

Bread Loaf Commencement in Vermont—August 11, 2007

John Elder

President Liebowitz, Director Maddox, Associate Director Bartels, esteemed colleagues on the Bread Loaf faculty, friends and family of this community, and, most of all, graduates in the remarkable class of 2007—please accept my warmest greetings and congratulations on this happy occasion.

I've been thinking about sequels since listening to Jim's appreciation of Joseph Battell's masterpiece Ellen, or The Whisperings of an Old Pine at our opening ceremony this year. Upon returning to our home in Bristol later that night, I decided, for reasons now hard to explain, that I would immediately begin re-reading the book again by starting at the last page and moving forward. While I may have thought I'd at least looked at every page of Battell's prose before, I now found myself staring at an unremembered advertisement for two projected sequels to Ellen. They were to be called, and I'm not making this up, Edith and Gertrude. I began to contemplate with mounting excitement writing a first chapter for the lost manuscript of Edith, for delivery upon this very occasion, but decided that we already had enough literary surprises and sensations around here.

One of the surprising pleasures in every Bread Loaf course turns out to be discovering which authors not on the syllabus will nonetheless end up entering into regular dialogue with the assigned books. In my seminar on the poetry of Robert Frost, one such writer turned out to be Virginia Woolf; this fact doubtless reflected, among other things, the exciting course simultaneously being taught on Woolf by Jennifer Green-Lewis. I'd like to reflect this evening about some of the ways in which our present, ceremonial afterglow relates to the core of our

summer's program, and to frame these brief remarks with a passage from *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Ramsay is musing inwardly as her dinner party draws to a close:

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more, and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all around them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

It's perhaps not so surprising that throughout this summer, having also been teaching a new course on the literature of farming and food, I've found myself thinking of Bread Loaf itself as a feast. Our school's very name brings eating to mind, of course, along with the accompanying bakery of metaphors--crumb, crouton, tortilla, nacho, biscuit, crumpet, hard-tack. Over the years more than one Bread Loaf speaker has reminded us, too, that the word

“companion” has as its fundamental meaning one with whom we share bread. Here we are, then, companions, ballasted in our seats in the Burgess Meredith Theatre for a few minutes, after a splendid banquet in the Inn that in turn represented the end of this summer’s feast.

When Gerald Graff spoke in this space earlier in the summer the question he posed was how to engage students energetically in literature when they may never have made a strong connection with it in the past; his own discovery as a teacher had been that this could be accomplished through criticism that was framed as an argument against other, specific points of view. I would like to ask a different, but perhaps still complementary question. How do we step away from literary experiences and conversation that have sometimes been intense to the point of incandescence? I tremble to express myself in this way, lest I sound sentimental or extravagant. In all honesty, though, it’s felt harder than ever to let go of this summer’s classes. If as I suspect, such difficulty is widely shared among our student-body and faculty, that very fact may cast light on the meaning our companionship that is rooted in a questing devotion to literature and language. I’d like to frame an exploration of this phenomenon by describing two particular class-meetings that I fortunate enough to participate in this summer. In each case, the most notable thing about the session was the way it ended.

In the second week of classes our seminar on agrarian literature focused on the fourth and final book of Virgil’s *Georgics*--that tasty mélange of mythology, celebration of the beauty of the Italy, and practical advice on everything from grafting fruit trees to crop-rotation. This last book, intriguingly, focuses exclusively on bee-keeping, and much of it is taken up by the epyllion, or inserted narrative, of Aristaeus. He is a farmer who complains to his mother, the nymph Cyrene, about the death of all his hives, with the destitution that seems to await him. She counsels him to grab the shape-shifter god Proteus and hold onto him until he finally explains

where Aristaeus's woes have originated. Cyrene takes her son to the cave of Proteus, then withdraws to watch. After struggling god has assumed his full repertoire of snakey and horrific forms to no avail, he finally lets his assailant in on the fact that his hives were cursed because of Aristaeus's role in the death Orpheus's wife Eurydice. As the lustful Aristaeus was pursuing her she stumbled upon a poisonous snake and died from its bite. At this point Proteus is released and Cyrene steps forward to tell her son what to do next. He is to sacrifice eight oxen and return to their bodies nine days later. He will find swarms of bees emerging from the corpses and can then capture them to repopulate his hives.

