Reading Old Friends

Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*, Ecco Press; Jiri Wyatt, *Against Capitulation*, Quartet Books; Michael Anania, *The Red Menace*, Thunder's Mouth Press.

I

Robert Hass begins one of the pieces in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* by saying that he has been "worrying the bone of this essay for days" because he wants to say some things against the poems he has agreed to discuss in a special issue of a journal celebrating the work of James Wright. I have been worrying the bone of this essay for days as well, but not because I want to say anything against the work I intend to discuss. I have decided to write in an autobiographical way beginning in this issue of the *Southern Review* devoted to autobiography and continuing in the issue for Winter 1987 about three books—a volume of essays, a novel, and a historical meditation—which are themselves autobiographical in different respects and which are, as it happens, all by old friends. I thought at first that it would be a very simple business to give a strictly personal and subjective account of these books. There would be no need to feign anything like a critical disinterest; it was specifically agreed that I should write about the work of friends from the perspective of a friend. But this is not an easy task. The chief reason why it isn't is that years ago all these books began for me as conversations or as an exchange of stories growing out of conversations—long talks with Hass first at Stanford and then later in the pubs and coffee shops of Cambridge about the art of poetry, stories traded back and forth with Anania driving in Chicago traffic jams, accounts exchanged

with Wyatt in the London of the later 1960s as we struggled for a language to articulate a politics and describe our primal childhood memories—and not as something printed on a page. Reading these conversations back into the texts, which is something that I find I cannot keep myself from doing, I am acutely aware that other readers are *not* doing this, although some are doubtless reading different, even contradictory, conversations back into the texts. Should my account include the conversations or restrict itself to the texts? If I am to be the autobiographer of my reading, as Robert Hass often is of his in *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* I must risk talking about a book that no one else can read. For example, there is a point in Hass's essay on Robert Lowell's "Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" where he deprecates "the slough of poetry" engendered by *Life Studies* beginning typically "Father, you. . . ." I remember his making that point in a coffee shop across from Trinity College, and I remember saying: "Yes, but your father is still alive." Then he said—but it doesn't really matter *what* he said; he went on to qualify or modify the remark by saying something else. What began in conversation and was open to the natural processes of conversation becomes a telling point, decisively made, in an essay where I still hear the resonance and backwash of an exchange which occurred ten years ago. This conditions my reading and my response and, while both can be communicated, the second probably cannot be fully shared. It also suggests that it may be more difficult to talk about work by someone you know than by someone you don't.

Then there is the question of voice, or, as the theorists like to say, the question of presence. The related questions of voice, conversation, and presence are taken up by Denis Donoghue in his recent book on current theory and ideology called *Ferocious Alphabets.* This has suddenly become a very useful book to me precisely because the form of language which Donoghue wishes to privilege, which in fact he thinks *is* privileged, is conversation. Arguing that conversation is so radically different from the notion of communication proposed by such early twentieth-century theorists as Jacobsen and Richards that we should regard it as communion rather than communication, Donoghue writes that conversation is made memorable "by the desire of each person to share experience with the other, giving and receiving."

> All that can be shared, strictly speaking, is the desire: it is impossible to reach the experience. But desire is enough to cause the reverberations to take place which we value in conversa-

> tion. . . . The resonating force in a genuine conversation is not admiration, but desire. In conversation . . . the words enact desire . . . the "I" and "you" are constantly changing places; not only to maintain the desire of communion but to keep it mobile. The two voices are making a music of desire, varying its cadences, tones, intensities.

When you separate these two communing and fully embodied voices in such a way that one becomes a writer and the other a reader, certain kinds of compensation must occur. The writer's compensation for the lack of conversation's true communion is style. The reader in his turn "makes up for the tokens of absence which he finds in written words. . . . He is not willing to leave words as [he] finds them on a page [but] wants to restore words to a source, a human situation involving speech, character, personality. . . . We read to meet the other. The encounter is personal, the experience is satisfying in the degree of presence rather than knowledge."

If this kind of reading, which Donoghue has an ugly word for—he calls it *epireading*—commits one not only to the *epos* of speech but to the logocentrism attacked by the kind of reader engaged in an activity for which he has an even uglier word—*graphireading*—the objections of the graphireaders might be summarized in the most severely reductionist terms by a bit of graffiti appearing in a recent *Times Literary Supplement* that looks to have been written by a deranged graduate student:

> D'ya wanna know the creed 'a
> Jacques Derrida?
> Dere ain't no reada
> Dere ain't no wrider
> Eider.

