

The Outer Fringes of Our Language: A Conversation with Werner Herzog

[Robert Pogue Harrison](#) interviews [Werner Herzog](#)

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*I INVITED WERNER HERZOG to Stanford to discuss a relatively unknown masterpiece published in 1967 called *The Peregrine*, by an obscure British writer named J. A. Baker. We hardly know anything about him, except that he authored one of the most extraordinary pieces of nature writing of the 20th century. *The Peregrine* is one of Herzog's favorite books, and it's one of mine as well.*

Herzog ended up speaking mostly about his devotion to books in general, and his belief that reading is the best, and perhaps even only, way to take possession of the world.

Our conversation took place on February 2, 2016, at Dinkelspiel Auditorium as part of Stanford's Another Look book events. This transcript is excerpted from that interview.

You can listen to the audio of the conversation [here](#).

ROBERT POGUE HARRISON: In your conversation with Paul Cronin in 2014, you say, “Read, read, read, read, read. Those who read own the world; those who immerse themselves in the internet or watch too much television lose it. [...] Our civilization is suffering profound wounds because of the wholesale abandonment of reading by contemporary society.” Could you share with us some of your thoughts about your relationship to reading books and the value of the literary?

WERNER HERZOG: In a way, it has been something that is guiding me throughout my life. Beyond this auditorium, there are many more students at Stanford University, and many of them do not really read — including film students. They read a book about editing, but they haven't read, let's say, the dramas of Greek antiquity. And I keep saying to them you have to read. Read, read, read, read, read, read, read, read. If you do not read, you will become a mediocre filmmaker at best, but you will never make a really good film. And almost everyone that I know who has made very strong, very good substantial films are people who are reading all the time. I see three, four films a year, maybe sometimes a little bit more during a festival, but I do read.

And of course, I've written prose and some poetry. I am fairly certain that my written work will outlive my films.

Is that right?

It's very, very clear. There's no doubt whatsoever in me.

Why is that?

When you make a film, you have cameras and production money and actors, a lab or a post-production editing. Many, many layers of very vulnerable elements. When you write, you just write and there's nothing else. It's a completely direct form of expressing something.



Legendary film director Werner Herzog discusses J. A. Baker's book "The Peregrine" with Robert Pogue Harrison, a Stanford professor of Italian literature, at the Feb. 2 Another Look book club event. Photo by L. A. Cicero.

I'm curious about the books that have become a part of you and your psyche. You mentioned, in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, that whenever you go on a film set, you bring two books with you, in particular. One is Luther's translation of the Bible. You have to read the Book of Job for consolation —

It's a 1546 edition in the original Lutheran language, which was an enormous cultural event. The German language somehow started with Martin Luther — the common language, *Hochdeutsch*, high German. Before that, there were only dialects. But Luther, yes, the Book of Job for consolation. Or the Psalms sometimes. I have it with me. I love to read it.

The other book that intrigued me greatly is Livy's *The Second Punic War*. It's the story of Hannibal's invasion [of Rome] and the war with Carthage. Fabius Maximus, who is the Roman general, refused to engage Hannibal directly and was derided by his fellow generals — even accused of cowardice. And you say that he saved Rome.

History derided him, yes. Until today.

But you think that we still owe a huge debt to that man because he's the one who saved Rome?

Exactly. And not only Rome, the Occident. The Western world was at stake. Rome was in a very, very deep crisis. Hannibal was coming across the Alps with a motley army and elephants. He defeated Rome twice at the Trasimene Lake and Cannae. They were the most devastating defeats Rome ever suffered. Rome was on the verge of collapse. And they voted in Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator.

“Cunctator” is his cognomen, a deriding attribute — the cowardly, hesitant one. *Cunctatore* means to hesitate, to not be bold enough to take steps, because he said to everyone, “If Rome continues to encounter Hannibal in open field combat, we will perish completely and we will be extinguished.”

He started a war of attrition, always moving away, always retreating, always being hesitant, never offering an open field battle and attacking the retro guard or the foraging parties. He was the one who saved Rome. Our civilization would otherwise have been dominated by the North African Punic ideas and culture. He was derided and solitary — the solitude of the man is totally intriguing for me.

