The Incantations of *The Apple Trees at Olema*

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There is power in language. "It [has] a marvellous capacity, which is to take elements of our mind, imagination, and memory and find a way to give them form. … Written language has given us the capacity to make some rather compelling forms that we call poetry, essays, [etc.]" comments Alison Hawthorne Deming in conversation with Robert Hass and David Abrams (Silverblatt, "Robert Hass"). And yet language also has limits. Robert Hass frequently laments the inescapable constraints of language: "We do not have a very good language for the ways in which it seems most interesting to think about form" (*A Little Book on Form* 2). He has also expressed this frustration in interviews and readings (Silverblatt, "What Light Can Do"; "Lunch Poems") and even in poetry itself (*The Apple Trees at Olema* 272; 274). Hass resorts to metaphors in order to communicate; as he concedes in *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* "the effect is hard to describe… Every phrase that comes to mind is a metaphor" (113). His apparent frustration is that metaphors are incapable of articulating the *being* of something — its *is*-ness. And yet, paradoxically, Hass's poetry creates beautiful illustrations that seemingly elicit a clear sense of what a thing *is*. Hass's ability to so clearly describe the nature of something is in contradiction with itself. Being is expressed through this contradiction and not through representation alone: it is the interplay between what is knowable and what is unknowable that allows Hass to convey the *being* of his subject matter.

There are many ways in which one might come to understand the *being* of something. One such approach is naming. The power behind a name is a recurring notion in cultures all across the world and throughout history. Examples include the unpronounceable name of God in

Judaism (Byrne 24), "Rumpelstiltskin" from medieval Germany (Tatar 128), or contemporarily, the BBC's *Doctor Who* (Moffat). Robert Hass uses poetry to demonstrate the power in names, such as in the poem "Etymology." At a reading, Hass preceded this poem by reading "Shame: An Aria", a poem that praises bodily fluids no matter how shameful, and comments: "In the writing of that poem… I realized … that there was not a word in English for one of the juices of mortal glory" ("Lunch Poems"). And what is this missing word? Hass writes in "Etymology": "And what to say of her wetness? The Anglo-Saxons / Had a name for it. They called it *silm.* / They were navigators. It was also / Their word for the look of moonlight on the sea" (*The Apple Trees at Olema* 272). Hass claims that he was trying "to reintroduce an old word into the English language" ("Lunch Poems"). However, the word "silm" never existed. In fact, Hass may have derived it from a fictional language made by J.R. Tolkein (1241). The word "silm" is arbitrary, and yet it is also fulfills its purpose. The word was chosen out of desire to assign a name to an unnamed thing. "Silm" is also introduced as synonymous with "moonlight on the sea," but since "silm" is a fabricated word, this synonym becomes a metaphor. Despite being a metaphor, the impression of *silm* is conveyed. But what information is actually given? A definition, a metaphor, and a name. It is the name that ties the ideas together. Assigning a name bestows life to something by giving it a place in the mind to be rooted. It becomes concrete, even though it is fictitious. That is the power of a name.

Another example of the power of names is in the poem "Fall," wherein the speaker and their lover indulge on mushrooms, risking their lives in the process. The speaker claims, "we drifted towards the names of things" (*The Apple Trees at Olema* 45). The couple are completely absorbed in all that is around them, so attuned to life and existence that they get close to some

form of knowledge. In this respect, drifting “towards the names of things” suggests that names are the ultimate way of knowing what something *is*. And yet the couple drifted without reaching any names; fundamental knowledge was unattainable. The reader is left unfulfilled: while there is the suggestion that knowledge is being acquired, this knowledge is never fully realized. Hass has established a distance between the feeling of knowing and true knowing. This tension is critical to the conveying of *being* in his poetry.

What are other ways in which something can be known? One suggestion comes from “For Czesław Miłosz In Kraków” wherein Hass writes: “And the smell of summer grasses in the world / That can hardly be named or remembered / Past the moment of our wading through them” (287). The grass cannot be named or known, except for that moment where one is completely immersed in it. Again there is reference to naming, and as in “Fall,” immersion is closer to understanding. These lines are soon followed by “Mark tells me he has seen the fawns grazing / with their mother in the dusk. Gorging on your roses” (287). Hass suggests that the fawns are closer to knowing the grass than we are. The natural is closer to understanding the natural than humans are. But why does distance necessarily impact understanding? In David Abram’s book, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* he notes that “‘Nature,’ it would seem, has become simply a stock of ‘resources’ for human civilization, and so we can hardly be surprised that our civilized eyes and ears are somewhat oblivious to the existence of perspectives that are not human at all” (28). Abram suggests that it is by being so caught up in our human world that we are unable to observe other modes of existence. But it is not so simple: Hass’s poetry demonstrates that a human approach to knowledge, similar to naming, simultaneously evokes not only the feeling of meaning but also meaning itself.