I don't know if I can be an "epireader" in general, but I think I am unavoidably and inescapably an "epireader" of my friends. I hear their voices and I feel the pleasure of their presence in their words. At the end of *Ferocious Alphabets,* Donoghue says that he detests the "current ideology which refers, gloatingly, to the death of the author, the obsolescence of the self, the end of man, and so forth. . . . To be sure that I exist, all I have to do is catch a cold or stumble on the pavement. Pleasure achieves the same effect more agreeably. . . . Knowledge is debatable, pleasure is not." Robert Hass calls his book *Twentieth Century Pleasures* and, I think, shares

most of Donoghue's basic assumptions about the nature of literature and language. Still, he writes in his essay on Robert Creeley that underneath some of the typical pleasures of our time are uncomfortable things "which the mind must, slowly, in love and fear, perform to locate itself again, previous to any other discourse." And in his best known poem he writes:

> Longing, we say, because desire is full
> of endless distances.

In reading the work of friends, something of desire's communion in the pleasure of familiar voices is very present and very real; but so, of course, is the longing, and so are the distances. We fall asleep in the middle of a conversation and awake with a page of prose in our hands.

II

I am surprised that Helen Vendler in a review of *Twentieth Century Pleasures* and some other books about contemporary poetry feels that Hass fails to engage some of the questions and assumptions touched on or alluded to above. Taking the part of the theorists in the 7 November 1985 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, she argues that all practical criticism "assumes positions silently taken" about basic premises and says that she would like to see Hass and the others consider first principles or at any rate make the reader confident that "the theoretical questions had been silently put, and satisfactorily answered, before the writing was undertaken." Vendler is also worried about the autobiographical element in Hass's writing—its familiar tone, its "determined effort toward the colloquial," its attempt through what she calls "interpolated narratives" to communicate the idea that the texts under discussion have some connection with his own sensual life and the life of the times, that the books have literally been lived with for a while and not just read and rapidly reviewed to meet a deadline. Actually, Hass engages the fundamental premises of the theorists and implies his own in any number of his essays. The piece on Creeley, for example, deals in Lacanian and Derridian terms with a poetics "which addresses the tension between speaking and being spoken through language," but also makes clear through some "interpolated narratives" why such an "austere and demanding" poet as Creeley could

communicate with a large and often uninstructed audience during the 1960s. The "interpolated narratives" imply a "premise" as fundamental as anything in Lacan and Derrida—namely, that art unfolds both in individual lives and our collective history, and that factors which only narrative can reveal condition our response to it. But of course there is no systematic statement of principles, no prolegomenon to any further study of contemporary poetry, in a book like this. It achieves its unity and authority from the manner in which art is shown to intersect with life. It *is* an autobiography of sorts.

Epireader of this text that I must be, the first thing I am conscious of in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* is a voice. It is a familiar voice, and it sounds like this:

> I've been trying to think about form in poetry and my mind keeps returning to a time in the country in New York when I was puzzled that my son Leif was getting up a little earlier every morning. I had to get up with him, so it exasperated me. I wondered about it until I slept in his bed one night. His window faced east. At six-thirty I woke to brilliant sunlight. The sun had risen.
>
> Wonder and repetition. Another morning I was walking Kristin to her bus stop—a light blanket of snow after thaw, the air thick with the rusty croaking of blackbirds so that I remembered, in the interminable winter, the windy feel of June on that hill. Kristin, standing on a snowbank in the cold air, her eyes alert, her face rosy with cold and with some purity of expectation, was looking down the road. It was eight-fifteen. Her bus always arrived at eight-fifteen. She looked down the road and it was coming.

Helen Vendler objects to what she feels marks a difficulty in controlling tone in a passage similar to this one taken from the final and most fully autobiographical essay in this book, which I am going to quote a little later on. It is an intentionally vulnerable passage and functions, along with others like it, to make clear exactly what elements, insofar as Hass is conscious of them, combine to condition his reading and his response, to make it *his* reading and *his* response rather than mine or Helen Vendler's or someone else's. It tells us some of what we need to know in order to understand his perceptions, his reactions, and his judgments. And it is especially in passages like it, and like the one quoted above, that I hear the familiar,

amused, vigorous, disarming voice often touched with a Chekhovian irony and sadness that I know. I sense the presence of a friend and not a difficulty in controlling tone. One function of the passage about Hass's children is, of course, to get an essay about form begun in a relaxed and graceful way. No academic categories introduced, no pedagogical solemnities. But we are also persuaded by this kind of writing that his coincident experiences of "trying to think about form" and remembering the power of repetition in the lives of his young children yield the surprised perception out of which the essay grows, that "though *predictable* is an ugly little word in daily life, in our first experience of it we are clued to the hope of a shapeliness in things. . . . Probably, that is the psychological basis for the power and the necessity of artistic form." But let me take an example from the first essay in the book to demonstrate more fully the usefulness of narrative and autobiography.

On these terms, Lowell's prayer moved me.

What are "these terms," and what conditions them? The prayer which Hass is moved by occurs in Part V of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"—"Hide / our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side"—and the terms of his being moved are conditioned by the way in which his own inherited Catholicism has been modified or transmuted by a range of experiences and some important reading by the time it meets the intense but unorthodox Catholicism of a convert's poem.