And you read Livy in Latin?

Yes, I do. I had to learn Latin and ancient Greek in school. I hated it. Only now, much later, I started to appreciate it.

And another classic that you read in Latin and love dearly is Virgil's *Georgics*.

Yes. I run my own film school, the so-called Rogue Film School. It's really wild stuff. In *Guide for the Perplexed*, there's some summing up of advice. “Guerrilla tactics are best. Take revenge if need be. Get used to the bear behind you.” Actually, there's a photo with a bear right behind me. It is not photoshopped. My wife made it, and there was a real bear. But it was a setup. The bear was not completely docile, but it didn't do any harm. It was habituated to humans. A few things I teach students: breaking safety locks or forging documents and doing criminal things for the sake of making a film.

The film school has a mandatory reading list. On it is Virgil's *Georgics*. It's more than programmatic writing, it's celebrating the achievements of the Augustan Rome. There's a clear ideology and a sheer celebration of Rome.

Virgil grew up as a farm boy near Mantova, in northern Italy. He observed it all. Of course there's also some program in it — half of it is about the world of gods who somehow interfere in things. But what's really incredible is his knowledge about what he is writing, the precision of observation. In a way, that's quite close to J. A. Baker. I'd like to read one brief passage, “Death of a horse, how a plague invades the stables.” It's totally illuminating in the caliber of language. The caliber of observation is unbelievable. I love his writing. Here it is:

Then everywhere in the joyous burgeoning fields, the young cows die; in their pens, in the very presence of their mangers full of food, give up sweet life. Fawning dogs go mad. The sick swine seized with retching, coughing, choke on their own swollen throats. The horse that was once victorious, now miserably sinks as he tries to arise, forgetting what he has been, forgetting his pasture with its lush green grass, averting his face from the waters of the trough, over and over again pounding the earth with a disconsolate hoof, his ears laid back, fitfully sweating. The sweat turns cold as death draws near. His skin is dry and hard, insensible to the touch of the stroking hand.

These are the signs you witness in the first days of the coming of the death. But as the suffering moves into its final phase, his eyes glare bright, with a brightness of the fever. The horse's groaning breathing drags itself forth from deep inside, and the whole length of the body labors and strains with drawn-out shattering sobbing. Black blood pours out from the nose and the creature's throat is utterly blocked up and choked by its tongue. There are those who have thought the only possible hope was to use a funnel to pour in a little wine. But this itself facilitated death. Revived, they raged with weird, new, desperate strength. And in the final crisis — god grant such madness not to ourselves, but to our enemies — they tore at their own flesh with their own bad teeth.

The difference between the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, both by Virgil, is that the *Aeneid* is about history, the founding of Rome, whereas the *Georgics* is about the earth, the cultivating of the earth, the care for the earth. This might be an occasion for one of the questions from the audience — Valerie Kinsey asks the following question: “Based upon your documentary films like *Happy People*, *Grizzly Man*, *Encounters*, and your admiration for *The Peregrine*, you seem to have a deep interest in exploring the need of some individuals, mainly men, to reconnect with the earth in a primordial way. Where does this interest come from? Is it an elegiac homage to an interconnection between man and earth that has all but disappeared among suburban contemporary populations? Or is it a diagnostic of our present alienation from the status quo?”

Well, that sounds ... complicated ... but I understand the core of the question.

There seems to be an interest, on your part, in people who have this nostalgia to reconnect with the earth. Is that correct?

No, I have no nostalgia. I’m not a nostalgic person.

I grew up in the very secluded in the mountains of Bavaria, with no real technology around. Of course, I was connected to the mountains. And then, more than anything else, traveling on foot. I would walk 1,000 kilometers for very existentially important reasons. I would travel on foot, not with a backpack — not with my household, a tent, and a sleeping bag on my back. I have understood, first, that it’s a solitude that is unimaginable for anyone who hasn’t done it. And second, a dictum: the world reveals itself to those who travel on foot.

