its insistence that man must not be reconciled to his own nature," as well as its special fear of sexuality as "a rival repository of the mystery of body and soul." The

essay shows Hass's sympathy with a vision of a world charged with sacramental presence and a human nature affirmed in Eros.

In the first part of "Notes on Poetry and Spirituality," originating in an address to Mormon students at Brigham Young, University, Hass distinguishes his sense of religion from his notions about spirituality:

If religion is a community created by common symbols  
Of the sacred, and is not the same thing as a spiritual life, then the first thing to  
say about spirituality is that it is almost always a private matter. It has to do with  
the soul's relation to its own meaning, or...each person's private relationship to  
the mystery of being alive or...to the inexplicable fact of being alive.

Hass then returns to a belief that animates him as both a poet and essayist: that American poets have been formed by their sense of the sacred and the traditional forms and practices of the communities in which they were raised. In order to introduce the idea of poetry as spiritual rather than religious, Hass goes on to discuss T.E. Hulme's remark about Romanticism as "spilt religion"—or a rechanneling of the Christian habits of introspection and prayer "to the direct experience of nature or to the pure experience of oneself as a conscious and perceiving being." Without denying the value of the good works done by religious communities, Hass keeps focus on the experience of spirituality in the solitary self, using Emily Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light" as a vivid, even searing illustration:

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are—

Hass presents the speaker's choice of feeling pain over feeling deadness as an example of the spiritual. His second example is a Basho haiku,

Deep autumn—  
My neighbor,  
How does he live, I wonder?

He concludes the essay by connecting a Buddhist idea about a contingent nature, "Deep Autumn," with the Christian idea of light in the Christian Gospel of John. For Hass, both these poems of loneliness reflect a longing for and separation from religion—and as representations of spirituality, "pledge themselves...to the work of imagination." As with his Romantic predecessors, imagination for Hass can lead to spiritual re-vision and

renewal, and art can be viewed as ongoing revelation—just as he implies in his sympathetic description of the Incarnation as the “Word that preexisted the world and will outlast it..”

## V.

Aspects of Hass’s own “spilt religion,” especially his reverence for the natural environment, is evident in many of these essays. In a deeper way, his essays on California writers, nature writing, and landscape photography can all be considered together in their common emphasis on “place.” Writing about Robert Adams collection of photographs in *Los Angeles* (2000) as a “record of an abandoned garden or a ruined kingdom,” Hass underlines this concern:

Things change, after all. We live our lives each of us with differing but usually deep attachments to place or to an idea of place, while forces larger than our lives are changing those places faster than we live them out....Many of the forces of change have been destructive. Some, at least, have made a possible life for people excluded from the pastoral romance of an earlier republic. It’s our task to make of this as we can what we can. But first we have to be able to see it.

References to light and seeing in *What Light Can Do* continue to blur the boundaries between the literal and the metaphorical, as between first-hand experience and the virtual experience of art. Though he does not pretend to be expert in the technicalities or aesthetics of photography, Hass’s talent for describing the gestalt of artistic reception—especially the interplay between first order sense perceptions and higher order aesthetic recognitions—make him an especially provocative and sympathetic critic in this medium. He is eloquent, for instance, about how Adams’ photographs are beautiful in the way they make the viewer aware of “the silence of the photographic image.” In “Robert Buelteman and the Coastal Range,” (2000) he suggests how the black band framing each print can be seen as a “formality of bereavement,” which might evoke the mournful biographical context of the photographer as well as the portentous limits of the magical landscape south of San Francisco under constant pressure from human depredation. Of the trio of essays on landscape photography, Hass’s writing in “Laura McPhee and the *River of Not Return*” (2008) comes closest to reaching the high bar set by his best writing on poetry because he reads her book of photographs as if it were a collection of poems which accrue meaning in their placements and interrelationships. Hass sees these photographs as a critique of the Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter school of idealized, sublime images of nature that

participate in the ethos of...corporate advertising t give us rain forests and mountain wildernesses that exist only in the mind as a form of history-erasing nostalgia so that, like advertising, they are apt to sicken us with impossible desires, especially the desire to be entirely at one with some wild and beautiful place with which, if you were there, you would not, by definition, be at one.

Hass appreciates McPhee for the way she consciously foregrounds her photos with human beings or images of human culture and sets them within the history of landscape images, thus creating a deep, complex meditation on fact and myth, natural beauty, and the processes of time.