At the beginning of his essay, Hass says that it's difficult to conduct an argument about the value of music in favorite poems once it's gotten into the blood: "It becomes autobiography there." But so does the meaning of favorite poems become a kind of autobiogrpahy—so conditioned is it by the times and places and the circumstances of initial or repeated readings—and only narrative can really show us how this happens. After explaining the "enormously liberating perception" found in Robert Duncan's prose that "the mistake of Christianity was to think that the soul's salvation was the only human adventure" and, Christ seen therefore on an equal footing with the other gods, Pound's idea that they all were "forms of consciousness which men through learning, art and contemplation could inhabit," Hass writes this paragraph:

> I got my Catholicism from my mother's side, Foleys from Cork by way of Vermont who drank and taught school and practiced

> law on the frontiers of respectability until they landed in San Francisco at the turn of the century. My father's side was Protestant and every once in a while, weary probably with the catechisms of his children, he would try to teach us one of his childhood prayers. But he could never get past the first line: "In my father's house there are many mansions. . . ." He would frown, squint, shake his head, but that was as far as he ever got and we children who were willing to believe Protestants capable of any stupidity including the idea that you could fit a lot of mansions into a house, would return to memorizing the four marks of the true church. (It was one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.) But 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, resting place 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, "the fauns chiding Proteus / in the smell of hay under olive trees" and the intoning of Latin with which we began the mass: *Introibo ad altare Dei.* On these terms, Lowell's prayer moved me: "Hide our steel, Jonas Messias, in thy side."

The essay on Lowell is important for a lot of reasons. It is the generative essay of the volume, written in England in the cold winter of 1977 when Hass and his family were living in the Cambridgeshire village of Little Shelford in a huge house owned by the master of St. John's College, which I had lived in two years before. The essay may be as personal, as autobiographical, as it is in part out of compensation for not being able to write, there in Little Shelford, the poems he had hoped to write in the course of the year away from his familiar turf in Berkeley and San Francisco. Actually, I feel vaguely guilty about this. I persuaded Hass to go to Cambridge for the year rather than to York where his Bicentennial Fellowship was really supposed to take him, thinking that it would be good to spend the year near one another—I was once again to be in the area—and that the big house in the little village would be as productive a place for him to live and work in as it had been for me two years before. Once the weather turned, all the poems were frozen out of his system—the house "has central heating," but the system is in a permanent state of disrepair—and he wrote very little poetry until the San Francisco sun had warmed his blood and spirit again

eight or nine months later. He did, however, write a lot of prose, and he wrote this first essay of the present book which, I think, led to his wanting to write the others and established their characteristic tone and point of view. It begins and ends with recent and more distant memories of voices—that of a mild-looking schoolteacher in the Shelford pub who, when the subject of favorite poems came up one night, treated the locals to a recitation of Kipling's "Gunga Din," and the surprise of Robert Lowell's when Hass finally got to hear it at a reading, which sounded "bizarrely like an imitation of Lionel Barrymore" or "like a disenchanted English actor reading an Elizabethan sonnet on American television." So much, perhaps, for the possibility of being an epireader of poets whom we haven't heard give readings or of those we don't or cannot know. Hass's own poems returned to him again once he was back in the world where he and his brother, as he remembered in the pub, had also, like the Shelford teacher, loved as children reading Kipling aloud "on summer nights . . . in our upstairs room that looked out on a dusty fig orchard and grapevines spilling over the wooden fence." I suppose it would have been even colder in York than it was in Cambridgeshire. Anyway, the one piece in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* actually called a memoir returns Hass to "the San Francisco Bay Area as a culture region." It is a rich and evocative autobiographical essay, and it connects with the important reading of Milosz that comes just before and the remarkable "Images" which comes afterward.

In his Bay Area memoir, Hass is dealing in the most delicate and often amusing and ironic way with the fundamental mysteries of our common world as they were given a local habitation and a name in the area where he grew up. The memoir glosses his desire, in the Lowell essay, to have "the battered figure on the cross . . . and Aphrodite as well," and provides a context both for the way in which he deals with the Gnostic side of Milosz and his celebration of the image in the final essay of the book. It begins, in fact, by recalling Hass's attempt to write another essay—for one Sister Reginald to enter on his behalf in a competition sponsored by the National League for Decency in Motion Pictures about how fine a film could be made from a book called *Stranded on an Atoll.* In his comical account of the revisions and reversals of attitude while working on this junior high school project, Hass's memory connects Sister Reginald's austere Dominican habit first with the order itself, "founded in the twelfth century as a kind of Papal CIA to root out the Gnostic heresy of the Cathars," and then, to his surprise, with

the modest dress of the Cathar women who had been burned alive at Monségur and elegized, as he had found years later, by both Pound and Robert Duncan. Hass's essay, revised at school but recopied at home before his favorite radio show came on—*I Love a Mystery,* heard ritually each night against the family rules but with his father's visible acquiescence—won a ten-dollar money order from a local bookshop where he bought, dizzy and confused by all the possibilities, *A Comprehensive Anthology of American Poetry.* Unable to understand any of the poems, he stumbles onto Stevens' "Domination of Black" with its cry of the peacocks. Although the young Hass does not at first remember the cry of the peacocks from the front yard of his Portuguese babysitter, the reader does at once, having read about them "trailing their tails in the dust" under a palm tree in the first paragraph of the memoir. Stevens' peacocks seem to announce the existence of another world. Hass read the poem again and again. "I read it exactly the way I lined up for a roller-coaster ride with a dime tight in my fist at Playland across the bay." It made him, he says, "swoon"—and it made him "understand what the word *swoon* meant" a year before he found himself actually riding the Playland roller coaster beside a girl in his ninth-grade class whom he thought to be "the most beautiful being I had ever come close to in my life, which may also account for some of the previous year's swooning."