In his poetry, Hass explores how personification can simultaneously bring us closer to and further from knowing. At first, Hass seems to take issue with personification. In his poem "The Problem of Describing Trees," he writes: "And the tree danced. No. / The tree capitalized. / No. There are limits to saying, / In language, what the tree did" (*The Apple Trees at Olema* 274). Hass interrupts the personification of the tree: it was not doing anything human-like. The tree was simply doing what trees do. In fact, there is science that explains the tree's actions: "The leaf flutters, turning, / Because that motion in the heat of August / Protects its cells from drying out" (274). The way the tree is physically is more poetic than the poetic language attempting to describe the tree. To personify is to make more human, and a human understanding of the world is inadequate for understanding what a tree is really doing. The tree may seem familiar, yet it is completely other to our everyday experience. As Abram notes for modernized society, "we cannot, as humans, precisely experience the living sensations of another form" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 14).

On the other hand, personification still conveys information; even if personification cannot completely convey what something *is* it can still emphasize something's otherness. Hass uses dramatic personification to place a reader between the unknowable and knowable, which is a powerful position for the human imagination. In the poem "Privilege of Being," the divine is expressed in human terms: "Up above, the angels / in the unshaken ether and crystal of human longing / are braiding one another's hair, which is strawberry blond / and the texture of cold rivers" (*The Apple Trees at Olema* 187). These surreal descriptions highlight how limiting language can be, but they also excite the imagination. Personification is the equivalent of a direct translation between languages: some of the meaning comes across, but it is not necessarily

coherent or artful. And yet there is a glimpse of *something*. The words invoke nonsensical images in the mind that are exciting. There is awe in trying to imagine the impossible. The bare glimpse of something *other* is stirring, it sends imaginations wild, and this flash of imagination encourages us onward to a form of knowing.

The tension between the knowable and unknowable is always in play in Hass's poetry: be it personification, or metaphors and names. There is always a contradiction. This gives way to a paradox: we are closer to knowing something, sometimes, by not knowing it. Knowledge through metaphor from a critical perspective helps to reveal what is happening here. Knowing what something almost *is* is an idea discussed in Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics," which examines the structure of language and how meaning is created. He summarizes, "it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (170). Under this structural philosophy it is clear why metaphors are important; they create differential knowledge. One is closer to knowing a thing by knowing what it is not. This bears great resemblance to some of the choices that Hass makes in his poetry. We know that *silm* is like moonlight on the ocean, but not quite. We know that *angel's hair* is like cold rivers, but not literally so. This ambiguous net of meaning creates no absolute meaning, but with proper connections some understanding is achievable. The question is whether this net allows for true knowledge of what a thing *is*. A net of meaning can feel as though it is true knowledge, such as in the case where there is a glimpse of something other because of the sense of wonder induced by trying to think beyond one's understanding.

Contrary to structural philosophy is post-structuralism, which has much to say on the topic of an absolute truth. In his essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense," Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions" (251). In other words, Nietzsche argues that truth is simply an effect of language, not some constant or absolute thing. There are no perfect forms to be understood. Already it would seem that there is no being that can be learned from poetry, but there is more on the nature of truth. Nietzsche also argues in his essay "The Will to Power" that "'Truth' is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered — but something that must be created and that gives name to a process, or rather a will to overcome that has in itself no end" (470). Truth is created. Truth is also caught up in the power of a name. One cannot reach some universal truth about the nature of an object, but one can create the truth. Keeping this in mind, Hass seems to claim in "The Problem Of Describing Trees" that we cannot reach an understanding of what the tree was truly doing. And yet the power of this poem is that it becomes its own source of *being*. The *poem* is surrogate for the *tree*.

With these critical philosophies, what else can be said about Hass's representational poetry? There are two more poems that help illustrate the effects of tension between what can and cannot be known. Hass's poem "The Problem Of Describing Color" illustrates the difficulty of describing something abstract. The poem captures the essence of *red* by building a net of meaning around the colour with frequent use of metaphor. Through representational tension (red's simultaneous otherness and familiarity) the poem imparts the *being* of the colour red. The poem is frequently conditional; Hass often writes "If I said," and cuts himself off with em dashes (*The Apple Trees at Olema 273*), suggesting a hesitation to even try describing the colour red.

