

THE LIBERAL ARTS AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE

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*“Bird life aplenty is found in the sunny air,
not all of it significant.”*

~Homer, *The Odyssey* II.191-2

The Opening Charge is a venerable institution in the Program of Liberal Studies which provides an annual occasion for a current faculty member to reflect—usually in a somewhat quirky way—upon the characteristics and value of an integrated liberal arts education like what we have on offer in PLS. Like all venerable institutions which are part of a long tradition, there is a somewhat formulaic element to the form of the thing: there’s usually some light self-deprecating humor near the beginning, a few jokes here and there which land with more or less success, some kind of retrospective view of Opening Charges which have been delivered in years’ past, a smattering of personal anecdotes, an appeal to texts we’ve all read together, subtle or not-so-subtle campaigns for texts we *don’t* read together but *really really should*; then, about halfway through, a rhetorical move like the one Erasmus makes in *The Praise of Folly* where the jests and the jester suddenly become tremendously earnest, and the seriousness of what it is we really do together in PLS is laid bare. This form is sacrosanct and from time immemorial and I will not be departing from it.

Part One. The Liberal Arts as Augury and Haruspicy

As I said, the form of the Opening Charge necessarily calls for some element of recapitulation of its past iterations. In one lecture in recent memory, what we do together in PLS was likened to the antique practice of necromancy, “the art of summoning the dead to gain from them some special insight otherwise thought to be inaccessible.” Such conversations with the dead were part of the “broader art of divination” which involved consulting seers “who could interpret dreams or read the entrails of animals or interpret the flights of birds.”¹ In keeping with this Opening Charge-sanctioned theme of the liberal arts as a kind of antique divination, my talk invites a playful comparison between the liberal arts and augury (the interpretation of the flight patterns of birds) and haruspicy (the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals), where such seers, sometimes called “bird-watchers,” could determine whether an omen or bird-sign was good or bad.

Before there is a mass exodus for the door or the rumors of the cult-level devotions of PLS students transforms from the metaphorical into the actual, let me reassure you in no uncertain terms that ours will only be a literary augury and a literary haruspicy. The meaning we seek is traced not in the sky or on the ground but rather in the pages, patterns,

images, and metaphors of the books in and beyond our common canon. And though these pages are indeed bursting with flocks of birds—crews, murders, quarrels, flutters, knots, bands, and swarms of them—I will prescind from all warblers, plovers, sparrows, starlings, robins, and storks in decided preference to the raptors: birds of prey and punishment and appetite, birds like sparrowhawks, eagles, merlins, kestrels, owls and peregrine falcons.

I feel I must confess in full disclosure that my interest in these raptors is not strictly limited either to cataloguing their descriptions in PLS books or mining such appearances for application to the enterprise of the liberal arts. It's personal. There's a pair of red-tailed hawks who have taken up a nest in the wooded area by my house, and I've become singularly attached. I watch for them circling languidly in the sky when I walk the dog, root for them against the nettlesome machinations of the crows. Even as my rational mind chastens me for it, I anthropomorphize them, ascribing intention to the movements of their animal instincts. What primeval human compulsion is this, to scan the horizon and to impute significance and meaning either to their absence or to these aviary, but almost angelic visitations? Nor can I fully shake, even as a non-superstitious, post-Enlightenment modern, the sense that certain of these encounters are trying to communicate something to me from beyond the veil. Let me tell you a few personal anecdotes so you'll see what I mean.

Once, when my three children were much younger, I had ushered them to the backyard for a lunch-time picnic, which, as anyone with small children can tell you, was no small feat. They had all that morning been weepy and bored and underfoot, and I thought a change of scenery might help all of us feel better. But the literal instant I spread everything out and laid out the food, a warm, bloody, headless bird fell out of the sky and onto the picnic blanket, dropped, presumably, by a hawk or falcon who was out hunting. Tell me, reader: how could I *not* take this personally? With apologies to *Casablanca* and to Humphrey Bogart, on all the picnic blankets in all the backyards in all the towns in all the world, this decapitated bird gets dropped onto mine.

