

## Robert Hass Interview Transcript

### Geoffrey G. O'Brien

Welcome. I'm Geoffrey G. O'Brien, professor of English at UC Berkeley, and a former colleague of Robert Hass, from whom we'll hear today. I have the pleasure of not only being a former colleague, but a former graduate student of Bob's, from whom in the early nineties I inherited a pedagogical model and a disposition in the classroom. I remember that Bob could really meet any kind of a starting student where they were, and focused mostly on suggesting quite tactfully poetic examples from the literary record that would rhyme with whatever the student was trying to do.

You could just instantly feel Bob's brilliant access to the poems and his erudition lightly worn. And it was really combined with a patience that's about student development. It's quite clear that he didn't feel that it all had to happen at once. It just had to start happening or be happening. And I've taken that with me into classroom after classroom ever since. It was also such a pleasure to ever hear him speak in department meetings, promotion meetings; the whole literary record comes in, so many intuitions and correspondences. He was really a pleasure to listen to for the better part of two decades for me and longer for other colleagues. I'm going to start with a little biographical information. It would be quicker to list the awards and accomplishments that Bob doesn't have, but I'll share some information about your incredible life and letters.

Robert Hass was born in San Francisco, grew up in Marin County, and attended St Mary's College and Stanford University. He's the author of seven books of poetry, the co-translator with Czesław Miłosz of ten volumes of the Polish poet's work, as well as a volume of translations of Japanese haiku and four books of essays. Another volume of Czesław Miłosz poems and translations forthcoming, as well as another book of poems and essays.

His first book of poems, *Field Guide*, received the Yale Younger Poet's Prize. His second book, *Praise*, the William Carlos Williams Prize from the Academy of American Poets. His fourth book, *Human Wishes*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry. His fifth book, *Time and Materials*, received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. And his first book of essays received the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism, and the later volume, *What Light Can Do*, received Penn's Weitzman School Award in 2012 for Special Excellence in the Art of the Essay. He has received the PEN Award, an award from the Association of Scholars in Slavic Languages for his collaborative translations. And volumes of his poems in translation have appeared in a dozen languages, including Spanish, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish, Hebrew and Mandarin. Robert Hass began his teaching career at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

He was there from 1967 to 71. He returned to the Bay Area and taught at his alma mater, Saint Mary's, from 1971 to 1989. And then landed here at UC Berkeley from 1989 all the way to 2019. Like any 30-year stretch, it was an eventful stretch, and we'll be hearing about that. He also served as a visiting lecturer at the University of Virginia, Columbia University, and the University of Iowa, and was the Samuel Fisher professor of Comparative Literature at the Free University in Berlin for a semester.

He has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a MacArthur Fellow and Fellow of the Bicentennial Exchange between Great Britain and the United States in 1970-77, and served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997. During his time as Poet Laureate, he organized Watershed, a national conference at the Library of Congress on Environmental Literature, and from 1996 to 2001, wrote a weekly column about poetry and poets for The *Washington Post*.

In 2014, he received the Wallace Stevens Prize from the Academy of American Poets for, “proven mastery in the art of poetry”, and proven it has been! Welcome, Bob! I thought that we would start by thinking about what the Bay Area has meant to you and how Berkeley loomed or shown for you long before you actually started working here. Given that you grew up a stone's throw from the university.

### **Robert Hass**

Yes. I was saying to you earlier, Geoffrey, that when (I don't know if it was in grammar school or early in high school) but my father took us to Cal football games on some occasions. And I remember one when I think I might have been in high school, and crowded, very excited. My brother and I, of course, had drawn pictures, for in those days there were still cartoonists for the sports pages of the newspapers. So we had all assiduously done pencil imitations of the heroic drawings of the of the Cal quarterback. Anyway, we got there, and we stopped for lunch, and I noticed all these gorgeous looking people sitting around reading books on subjects like nuclear physics and books in kinds of typography (it was probably Russian) that I didn't recognize. And I thought, Wow, this is an amazing place. And so Berkeley always was a magical, a magical place to me. And then, of course, and my St Mary's is just over the hill from Berkeley, and I lived in Berkeley for part of the time when I was a student at St Mary's.

And so then having gone to Stanford to graduate school and then to Buffalo, New York, to teach, getting back to Berkeley, which I did in 1971, was getting home.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

And I want to forgive you for going to Stanford and concentrate on that for a little bit. One of the things that's interesting to me about it is just that you did it at all at that particular time, by which I simply mean that the vocation of poetry wasn't as decisively tied to the profession of literature, compared to now or even the last 20, 30 years.

So I'm wondering what made you think about becoming a professor of English alongside your unstoppable [writing]?

### **Robert Hass**

Yeah, it wasn't yet there. To me at the time there was no connection, really, or it didn't occur to me that there was one. I think there were two graduate programs in creative writing in 1963 when I was graduating from college, one in Iowa and maybe at Stanford. I was unaware of either one. I knew I vaguely wanted to be a writer of some kind, and I was partly drawn to Stanford because I had heard that there were writers there. The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor was there. In college, I had started to read a book called *Politics and the Novel* by a critic named Irving Howe. And I knew he was at Stanford. So, there was also a famously

conservative poet Yvor Winters that I was unaware of until I got there. And when I got there to Stanford, in fact, Frank O'Connor and Irving Howe left.

So, I thought in college that, first, I admired my professors, and they got to read books for a living. And so, it seemed like and it was, I don't know: did a senior in college have any models for how you would go about being a writer just then? So, I had to do something, so I applied to graduate school. And in fact, though I started writing poetry intensely and seriously at Stanford, and it was partly under the influence of the people who were there, I thought that writing poetry was my own private business and had almost nothing to do with my trying to get a degree so I could be a professor and get to read books for a living. And in fact, when I interviewed for a job, my first job at Buffalo, I didn't even mention that I wrote poetry. I was doing a dissertation in the history of the novel at the time. So, yeah, it was interesting by the time--

Geoffrey, what year did you start at Berkeley?