Mysteries, then. The young boy's fascination with the Sister's habit and her "long beautiful hands which she waved in the air like doves when she conducted us at Mass in the singing of the *Tantum Ergo* and *Pange Lingua,*" the Cathars at Montségur, the theosophical and Gnostic writings standing behind the poetry of Robert Duncan later given association with these early memories, the hypnotized amazement at the sound of peacocks crying in what seemed to be an incomprehensible poem read over and over again like a mantra nevertheless, the similarity hypnotized amazement at the existence—at the otherness—of a beautiful girl, a radio program called *I Love a Mystery* mysteriously allowed to be heard even though it violated family rules, and the sound of peacocks crying in a babysitter's yard unconnected with the ones that cried in the poem, even unnoticed.

In the same year he won the essay prize, Hass and his friends were playing baseball on teams sponsored by businessmen's clubs and insurance companies with hilarious names, especially when seen stitched on players' uniforms in competition, like *Optimists* and *California Casualty.* Playing center field, he heard the "irritated,

prenocturnal cries of the peacocks" in the yard of the Portuguese babysitter. And the grown man writes:

> I never once associated them with the Wallace Stevens poem. Art hardly ever does seem to come to us at first as something connected to our own world; it always seems, in fact, to announce the existence of another, different one, which is what it shares with Gnostic insight. That is why, I suppose, the next thing artists have to learn is that this world is the other world.

Beside the baseball field ran a creek called "Papermill." By the time Hass reads a poem by Kenneth Rexroth, who published "the first readable book of poems by a resident" of San Francisco in 1941, he is a little older. But reading that "Under the second moon the / Salmon come, up Tomales / Bay, up Papermill Creek, up / The narrow gorges to their spawning beds in Devil's Gulch" moves him deeply, and in a way very different from that in which he had been moved by "The Domination of Black" before. It is the presence of Papermill Creek in the poem that provides the final jolt and makes it "seem possible that the peacocks in Wallace Stevens and the scraggly birds under the palm tree could inhabit the same world."

These are some of the factors that condition the mind—the being-in-the-world—of the man who will read Milosz for us (and Rilke and Wright and Transtromer and Brodsky) and tell us about the nature of images, the music of poetry, and a poetic form which is "one body." We learn to trust his voice because he does not seek to mute its characteristic tones and intonations in the idiom of critic-talk or theoreze, and because, as they used to say in the 1960s, we know—we are specifically told—where he's coming from. One of the places he is coming from *is* the 1960s, and Helen Vendler is right to point this out in her review. But she is wrong to stress the notion that Hass's aim is to rehabilitate the familiar essay. The familiar essay may be rehabilitated along the way in some of these pieces—and very winningly so at that—but the *aim* of the autobiography and "interpolated narratives" is to dramatize as vividly as possible the inevitable historical conditioning of both the texts to be read and the perceptions of the reader who intends to talk about them. Hass does not attempt to clear his mind of everything that's in it before turning to the poem on the page; instead, he gives us an account of what is in his mind when he begins to read and how it comes to be there. He does not stop living while he struggles with intractable profundities in Milosz or in Rilke; he shows us daily life as an illumination

of the struggle. Even poems that do announce the existence of another world must be perceived in this one, and the history—both personal and social or political—which shapes the circumstances of their being read by this particular reader in this particular time in this particular place becomes, in Hass's writing, essential to the work at hand. The premises for which Helen Vendler is looking are found, essentially, in the narrative and autobiographical passages of the book. And not only premises, but a whole implied poetics. There is a moment—and Vendler doesn't like it; it is the passage she objects to in terms of what she regards to be a descent into bathos and a failure of tone—when Hass the particular reader becomes for a brief moment the perfectly average American of his time and place, which is one aspect of his existence as person and poet and reader of poems which he knows he must acknowledge.

> I am a man approaching middle age in the American century, which means I've had it easy, and I have three children, somewhere near the average, and I've just come home from summer vacation in an unreliable car. This is the *selva oscura*.

That is the passage which Vendler quotes. But it goes on: "Not that it isn't true, but that it is not the particular truth. It is the average, which is different from the common; arbitrary, the enemy of form." And Hass is the friend of form.