You see a connection with the German poet Hölderlin, whom I really love more than anyone else. He traveled on foot and actually became insane. He traveled from Bordeaux to Tübingen or Frankfurt and arrived stark mad. He had a premonition of insanity coming at him, creeping up on him. He describes it in some of his poems in a very secretive form. Very, very tragic man. He understood the outer fringes of our language. He understood the essence of being solitary, of solitude.

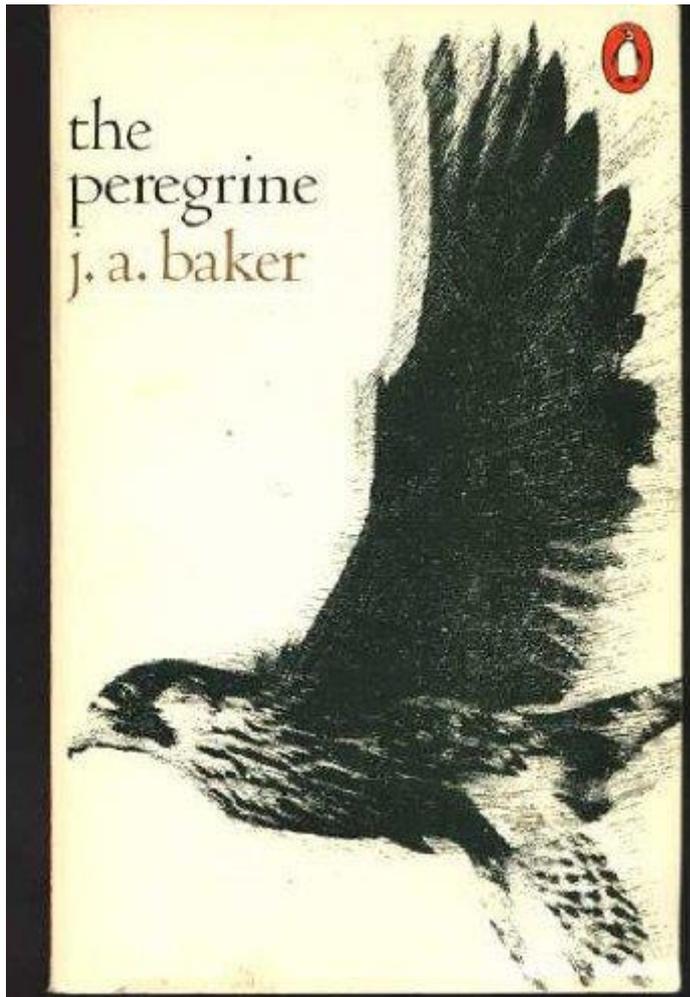
I keep saying to the Rogue Film School students that *The Peregrine* is a book that is the absolute must-read piece of literature, because that’s how a filmmaker should see things: in loneliness. He or she or it should see the world with an incredible amount of human pathos and enthusiasm and rapture.

He sees with ecstasy. He has such rapture, such enthusiasm, such passion. That’s the way a filmmaker should see the real world and people and everything around us — with an enormous amount of passion. But that’s not all. Anyone can have this passion, but he writes in a language, with a caliber of prose, that we have not seen since Joseph Conrad’s short stories. That’s why I find this a very, very decisive book for anyone who wants to make films. By the way, for anyone who is becoming a writer, you will have to read it, learn it. Learn the whole book by heart.

I agree. When you open that book, you ask: What is going on? What passion is he bringing to bear? I think he falls in love with a peregrine. He is infatuated. On page 12, when he describes his first encounter with the peregrine, it’s a language of rapture. He says,

This was my first peregrine. I have seen many since then, but none has excelled it for speed and fire of spirit. For ten years I spent all my winters searching for that restless brilliance, for the sudden passion and violence that peregrines flush from the sky. For ten years I have been looking upward for that cloud-biting anchor shape, that crossbow flinging through the air. The eye becomes insatiable for hawks. It clicks towards them with ecstatic fury ...