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

92. Oh, you mean as a grad student or as a professor?

**Robert Hass**

As a graduate student?

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Yeah. 92.

**Robert Hass**

So 62. So, there were really 30 years difference in our experience coming in. And over those 30 years, it was half, most of the poets in America at that point were teaching creative writing in universities, in the colleges. So interesting, huge difference.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Sea-change, mostly economically driven. It's the only patron left.

**Robert Hass**

Am I right in remembering by my recollection of you as a graduate student besides just, I thought, your writing was brilliant, was that I told you to go away?

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

You did. And I heeded that. I came back.

**Robert Hass**

It wasn't that I didn't like Berkeley or love Berkeley or the profession. But I thought, oh, this guy should not be writing papers read by one person for the next four years. He should go someplace where he can write his poems.

## **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Here is Bob's generosity already reversing the charges of the interview. Back on you. Before we leave Stanford. For the sake of literary history, tell me what it was like being around Yvor Winters, under his tutelage to whatever extent you were.

## **Robert Hass**

I was under his tutelage, for sure. But my first—it was the quarter system at Stanford—and my first class was a history of English poetry taught by Yvor Winters. Winters was a bulky, medium sized guy. These people said he'd been a boxer in college. He looked it. He wore baggy, dusty, old suits. He had a complexion of someone who loved wine.

He must have been 60, but he seemed ancient to me. And he came in to the classroom and started speaking. And I don't think I've ever heard anybody speak so passionately about anything. It was completely riveting. And in fact, he began by saying, I know why you come in here. You've heard that I'm the eccentric old man who thinks that Yeats shouldn't have written fascist poems, that Hart Crane got sold the Brooklyn Bridge by Emerson, that Keats's sonnets or blah, blah, blah.

And he went, So let me tell you something. How did he say it? He said, let me tell you something. Here's a definition of poetry. It's a statement in words about a human experience in which the rhythm exactly conveys the feeling and the thought. Something like that, he said. Most of you can't even hear the rhythm of poetry. I'm going, and then he recited a poem to demonstrate to us that none of us would understand the rhythm of poetry. And then he said, My friend Hart Crane committed suicide. My friend Ezra Pound was committed to an insane asylum. The history of poetry, since romanticism is full of the wreckage of poets who waded into their feelings, you're not going to do it.

You're going to be sentimental, old college professors dabbling your toes in the destruction of your betters. And he said, that's all I have to say for today, and he walked out of the classroom. He was wearing an armband, a black armband in mourning for the three Mississippi African American girls who were killed in a church bombing that summer.

He walked across the campus to teach his Melville course carrying a very heavy iron harpoon. He was a riveting figure. And he certainly got me reading poetry with great intensity. I disagreed with almost every word he said. There were poet people, lots of people, who went on to [write] really interesting poetry there at the time, Robert PINSKY and John Mathias and Jim McMichael among them, Scott Baumer.

They had been there before. Thom Gunn had been there before. Phil Levine had been there. There were a lot of poets around Winters, and it wasn't that he was poisonous to me. In fact, at a certain point he wrote a book called *In Defense of Reason*. And that was part of what made him notorious as a critic and a poet at the time. He thought that the formlessness of romantic poetry, the exploration of not knowing what you were going to explore, the sublime, the infinite scary stuff should only be approached with rational, discursive formality. Otherwise you got into real trouble. That was his sort of basic thing. And that the great poets—Shakespeare, Donne, and so on—had the structures that got lost somehow. So that was the line that he took, and I didn't like

it at the time. I thought, of course, I was interested in the way the imagination does get lost and finds itself.

That seemed to me the great thing in poetry. And I went up to him one day after class, just gathered my forces. It was that fall that John Kennedy was assassinated. The world was raw with the sudden violence that was going to be continued in the assassination of his brother and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. It was 1963, was really was a very raw time in American culture. And so, I imagined confronting Winters. So, I went up to him after class one day and said, How could you call a book in “defense of reason” and then just bully students every day? And I was almost trembling for saying it, and he looked as if I kicked him in the gut. He looked completely hurt and said, Oh, I'm so sorry you have that impression. And kept on walking. And I felt terrible. Suddenly he became a human being anyway. So that was, that was about the story of my relation to Winters.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Glad I asked. So you go from that possibly conservative oracular culture around poetry to the hotbed of Buffalo in the late sixties, what was that transition like, and moving to becoming a professor in your own right?

### **Robert Hass**

I was writing poetry, had a group of people to share poems with at Stanford, supposedly writing a dissertation about the English novel or the European novel. And in those days, even though I had been told by the chairman of the English Department that he personally was going to tell people not to touch me with a ten-foot pole because I was such a rabble rouser (and it was nothing special about me), I had 11 job offers at the end of four years of graduate school, before I had finished a dissertation. And that was, I think, quite common at that point. It was. . . '63 must have been the turning point to the moment when suddenly tons of people were going to graduate school and--history of the GI Bill--many more people going to undergraduate school. And there was a national effort to make college teachers to teach all these people. So, and the job I accepted was the one at Buffalo because it had the reputation of being the most exciting place in the country for poetry, and for not just poetry. Novelist John Barth was there. Leslie Fiedler, novelist and critic was. It seemed like a very lively place.

So, I was very, very happy to get an offer from them, to get in a car and drive across the country to Buffalo, which was that lively. Almost everyone was there. The day I was driving into town, I recognized the poet John Logan, whom I met on the West Coast, and I stopped to introduce myself, and he introduced me to the guy he was walking with, a man named Saul Touster, who was the attorney to the president of the university and who had just published a book of poems that was on a way to the bookstore to give a reading from his new book of poems. And at that reading, I met dozens of the young poets of the Buffalo scene, and they invited me that weekend to a big poetry festival in a park, which included the Irish poet Austen Clarke, and Bob Creeley, John Wiener. Anyway, many of the poets of what had been the San Francisco beat scene and its overlap with the Black Mountain scene. I don't know if these terms are going to mean anything to anybody in the future, Geoffrey. And suddenly I was in the midst of this very exciting literary scene, and Buffalo was really fun.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I realize I don't know exactly what you were hired to do, though.