Because California writers, like the landscape photographers of the American west, helped create the legacies and myths of a region that Hass was born into and clearly loves, it is easy to understand why, as a writer, he would be drawn to attend their lives and their work. Still, even after reading Hass's best case for Jack London as an artist ("Jack London In His Time: *Martin Eden*," 1986), I doubt that he would have merited such a considerable essay-review if he had not grown up, along with Hass, in the San Francisco area; and since William Everson seems to have had only a negligible influence on Hass as a poet, it seems unlikely that the former would have drawn the essayist's attention ("William Everson: Some Glimpses," 1995) had he not been a figure in the San Francisco poetry scene or lived in a monastery close to the Catholic men's college that Hass attended. While his sympathetic essay on the fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston ("Maxine Hong Kingston: Notes on a Woman Warrior," 1991), a Bay area writer of Asian descent, is characteristically full of appreciative insight, especially about Kingston's more difficult novel, *The Tripmaster Monkey*, her connection to California seems less than essential and, in any case, her well-lauded work hardly needs special attention. In "Mary Austin and *The Land of Little Rain*" (2003), on the other hand, Hass is uniquely equipped to bring light to a neglected treasure of American nonfiction. Beyond tracing the writer's determined self-education and her migration to California from a frontier Midwest, he ingeniously locates her foundational book in several overlapping categories: a collection of brief sketches on the desserts and mountain valleys of southeastern California published in 1903, *The Land of Little Rain*, is first of all, a classic of feminist prose; also, it is one of the last of the genre of Victorian nature studies and one of the first important works of modern environmentalist writing; lastly, it is a trailblazer in the literature of California and specifically foreshadows the noir sensibility of Los Angeles novels. But Hass is ever the poet-as-critic, and he would not champion a book which do not offer something special in its use of language and employment of style; hence, he also holds Austin's prose up to his light for the

“sheer, odd deliciousness of its sentences.” Describing the stars in the desert sky, Austin writes,

They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out their watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls.

Hass uses this passage to illustrate the book’s tone and vision: its blending of the scientist’s eye for shapes struggling for survival in a Darwinian universe with a poet’s sense of fatedness and loneliness.

At least until Hass arrived on the scene, Robinson Jeffers had been the most renowned poet of California as a place—the poet laureate of its frontier severity and sublime beauty. Reflecting Hass’s intense, conflicted admiration for his subject, “The Fury of Robinson Jeffers,” (1987) is one of the strongest essays in the book. It persuades readers like myself who would tend to dismiss Jeffers poetry as full of abstract generalizations, overdramatic rhetoric, and primitive politics, that his work is substantive, original, important—and sometimes even beautiful and moving. An early poem in *Field Guide* (1973), “The Return of Robinson Jeffers,” is a vivid reference point for how deeply his poetic predecessor had impressed himself on Hass’s imagination:

Human anguish made him cold.  
He told himself the cries of men in war were no more conscious  
Nor less savage than the shrill repetitions of the Stellar’s jay  
Flashing through live oaks up Mal Paso Canyon  
And that the oaks, rooted and growing toward their grace,  
Were—as species go—  
More beautiful.

Writing shortly after the appearance of *20<sup>th</sup> Century Pleasures*, Hass’s essay attempts to articulate the nature of the radical epiphany that ushered in Jeffers mature work:

This aspect of his transformation in the early 1920’s does not suggest slow change but a bolt of lightning, a gnosis. If he did not have a vision, he had a series of insights that came to have the quality of a vision. There is first of all a sense of terrible and tormenting violence at the center of life, from the hawk’s claw to the fury of war to the slow decay of stone. And there was also a sense, sharply, of something pained, decidedly and deeply sick in the human heart, at the root of sexual desire and religious longing. And finally there was the leap—to the wholeness of things, a leap out of the human and its pained and diseased

desiring into the permanent and superb indifference of nature. The possibility of this leap became at first a central wish and, finally, the doctrine of his poetry.

Hass credits Jeffers for daring to stake large general claims and for enacting a vision that is sublime in its uncompromising extremity and its majesty of scope.

