

Bryan Conover

Commencement Speech: Draft

11/29/11

Draft

I would like to start with a quote from Marcel Proust's novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. The passage I will read is taken from the start of the sixth volume. At the time, the narrator is in love with a woman named Albertine. His love is fueled by a painful jealousy, which inspires him to bring Albertine to Paris and have her live with him. In their time together, the narrator comes to believe that, despite his jealousy, he must separate from Albertine in order to fulfill his potential as an author, and he imagines different schemes that would allow him to do so. Despite his plans, Albertine leaves unexpectedly and of her own accord. The narrator's response is as follows:

'Mademoiselle Albertine has gone!' How much further does anguish penetrate in psychology than psychology itself! A moment before, in the process of analyzing myself, I had believed that this separation... was precisely what I had wished, and... I had felt that I was being subtle, had concluded that I no longer wished to see her, that I no longer loved her. But now these words: 'Mademoiselle Albertine has gone,' produced in my heart an anguish such that I felt I could not endure it much longer. So what I had believed to be nothing to me was simply my entire life. How ignorant one is of oneself.

We have been told since we were freshmen that the experience of going to Bennington College will be as productive as we make it. The academic structure of this school is built upon the idea that education belongs to the individual and it is designed to prevent passivity. The

classes we have chosen, the reflection papers we have written, and the plan meetings we have survived all attest to the control we have had over our academic endeavors. The student's role in shaping his or her own education is remarkable, and it is part of a larger system designed to mould all aspects of the college experience to fit the necessities of each individual. We have been encouraged to use the housing process to find the living situation best suited to us, and to use the size of the school to engage with our peers in a way that is comfortable for us.

The Bennington experience, like all college experiences, is fundamentally preparatory. In the past four years I have tried to use the opportunities available to direct my life in accordance with my aspirations. The future has been, and continues to be, a source of anxiety. As my senior year moved along, I began to feel similar to how I remember feeling freshman year. This campus and the people on it seemed strange and monumental again. It reminded me of the frailty of self-conception and the importance of environment in all things. Four years can be a long time. I would like to think I understand the significance of my time here, but I know that is impossible. I am wary of the Proustian revelation where in something's absence I am to realize "what I had believed to be nothing to me was simply my entire life." Bennington has changed for each of us as we have changed, and when anything comes to its close, it can be easy to overlook the value of what is being left, or what is leaving.

Graduation challenges us to assess our time at Bennington without the comfort of being here. The habits that have allowed us to live and work at this school will be tested elsewhere. It will be hard for me to measure the worth of my Bennington education. I generally find it difficult to determine the precise significance of my experiences, and I often struggle with arranging my memories according to logical value. Time that has passed exists differently in my mind than what it corresponds to, and the complexity of each moment lived prevents me from seeing it

clearly. I know I have grown intellectually in the past four years, but questions regarding the purpose and value of this time are not easy to answer.

As a freshman I had difficulty at Bennington. In an essay from his *Adventurer* series, Samuel Johnson writes of scholarship: “It is difficult to imagine with what obstinacy truths which one mind perceives almost by intuition will be rejected by another; and how many artifices must be practiced to procure admission for the most evident propositions into understandings.” He is referring to the necessity for communication; ideas are not useful unless they can be shared. Freshman year I had trouble expressing my ideas in class conversations. I was intimidated by the intellectual culture at this school and leaned on my written work for my contributions.

In terms of literature, to become a better speaker I had to become a better reader. When someone shares his thoughts on a text he allows his reading of the text to be challenged. I had to become more confident in my interpretations so that I could learn how to defend them. The way to do this was to become a more demanding reader. The literature faculty helped me come to see reading as an art in itself. I have had the pleasure of reading beautiful things under the guidance of intelligent and generous people. My professors demanded that reading be more than academic work or pleasure; it needed to be personal. We have to read literature as if we are reading ourselves. I believe this idea translates into other art forms and disciplines. If what we create is to be authentic or what we think is to be true, it has to be rooted in what is personal.

History is, of course, important and I have been able to explore it here, but it should not overshadow what we have lived ourselves. The merit of intellectual or artistic work is not dependent on its placement within a movement or school of thought. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, widely considered to be the first English novel, was published in 1719. In 1759

Lawrence Sterne published *Tristram Shandy*, a novel more similar in composition to the modern and postmodern novels that arrived hundreds of years later than to those of its own time. Only forty years separate the origin of the English novel from the revelation of its foreseeable limits. Tens of thousands of years separate the work of Pablo Picasso from that of the ancient cave painters, but we can still see remarkable similarities between them. What strength do names have against the workings of time? Ideas have been repeated throughout history but in different ways. Artistic merit is not measured according to a work's similarities with others, but to a work's specific beauty.

When I read I connect literature to memory. The struggle to find meaning in a novel is not that different than the struggle to find meaning in the past. There is no universal means of interpreting experience; it is always relative to the individual. Each individual is continuously abstracted from past experiences by the gradations of time. When I try to determine the significance of an event in my life I inevitably attempt to pin it down with logic, and my conclusion, if I arrive at one, seems hollow. I have had similar results when trying to identify morality in people. If nothing else, the variety of actions we perform and the myriad ways that others see them suggest that we live without any explicit guide to help us.

What I have learned in my time here has led me to believe that the lack of distinguishable reasons for an action to occur does not invalidate what is sensed or felt of the action. Obscurity cannot always be avoided. I think that just as art is rooted in the personal, so is desire, motivation, and even morality. Moral obligations, though often unexplainable, can be felt in the heart. If we were not able to feel them we would not care that they are problematic. The desire to fulfill our perceived obligations is similar to the desire to make a work of art: they both seek a

form of self-definition; one through relationships, the other through representation. Either way of defining oneself is tied to the individual's past.

The events that impact us the most never truly end; they merely become imperceptible to us by altering our direction and distorting the past. There is a truth in poignant memories that speaks more to who people are than intellectual truth can. The truth attainable through memory is connected to the imprints that have been made upon someone and is therefore something of immense personal value. I know I am not alone in feeling that I will be leaving part of myself behind when I leave Bennington, but I also feel that I will be able to understand my time here differently, even more comprehensibly, once I am gone. Returning to Proust, I do not think we will have a shocking revelation of Bennington's importance upon our departure. Proust's narrator has suddenly been abandoned by the woman he loves; he loses the only person capable of comforting him and the pleasures he enjoyed with her. As we leave school, we leave a structure that brought us closer to what we do not know. We have all completed a liberal arts education, but, more importantly, we have all had to read what is only understandable to each of us, what is inside our hearts. The pleasures of this experience are alien to the temporal fixity of erotic pleasures. I like to think that the last thought of the narrator, "How ignorant one is of oneself," is the first thought in the Bennington education.

Our perception of Bennington will surely heighten in absence, but if we have used our time productively the loss we feel will be outweighed by the sense of what remains. We have lived and worked with beautiful ideas that will remain with us for a long time. Towards the end of *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator, contemplating the importance of past experience, comes to the conclusion; "the only true paradises are the ones we have lost." I think that this is a better representation of the transition we will go through. Our departure from Bennington will allow

our memories to breath new life into the time we spent here. Although we are leaving the school now, we will never be able to separate ourselves from its influence, or ignore the life it will have in our minds. Thank you.