In the Milosz essay, the Berkeley native, conditioned by a life that makes him in some ways a hostage to what he calls "the seemingly eternal Saturday afternoons of *l'homme moyen sensuel*" and in others a gifted and utterly displaced member of the diaspora of poets and readers of poems still half listening for the peacock's cry that announces the existence of another world, must deal with the fiercely isolated and visionary Berkeley immigrant from Lithuania who refuses "in the privacy of his vocation as a poet to become an accomplice of time and matter." This last, says Hass, is a difficult step for the American imagination to take.

Hass's imagination as a poet does not take that step, but his imagination as a critic follows with deep sympathy and understanding the voyage of Milosz as *he* takes it. The essay on images which ends the book probably comes closer than anything else to being Hass's *Ars Poetica*. The essay on Milosz, to use a word borrowed I think from Robert Duncan in these essays, gives "permission" for its affirmation of the world—of time and matter—by testing the most typical manifestations of the American poetic imagination

against Milosz's "leap into dualism or gnosticism" seen against the full history of the poet's life and thought and, again, the factors conditioning the critic's reading. "It might be useful," he says, "to begin by invoking a time when one might turn to the work of Czeslaw Milosz."

The time turns out to be the later 1960s, and the first scene recalled is a protest march to the napalm plant in Redwood City which I remember very well participating in. Bearing our pathetically inadequate signs and listening to the hopelessly inane or merely rhetorical speeches, we did indeed "feel sheepish between gusts of affection for this ragtag army of an aroused middle class." In three pages of narrative and description as good as anything in *Armies of the Night*, Hass evokes the atmosphere of guilt, commitment, generosity, illusion, disillusion, cynicism, and craziness culminating in what he calls "a disease that was on me." He remembers the World War II veteran who shaved his head, smeared himself with red dye, and began attending Quaker meetings carrying an American flag; the careerist professor who returned from a European antiwar demonstration "to wear jeans, T-shirt and a Mao cap to teach his course in Victorian bibliography"; a friend arrested with dynamite in his trunk driving off to blow up a local air base. On his way home from the Redwood City demonstration, he even catches a glimpse of his loathed double twenty years before its time, a version of "the man approaching middle age in the American century" from the essay on images in the form of a vacationing paterfamilias driving his wife and somewhere-near-the-average-number-of-children off to enjoy dinner "on a deck from which you can admire green pines, grey granite, blue sky . . . thousands of miles away [from] fear, violence, brothels, villages going up in an agony of flames." He thinks about myth and decides that "myth is about eating each other . . . man's first tool for sanctifying the food chain. . . . The world was a pig-out; or the matter-universe was a pig-out. As if there were some other universe to distinguish this one from."

The disease that was on him had various names—philosophy, theology, eschatology—and the one thing he felt he knew about them "was that they were the enemies of poetry." But they were the enemies of a poetry inherited from Williams and Pound, an American modernism which sought to render things rather than ideas, to build a poetry out of natural objects or pictographs "as if no one had ever thought before and nothing needed to be thought that was not shot through with the energy of immediate observation." The

problem was that the things and objects and pictographs of an imagist or imagist-derived poetics threw "the weight of meaning back on the innocence and discovery of the observer, and something in the dramatic ambivalence of that gesture rhymed with the permanent unconscious of the man with the boat," the vacationing paterfamilias noticed while returning from Redwood City. Hass felt "vaguely ashamed" when he saw this in the poems he was reading. "I wanted to read a poetry by people who did not assume that the great drama in their work was that everything in the world was happening to them for the first time." He finds such a poetry in the work of Milosz, but also a poetry willing to postulate a universe different from this one, different from the pig-out matter-universe of Hass's eschatological disease which the medicine of American poetry didn't seem to cure.

Hass discusses or alludes to twenty-nine books by Milosz in his long and loving consideration of the full career, and I haven't space enough to outline the entire argument. For my own purposes, I want to focus on the end of the piece, the pages where Hass's poetic imagination sidles up most closely to Milosz's own, but where—because Milosz really does locate the disease Hass was suffering from in the matter-universe itself, and not in a particular subjective aberration caused by a particular objective moment in a nation's history—the two imaginations also must part company.

Hass argues that Simone Weil's lesson to Milosz that "contradiction is the lever of transcendence" gave the poet, who had also taken Eros as one of his teachers, permission to dwell in contradiction: "and once that happened, Eros—in the form of dream, memory, landscape—comes flooding back into his work" after the years in Paris during the 1950s. But since erotic poetry "is usually intense because it is narrow and specific, mute and focused," when the focus of Milosz's work "widens through a terrible and uncompromising love of his own vanished experience, the poetry, refusing to sacrifice the least sharpness of individual detail to that wider vision, makes a visceral leap into dualism or gnosticism." Hass writes three closely argued pages explaining exactly how this happens, concluding thus:

> If you do not want one grain of sand lost, one moment lost, if you do not admit to the inexorable logic of the death or suffering of a single living creature, then you might, by a leap of intuition, say that it is *all* evil, because then nothing could be judged. Because it all dwelt in limitation or contradiction or, as

> Blake said, in Ulro. But the universe could be saved if you posited a totally independent but parallel universe of good in which each thing also had an existence. Thus, when the matter-universe fell away, the good universe survived.