Another time, one early morning just a couple of years ago, I looked outside in the grey light of dawn to see—standing perfectly still with its haunches raised, about ten or fifteen feet from the sliding glass door where the kids were eating breakfast—an enormous and terrifically scary-looking coyote. As I watched, a massive hawk swooped down from out of nowhere with a guttural sort of scream and attacked it, chasing it away from the property. Tell me, reader: what kind of Homeric omen was this—either of my looming victory or of my eventual defeat?

I have other stories. On the anniversary of a dear friend's sudden accidental death, I was standing in the backyard and a little songbird, presumably just learning to fly, landed on my

shoulder and stayed there for at least a full minute, chirping in my ear like a voice from the far country. And I must mention as well that residents of Indiana this very evening have been alerted to a high migration event, with over 100,000 birds currently flying over our heads tonight.

Truly, though, the power and fury and gravitas of these tremendous creatures stimulates the imagination no less in our books than in our backyards. Raptors are invoked not merely as occasions for auspicious or inauspicious bird-signs in the antique epics but also throughout the canon, up to and including what is almost a cottage industry of raptor books within the genre of modern nature writing: think of T.H. White's *The Goshawk* (1951), J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967), or, more recently, Helen MacDonald's *H Is for Hawk* (2014) and *Vespers Flights* (2020).

This evening I plan to gloss over some of the more powerful literary examples of raptors across our shared canon, and then move to a more detailed presentation of Baker's masterpiece *The Peregrine*, an utterly harrowing, heartbreakingly gorgeous example of this sort of literature. Because you did not come out tonight *just* for a catalogue of birds across the PLS canon (although that would be a worthy endeavor), I will use *The Peregrine* as the occasion and the ground to reflect more constructively upon the unique sort of education that is on offer in PLS and in the liberal arts in general.

Before we begin in earnest, I would certainly be remiss were I not to mention here that birding and bird-watching actually has a strong precedent in the annals of PLS history. In a 1977 issue of *Programma* (our PLS alumni magazine), Prof. Ed Cronin wrote in amusingly vivid detail of his new sabbatical hobby of watching the birds.² And as I understand it from Prof. Phil Sloan, Charles Nutting (1858-1927), the father of Prof. Willis Nutting, one of the original founders of our program, was a noted ornithologist after whom the Nutting Flycatcher was named.³ Prof. Nutting was described by another beloved emeritus professor, Walt Nicgorski, as someone compelled by the Catholic Agrarian Movement who "sought to keep all close to the spectacles and rhythms of nature."⁴ He would routinely lead PLS bird walks for both students and faculty as an informal part of the curriculum. Often meeting well before 5:00 AM, these intrepid PLSers would assemble at the lakes and proceed to bird-watch both on campus and in the more wooded area north of campus. It might be time to bring that tradition back again.

Part Two. A Litany of Hawks

Those of you currently in Seminar I will have already gotten your fill of raptors within the first few weeks of the semester. Though we could multiply examples, just a few samples of

the bird-omens as messages from the gods in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* will suffice for our purposes.

We may all recall the famously gruesome bird-sign in Book XII of Homer's *Iliad*, which Hektor soundly rejects both to his and the Trojans' mortal detriment:

Just then
as they desired to cross, a bird flew by them,
heading to the left across the army,
an eagle beating upward, in its claws
a huge snake, red as blood, live and jerking,
full of fight; it doubled on itself
and struck the captor's chest and throat. At this
the eagle in its agony let go
and veered away screaming downwind. The snake
fell in the mass of troops, and Trojans shuddered
to see the rippling thing lie in their midst (*The Iliad*, Book 12.220-229).

The Odyssey likewise employs several bird-omens to foreshadow the final defeat of the suitors by Odysseus:

Now Zeus who views the wide world sent a sign to him,
launching a pair of eagles from a mountain crest
in guiding flight down the soft blowing wind,
wing-tip to wing-tip quivering taut, companions,
till high above the assembly of many voices
they wheeled, their dense wings beating, and in havoc
dropped on the heads of the crowd—a deathly omen—
wielding their talons, tearing cheeks and throats;
then veered away on the right hand through the city (*The Odyssey*, II. 156-164).