Yes, it's ecstasy. And that's one of the things that really caught my attention because there's always a question — in filmmaking, particularly in documentary filmmaking — of what constitutes a deeper truth. Sometimes in poetry, you have the instant sense that there's a deep truth. You don't have to analyze it and vivisection it in academic terms and with the tools of literary theory. The same thing with films. Because today what you see — and what I hear constantly at any festival, with all colleagues — is they believe wrongfully that facts constitute truth. They do not. At best, facts create norms; they have that power. But only truth is something that illuminates us, that carries us into some sort of an ecstasy. And that is something which I find on every second page in *The Peregrine*. There is a religious quality of incantation, the invocation of a demon brother, which is a peregrine falcon. It's like a ritual and the question, of course, is: How much is factual?



I have tried to defend Baker on factual grounds, but I don't have the competence or authority to do that. The question is: If the book is full of factual inaccuracies ...

There may be a few. That's what I keep saying in moviemaking: "It's the accountant's truth you are after. You get a straight A, you idiot!" In [Robert Macfarlane's] very intelligent, beautiful introduction, he says it's irrelevant, that *The Peregrine* is "not a book about watching a bird, it is a book about becoming a bird." Quite often in the book he writes how the peregrine is soaring higher and higher, and becomes a dot in this incredible sky. Then he writes, "And then we swooped down" — we swooped down — as if he had become a peregrine himself. Sure, that's a factual inaccuracy.

Let me make a case for facts. A quote from Henry David Thoreau, in one passage from *Walden* where he says, "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the

sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality.”

I crave many other things beyond reality. It's a very impoverished life if we go only for that. Even a good steak is a form of ecstasy sometimes. You shouldn't dismiss that the primitive things of real, everyday life can acquire different quality.

And facts and ecstasy go together.

No, they do not marry.

They do not?

Truth gives you an illumination and transports you into a state where you step outside of your own existence in an ecstasy. You can, for example, find it in the writings of late medieval mystics — that kind of ecstasy. That's the beauty of this book.

After the book came out, many people were calling attention to misrepresentations. Baker was asked if he took any poetic license in writing this book — and Baker said none.

Probably all these kinds of reports are made-up things, like on the internet. I believe it wasn't until recently we even knew who J. A. Baker was or what the J and A stood for — I still do not know. Probably we only know that he may have worked in a library sometime in his life and he may have been carrying some illness. That's all. I think we do not have a single letter from him. And it's better that we don't know.

Well, it doesn't matter. We have a few letters. But let me quote this to you. Maybe this can shed some light. He says, “Everything I describe took place while I was watching it, but I do not believe that honest observation is enough. The emotions and behavior of the watcher are also facts, and they must be truthfully recorded.”

That's beautiful. I hope that he really wrote it and not some internet imposter. Yes, it's strange what happens to us. It's not happening to the observer alone, it happens to the memory of the observer. I give you a recent example, which is very puzzling for me. I made a film, *Lessons of Darkness*, about the fires in Kuwait. It's a film where, for 60 minutes, there's not a single image that belongs to our planet anymore. You do not recognize our planet anymore. I start the film with a caption and it reads, and it's a very beautiful two-liner: “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur — like creation — in grandiose splendor. Blaise Pascal.” Some people asked me, “Where can I find this? I can't find it in his aphorisms. I can't find it in *Pensées*.”

Fact is, I invented it. And I put “Pascal” under it. Pascal could not have written it better. But it takes the audience right into a quasi-ecstasy, to a very sublime, elevated position. And then the film begins, and I never let them down from that.

In *Lo and Behold*, about the internet, there's one question I'm posing. The Prussian war theoretician Clausewitz, in Napoleonic times, once famously said, “War sometimes dreams of itself.” Does the internet dream of itself? It's really a deep and a very, very puzzling question for very intelligent people.

Now, what happened? I tried to find this quote in Clausewitz, and I did not find it. So it may happen that in my memory I somehow thought it was Clausewitz — but maybe I made it up myself. I do not know. So it's a very blurred thing. But the question itself, in the way I quote Clausewitz, has such a

formal clarity in it that it doesn't matter whether it was Clausewitz or me making it up and not *remembering* whether I made it up. That's a very disturbing moment.