**Robert Hass**

To teach, to teach the history of the novel.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Okay.

**Robert Hass**

I did a seminar. Buffalo was an amazing place at that time because the state of New York was suddenly pouring money into its public education system. And a man named Albert Cook, a poet and scholar, taught at Berkeley, was turned away from tenure at Berkeley, went to Buffalo and hired every loose pistol in the country. And so, it was just a very exciting place and had a lot going on. And so, I and the older faculty there were determined that it was going to be a better place for young faculty than their experience. I remember what a critic, Irving Massie, saying about his graduate time at Cornell, that the only thing Homeric about Cornell, about Ithaca, was the Olympian contempt of the senior faculty for the junior faculty. And so the senior faculty in Buffalo were determined that it'd be different from their experience of that old, starchy formality of the university, those departments in the 1940s and fifties. I say that old, starchy formality, as if I knew that that was so. I of course don't know anything about it, but that was the take.

So, it was a very lucky time. I think I taught a seminar called Adultery and Revolution about Sex and Politics in the novel to graduate students, most of whom were older than I was at that point. I was, you know, I'd just been in four years of graduate school. So I was like 22 or 23 years old and teaching a graduate course.

So ridiculous.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

So when did your professional training and your private life as a poet start to converge institutionally? When did you first teach poetry?

**Robert Hass**

I don't remember which year. Probably I taught introductory literature courses. But in a short time, Bob Creeley, Robert Creeley, was going on leave and I was going to take over his class, and I was reading, though I was supposed to be working on this dissertation, I was just reading poetry. And there was so much of it then. That generation of poets born in the twenties, starting to publish in the fifties, the variety of experience that they were getting at, they made me think, compared to the novels I was reading, compared to Updike, Malamud, Roth, Cheever, it felt like what was happening in American poetry was incredibly exciting to me. So, I said to Bob Creeley, Why don't I teach a course in contemporary poetry and invite the poets I teach to come and teach in alternate weeks.

So, we went to the chair and said, Can we take Bob Creeley's salary and hire poets to teach every other week? That is, so they would come Tuesday, give a lecture reading on Wednesday night, teach on Thursday. And they said, fine. So the first person I asked was Allen Ginsberg to come and teach. He said, I will only do it if you invite Gregory Corso to come. So we invited Gregory Corso. And then, because I was enthralled at that point with Denise Levertov like everyone, and she was writing her poems of the Vietnam War period, I invited Denise and Robert Bly, and so on. Anyway, so that was my first experience of teaching a poetry class, was teaching this class that was like a festival. The auditorium was jammed with people, and Gregory Corso would come in, came in and gave a talk about the Lescaux cave paintings, making the argument that they had found Morning Glory seeds in the cave, and the remains of fires, which meant that everyone was getting stoned on Morning Glory Seeds and the Lescaux caves were basically the first Filmore Auditorium light show, etc. Anyway, Allen Ginsberg, on the other hand, wrote down on the board from memory the opening stanza of Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark" on one side and the Diamond Sutra at the other, and demonstrated that they had the same vowel pattern as a way of doing meditative breathing to achieve ecstasy through poetry.

Anyway, it was fun; those days, were fun.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Perfect metonym of that moment and those poets. Yeah, we should reprise that at Berkeley. I just don't know how we'll get the money. So why did you leave in '71 and go back to your alma mater for the better part of two decades?

### **Robert Hass**

I, I just want to. I had some feeling. . . Well, there are several reasons. One, the first reason was That I promised my wife we would stay no more than four years in Buffalo. And the second reason was, I had a feeling that whatever I was going to do as a writer, I would do better if I lived in the place where I grew up, if I knew what happened to the people I went to school with and what happened there. And then I just love that culture and the physical beauty of the place. So the hope was it was that it was enormously exciting in Buffalo. And there were quite amazing things about it at that point. Merce Cunningham and John Cage were visitors in the English department at that time; Michel Foucault was a visitor in the French department at that time. Archie Shepp, the jazz musician, was teaching them these music courses.

Anyway. But it was time for me to go home. So. And the lesson of the writers in the place was that they hadn't begun in the most prestigious schools. Bob Creeley started at the University of New Mexico. Lesley Fiedler was teaching at the University of Montana. John Barth in Pennsylvania State University. They had gone to quiet places and done their work. So, what was great about Buffalo was the lesson of being there was to leave.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

So you go back to a very different culture. Were you teaching great books courses?

### **Robert Hass**

Yeah, at St. Mary's I liked how the majors as undergraduates had a four-year great book program where you did Greek literature, philosophy and mathematics and science in the

freshman year in Rome, and medieval in the sophomore year, you did Ptolemy's Almagest as your math course, etc. And so, I was, it was the St John's of Annapolis curriculum, completely useless. I learned calculus in Leibniz's notation. Hard to think of a less useful thing, anyway. So yes, I went back and I taught mostly world literature seminars, and also, I didn't teach creative writing there. But by the time I was there . . . And I was under no pressure to publish there. In my second year at St Mary's, I'd had a book of poems published, and there was a little article in the *Chronicle*, back in the day when you would still do that, saying that, you know, just I won the Yale Younger Poets Prize. And as I'm coming on campus that morning, I met the Christian Brother monk, who was the chair of the history department, and he looked at me and said, "Calling attention to oneself, I see".

It was very much the opposite of publish or perish at St Mary's. It was teach these lively students. And so, I did. Though I remember my first day in my first seminar, that we had been reading Plato's *Apology*, the story of Socrates in prison. And I had been had learned at Buffalo to teach lecture courses. Or, I didn't learn, but I went about it. And so when I got to St Mary's and I was in this room with 15 kids and said, Well, so what did you think of Socrates? And one young woman said, "I think he must have been very old" (you know, okay, he's ready to die) and I, I didn't know what the follow up question was. But I had to teach myself to teach people how to have a conversation about a book.