Intense raptor imagery gets used elsewhere in the *Iliad* to describe the gods, invoked in these cases for their speed and power.⁵ We see Homer, for instance, likening Poseidon to a hawk and Apollo to a peregrine falcon.⁶ The human characters likewise get the raptor treatment, not just to evoke their animal speed and power but also the perhaps more anthropomorphic senses of intelligent sight, in the case of Meneláos, or the dark fury of grief in the case of Patróklos, when a fellow-soldier loses his life in the fierce battle over Sarpêdôn's body.⁷

Finally, in Homer's *Odyssey*, powerful raptor imagery is evoked in that first emotional reunion between Odysseus and Telemachos in Book 16:

They, throwing
his arms around this marvel of a father
Telémakhos began to weep. Salt tears
rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings farmers take before they fly (Homer, *the Odyssey* 16:256-259).

Had we “but world enough and time” I could have elaborated upon the raptor imagery of the Bible: on passages in the book of Job, for instance, which in its own way displays the ferocity of the best nature poetry as it interrogates God: “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,/and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?/ It lives on the rock and makes its home/in the fastness of the rocky crag./From there it spies the prey; its eyes see it from far away./ Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is” (Job 39:26-30). Or the apocalyptic bird sign of Revelation 8 wherein an eagle cries “out in a loud voice, Woe! Woe! Woe!’ to the inhabitants of the earth” (Revelation 8:13). I could also have speculated about why Lucifer is portrayed in Dante’s *Inferno* as a great, frozen bird, really more a bat than anything else, or else considered the rich eagle imagery on the sphere of Jupiter in Dante’s *Paradiso* or perhaps done a deep dive into Robert Penn Warren’s poem “Evening Hawk,” whose title character climbs “the last light/Who knows neither Time nor error, and under/Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings/Into shadow...”

But what I really want to use the rest of my time for is to confess and to share an obsession. And—I must be quite forthright with you—it is a contagious one, borne of another man’s intense obsession and one which tends to breed other forms of obsessiveness. It is my obsession with a book certain passages of which might well—something like Blaise Pascal’s fiery *Memoria*—be sewn permanently into the lining of jackets everywhere: J.A. Baker’s 1967 environmental classic *The Peregrine*. It is a book in certain respects about the human transparency (or lack thereof) to the animal and natural world. And though it is a book about anger, loss, and grief, it has been—at least to me, especially in these last few difficult years—somehow also a book of unusual consolation. People have been known to carry this unlikely book with them everywhere in life and even to be buried with it in death.⁸ What accounts for that kind of response? And what can such a book as this tell us, gathered here tonight together looking for some scraps of wisdom about the enterprise of the liberal arts and the intellectual life?

Part Three: Perceval and The Peregrine:
Birdwatching and the Quest for the Holy Grail

On the face of it, J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* is just another nature book about watching birds. A closer look, however, reveals an epiphanic, even apocalyptic study in the art of the slow burn: in descriptive and metaphorical language, in cinematics, in optics, in landscape, in setting, and the boundaries and possibilities of narrative voice and of human relationships with the animal world. In certain respects, it's not an easy book to read: it is sometimes tedious, often bloody, occasionally voyeuristic, and a bit despairing about the capacity of most human beings to relate to nature in anything other than an exploitative way. As Helen MacDonald (of *H Is for Hawk* fame) suggests, "Baker writes like an angel, but always the angel of death. No community and little human warmth exist in its pages. Baker wrote it as if he were the last man on Earth and the peregrines he watched airborne revenants, lost and losing souls."⁹ But even though the price of admission is high, on my estimation it is worth every single penny. *The Paris Review* acclaims *The Peregrine* as deploying such a "technique of description, a technique of ecstasy, really, that has the ability to transform the way you see, to cleanse the window's perception as it were, and reveal the world in all its pure and infinite primal glory."¹⁰ *The Guardian* praises its "dark fury" and its "ecstatic, violent, enraptured prose;"¹¹ to the *New Yorker*, the book represents "a record of desire."¹² It is also one of the few mandatory texts—cinematic to its core—that Werner Herzog assigns in his filmmaking courses.