And that's why, if it's true that the emotions and behavior of the watcher are also facts and must be truthfully recorded, then there could be an exact, a very exact truth, that has to do with the subjectivity of the watcher.

And the behavior of the watcher.

Behavior, where he becomes more and more the hawk. It's quite remarkable. The further Baker gets on in his diary, and he's inspecting these kills, there's a suggestion that he ends up also tasting

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He writes:

I found myself crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk as in some primitive ritual, the hunter becoming the thing he hunts. [...] We live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men.

We. While he writes these five lines, he morphs into a falcon.

A hundred pages later he says, "What was left [of the kill] smelt fresh and sweet, like a mash of raw beef and pineapple. It was an appetizing smell, not the least bit rank or fishy. I could have eaten it myself if I had been hungry." And one has a sense that he might have, every now and then, even tasted some of these dead birds.

Yes. But I think there wouldn't be anything wrong to eat a bird or the carcass of a bird raw. Why not?

Perfectly understandable. Let me propose my interpretation: it's not so much that Baker desires to become the hawk. He does have flight envy and he does have this aerial envy. He wants to fly and

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So do I. I've wanted to fly all my life.

— and unfortunately, the only way he can do it is in prose. There are moments in this book where he is soaring as high as any writer can soar in sentences, in the way he's writing, and in the ecstatic passion that transports him. And therefore, as a writer, he *does* become like a hawk.

The raptor has another myth associated with it, which goes back to the Greek myth of Ganymede — the young boy, the most beautiful of all mortals whose father was Tros, after whom Troy was named. On Mount Ida, Zeus takes the form of an eagle and seizes him, captures him, "rapes" him in a sense, of rapture, bearing him up into the heavens. He becomes the cup-bearer of the gods and he becomes immortal. There are moments in *The Peregrine* where one has a sense that Baker is just waiting to be rapt or enraptured by the hawk.

That's fantastic. Via his own writing and via his own life watching the birds.

Let me see if I can find the passage. On page 154–155:

After two minutes of uneasy glaring, he [the peregrine] flew straight at me as though intending to attack. He swept up into the wind before he reached me, and hovered twenty feet above my head, looking down. I felt as a mouse must feel, crouching unconcealed in shallow grass, cringing and hoping. The hawk's keen-bladed face seemed horribly close. The glazed inhuman eyes — so foreign and remote [...] I could not look away from the crushing light of those eyes, from the impaling horn

of that curved bill. Many birds are snared in the tightening loop of his gaze. They turn their heads toward him as they die.

The fantasy is to be borne up into the sky like Ganymede. To call it a Ganymede complex would trivialize everything, but he wants to leave the earth and he can't leave the earth.

At the same time, he is very warm-hearted, almost humorous. A couple of times he describes wrens. They really touch his heart very deeply: "The flat land was booming void where nothing lived. Under the wind, a wren, in sunlight among fallen leaves in a dry ditch seemed suddenly divine, like a small brown priest in a parish of dead leaves and wintry hedges, devoted till death." I mean, it can't get any better. Or he writes another time about a wren: "Turning through a hedge-gap, I surprised a wren. It trembled on its perch in an agony of hesitation, not knowing whether to fly or not, its mind in a stutter, splitting up with fear. I went quickly past, and it relaxed, and sang." It's just wonderful.

The elements are very present in this book. There's the earth, water, air, obviously, and then the circle of fire. Fire is not technically an element, but the sun really represents that fiery element. He speaks of the falcon in terms of fire. He speaks of the heart of fire that it has. He sees it flying, he calls it a burning brand. And yet he is earthbound.

I think he's not reconciled with the world ...

No, he's not reconciled.

He's not reconciled with human beings, and he's not reconciled with creation. Absolutely not. I share this kind of anger against the mess out there. When you look at it, there's no glorious harmony of the spheres. It's a stupid concept that still pops up in Walt Disney sorts of movies sometimes.