It was fun.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

So are you saying you never taught a grad or undergrad workshop until you came to Berkeley?

### **Robert Hass**

No. Well, no. Actually, I got invited, after I published a book of poems, I got invited at San Jose State University to teach a night school open admission, creative writing class, \$100 a week. That's a lot of tennis shoes. My kids were. . . I had three children at that point. And so I would get on the Nimitz and drive down there on Mondays and, and teach from 6 to 9. And it was my first experience of teaching creative writing, which is really sort of looking at poems people brought in and sharing them. And the open night school meant a dentist from Fremont, who wanted to write a Oscar Hammerstein song lyrics, and a white-witch from the Santa Cruz mountains, who wanted to write spells, and a gifted high school dropout.

One of the gifted high school dropouts was Lorna Cervantes, who went on to write, to be one of the originary writers of recent Latinx poetry. Anyway, that was my first introduction. What did you first teach as a creative writing class? But you did you have a creative writing class as an undergraduate?

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I did. I took classes with Seamus Heaney and he brought quite [?] And at Iowa, 90 to 94, I taught undergraduate workshop.

**Robert Hass**

Yeah, I had no, I mean, I don't think it occurred to anybody to teach creative writing class at Saint Mary's in the time I was there.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

And if they did, it would have been almost exclusively not the poetry of the students in that room, probably. And so, you're there through 1988 at St Mary's. And what made you make the jump to public, to larger, to Berkeley?

**Robert Hass**

Well, I was offered the job. So I came back from Buffalo to teach at Saint Mary's, and we lived in Berkeley from 1971 for the 18 years I taught at Saint Mary's, though I was away part of the time: at least one year in England and a couple of years in which I wasn't teaching. But I first taught at Berkeley as a Holloway. As you know, the university received from a graduate, Roberta Holloway, professor of English at San Jose State, an endowment of a fund to bring a poet—think those days they said a younger poet—to Berkeley to teach for one semester. And as you know, we've had since, I guess, 1988 or so, a visitor every year from the generosity of that endowment.

Anyway, I was fairly early on, but don't think I remember [precisely?] Around 1982 or '83, I had taught for a semester at Berkeley, and the poet Robert PINSKY was teaching then in the English department, and we were friends. And living in Berkeley, of course, it's a company town: you knew who's a who. I had friends who were in the English department. Anyway, when Robert PINSKY pulled up stakes and left to go to Boston, they hired another poet, and they offered me the job, and I jumped.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

To this.

**Robert Hass**

The little kid who had watched the guy reading a book on physics in a cafe on Telegraph Avenue and thinking, Wow, this is a cool place.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

So, it's 1989. People are taking hammers to the wall in Berlin. New historicism was flourishing in the English department, or was about to. What was it like when you came in to that department culturally, especially coming from a place like St Mary's?

**Robert Hass**

Well, I was saying to a young person the other day who's just starting in the English department that because St Mary's is very small--about 1500 students then, I think there are 2500 now--I knew the names of the children of the person who ran the telephone switchboard. If there was a faculty meeting about a personnel issue, you showed up. If it was somebody in astronomy or classical Greek, there were people you knew. You had to go to the meetings. So it was a small familial place. So Berkeley felt anonymous to me. I was, I felt like, the English department felt like a mailbox for individual entrepreneurs, compared to the feeling of St Mary's. I came to see

that that was not the case, but my first experience was, Oh, okay, they gave me an office, they gave me a mailbox, and I'm on my own, you know.

So they would say, What do you want to teach? And I would say, I'm used to being told what I'm supposed to teach. It's your turn to take, you know, this course and that. But they did ask me to teach American poetry, which, given my odd education between the great books in college and the great books at St Mary's and the graduate work on the novel, I really didn't know the history of American poetry.

So that's one of the main things that happened to me was that I had to think about how I would do that. And then walking into a classroom in Berkeley in 1989 and seeing, I think I wrote to a friend, my class looks like a UNESCO postcard. Berkeley was just becoming a kind of place where the European-American students were going to be no more than half of a classroom.

And it was before Ward Connerly had managed to stifle the efforts to increase the number of Black and Latino students through affirmative action admissions programs. So it was very exciting and vibrant to walk into a room, first of all, walk into a room where 120 people were very excited to take a course in poetry was really interesting. And then the question was, What is it exactly that I have to give to them or that American poetry has to give to them? And so the first three or four years of being there, I don't remember what else I taught, but I do remember teaching that course and the excitement and the challenge of, first of all, of learning. You know, do you start with the Puritan poetry? How much Puritan poetry? When I was growing up in California and my high school textbook had all this New England writing, I thought, this doesn't have anything to do with me. I just didn't connect to it. So, I didn't know what, you know, what these kids were going to connect to. So what did I want to give them?

And anyway, so that was interesting. And Berkeley was a feast and still is, of course. One of the things I was thinking about--and I'm sure you did too, as you taught it--was how to do it. If you have 13 weeks to teach, to convey some experience, you're putting experiences in people's heads by making assignments for them to read, and then you're organizing maps.

This is also the period in English departments when the canon was under revision, when the whole idea of the canon as an authority was suddenly treated with appropriate suspicion. And so thinking about, well, how you how do I teach African-American poetry? Do I go back to the beginning and teach this Phyllis Wheatley, who was a slave girl, who was dead at 24, I think, who published one remarkable book of poems, very much in the style of a bright student in the 18th century? Do I begin there or should I just jump in at the Harlem Renaissance, or and etc.? My students who'd come in would tell me what classes they were excited by. And one of the legendary classes at Berkeley in the early '90s, late 1980s was a course by the composer Olly Wilson, in African and African American music. African music in the first semester, and African-American music in the second. And I would run from my class to his class to audit the class. And he had done a Ph.D. in musicology in Ghana and had gone all over the country making recordings. So if you walk into class, he would talk about polyrhythms and the difference between rhythmic conceptions in African and European music and then play the recordings of these tub bands that he'd recorded at weddings and other formal events in Ghana and then play Smithsonian recordings of South Carolina or Tennessee bands.