The book tells the story—if you can even call it that—of one man's obsessive hunt not only to observe raptors in the wild but also to ritualize his own behavior to adapt to their habits and perspectives. He writes:

To be recognized and accepted by a peregrine you must wear the same clothes, travel by the same way, perform actions in the same order. Like all birds, it fears the unpredictable. Enter and leave the same fields at the same time each day, soothe the hawk from its wildness by a ritual of behavior as invariable as its own... Learn to fear. To share fear is the greatest bond of all. The hunter must become the thing he hunts."¹³

And later:

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified.¹⁴

As *Landmarks* author Robert Macfarlane has it, “*The Peregrine* is not a book about *watching* a bird, it is a book about *becoming* a bird.”¹⁵

It is also nearly impossible to tell whether the book is fiction or non-fiction, art or science, poetry or prose. There is also a deliberate collapsing of phenomena observed, observer, landscape, author, and narrator such that the reader gains a new kind of sight: we become *katascopoi*, “looker-downers,” like birds or the gods of antiquity.¹⁶ Near the beginning of the text, Baker writes, “In my diary of a single winter I have tried to preserve a unity, binding together the bird, the watcher, and the place that holds them both. 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.”¹⁷ This is not, however, entirely true. Though in form it purports to be a brief personal diary of the narrator’s recorded observations of the activity of raptors in Great Britain in over just a few months (October 1 to April 4), in fact into these seven symbolic months Baker distills in heavily concentrated doses the data of over ten years and 1600 pages of field notes and maps heavily annotated with hundreds of markings which recorded the particularities of his raptor sightings. Every page is crammed with hundreds of metaphors and similes with varying degrees of plausibility. And though it could be said (and indeed has been said) that nothing really *happens* in this book—Robert MacFarlane quipped that “*Waiting for Godot* was once described as a play in which nothing happens, twice. *The Peregrine* is a book in which little happens, hundreds of times”¹⁸—its drama and its so-called “hyperkinetic” energy comes from its remarkably inventive deployment of figurative language and the utter sensuousness of his descriptions. The setting is strange, crepuscular, wrenched out of time. For instance, in the book’s cinematic opening, Baker writes that “a fragrance of neglect still lingers, like a ghost of fallen grass. There is always a sense of loss, a feeling of being forgotten. There is nothing else here; no castles, no ancient monuments, no hills like green clouds. It is just a curve of the earth, a rawness of winter fields. Dim, flat, desolate lands that cauterize all sorrow.”¹⁹

Similarly, his figuration of the song of the night-jar flirts with synesthesia:

Its song is like the sound of a stream of wine spilling from a height into a deep and booming cask. It is an odorous sound, with a bouquet that rises to the quiet sky. In the glare of day it would seem thinner and drier, but dusk mellows it and gives it vintage. If a song could smell, this song would smell of crushed grapes and almonds and dark wood. The sound spills out, and none of it is lost. The whole wood brims with it.²⁰

There are, as Robert MacFarlane elaborates in *Landmarks*, adjectives “torqued” into verbs; verbs “incite[d] to misbehavior”; “audacious comparisons,” and the contrivance of plentiful “neologisms and coinages.”²¹ Moreover, the manuscript pages were quite heavily revised at least five times; many of the pages were marked with stress-marks over certain syllables to indicate something like poetic meter, even if the pages themselves might look ostensibly like prose. Some of the sentences had been rendered into verse in the marginalia, and there were running tallies of how many hundreds of metaphors, similes, adjectives, and verbs had been used on each page.²² He could well be compared to another of England’s poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in another voice and in another time.

