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**Nature, Fidelity,  
and the Poetry of Robert Hass**

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Sarah Jane Barnett

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses two methods of investigation—a critical essay on Robert Hass and a collection of poetry—to explore the relationship between contemporary poetry and the natural world.

Central to the early collections of American poet Robert Hass is the question of whether language can depict the natural world. Hass uses techniques to try to accurately describe the natural world in some poems, while suggesting in others that language is limited in its ability to represent the natural world. Hass's use and refusal of poetic technique, and the tension it creates, has not previously been explored in the critical literature. To address this critical gap, I use a third-wave ecocritical approach to examine Hass's depiction of "nature" in his collections *Field Guide*, *Praise*, *Human Wishes*, and *Sun Under Wood*. The examination explores Hass's use of scientifically accurate names and descriptions to realistically depict the natural world, which suggest that Hass sees the natural world as knowable, particular, and valuable; the way his poems depict humans as animals by drawing comparisons between human and nonhuman behaviour, but also suggests that humans are separated from other animals by language, rational thought, and self-awareness; and Hass's use of three strategies—that of showing the limitations of language, qualifying language, and the theme of loss—to explore the role of the poem in our relationship to the natural world. The critical essay concludes that, instead of resolving the tension created by both his use and refusal of poetic strategy, Hass uses the tension to enact the complex relationship between poetry and the natural world. Hass makes the poem an object of inquiry where one part of the poem examines another part of the poem, and the outcome of the inquiry is the creation of knowledge, which suggests the poem is a form of epistemological phenomena. Furthermore, the thesis suggests that Hass's depiction of nature becomes a statement about poetry that asserts we should put issues of representation aside in order to take pleasure in the experience of poetry.

The creative component of the thesis—a collection of poetry—has been shaped and informed by the investigation of the critical essay. Inspired by Hass, the creative work uses a series of strategies to explore the relationship between poetry and the natural world. While less

polemic than Hass's work, the poems call attention to the way our depictions of the natural world are constructed.

A central strategy of the creative work is the use of technical language and terminology from fields such as geography, biology, and glaciology. Rather than relying primarily on traditional lyric imagery, the poems use scientific discourses to suggest human emotions and situations. By bringing together different types of language—that is, scientific and lyric—the poems place pressure on each discourse. The unexpected and out-of-context use of technical language to describe human concerns is meant to subvert the discourse and imply that, because it can be used out of context, it is a constructed rather than an objective representation of the world. Through such subversion the poems intend to suggest that other discourses about the natural world are equally constructed.

Other strategies used by the creative work include depictions of the evolved human animal with a focus on sexuality, gender, mortality, and urban habitats. The creative work also draws attention to the way our conceptualisations of nature often reflect human intention and imagination, rather than representing the nonhuman world. For example, a series of poems about birds and animals investigate the way we imagine and use animals as a mirror for human concerns. Other poems depict our perceived separation from the natural world, and the way we conceive of nature as a place of solace.

The strategies are used both explicitly and implicitly in the poems, as in the critical essay. They call attention to the way poetic depictions of the natural world reflect human culture and intention, rather than the physical world.

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