And they sound exactly alike. And he would talk about it, and it was magical watching that structure, and it began to give me a vocabulary for figuring out how to teach the poetry. So I audited a lot of classes during the first couple of years. I was there while I was figuring out how to teach a lecture class about it and how to . . .

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I loved things like the tableau of the Berkeley student population producing this good pressure on you to complicate the story of American poetry precisely at the moment when the canon is under significant and long overdue review. For those of you who don't know this, which is just about everybody, Bob handed me the US poetry survey when he retired, and the same questions are still being wrestled with. I start with Bradstreet and then Wheatley and then I'm going to Dunbar after time with Walt and Emily. But I'm thinking of increasing and specifying further and enriching the 19th century, for instance, Dave the Potter. I want to look at some of those pots with poems on them that he threw. Things like that. Thank you for giving me that class.

It's one of the joys with . . .

### **Robert Hass**

Another observation about the early time. So we're spending all our time there. But My experience of Buffalo and my experience at the University of Virginia, where I did a semester visiting, and at St Mary's was that sometimes the students came to office hours. Mostly in the afternoons, they wanted it to be involved in intramural sports.

So often I would sit in my office and read. Somebody would come by, I'd be happy to talk to them. At St Mary's, it was so informal that if I were late or something, the students would be sitting in my office chatting with each other. But mostly they didn't show up for my office hours very much. And in Berkeley as soon as I mentioned a book in class, "By the way if you're interested in this you might want to read this", the diligent students would show up at my door within the week to discuss the book that they had read. And in Wheeler Hall, there's no place for students to sit while they're waiting for a professor to see them in that corridor up on the fourth floor. And I found that when I would get to my office for my office hours, a dozen students would be sitting on the floor like boat people, patiently waiting for the 5 minutes in which to . . . I'd count the number of them and say, Well, I have so many hours.

In my third year there, I doubled my office hours thinking maybe that would solve the problem. And it didn't. It just meant more people came when they came. And I thought, oh, these, these they're all type A greyhounds that I'm teaching here. You can't just casually mention that they should read some book because they will feel under obligation to read it. You have to parcel this stuff out. So it was the intensity and often brilliance of the Berkeley students was a huge gift, but it was also something that needed to be managed. It seemed to me my colleagues moved through Wheeler Hall as if they didn't want to be stationary targets, that they'd rush to the mailbox and rush to the . . . And they're always in a hurry to get . . . As many of them were because to be the kind of writer and scholar that Berkeley assumes, you almost have two full-time jobs: the job of being a teacher and the job of being a writer or a scholar. And so people

are moving very fast, and figuring out how to give appropriate attention to the students, especially when you're teaching large classes, was another thing to figure out.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

You couldn't move that quickly past Bob's office because there was an obstacle course of student knapsacks and knees waiting outside. So I can attest to the truth of what Bob was saying. What about the poetry culture at the university when you arrived? Thom Gunn was still there. Josephine Miles was a lingering presence, but was no longer, obviously, teaching.

### **Robert Hass**

Yeah, I mean, I had been living in Berkeley for 15 years by the time I was on the faculty so I was aware of the town/gown issues. And in the university culture itself, it was Jo Miles for many, many years. And then Thom Gunn was hired. But Thom functioned as a lecturer and came and did his job, and very much went back to the Castro and his San Francisco world, and was not in my years there deeply involved in the local poetry culture.

Peter Scott was on the faculty and teaching classes in epic poetry and writing those quite amazing poems that he was writing. But outside of the university, someone said to me, when I said I'd been invited to give a reading at Berkeley, and they said, "It's like beating an old rug." The feeling of the townie poets was that Berkeley was staid and insular, and the students sat there making judgments on you when you read your poems. And so one of the things that I was interested in doing on that side of things was to try to invite more local poets to read their poems at the university. And the culture was changing, and Robert PINSKY had partly changed it, and had also made efforts in that direction. So the culture, on the one hand, was very rich.

One of the results of my being there was to was developing a relationship with Czesław Miłosz. During if you're going to say what were the amazing things that happened in the humanities culture of Berkeley in the second half of the 20th century? Probably you would say Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew scriptures and Czesław Miłosz's poetry are the two that would come to the top of my head as that.

And then there's Josephine Miles' work and Thom Gunn's work. When I was hired. Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee were hired, and Ishmael Reed was already there. And though they were lecturers, so they weren't the people, as you know, the way it works, who sit on the committees, who decide who will come to read, who organize the readings. And so they didn't do that. They didn't do that stuff. Still, it was very lively in that way. And then with the Holloway we had, in addition, money to have some younger poets come and teach for a semester. And Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, came and taught for a year in the department. I remember taking my children to Easter Mass with my wife when we first arrived back in Berkeley, at St Mary Magdalene Church over on Berryman Street, and I noticed, in front of me, Miłosz and Seamus Heaney, who didn't know each other at that point, sitting in opposite places. Two poets who were going to go on to win the Nobel Prize were in the mid-seventies sitting listening to a bunch of schoolchildren sing Easter songs in the church. So anyway, Berkeley was a miraculous place in many ways, but also figuring out how to get that richness into the lives of the undergraduates. Graduate students found their own way to the poetry scenes, it

wasn't a problem. But figuring out a culture that would make poetry a rich, accessible, available, interesting part of their lives, in the feel of Wheeler Hall when they walk through it, that was the interesting task. And it and you're doing it now. I think it is that place.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Yes. But one of the things I inherited from you as an example of your making culture, rather than just coming upon it, are Lunch Poems. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what caused you to institute that, and then maybe also talk about the Addison street project as well. Poetry outside the university.