In Part 1, called “Beginnings,” Baker’s narrator retrospectively considers what prompted the text, saying, “For ten years I followed the peregrine. I was possessed by it. *It was a grail to me.*”²³

If it is true that *The Peregrine* is a book about descriptive language and prose style just as much if not more so as it is about birds, and if we continue to take into account the scrupulosity with which Baker revised his manuscripts for final publication, it will be clear indeed that the likening of his decade-long hunt in *The Peregrine* to the quest for the holy grail is not a throw-away line. Other images and diction choices throughout the book corroborate this evocation not only of a natural landscape saturated with religious imagery, but also the medieval Arthurian legends and their immediate predecessors.²⁴ (Here it is perhaps worth noting as an aside that T.H. White, the author of the classic falconry book *The Goshawk*, is also the author of *The Once and Future King*, another 1950s classic based loosely upon *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485)) In Baker’s world—which seems at the same time to be both medieval and modern—birds are “sepulchred in twilight”²⁵; glimpsing a hawk after hours of searching means that “all is transfigured, as though the broken columns of a ruined temple had suddenly resumed their ancient splendor”²⁶; a wren is a “priest;” another bird occupies a “hermitage”²⁷; a falcon startled from the marsh arises “like a departing god.”²⁸ A frigid wind blowing in from the east he calls “a blaze of lances;”²⁹ the wings of the peregrine shine in the sunlight “like red and gold chain-mail.”³⁰

There is also a haunting encounter with an owl in the woods whose

helmeted face was pale white, ascetic, half-human, bitter and withdrawn. The eyes were dark, intense, baleful. This helmet effect was grotesque, as though some lost and shrunken knight had withered to an owl. . . Neither of us could bear to look away. Its face was like a mask, macabre, ravaged, sorrowing, like the face of a drowned man.³¹

On my reading, however, it seems that there is evidence that it is not just Arthurian-style legends and medieval landscapes in general to which Baker meant to allude, but perhaps even one in particular: namely French poet Chretien de Troyes' (c.1130-1190), *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*³² which predates Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1469) by about 300 years.

One of the reasons that I think this is the case are the conspicuous similarities in each text in scenes which describe the strangely aesthetic experience of seeing blood on snow after raptors have wounded or killed, and then subsequently abandoned, their prey. Both protagonists are utterly enraptured by the contrast. First is the passage from *Perceval*:

He came to the king's camp/But saw, before he reached/The tents, a flock of wild/Geese, dazzled by the heavy/Snow, fleeing as fast/As birds can fly from a diving/Falcon dropping out of the sky. It struck at a single/Goose, lagging behind/The others, and hit it so hard/That it fell to the earth. But the hawk/Didn't follow it down, not hungry/Enough to take the trouble,/Too lazy to chase it. So the falcon/Flew off. But Perceval rode/To where the goose had fallen./The bird's neck had been wounded,/And three drops of blood/Had come rolling out on the snow,/Dying it vivid red./The bird had not been badly/Hurt, just knocked to the earth,/And before the knight could reach it/It had flown away in the sky./but its body's oval shape/Was printed in the snow, the blood-/Dyed color suffused inside it,/And Perceval, leaning on his lance,/Sat staring at the sight. Blood/And snow so mixed together/Created a fresh color, /Just like his beloved's face,/And as he stared he forgot/What he was doing and where/He was. The red stain/Against the white snow/Seemed just like her complexion.³³

Baker similarly describes two dead herons "shredded by many shapes of tooth and beak and claw...A day of blood; of sun, snow, and blood. Blood-red! What a useless adjective that is. Nothing is as beautifully, richly red as flowing blood on snow. It is strange that the eye can love what mind and body hate."³⁴

Here both Perceval and Baker's narrator could be said to be acting somewhat like modern haruspex, observing the entrails and blood of fallen animals and finding not only meaning therein, but also the occasion for their own enchantment and for the re-enchantment of all of nature.

What is perhaps more apropos for our purposes in *Perceval*, however, is the symbolic value of the grail in tandem with the theme of *the unasked question*. The particular combination of elements in *Perceval*'s story, some of which reflect earlier iterations of the tale (a 1056 text called *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*), are quite striking: there is a magical castle, a

mysterious vessel, an enigmatic procession surrounding the grail, a bleeding lance, the mortally wounded fisher-king, and the visitation of a guest-hero who is expected to—but does not—ask a fundamental question which would have healed all wounds and restored the king and his imperiled land to health. As Perceval witnessed the marvelous procession of the grail and the maimed fisher-king, he wanted more than once to ask whom the grail served and what it all meant, but again and again he chided himself and kept his silence, again and again he deferred his asking of the fundamental question of the meaning of it all.