While some poetry critics may bring comprehensive learning to their subject poet or may work wonders as close readers of individual poems, few if any can deliver what Hass does: an appreciation that identifies with the creator's vision and interrogates that vision critically at the same time. One can feel Hass's sympathy for his fellow Californian in his description of Jeffers' mystical leap beyond the human:

Looking out at the Pacific landscape, with its sense of primitive violence that weather has not quieted or eroded, he found himself haunted by the riddles of desire and suffering, and he thought he found a way out of the cycle, and the way connected to his almost mute, though intense, feeling for the natural world—for all the life outside of and imperiled by the rapacity and unconsciousness of the human usurpation of the planet. He came to feel with tragic clarity, that human beings could be saved, only by what they were destroying. This is his moral side, his Cassandra voice As a poet he kept trying to make images from the movements, serene and terrible, of the life around him, for what he had discovered or intuited—for the power at the center of life that reconciled him to its cruelty. One feels him straining toward it, toward what is not human in the cold salt of the Pacific and the great sunsets and the rocks and the hawk's curved, efficient beak. It is in the farthest reaches of his intuitive straining that one feels most in Jeffers the presence of a great poet.

While acknowledging the reasons why other poets and critics (including his teacher Yvor Winters) found some of the poetry as banal, bombastic, or verbally careless, Hass weighs these flawed tendencies against the primitive power of the poetry's directness and the ambition and the largeness of mind that tries to encompass and explain the epic catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The vision of destructive violence in Hass's own poetry is balanced, if not redeemed, in its evocations of the numinous and in its celebration of sweet particulars; yet sometimes in the rhapsodic sweep of Hass's meditative and descriptive lyrics on nature, a reader can hear an echo of Jeffers and understand the nature of the essayist's conflicted identification.

As his essays on California writers make abundantly clear, Hass imports high value to a sense of "place", defined not as a collection of facts about topography or climate, but as the dynamic interaction of human culture and the natural environment, and an ethos that accrues over time. Hence,

it is no accident that Hass chooses to conclude his collection with “Oak Grove,” (2009) an essay prompted by a recent environmental controversy at the University of California at Berkeley, where he teaches. Despite drawn out protests and a court case, the university accomplished their plan to cut down a grove of California live oaks to make way for athletic training facilities. Written in the aftermath of the crisis, it is not a work of tendentious advocacy, nor does it culminate in a political position, but is rather a meditation on the way people think—or more often, fail to think—about nature, especially those in a university community. More specifically, it explores how the values and vision of a university are reflected in its relationship with its natural environment. This occasional subject gives Hass the opportunity to dwell on the resonance of local history. Tracing the origin of the site from its beginnings as a Spanish land grant through its development by Frederick Law Olmstead and the University of California leads Hass to discuss the Arts and Crafts and conservation movements in Northern California at the turn of the century. He further discovers the peripheral influence of the environmental writing of John Muir and the paintings of William Keith on the landscape firm of MacRorie and McLaren, which originally designed the later contested grove. Comparing Keith’s famous painting called *Berkeley Oaks* with a photograph of the vanished oaks, Hass finds those native trees bathed in the “same golden light...an Edenic vision that the actual light in northern California sometimes cooperates with on the September afternoons of our Indian Summer.” Here again Hass blurs the line between the perception of the natural and the artistic.

Hass’s characteristic and fascinating digressions about the literature and environmental politics at the time of the oak grove’s foundational moment eventually bring him back to contemplating the notion that the university campus was constructed as a garden—as distinguished from some idea of pure, wild nature the protestors believed they might have been protecting. While his essay thus makes the political problem more, rather than less, complex, Hass also wants to enhance “seeing what’s there” as well as naming it. It is Hass the lyric poet more than Hass the storyteller or environmentalist who reminds us why trees excite our passions to begin with:

I suppose, because they remind us of our origins and because they live longer than we do, which can be reassuring and because we love their shapes and the way they reach toward light and the way they smell and their shade and the sound of wind in their leaves. And because we are inveterately social beings and build housing so that we can crowd around and hear and see each other, we like them in order to escape our social being for quiet and reflection. And that is why we make art out of them—make gardens, like the Memorial Grove.

Though Hass acknowledges how daunting is the ambition to sustain diverse life on the planet, he ends this final essay of the book with a beautiful articulation of clear-eyed idealism: “We have to act as if the soul gets to choose.”

It is not an accident that this book which began with an essay about the problem of Stevens’ seemingly removed aestheticism should conclude with an essay about the importance of preserving and cultivating nature. Hass’s work demonstrates a love of art considered primarily as an extension of first order experience and feeling, not as an autonomous alternative to the world-outside –of-self which he continually affirms through his “acts of attention.” Many of these essays move us into finer discriminations of art works which in turn move us back into our shared world with new perceptions and insights about what is there. In that way, Hass’s writing works like natural light—illuminating and nurturing, allowing us to thrive in its appreciative glow.