### **Robert Hass**

Yeah, yeah. I don't know how much time we have. Of course, the other important... I mean, I will answer that question, but I want to finish the last one by saying that the other critical piece of making this happen was hiring Lyn Hejinian. Outside, the poetry culture of the department, which tended to be somewhat conservative in the '40s, '50s, '60s, was the Berkeley poetry culture. For people who might be listening to this, who don't know, for poets like me, a teenager growing up and reading, there was something called the Berkeley Renaissance. They were a group of poets with Robert Duncan, who was an English major at Berkeley, and Jack Spicer, an English major at Berkeley, Robin Blazer an English major at Berkeley, somewhat at the same time, Barbara Guest, an English major at Berkeley. There were really interesting poets in the new generation that got called the Berkeley Renaissance, who were publishing and reading in and around San Francisco at that time. And the graduate students could easily find their way to those to that poetry scene.

And there was a faculty member, Tom Parkinson, who was a poet and a friend of many of the beat poets, and in fact, did the first academic anthology, Handbook of the Beat Poets. In the sixties, I guess, Tom would have done that anthology. So there was enormously lively stuff going on in the beats, out of city lights and then and in the scene in North Beach, at San Francisco State where there was a poetry center, and the graduate students could find their way to that. And out of that came in the eighties, a group of poets who got very interested in . . . It's hard to know how to describe it. Do you have a handbook handle on how to describe language poetry as a literary movement?

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Well, I mean, it's right there in the name of the movement, right? They were interested in the materiality of language. They just, they distrusted straightforward communication, and they were also very interested in disrupting the kind of reason that Yvor Winters had been defending. I think also because of a history of mistrusting communiques from the government about the war in Vietnam, etc. as well as a whole boatload of theory from the continent.

They were also no longer particularly interested in confessing the details of a particular person's interior experience, not so much as seeing what language itself could disclose.

### **Robert Hass**

Yeah. So yeah. Lyn I mean, for example, Lyn was in some way responsible for getting a whole new generation to read Gertrude Stein, to read poetry that was trying to see if language can do

with abstraction what painting did with abstraction. And, and she's brilliant at that work, and she joined the department . . .

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

2000.

**Robert Hass**

In 2000 and was just a force for bringing energy into the place. And Lunch Poems was really just part of that. I didn't exactly start it. That is, a graduate student, who was working for me when I had the odd job of being Poet Laureate, and a staff person, a poet and playwright named Zach Rocco came to me and said, We want to start a poetry series, a daytime poetry series for the staff.

And I think they were feeling that the night poet, the Holloway, the evening poetry series, which was very strong on experimental work, was not apt to reach people who weren't already very interested in poetry. They wanted people who were livelier performers to talk about the poetry scene. Reminds me that you can't also talk about it without talking about June Jordan and Poetry for the People. That year before I was hired in 1988, an African American poet, June Jordan, came to the department and came to the African-American Studies program and started a hugely popular creative writing program, kind of taught on a large basis, that got a lot of people writing stuff, encouraged them particularly to write about political issues, encouraged them to write about personal politics, identity politics, ethnicity politics. And so that was also happening on campus at that time. And they also were very strong on performance. I had the prejudice of someone who thinks that it's the written words on the page that matter the most.

And anyway, so Zach and Natalie Gerber said, Can we start a noontime program? And I went to the library--or did Zach do it?. Anyway. Dave Doer, who was the head of development at the library, encouraged us and found a donor, and we were able to have a once-a-month poetry series. We began it each semester, or each year we would begin it with faculty and staff, and waiters from the faculty club, and basketball coaches reading their favorite poem, and end the year with a group of students reading their poems.

And then in the middle we had every year spaces for six or seven poets to read in the Morrison room at the library. The most recent one of which you missed, Geoffrey. It was really fun to see Louise Glück reading because, as happened with a few other readings, the galleries were just jammed. People were standing outside on the cement benches, looking in through the window to see. There were students sitting reverently on the floor listening, surrounded by all the sort of elegant old busts of the of Morrison room.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I think that happened when I had you back to read as well, by the way. it happened a few times.

**Robert Hass**

Yeah, Gary Snyder had a huge reading, but as Adrienne Rich read, we had to move it to I-House because there were too many people for even the Morrison room to hold. And that

spilled over. [gap here where you switch to the Addison project]. So a landscape architect in town in Berkeley decided that something needed to be done, and he approached the city council and said, we really need to turn Addison Street into an arts district. We have the Berkeley Rep there, and we have Freight and Salvage, the folk jazz venue there, and a music school. So he proposed to them putting squares of poetry in the street and approached me about it, and I said I would do it if I could do what I wanted and didn't have to go to committee meetings.

And so we made an anthology of the history of Berkeley poetry in the street on Addison Street.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Which was not your only anthology, but the only one made of metal and on which . . . Yes.

**Robert Hass**

So you had to really be careful about typos because they were actually there. It's a stainless, not stainless steel, steel with enamel lettering, the kind of enamel you make teeth with. So it was dusty black and very white and then rusted toward tan and an almond shaped shades of color. I was able. . . . Going back, Berkeley had one of the first creative writing courses ever taught at an American university, back in the nineteen-tens, taught by a poet named Witter Bynner. Witter Bynner had been a classmate of Wallace Stevens at Harvard.

They edited *The Advocate* together, and Bynner came out and to teach. Who invited him or how is lost. I tried to find out, but Bynner came out and proposed to the English department that he teach a creative writing class. I don't know if they used the word creative writing then. He taught a class in which the students [wrote], called the writing of poetry.

Several of the poets, the undergraduates, undergraduates who signed up for that class went on to become writers, one of them a writer for *The New Yorker* magazine in its early years. Another of them a published poet. Anyway, Witter Bynner. I was able to get his poems, get the poems of some of his students, poems of the poets of the thirties. So, it was fun: was all into the street in Berkeley.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

How many are there? How many plates there are?