Meanwhile, the wonderful grail/Was carried back and forth, /But again the boy was silent,/Not asking to whom it was served. And again it was thoughts of his master/Which kept him from speaking, for he never/Forgot how clearly he'd been warned/To beware of too much talking./And so he stayed silent too long./With every course, the grail/Was borne back and forth,/Uncovered, plainly visible,/And still he did not know why./Although he wished to know/He told himself he'd surely/Make some safe inquiry/Before he left; someone/Would tell him. He'd wait until morning...And so he postponed his questions..."³⁵

When he awoke, however, he discovered that it was too late to ask the question of what it all meant, to ask “why the lance/Dripped blood (was some sorrow involved?)/And why they'd borne the grail...” For the castle had been abandoned during the night. “He called, but no one answered...”³⁶

Perceval meets a mysterious lady, the sort of which abound in Arthurian legend, who chided him, saying, “Ah, how unlucky you are./For had you asked those questions/You could have completely cured/The good king of all his wounds:/He would have become entirely/Whole, and ruled as he should./How much good you'd have done!”³⁷

Simone Weil's much later, deeply personalist gloss on this story puts the refusal to ask the question in the register of compassionate attention to the suffering other. On her reading, the question that the wandering hero *should* have asked the Fisher-King, who was “three-quarters paralysed by the most painful wound was simply this:

“What are you going through?”³⁸

IV. The Quest and the Question, or, How Not to Be a Scavenger

So what exactly can this deep-dive into falconry and medieval quests say about the value of our common project in PLS or of a liberal arts education more generally? As we all already know and appreciate, a liberal arts education provides an integrated vision of a kind of pedagogical formation that is multi-disciplinary, inquiry-based, contemplative, communal, and which aims at the total development of the human person in her intellectual, affective,

aesthetic, and social dimensions. The liberal arts are called “liberal” in part because this course of study allows for and encourages a spirit of free inquiry. We are a questioning and a questioning people. To call the liberal arts “liberal” is to celebrate the liberty to seek the truth wherever it may be found, uninhibited by the external forces of coercion, authority, power, utility, pragmatism, social norms, premature specialization and professionalization, or private interests which could constrain the integrity of such a search.

So first we might notice that in *The Peregrine*, Baker’s narrator comes to inhabit the perspective of the avian other with such a fierce and radical kind of sympathy that by the end of the book it is difficult to tell if he still considers himself to be of the species of those called human. Certainly he does not shy away from asking the question of the ultimate meaning of these natural phenomena.

He adopts a doubled perspective, to see at once as the hunter and the hunted, the bird and the man, and even to come to a sort of transformative communion with it. “I found myself,” he writes, “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...”³⁹

Analogously, to move through our PLS seminar list is—if and only if we, unlike the unlucky Perceval, ask the fundamental question when our hearts and minds prompt us to do so—to come to see a wide range of the patterns of human behavior, to expose and evaluate a full slate of possibilities of forms of human life: heroes, villains, statesmen, matricides, patricides, philosophers, lovers, wanderers, saints, sinners, pilgrims, mothers, fathers, poets, the bereaved, kings, travelers, contemplatives, prisoners, theologians, politicians, knights, actors, mystics, idealists, pragmatists, monsters, friends, scientists, revolutionaries, the visible, the invisible, the powerful, and the weak.