You read the passage on the wren. With your permission, I'll read one about the mouse. I think those of you who read the book will have noticed that Baker takes the perspective of a bird's-eye view. He describes a valley, estuary, sea. It's from great distances. But all this changes when he's speaking about a little mouse that is an earthbound creature. I'm reading from page 45. Let me read the whole paragraph:

At the side of the lane to the ford, I found a long-tailed field mouse feeding on a slope of grass. He was eating the grass seeds, holding the blade securely between his skinny white front paws. So small, blown over by the breath of passing cars, felted with a soft moss of green-brown fur; yet his back was hard and solid to the touch. His long, delicate ears were like hands unfolding; his huge, night-seeing eyes were opaque and dark. He was unaware of my touch, of my face a foot above him, as he bend the tree-top grasses down to his nibbling teeth. I was like a galaxy to him, too big to be seen. I could have picked him up but it seemed wrong to separate him now from the surface he would never leave until he died. I gave him an acorn. He carried it up the slope in his mouth, stopped and turned it round against his teeth, flicked it round with his hands, like a potter spinning. His life is eating to live, to catch up, to keep up; never getting ahead, moving always in the narrow way between a death and a death; between stoats and weasels, foxes and owls by night; between cars and kestrels and herons by day.

This is the fate of those who are earthbound. It's also the fate of Baker himself. He can get that close to the mouse because they share, at least, this earthboundness. And we know that Baker was in the grip of a very serious illness when he was out there, recording these things that he was seeing. Perhaps there was some kind of promise of transcendence if you could somehow take to the sky and free yourself from living "between a death and a death" on earth.

I think that pervades the whole book. It is not just observations of natural creatures out there, it's much more.

I traveled on foot to Paris in snowstorms, in rainstorms. You see so many mice. It's astonishing how many mice there are. In *Of Walking in Ice*, I write, "Friendship is possible with mice." It's very strange. They have something which has a very strong allure to those who are the solitary wanderers out there.

Baker writes that creatures, even when they're dying in agony, will do anything desperately to get away if a human being approaches them. Their fear and phobia of humans is such that you can never get near them. And yet Baker can actually stroke this mouse.

We have a question from Mark, in the audience: "Part three of *The Peregrine* begins, 'Wherever he goes this winter, I will follow him [the peregrine]. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life.' Do you feel this way as a documentary filmmaker, that you are on a quest without knowing where it will lead you? Or do you have a clearer idea of what you'll find when you begin?"

That's a deep question because I do have a focus and I do know basically what I'm out for. Of course, there are surprises en route. I follow the surprises and I follow my instincts. It's a little bit like hunting. But in documentaries, you should not underestimate the amount of casting that I do. I'm speaking of casting the same way you cast a feature film with actors. And I look around, [and I think] "Who could be really good for introducing me to this or that phenomenon?" Casting somehow narrows the possibilities, of course, but it intensifies the possibilities at the same time. So, yes, it's wonderful where you are ending up. One signal that I know what I'm doing is that I end up with very little footage.

Yes. For those who have devoted decades of their lives to a kind of scientific study of a bird or some other aspect of nature, and go through the labor and careful analysis to get the facts correct, that's also a form of devotion. It's not poetry, but it is a love that takes a different form.

That's what scientists do. That's the charm of what they do. Sometimes it takes them to discoveries that decide the shape of our civilization — the tools that we use, the inventions or the insights that they have. We change because of these lonesome insights. That's the beauty of it. It transforms society, it transforms how we behave as human beings. Our humaneness suddenly changes because we are using cell phones, the internet, Facebook. The idea of self, which is shifting and changing, and the ambiguity of human exchange suddenly becomes so clearly visible.

May I ask about some of the other books that you ask your students at the Rogue Film School to read?

Yes. I brought with me the *Poetic Edda*, but I also, for example, have a very, very fine book by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*. He was a 19-year-old footman of the conquistador Cortés. Late in his life, he wrote a very, very, very detailed account — much better than any other source at that time. It is a phenomenal book.

I would also recommend you all read the *Warren Commission Report on the Assassination of Kennedy*. Everybody puts it down, yet nobody has read it. It's a wonderful, incredible crime story. And it has a logical conclusiveness that is staggering. It's a truly wonderful, wonderful piece of reading.