In over an hour spent exploring this epyllion we had already considered it from the perspectives of Orpheus, Eurydice, Aristaeus, and Virgil—who seems to have invented this elaboration of the Orpheus myth. We had both appreciated the vigor of the poetry and related the death of the bees to the disappearance of colonies of honeybees all across North America. We had looked back over a range of political and economic challenges facing Virgil's farmers, anticipating modern versions of them in our subsequent readings. But then, when it seemed we were about done, one participant in the seminar, Marshall Schwarz, had called our attention to the unremarked fact that this entire epyllion is framed and managed by a female character, Cyrene; this was notable because the rest of *The Georgics* are thoroughly dominated by male characters and by Virgil's often militaristic similes. Two immediate benefits followed from this insight that was articulated just when the discussion was feeling done. One was that it opened a new perspective on Virgil's desire for control and effectiveness, both on the farm and in the nation. The difficulties of succeeding in both realms seemed tied, on the surface, to bad weather, pests, war, and the like. But on a deeper level, the framing of the epyllion suggested, they had to do with problems inherent in the very impulse for domination and control. Agriculture,

technology, and the accumulation of land and wealth may sometimes be presented in Virgil as vehicles to recapture, at least temporarily, the plenty and wholesomeness of the Golden Age. But from another perspective they are themselves manifestations of a fall from such blessedness. Without communication with, reverence for, and intercession by the Mother, we are finally helpless. Such an understanding remains deeply rooted in Italian culture to this day. As this new aspect of our discussion opened, I remembered the painted terra cotta shrines Rita and I have often encountered when walking through the farmlands of Tuscany—with the blue-cloaked Mother fondling her infant son, and with sheafs of wheat, clusters of grapes, and flowers draped across those altars in season by the neighboring farmers.

When I mentioned this discussion to Heather James over lunch on the next day, she told me about a recent article in *Renaissance Quarterly* that looked at this epyllion with specific reference to gender and the role of Cyrene. I emailed the [pdf](#) of this article to everyone in the seminar, and we all learned a new word, “bugonia”—meaning the spontaneous generation of honeybees from a sacrificed ox. We also learned that our own speculation about the significance of gender in the epyllion’s framing character was currently of the great interest to classicists far more deeply versed in *The Georgics* than anyone in our group.

This unanticipated turning at the very end of a conversation returned to mind just last Wednesday, when I was having lunch with a group of faculty colleagues that included Sara Blair, Jonathan Freeman, and Jacques Lezra. I was eager to ask them some questions about literary theory, in connection with my current collaboration with the ecologist, Glenn Adelson. My question for these colleagues was how we might better understand the theoretical implications and potential of this new joint-venture. While I was at it, I also asked for their perspective, as folks well versed in theory, on the sorts of close-reading that are central to my teaching. They

offered a variety of highly interesting and encouraging replies in response to my foggy questions, and I left the table filled with new ideas and good intentions. As we were all saying goodbye and heading off to our classes Jonathan remarked, with characteristic grace, that he always found it best not to apply theories systematically but rather to view them as an array of options to consider when approaching a given work of literature. Pick a theoretical gambit that seemed promising, see where it goes, then abandon it and pick up another when that approach runs out of steam.

I loved this angle but also reflected wryly that it would be hard for me to follow, having essentially no theoretical arsenal at all--regardless of the literary work at hand. In this regard, I remembered my warm sense of kinship with Vice Admiral James Stockdale, the candidate for Vice President on Ross Perot's ticket in 1992. In a nationally televised debate with the other candidates the conversation turned technical after the first round and Stockdale called memorably, "Out of ammo, out of ammo!" But the point I'm trying to make here is that, though I didn't invoke a feminist perspective in framing this discussion, such an insight arose from the class at a perfect time. In the context of Virgil, it deepened our interest in the issues of control, faith, and sponsorship. And when we moved on to works where I had already anticipated talking about farming and gender—such as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the stories of Wendell Berry, and Jane Brox's saga of a failing family farm, *Here and Nowhere Else*, those conversations were now much more readily integrated with our Virgilian framework. Might this effect be called retrospective framing? At any rate, from that meeting onward, a number of our best sessions in that class included a final half hour of speculation that felt wild, totally beyond my own ability to synthesize, and as generative as Cyrene's classic recipe for bugonia. Hanging in there with each other and the book for just a little longer paid off.