What has the power to heal our wounds and the wounds of those around us is not simply proximity to the grail; that is somehow not enough. Rather, it is the presence of the grail together with the willingness to ask the question. Not *a* question, but *the* question, the one needful thing, the question prompted by our most intimate desires toward ultimate meaning. We are, as Michael Gelven describes it, *asking mysteries*.⁴⁰

In Leon Kass’s chapter “The Aims of Liberal Education,” in *The Aims of Education* (1997), he draws some helpful etymological connections between the words “*question, query, [and] inquire*” with the Latin *quaero*, meaning “to hunt out.” “To question,” he says, “is to quest, to search out and to seek after, to be engaged in a passionate pursuit. Like the hunting dogs’ search for game—the original meaning of our word *quest*—questioning is an earnest activity. This insight is preserved in the Latin root: *quaeso* means to seek and search, but also to beg,

pray, beseech, entreat. In true questioning, we seek for an answer and by our questions entreat being itself to reveal, to uncover, to make unhidden, the object of our search.”⁴¹ And in the liberal arts, the object of our search is not an empirically demonstrable fact but rather is the “search for *what we are* and *what we can and should become*.”⁴²

If *The Peregrine* is indeed a “record of desire”—and here we might remember that the pilgrims who embark upon the pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago are called the *peregrino*—what is it precisely that he (and we, and they) are seeking? What adventure, quest, or journey of transformation awaits us in the project of our liberal arts education toward which we, like those Camino pilgrims, are always on the way? The narrator of Baker’s book wants not only to observe the raptors as empirical realities, but to gain a “sharpen[ed] vision”⁴³ to see, as he puts it, “the hardest thing of all... what is really there.”⁴⁴

But even when the narrator seems to get exactly what it is that he is after, it turns out that the sort of desire that motivates his search is exactly the sort of desire that can never be satiated. Even as he marvels at the falcon’s tremendous power of flight, for him to see it is to want to continue to see:

Now, I thought, I have seen the best of the peregrine; there will be no need to pursue it farther; I shall never want to search for it again. I was wrong of course. One can never have enough.⁴⁵

This may rhyme with some of our own experiences of moving through our liberal arts curriculum. Whereas early on in our study we might become frustrated at the lack of definitive answers at the mysteries opened by our common texts, later we begin to see the wisdom in asking more and more incisive, provocative questions. As Kass reflects again in “The Aims of Liberal Education,” “Unlike the solution to a problem, the gaining of an answer to our questions does not dissolve the quest, or at least, does not abolish the desire. Like other forms of genuine love, love does not vanish but even grows when the object is present. As the lover loves to gaze on the beloved, so the questing mind delights in beholding the insights it receives.”⁴⁶

To undertake a course of study in the liberal arts is also to appreciate that some enterprises are their own reward, not *for* anything, not economized into profit or the crassness of gain, which chides in a small but significant way the calculus that human persons can be measured in terms of use, commodity, economy, or exchange value. The liberal arts education is not really *for* vocational training or for the production of scholarship, or for becoming more cultured, even as it does happen to give us these things along the way. The singular aim of liberal education is “*the cultivation in each of us of the disposition actively to seek the truth and to make the true our own*.”⁴⁷

If there are any fans of Thomas Merton out there this evening, you will already have guessed that the title of tonight's address, "The Liberal Arts and the Birds of Appetite," is a riff on the title of Merton's 1968 book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. While Merton and I are up to very different things, I wonder if there is a certain wisdom to be found for us with respect to this point in his prefatory author's note:

Where there is carrion lying, meat-eating birds circle and descend. Life and death are two. The living attack the dead, to their own profit. The dead lose nothing by it. They gain too, by being disposed of. Or they seem to, if you must think in terms of gain and loss. Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing,' the 'no-body' that was there, suddenly appears. . . . It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.⁴⁸

In our study of the liberal arts, we are best served, I think, to envision our task not like vultures who pick over the bones of carrion long dead, but more like these raptors, like predators who seek a *living* prey, who revel in the dynamic, dramatic thrill of the hunt and not just the impoverished categories of gain and loss. Scavengers are content with nourishing themselves on dead things that have been left behind and that are relatively easy to obtain. The aim of liberal arts education, however, is—through often agonistic grappling with our texts and with each other—cultivate a disposition of thoughtful inquiry, to seek as if we desire whole mysterious worlds beyond bare facticity, conceptual formulations, and merely pragmatic solutions to problems and nothing beyond the sake of knowledge itself, to go out hunting for the truth in whatever dells or valleys or forests or castles or rivers in which it may be found without foreclosing any possibility of free inquiry. May we desire and question and quest in such a way that the scavengers will miss it, as we continue the "search for *what we are* and *what we can and should become*."