Again, if you like, the cry of peacocks. But for Hass himself the other world announced must be this very world he's living in—the other universe, the only universe we know.

In the final essay in the book—and I am passing over a brilliant reading of Rilke which falls between the Milosz essay and the essay celebrating images, not to mention half a dozen others of enormous interest—Hass becomes "an accomplice of time and matter." To praise things is not necessarily, as it comes to be in Milosz, "to praise the history of suffering; or to collude with torture and mutilation and decay." The American will out (with a little help from the Japanese), his illness purged perhaps by contemplating all the implications of the *gnosis* vouchsafed to the Lithuanian. But the most extraordinary thing about this essay is that it requires from life a vision as remarkable as any given to a Catholic mystic or a Gnostic prophet, and that life cooperates with all the urgency that literature could possibly require of it.

It's difficult to know even what to call the essay on images. Like other essays in the book—but maybe here more fully achieved—it may invent a new nongeneric form of writing in its combination of vivid anecdote, personal reminiscence, literary history and analysis, meditation on life and death and imagery found in poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, mythology, and ordinary quotidian experience. Hass begins by gathering some images from his recent domestic life and running them through his mind along with others found in Chekhov, Buson, and Issa to demonstrate their power and the extent to which we may be haunted by them. He examines the nature of "the moment, different for different memories, when the image, the set of relationships that seems actually to reveal something about life, forms." Then he picks out such a moment: a woman camping with him and his family in a canyon about to tell a story of early sorrow: a frying pan in one hand, a scouring pad in the other, a Stellar's jay perched in the tree above her, Hass's son playing card tricks, a long granite moraine behind them, a meadow in the distance. Then Issa, then Buson, then Tu Fu who said of the power of images: "It's like being alive twice." Neither idea, nor myth, nor always metaphor, images do not explain or symbolize: "they do not say this is that, they say this is."

Hass walks through the rooms of his house feeling his life to be in part "a long slow hurdle through the forms of things." It is a sensation he resists because it implies a kind of passivity, but he would doubt the absence of the sensation because he knows his life is lived among the forms and facts and objects of the natural world. "The terror of facts is the purity of their arbitrariness. I live in this place, rather than that. Have this life, rather than that. It is August not September." Then comes the sentence about being a man approaching middle age in the American century having come home from a summer vacation. The true haiku of his recent domestic life would have to go, he says, something like this: "Bill and Leif want to climb Mount Allac and Karen and I are taking the Volkswagen to go fishing, so can you and Mom walk to the beach now and pick up Luke at Peter's later in Grandma's car?" Collecting images, beginning his essay, these distracting twentieth-century pleasures had begun to eat him up. He felt "a means to a means to a means" and longed for a little solitude in which to think about poems as arresting as Basho's haiku written just before his death: "Sick on a journey, / my dream hovers / over the withered fields."

At this point, Hass breaks off writing. The second part of his essay begins by unexpectedly incorporating an experience which has just occurred. "Because it is summer," he says, "I have been in the mountains again and am now back at the typewriter." The experience in the mountains has been shattering. Walking a path in Desolation Wilderness, Hass began to feel the prickly sensation and notice the rash of an allergic reaction which he sometimes gets. He ignored it and kept walking until the inside of his mouth began to swell, the sign of a generalized reaction which can end in one's throat closing up. He took two antihistamines, but the reaction intensified nevertheless, and he began to feel dizzy and frightened. He thought of the worst that might happen: that his son would have to punch a hole in his trachea with a knife; no, that he would die. The images and attendant memories that he had been collecting passed through his mind, including Basho's dream that "hovers over the withered fields." Then his legs gave way and he was on his back looking at the hillside and the sky. "Everything green in the landscape turned white, and the scene flared and shuddered as if it were on fire." Later, after the antihistamines had taken hold and he had recovered, he felt as if he had been granted a vision of death. "White trees, white grass, white leaves; the snow patches and flowering currant suddenly dark beside them; and everything there, rock, tree, cloud, sky, shuddering and blazing. It was a sense, past

speaking, past these words, that everything, all of the earth and time itself, was alive and burning."