The other class I'd like to tell you about was our final session of the Frost seminar. We began by focusing on "The Silken Tent," the single-sentence sonnet that figures prominently in Jay Parini's biography of the poet because of its association both with Frost's wife Elinor and with Kay Morrison. Here's the poem:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
And its supporting central cedar pole,  
That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
By countless silken ties of love and thought  
To everything on earth the compass round,  
And only by one's going slightly taut  
In the capriciousness of summer air  
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

The folks in this seminar really had their chops as readers of poetry by now, and our conversation was a highly satisfying and expansive one. It ranged, in turn, from metrical and musical effects, to themes religious, sexual, and biographical, pausing over the cluster of images relating this sonnet to the process of composing poetry itself. Along the way individuals in the class also helped us all to hear some of the specific echoes this outwardly non-allusive poet so frequently achieves in his poetry. David McCullough recited the opening lines of Herrick's "Whenas in silks my Julia goes," while Kellam Ayres helped us recall Roethke's variant on that theme in his poem "I knew a woman." Katie Retalliata brought in Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which the central cedar pole of Frost's poem has its equivalent in the fixed leg of a compass, as couple inscribes the circle of their love through the experience of separation and return. It was another feast, with numerous chefs companionably at work in a spacious kitchen.

But then, just as we were getting ready to move on to another poem, “Never Again would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” Cliff Gahan and Steve Suomi spoke up. They were both thinking about the passage at the end of *Exodus* when Moses has come down from the mountain with the tablets of the law and Yahweh commands him to build the Tent of Meeting, which would house the Tabernacle and which would both reveal and conceal the presence of God. This was an unexpected tug in one direction, just as the class and the poem seemed to be gently swaying at ease. As at the end of Virgil’s Book IV, it both amplified and complicated the themes we had considered. We were reminded that Frost’s silken art may be a discloser of form, human and divine, but it is also an encloser and a screen. Much of the power of his writing comes from the way in which, after having drawn us in with his limpid verse, he turns away so resolutely at the end from any implications of closure. Whatever the priestly poet may have glimpsed within the tent, our perspective on it remains from without—that’s we get, that’s what we see. That’s what keeps us swaying together instead of lifting the flap one at a time and getting on with our personal projects. In fact, bringing a wide variety of angles to bear on a work of literature can feel like Mrs. Ramsay’s floating “element of joy.” One of the many reasons for celebrating Jim and Dixie’s sustained efforts, over so many years, to bring a greater diversity to the faculty, student-body, and curriculum of Bread Loaf is that it allows for a richer and richer experience of such suspension within the widening concord.

Just as we often emerge from an exciting discussion with no definitive line on the work in question, so too do we depart from Bread Loaf with no particular pedagogy or critical methodology. What we do have is the memory of moments when literature has been the catalyst for the conversations of true community. In one meeting of the Frost seminar we were talking about the word dialogue, and the fact that it derived not from the particle *di*, for double or two,

but from dia, for across--as in a group's dialogue across a table. At this point one of our group's members, Marty McMahon, said, "Yes, and the poetry we discuss is the table." Conversations fostered by literature may be luminous ones, living in us for many years, as Mrs. Ramsay's gift for gathering people together did for Lily Briscoe, as "globed, compacted things over which love lingers and thought plays." But such gifts finally have less to do with attachment to any one place, group, or book than they do with openness to whatever comes next. Upon the conclusion of this Commencement ceremony we won't be marching down off the mountain in lock step, but we may still take a certain recognizable sway with us as we saunter away.

Just one final memory, from this Theatre, and I'll close. Every year we are transported by another of Alan MacVey's amazing productions, as we were this year by the endlessly thought-provoking Henry IV. The first such production Rita and I ever saw here was the 1980 staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So much about it was wonderful, but the moment that returns to mind now was its aftermath. After Puck's epilogue the audience still held together speechlessly in that circle of enchantment, when our eyes were suddenly drawn out onto the west lawn--where this present group will soon be exchanging farewells. That's where the fairies were scampering or floating away with their candles, toward the dark line of trees. It was a moment of breath-taking beauty, and I can still remember how long the audience remained looking into that mysterious and scattershot constellation toward which the whole play had moved. But when Rita and I finally made it to our car for the drive home to Bristol, we saw swirls of fireflies in the brushy fields on either side of Route 116. Bread Loaf's greatest gift may be an enhanced receptivity to the unexpected weathers and concords of an enlarged world.

Thank you.