Endnotes

¹ Prof. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, “Moses Comes to Seminar: The Bible and the Great Conversation,” Opening Charge 2018, reprinted in the February 2019 edition of *Programma*, 13-25.

² *Programma*, 1977. Accessible at https://pls.nd.edu/assets/119892/12.1977_programma.pdf.

³ Phillip Sloan, “Remarks on Willis Nutting,” Program of Liberal Studies Senior Dinner, May 15, 2018.

⁴ Personal Correspondence, September 6, 2021.

⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 21.567-577.

⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 13.73-78; Book 15.276-277.

⁷ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 17.761-769; Book 16.669-675.

⁸ Robert MacFarlane, “Violent Spring: The Nature Book that Predicted the Future,” *The Guardian* (April 2017). Accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/15/the-peregrine-by-ja-baker-nature-writing>.

⁹ Quoted in Hilary A. White, “The Secret Life Behind the Writer of England’s Greatest Cult Book,” *The Irish Times* (January 6, 2018). Accessible at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-secret-life-behind-the-writer-of-england-s-greatest-cult-book-1.3333957>.

¹⁰ Barret Baumgart, “Reading J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine* in Fall,” *The Paris Review* (September 22, 2017). Accessible at <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/09/22/reading-j-a-bakers-the-peregrine-in-fall>.

¹¹ MacFarlane, “Violent Spring.”

¹² Cynthia Zarin, “Time Out: The Beauty of J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*,” *The New Yorker* (April 17, 2017). Accessible at <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-beauty-of-j-a-bakers-the-peregrine>.

¹³ J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2004), 13.

¹⁴ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 41.

¹⁵ Robert MacFarlane, Introduction to *The Peregrine*, xiv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 14.

¹⁸ Robert MacFarlane, *Landmarks* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 151.

¹⁹ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 10.

²⁰ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 11.

²¹ MacFarlane, *Landmarks* 152.

²² As MacFarlane notes in *Landmarks*, “‘Beginnings’...though only six pages long, contained 136 metaphors and 23 similes, while the one-and-a-half-page entry for the month of March used 97 verbs and 56 adjectives” (153).

²³ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 14; italics added.

²⁴ I owe a debt to Jonathan Geltner for pointing some of these allusions out to me in some unpublished work.

²⁵ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 11.

²⁶ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 14.

²⁷ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 81.

²⁸ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 149.

²⁹ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 138.

³⁰ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 123.

³¹ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 78-9.

³² Chretien de Troyes: *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

³³ de Troyes, 132-133.

³⁴ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 132.

³⁵ de Troyes, 105. C.f. also the lines that read, “The boy saw that wondrous/Sight, the night he arrived there, /But kept himself from asking/What it might mean...” (de Troyes, 102); “And the boy watched them, not daring/To ask why or to whom/This grail was meant to be served,/For his heart was always aware/Of his wise old master’s warnings./But I fear his silence may hurt him,/For I’ve often heard it said/That talking too little can do/As much damage as talking too much./Yet, for better or worse,/He never said a word” (De Troyes, 103).

³⁶ De Troyes, 108.

³⁷ De Troyes, 114.

³⁸ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” *Waiting on God* (Routledge Revivals, 2009), 32-37.

³⁹ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 95. The passage continues: “We live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men. We hate their suddenly uplifted arms, the insanity of their flailing gestures, their erratic scissoring gait, their aimless stumbling ways, the tombstone whiteness of their faces” (95).

2000).⁴⁰ Michael Gelven, *The Asking Mystery: A Philosophical Inquiry* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press,

⁴¹ Leon Kass, "The Aims of Liberal Education" *The Aims of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 92.

⁴² Kass, 96.

⁴³ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 13.

⁴⁴ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 19.

⁴⁵ Baker, *The Peregrine*, 149.

⁴⁶ Kass, "The Aims of Liberal Education," 92-93.

⁴⁷ Kass, "The Aims of Liberal Education," 86.

⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, "Author's Note," *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New Directions, 1968).