This is an amazing passage to encounter in the middle of a literary discussion, and it ought finally to make clear that phrases such as "interpolated narratives" or categories like "familiar essay" don't begin to say enough about how Hass's writing works on us. After the death vision—and it *is* a vision of death, not resurrection, not the vision of Czeslaw Milosz where "the demiurge's workshop will be stilled . . . / And the form of every single grain will be restored in glory"—Hass returns gratefully to time and things and human beings to celebrate the world of the peacocks in the babysitter's yard, the other world which is this world, and the sensation which great art and image-making give us of marrying that world, of living in the grain at the permission of eros and "in the light of primary acts of imagination." He doesn't give up the idea from the Milosz essay that many things bear thinking about that are not "shot through with the energy of immediate observation," but he does, here, affirm that energy as one of the supreme values in poetry. In spite of this, or maybe even because of it, the essay is death-haunted to the end, and this is one of the things that makes it so exceptionally memorable. "The earth turns, and we live in the grain of nature, turning with it. . . . When the spirit becomes anguished or sickened by this cycle, by the irreversibility of time and the mutilation of choice, another impulse appears: the monotheist rage for unity. . . ." One sometimes finds this rage in Hass's work both as poet and critic, but not very often; not, at any rate, unless it appears as the "fuel" which he says can power "the natural polytheism of the life of art." Remember the essay on Lowell's monotheistic rage in "The Quaker Graveyard" and the terms according to which Hass was able to be moved by the prayer at the end of its fifth part. For the rest, the essay delicately builds a collage of images from the haiku masters, from Pound and Williams and H.D., from Whitman and Chekhov and Cézanne, and comments on them, bringing life's experiences—his own and those of the artists whose work he loves—to bear upon that commentary. If we are lucky, he says, the images in terms of which we live our lives "are invisibly transformed into the next needful thing." (The danger is in clinging just to one, to the exculsion of yet others which should naturally compose themselves.) Although there is something of Basho's spirituality and a lot of Issa's humanity in the prose of *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, I associate the author of these essays most of all with the spirit of Buson whose "apparent interest in everything that passed before

his eyes and the feeling in his work of an artist's delight in making" provide a sense of "something steadying and nourishing" for Hass. I am similarly steadied and nourished by his own work here, and by the sound of a voice that I think I know. Concluding his book by quoting a final Buson haiku about whale-watching, Hass remembers his own participation in a West Coast version of that ritual and says: "We go to glimpse being." And of the poet himself, whose whale-watchers in the haiku find no whales: "Buson is not surprised by the fullness and the emptiness of things."

III

Jiri Wyatt's *Against Capitualation* deals directly with many of the issues which Hass takes up in his essay on Milosz and indirectly with those taken up in "Images." More obviously autobiographical in its intention than *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* the book nonetheless is difficult to classify generically. It, too, is very much the prose work of a poet. Falling into two uneven parts—a twenty-five page essay published before the rest of the book was even conceived, and a sequence of twenty-three often oddly titled chapters ranging from childhood reminiscence through political analysis and travelogue to something like dream-vision and prose-poetry—the book deals with Wyatt's childhood in Fascist Slovakia; his later life in South America, the United States, Canada, and England; his trip back to Slovakia in 1978; and his attempts to clarify his thoughts about the Holocaust, revolution, socialism, Stalininsm, the 1960s, and his identity as a Jew, a son, a father, a Slovak, a New Yorker, a writer, and a radical. The sweep of the book is ambitious enough to require all of its unusual means. And it is good enough to take an honorable place beside the work of those more recently exiled Czechoslovak writers, Milan Kundera, Josef Skvorecky, and Jiri Gruša.

Once again, as in *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* I find myself listening to a familiar voice telling both familiar and unfamiliar stories, advancing arguments I've heard in conversation many times and some that are entirely new. Jiri Wyatt, however, is not a familiar name; it is a pseudonym made necessary for the same reason that other people's names and identities have been disguised in the book—to protect the men and women who, in the Holocaust of 1939–1945, saved the author's life. There is a certain irony in the fact that this is necessary. *Against Capitulation* begins with a scene set in a small bedroom with a single window looking over a bleak Manhattan

landscape. Here the author's parents came "one surprising evening and announced matter-of-factly that they planned to change our family name." He was sixteen at the time. His parents said, "We're doing this for you. You don't know what it means to be Jewish." The book, then, has to do in part with "Jiri Wyatt" learning what it means to be "Jiri Weinwurm," learning, not perhaps until the visit to Slovakia in 1978, what it means to have been born "a Jew in the town of M—." But it also has to do with two forms of hubris—that of parents and that of children—and the literary means of discovering the nature of these while simultaneously engaged in attempting to regain the past without sacrificing the felt life of the present and learning, as Hass says of Milosz, "to dwell in contradiction."

In the same spring of 1966 that Hass participated in the demonstration at the Redwood City napalm plant and began to sense "the disease that was on [him]," Wyatt—and perhaps Hass, too; I wasn't there myself this time—occupied the office of J. Wallace Sterling, the president of Stanford University, with a group of war protestors. The first part of *Against Capitulation*—the essay that was published separately—concludes with a description of the occupation and an evocation of the period when "events invited a millennialist vision to which we felt egotistically equal." In the second part—the long account of the visit to Slovakia and its background—Wyatt writes of another millennialist vision, that of the Holocaust survivors who project onto their children a "raging, primal need to *see* themselves reproduced. . . . The parents are possessed by a vision of their fulfillment so intense, so millennial, that they are wholly unaware that they are possessed. They, the parents, embody the message, and now the children will speak it." Because Wyatt finds "the experience of survival equivocal," he cannot accept Elie Wiesel's position that religious witness must be paid to those who "set eyes on 'an event that weighs on man's destiny.' " Wyatt's own experience of survival made Wiesel's notion that "persecution bestows upon the victims moral stature" less than self-evident.