**Robert Hass**

There are about 50, I think.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I'm well, let me make the inelegant segway, given that we're talking about infrastructure on the streets of Berkeley, to another aspect of being on campus from 1989 to 2019, the fight for public education, the funding and defunding vicissitudes of that time, as well as activism, both on campus and, of course, for you as well off. Would you talk about what you saw across that 30 year arc a little bit?

**Robert Hass**

During my time, during the 30 years I was at Berkeley, aside from the regularly recurring student strikes, often over wages to parttime workers and to graduate students, the big event was the demonstrations around Occupy, which led to students camping on campus in tents and the administration felt the need to move them off campus and called in the local police to do that. And, Geoffrey, do you want to tell your part of the story?

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Well, I mean, we both went to defend the tents, and we were both knocked down by

**Robert Hass**

The

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

police who I don't even think were local. I don't think they were only from Oakland or Berkeley. I think they have their own version of mutual aid. And I think they came from farther afield as well, which means they don't have any investment in the community. And batons were swinging. It was not a pretty sight.

**Robert Hass**

Yeah. In retrospect, it seems odd. I think it started on the East Coast, but it was around the idea that about 10% of the population commanded about 90% of the wealth. And that that was wrong. And started holding rallies in and occupying various public spaces. So it got the name of the Occupy movement and it sprang up all over the place, and sprang up in Oakland and in Berkeley, and the students at Berkeley met that they're going to sit in. It was never absolutely clear what the demands were of the Occupy movement.

So, they were marching, but they would march saying "whose university?" our university!" "Whose university? our university!" And I sort of wanted to say that the university belongs to the whole, to all the people of California, but through the generations of donations of alumni and others interested in public education, going back to the 1860s, and how we claim it now is a complicated matter, but I wanted to defend the right of the students to do this protest. And I heard one day that in the afternoon the police had come in and, using batons, had beat the students off the campus.

I didn't quite believe that they would do anything quite so brutal and stupid. So my wife and I turned around from somewhere we were going, having heard this on the radio, and drove back to the campus, where outside Sproul Hall there were lots of students packed. Hundreds, I think. Fair to say Geoffrey? And you were there.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Yeah. On the steps where the FSM had proclaimed what it wanted. Yeah.

**Robert Hass**

So, we went too. I wanted to get to the front of the line. I wanted to get to the place where the students were meeting with, it turns out, with people, mostly young people from the Alameda

County Sheriff's Department, who were lined up in Darth Vader outfits and starting to form a wedge to drive the students away. And then at some point, when we got to the front of the crowd, where we could see what was happening, the police and the sheriff's deputies had gotten a signal to move the crowd. And so one of the young deputies reached out and shoved my wife hard and knocked her down. And as they were moving, we couldn't move forward or backward, and then they just started whacking at us with what the newspapers called batons, and were their billy-clubs, about the size of a little league baseball bat, whacking your back. And, it worked; It cleared the place. The next day, the students came back, having been told they absolutely couldn't camp there, and they had tied balloons to the tents. So they were floating above the place where they had been driven out. In the air were these big REI orange and blue sierra hiking tents. And I think it was Hugh Jeffrey who said they had figured out if they couldn't occupy the ground, they would occupy the air.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Very clever.

**Robert Hass**

Anyway, a memorable event. And I wrote a description of it the next day for the op ed page of the *New York Times*, which got reprinted often. And one of the graduate students, who studied the Beat Generation movement, had made a little sign the next day that said "Beat Poets, not beat poets".

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

It had to be said. And that moment, I think, rippled across buildings on campus and for years to come, in terms of thinking about the relationship between the administration and the police and student protest in important ways. So let's move towards the end and think about why you wrapped up in 2019 and what you've been doing since then and how you conceive of

**Robert Hass**

work and

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

education, post your formal employment.

**Robert Hass**

Yeah, I think another interesting thing to talk about a little bit at least is that in 1995, when I was invited to be poet laureate, I assumed that it was because they had never invited anyone from west of the Mississippi. I don't know if they'd ever invited anyone from west of the Alleghenies, and that I should somehow represent Western writing during my time in Washington. And so I talked to friends and we organized this environmental conference, a conference on it, to be held at the Library of Congress in D.C., to be held in the springtime when there were many contested environmental pieces of environmental legislation up for grabs, which made the Library of Congress very nervous.

But as a result of thinking about that, I found-it was 1995—a friend in the Environmental Science Policy and Management Program, a plant pathologist named Greg Gilbert approached

me, and we were talking, and he was teaching an introduction to environmental science and policy course, and said, why don't we do an introduction to environmental studies course together and team teach it? And so I had to go to the English department and say, Can we do this lower division undergraduate course? And Berkeley being Berkeley, they said, Sure, of course, go for it. And so we did. Started it in 1996. I taught it with Greg for two years and like the teaching of the American poetry course it was . . .

How do I teach this? What do I bring? We had 200 students signed up for the first iteration. I think in the end we only had 150 in the class. But still, how do you teach a class that big and make people feel like they're there, participating individually, being seen individually? And then, Gary Sposito, who was a professor of geochemistry, said when Greg left, he would love to join me to do it, and so for 20 years, Gary and I taught every fall this undergraduate introduction to Environmental Studies course, which was another huge gift that the university gave us.

I was feeling at the time like so urgent about environmental issues that I felt like I just wanted to be doing something about educating people toward environmental citizenship. And we talked about that, and what that would involve, and why do it. And one of the things it involved was, for me, watching Gary Sposito, who had edited [at Oxford?], the Cambridge University anthology, I mean textbook on Geochemistry and served on the California State Assembly's committee that vetted environmental bills. Gary worked in hydrology, soil science, environmental issues across the boards. He received a big grant to figure out the geology of if the smokestacks of coal burning plants could be scrubbed and get the CO<sub>2</sub> out of them, where could you put it in the earth where it would not just come up? And so anyway, he worked on many interesting problems and he was a brilliant, careful, lovingly methodical and imaginative teacher.