This uncertainty establishes distance from the colour red; it communicates the abstractness and difficulty of understanding it on a base level. But the tension is created through heavy use of metaphor, which makes red seem familiar. "The cardinal's sudden smudge of red," "If I said fire, if I said blood," and "flecks of poppy in the tar-grass scented summer air" (273) all make use of bright imagery to normalize the colour. He ends the poem with "Red, I said. Sudden, red" (273) as if that is all there is to it. Structurally he creates a net of meaning around the colour red thus articulating what it almost *is*. But red is still something other, so trying to conceptualize it excites the mind. This excitation gives way to the meaning of red, as created through tension. Red is knowable and unknowable and out of contradiction the poem becomes red's *being*. Again: "Red, I said. Sudden, red" (273). It is what it *is*.

Another representation poem is "Poem With A Cucumber In It". This poem is different from "The Problem Of Describing Color" in that it does not lament the limitations of language. Instead, its tension is created simply through metaphor, creating knowledge of what a cucumber *is* as a poem. Keep in mind that this is different from some hypothetical ideal cucumber. Meaning is again achieved through a 'cucumbral' net of meaning, or, to borrow a term from agriculture, the cucumber's metaphysical terroir. A terroir is the sum of all environmental factors that give way to the final product: for a poetic cucumber, they are all linguistic and metaphysical in nature. Hass begins creating the terroir with simile: "Sometime from the hillside just after sunset / The rim of the sky takes on a tinge / Of the palest green, like the flesh of a cucumber / When you peel it carefully" (318). This is perhaps the easiest way in which to ease a reader into the deep knowledge of the *being* of a vegetable: a simple, yet beautiful, simile. He continues with metaphors and imagery describing scenes and flavours. The rich descriptions create a strong

set of associations around a cucumber such that there is a sense of life where there would not otherwise be. The terroir becomes more established and knowledge of what a cucumber *is* seems not so far away. But the poem continues: Hass addresses the etymology and other meanings of the roots of the word "cucumber", adding to the complexity of the sense of being.

"Poem With A Cucumber In It" also plays with expectations. Contributing to the layered terroir are the lines: "If you think I am going to make / A sexual joke in this poem, you are mistaken" (318). This couplet is a perfect analogy to the tension being created that gives way to knowledge or understanding. After becoming familiar with Hass's poetry, one expects the phallic image cucumber to play a role in its net of meaning. Hass plainly rejects this expectation while simultaneously acknowledging it exists. This is tension between what a cucumber *is* and is not, is similar to a reader's understanding of the cucumber's *being*. Structurally, Hass encapsulates the nature of a cucumber through negative knowledge; we get closer to it by thinking around it, and knowing what it almost-but-not-quite *is*. Post-structurally, knowing what a cucumber almost-but-not-quite *is* is the *is* itself. Being has been created and a *cucumber* implanted in the mind.

The ability of thirty-three lines to completely encapsulate the being of a *cucumber* is nothing short of miraculous. In discussion with Robert Hass, David Abram comments on the magical nature of language:

> How potent is this particular technology that we all take so much for granted? … We open a book and we focus our eyes on these little bits of ink on the page, and we hear voices. We see visions of strange events happening in other places and times. This is not that much different from a Hopi man standing outside and focussing his eyes on a stone and hearing the stone speak to him. … As soon as we look at the letters they

> speak to us. And it seems to me that this is a highly concentrated form of animism or … magic. (Silverblatt, "Robert Hass")

Hass makes full use of the magical nature of language. Words can create a differential net of meaning, where to know something one must know what it is not. With this idea in mind, Hass laments the inability of language to perfectly articulate what something *is*, since the differential net of meaning cannot reach any absolutes. But in not being able to reach an absolute truth, Hass gains the freedom to create truth itself. Representing a cucumber is no longer the point. The poems give way to *being*; the poems *are* what they set out to represent and they create the truth they set out to find. They create the name, and assign it to some infinitely complex process that is beyond understanding, and reign it into the realm of the understandable. Red is *red*. The poems become more than the sum of their words, the sum of their spells. The tree *danced*. Human experience becomes blurred into the forms conjured by language. Silm is *silm*. Language only asks for a reader to participate in the spell. A cucumber is a *cucumber*. "And Charlie, / laughing wonderfully, // beard stained purple / by the word *juice*, / goes to get a bigger pot" (103).

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