> I lived what amounted to a life without moral example, embroiled in survival but lacking the dignity of an asserted self-respect or of a proud history. My parents retrieved from the Holocaust a determination that they would not be caught out again: out of the disorder forced upon them they would secure, less for them than for me, a permanent inviolable stability. This turned out to be an emphasis in their lives with few affirma-

> tives: the chief rules were don'ts, and the sum of these don'ts was a deadly practicality aimed against belief in any of its delusory and dangerous forms—against belief in anything but the worst.

Both Wyatt and his parents could not, he saw, have what they wanted—"They a vicarious triumph through me, and I my own life." Insisting on denying his parents their vicarious triumph by becoming himself, Wyatt attempted in high school to annihilate his past by taking hold of fate in a Sartrian manner and, free to choose his identity, trying to make "the authentic daily assertion of individual freedom." Insisting on belief—on belief in nothing but the best against his parents' fear of belief in anything but the worst—he became the politically committed radical sitting in the president's office at Stanford where "events invited a millennialist vision." But nightmares of his childhood in hiding mocked Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* with images of a past which he could no more escape than he could choose his dreams; and a sense emerged, after the fact, that there was something hubristic in "the pleasure of absolute certainty" sitting there in the Stanford president's office confident that the future would prove one absolutely right.

At about the time his daughter was born in 1970, Wyatt and his parents began to share "the suppressed history" of their lives between 1941 and 1945, and slowly his determination formed to visit Slovakia. Much of the long second part of *Against Capitulation* has to do with images—how they are manifested in dreams and nightmares, arise unexpectedly before the traveler, compose and recompose themselves and then dissolve, draw one to the past or lead one to the future or hold one in the present moment—images of justice, tyranny, life, death, pain, pleasure, and joy. The danger with images, as Hass points out, is to cling to one alone as if it embodied the entire truth. For example, the image of "a raving inarticulate parent, replete with impossible demands, posturing like an Old Testament prophet." Or of oneself as Stanford's Bob Dylan telling Wallace Sterling how he doesn't know what's happening, does he Mr. Jones. Images, says Hass, "either . . . dry up [and] are shed, or . . . are invisibly transformed . . . or we act on them in a way that exposes both them and us." "What do you want to go there for?" Wyatt's mother asked him when he told her that he planned to visit Slovakia. One reason was to trace to their source his primal memories that appeared to him "not as sequences of actions but as images accompanied by specific and powerful emotions. . . . My lost childhood,

my forgotten sensuous past, this darkness rank with smell, taste, and terror—that was what I wanted." Another reason, he discovered, was to act on certain images which had begun to petrify in such a way as to expose, in Hass's terms, both himself and them—to form thereby another image, for example, of the figure making impossible demands and posturing like an Old Testament prophet. "One of my reasons for going," he says, "was to love my parents."

The journey itself begins in America with a visit to several surviving relations who might possibly give Wyatt information which will allow him better to connect those images which the word *past* conjures in his mind with the people and places he needs to see in order, at last, to ground them in a fully personal, historical, and geographical context. *Past* had conjured an almost contextless vision of interiors in sequence: "a ground-floor room . . . with windows at one end . . . my mother is ironing . . . outside the world is snow . . . soldiers on skis are working their way up the hill"; or another room, a mountain bunker with wooden boards to sleep on, a stool on which a child stands to suck his mother's breasts; or the house in M— where the child will not leave the window looking out into the darkness of the village as he waits impatiently for his parents to return. But sometimes *past* had conjured other images—images which were not constricting or frightening, but which seemed to open into a world of peace accompanied by emotions "which approached euphoria." He remembered "being pulled by [his] father out of the mountains on a sledge . . . after the Russians had swept through [their] sector of the White Carpathians," and before that "crossing a brook or small stream under a stunning night sky" heading for a second bunker which his father had built higher in the mountains feeling "wonder and peace as we crossed that stream, exactly as if the forest and the overwhelming clear arc of the night sky and the stream were themselves a little in awe." In Boston, Wyatt's uncle Pepo asks him "Who can you go visit . . . ? There's no one left." And in Atlanta his Aunt Sharon opens on her lap a box stuffed "with every scrap of paper—every railroad ticket, letter, note, telegram—from the years 1939–1945" which she has saved from a life of hiding, flight, and exile. She has kept all this to document their family's history and pass it on to their daughter, Wyatt's cousin Valery, who isn't interested. Valery's parents, like Wyatt's, had come to America "with the Holocaust raging behind them. They were, they knew, survivors; their lives had been threatened and spared, and they aimed to recoup what in truth they could not regain through the life they would give their children." Valery, in a