Back to the *Poetic Edda*. I am somebody who has held the *Codex Regius* in my hands twice in my life already — a little crumpled parchment text which is a little like the Dead Sea Scrolls for Israel. This is a book for Iceland. It goes into the mythological life and description of the creation of the world. It's very, very strong. I tell people who make documentaries: go read the *Edda*, read the depth of the myths that can suddenly come out of very simple things that you do not notice — unless you have a sensory organ for the mythological. Here's *Völuspá Edda*, the creation of the world:

In earliest times did Ymir live:
was not sea, nor land nor salty waves,
neither Earth was there nor upper heaven,
but a gaping nothing, and in green things nowhere.

Was the land then lifted aloft by Bur's sons
who made Mithgarth, the matchless earth;
shown from the south the sun on dry land,
on the ground then grew The greensward soft.

The “matchless earth” is just very, very beautiful. A few stanzas later in the text — the creation of dwarfs. And all of a sudden, the text about the creation of the world rattles down to 84 names of dwarfs. Idiot scholars believe that it is an interpolation of later times, which probably it was. It doesn't matter. It is an integral part of the *Codex Regius*. It's just really, really beautiful. I'll read a little bit into it, if I don't bore you with names of dwarfs:

Then gathered together the gods for counsel,
the holy hosts, and held converse:
who the deep-dwelling dwarfs was to make
of Brimir's blood and Bláin's bones.

Mótsognir rose, mightiest ruler
of the kin of dwarfs, but Durin next;
molded many manlike bodies
the dwarfs under earth, as Durin bade them.

Nýi and Nithi, Northri and Suthri,
Austri and Vestri, Althjóf, Dvalin,
Nár and Náin, Níping, Dáin,
Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Nóri,
Án and Onar, Ái, Mjóthvitnir.

Veig and Gandálf, Vindálf, Thráin,
Thekk and Thorin, Thrór, Vit, and Lit,
Nár and Regin, Nýráth and Ráthsvith;
now is reckoned the roster of dwarfs.

Those are only the first 40. And you see this kind of love for these things is ... I cannot describe it. These things have not changed the course of my life, but they have made it better.

I've never made a pilgrimage to a filmmaker, but I did make a pilgrimage to Salt Lake City, to the University of Utah. One of the texts, which is not on my list, is one of the greatest books — one of the most intense and beautiful texts. The *Florentine Codex*, a collection by monks who accompanied the next wave, the next generation of Conquistadors. They collected voices from Aztecs about child rearing, about botanic knowledge, about military things, about history, about religion, about human sacrifice, and so on.



Legendary film director Werner Herzog discusses J. A. Baker's book "The Peregrine" with Robert Pogue Harrison, a Stanford professor of Italian literature, at the Feb. 2 Another Look book club event. Photo by L. A. Cicero.

The text is so stunning because the Aztecs, in the shock of the conquest and utter destruction, tried to regain their speech. They try to describe simple things. "A cave is a place of darkness. It is full of fear. It is dark, yes, very dark. And fear looms there and do we dare to enter because the cave is big and it is dark" — and it continues like this. Somehow trying to grasp the world by newly trying to name it — just name it. The translation was done by some scholars of the University of Utah, because the Mormons believe that the Aztecs were one of the lost tribes of Israel. So they have the probably the best pre-Columbian studies in the world. Two professors translated the text, which is Nahuatl, with Spanish translation in parallel text, in the *Codex Florentino*. They translated it into English. Over 25 years, they released bit by bit by bit in scholarly editions. Now you can buy it. It's a book which unfortunately has very few copies. I think I had to pay \$1,200 or so for 12 or 14 volumes. The translation has such a power of language. It's like the Old Testament in the King James Bible translations. Something which happens only once in a few centuries. And it was translated by two wonderful scholars, Professor [Arthur] Anderson and Professor [Charles] Dibble.