And watching him teach and teaching with him was a huge gift for me. And it meant that as we tried to think well in the first years we were doing it, it was a matter of looking at the still controversial science of climate change, whether it was anthropogenic, caused by human activity or not. So there is still a massive amount of misinformation and disinformation on the subject. So having the students read carefully the ice core studies of the history of temperature of the planet, and so on, was part of our work then from the beginning. Though, it began, of course, with saying what do people need to know in order to be environmental citizens. They need to know how science is done. They need to know the language of the discourse on this subject.

When somebody says that the Alaskan National Reserve is pristine, what does pristine mean? Is that a value term that you can put measures to of any kind. So anyway, stuff like that. As we said, to find the areas of need to be addressed, Gary knew who in environmental science, policy and management could be guest speakers. And there I got another sense of what can be rich and amazing about Berkeley. That is, in talking about agricultural regimens and there was Miguel Altieri who created a center for agro-ecology, come to talk to our students every year. Miguel's premise was that most of the development work to try to improve the quality and productivity of agriculture in the Third World, in Latin America and in Africa and in some parts of Asia, specifically meant issuing money loans to farmers so that they could buy expensive equipment

and imitate agro-business ways of production, of and that basically pauperized them and put them in debt, and made them dependent on really destructive nitrogen fertilizers, which they had to pay back the cost of. So he's trying to figure out how to use the agricultural methods, especially in Latin America, of production, and intensify them without pauperizing people and basically putting the development money in the pockets of manufacturers. Really smart, interesting lectures. Justin Broadshares, a wildlife ecologist could show the students a photograph of the Norwegian parliament voting for their annual subsidy to their fishing fleets.

And then a slide of the fishing fleets off the West African coast sucking up fish in these huge vacuum cleaner ships that the parliament had paid for. And then showing the empty classrooms in the schools along the coast because the kids had to be in the boat with their parents, because the parents had to go further and further out to sea to get the fish from the fishing fields that that the Norwegian or American or English or German fishing boats had not already sucked up. Inez Fong, who is doing the work on climate change, who is part of a group that got the Nobel Prize for their work on climate change, spoke to the class. Ignacio Chapela, who was working on the way that genetically modified crops were leaking into areas where they were replacing the rich ecosystems that are native to the place and, in the process affecting pollinators, changing the patterns of butterfly migration. Anyway, it was somebody else when there was an issue of how tropical forests could regenerate compared to compared to forests and cool climates. Strong in the literature was the idea that that they don't regenerate much at all because the soil is so poor. And Nancy Peluso was there, right there to come in. She wore a hard hat to come into class and talk about what it was really like working in Indonesian forests that had been clearcut and how to regenerate them.

So I had in that class, the really interesting challenge again of how to organize material, but then also of seeing the incredible work that's been going on at the university in so many different ways. So that was a huge gift, has been. And then Michael Pollan, we invited when we talked about agriculture and food policy then we had talk about his book of the Botany of Desire on how the planet had been changed by human appetites. The premise of that book, as he said, was that humans had been converted, had been recruited by grasses to defeat forests because humans like to do grain.

Anyway, then Michael's work with Gary Sposito led Alice Waters to contribute to make sure that there was a food course, the ecology of food course in the environmental science program. And one of the things I found with the teaching was that the students responded to that very intensely because they're very concerned about climate. They want to be trained themselves with skills in their lives that can address the problems of the future and the one area that they can have some control over now, for the first time in their lives, because they're away from their parents' homes, is how they shop and how they eat. So watching them wake up and get excited as we brought in speakers to talk like Michael, to talk about agriculture and the marketing of food and diet and in America, that was really fun and interesting to see.

### **Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

I can't help but observe that you started at Buffalo already thinking about teaching as collaborative inter-relational bringing all those poets in on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and you ended up mixing it up with all these scientists and doing the same thing in a different field of

knowledge, but the same idea that knowledge production is really only done by a group and across differences in specialties rather than only within one. And it's lovely to see that bookending your career so emphatically. So what happens when you retire and don't have the same forms of access to that space of exchange? What are you doing?

**Robert Hass**

Yeah, I found my way without thinking one way or the other. I found my way gravitating back to it in various ways through Zoom conversations. An area, intense area of my experience at Berkeley was my 20 years of collaborating with Czesław Miłosz on the translation of his poems. It's a topic for another time, but for, you know, from the 1930s in Lithuania, through the 1940s in Nazi occupied Warsaw, through the forties and fifties and sixties, and the cold struggles over literature in the Cold War.

Miłosz was writing, accumulating this body of work, came to Berkeley in 1960. He his work was banned in Poland, so he was writing and he's writing poems about the sun going down over San Francisco Bay in Polish that nobody can read where the sun is going down. Nobody can read and who would understand the language. And so for 20 years we would meet on Monday mornings and he would have a rough English translation of his poems that we would work on those.

So Miłosz died in 2004 and I went, as a representative of the university with David Frick, who was then chair of the Slavic Languages Department to represent the university at the funeral in Krakow, the beautiful central square in Krakow. And I'm still working on Czesław's poems, I find. That the poems that he wrote when he was a diplomat in Washington in the 1940s, as the Cold War was making politics impossible or making for impossible politics.

So I've been working at that and I taught an online class through the summer program of the community of writers up in the Sierra Nevada on Czesław's poems. And I'm in a couple of reading groups that get together and read poems and talk about them. So it turns that--I don't know what your experience is--but it turns out there's an entirely lively world of conversation out there that seems to have satisfied my appetite for what I feared I would miss not being in the classrooms.

**Geoffrey G. O'Brien**

Surprised that you refuse to equate retirement with solitariness. And I'm really glad that you been able to do that. I think we can wrap up there. I want to thank you for giving us such a rich repository. It feels like legacy has many meanings and senses in relation to this conversation. So thank you very much for all that reportage from a life well lived, well taught.

**Robert Hass**

Well, thank you, Geoffrey. And thank the folks who devised this for the UC retirement community.