Anderson had died. I learned that Professor Dibble was still alive, professor emeritus at the University of Utah. And so I went to Salt Lake. I asked him if I could see him and I made a little

pilgrimage to him. He was completely astonished that a filmmaker would come and visit him. Nobody had ever visited him. And he had no real help. I cooked tea for him. He didn't know how to ignite his gas stove anymore. So he was really a great, wonderful, tragic man who made an incredible achievement in language. And for him, I made a pilgrimage. I visited him. I would never do that for a filmmaker.

So, Werner, to conclude, you're persuaded that you'll be remembered more for your books and your films.

Not remembered. I don't care about being remembered. No, no, no, I mean something different. They will outlive the films, whether anybody cares who the person was, or what my name was. You cannot become completely anonymous in our time, in our century.

Good. But there is another book that maybe you could read from, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from the Making of Fitzcarraldo*.

It was written during the time when I filmed *Fitzcarraldo*, and of course there were lots of catastrophes. Whenever I had a moment, I would write, and my handwriting shrank to miniature size — I mean, microscopic. It has this kind of strange prose in it, which just comes at me here. I'll read something from the prologue:

A vision had seized hold of me, like the demented fury of a hound that has sunk its teeth into the leg of a deer carcass and is shaking and tugging at the downed game so frantically that the hunter gives up trying to calm him. It was the vision of a large steamship scaling a hill under its own steam, working its way up a steep slope in the jungle, while above this natural landscape, which shatters the weak and the strong with equal ferocity, soars the voice of Caruso, silencing all the pain and all the voices of the primeval forest and drowning out all birdsong. To be more precise, bird cries, for in this setting, left unfinished and abandoned by God in wrath, the birds do not sing; they shriek in pain, and confused trees tangle with one another like battling Titans, from horizon to horizon, in a steaming creation still being formed. Fog-panting and exhausted they stand in this unreal world, in unreal misery — and I, like a stanza in a poem written in an unknown foreign tongue, am shaken to the core.

This kind of stuff calms you when you're battling in the forest. Others would seek consolation or refuge in drugs or in alcohol or in religion or whatever. My last resort is language. It's a last resort. And it is boiling inside of me and I sometimes, like a tune that you cannot get out of your head for weeks and weeks, words and things are spinning in my head. It was very strange because I later returned to the site where I moved the shape of the mountain, and there was hardly anything that you could see, no trace is left. I noticed the hostility among people in a native village, which I had not really noticed before but it was evidently there. I describe it:

It was midday and very still.

I looked around, because everything was so motionless. I recognized the jungle as something familiar, something I had inside me, and I knew that I loved it: yet against my better judgment. Then words came back to me that had been circling, swirling inside me through all those years: Hearken, heifer, hoarfrost. Denizens of the crag, will-o'-the-wisp, hogwash. Uncouth, flotsam, fiend. Only now did it seem as though I could escape from the vortex of words.

Something struck me, a change that actually was no change at all. I had simply not noticed it when I was working there. There had been an odd tension hovering over the huts, a brooding hostility. The native families hardly had any contact with each other, as if a feud reined among them. But I had

always overlooked that somehow, or denied it. Only the children had played together. Now, as I made my way past the huts and asked for directions, it was hardly possible to get one family to acknowledge another. The seething hatred was undeniable, as if something like a climate of vengeance prevailed, from hut to hut, from family to family, from clan to clan.

I looked around, and there was the jungle, manifesting the same seething hatred, wrathful and steaming, while the river flowed by in majestic indifference and scornful condescension, ignoring everything: the plight of man, the burden of dreams, and the torments of time.

So that's how I see nature.

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<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-outer-fringes-of-our-language-a-conversation-with-werner-herzog/>

LEGENDARY WERNER HERZOG TALKS BOOKS WITH AUTHOR ROBERT POGUE HARRISON: FULL-LENGTH VERSION

Renowned filmmaker Werner Herzog comes to Stanford to discuss J.A. Baker's ""The Peregrine"" – and much more – as part of the Another Look book club series. The conversation with acclaimed author Robert Pogue Harrison, Stanford's Rosina Pierotti Professor in Italian Literature, took place on February 2, 2016, at Dinkelspiel Auditorium. [<http://anotherlook.stanford.edu>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4b7vBWwbuo>