David Ferry

It was in the fall of 1964, I think, that I was privileged to listen to what David Ferry had to tell me about "The Late Eighteenth Century." This was not, generally, an eagerly elected class; the names Samuel Johnson, William Collins, Thomas Gray, Edward Gibbon would not come readily to the mind of someone drawing up a list for a contemporary reading group. But Mr. Garis was my adviser, and he told me that David Ferry was a great teacher—and Garis was right.

Ferry would come into class with long strides and with his frame tipped slightly backward, then settle quickly into the lecturer's chair and begin to talk. When he pointed out the vowel music of Collins's poem "To Evening" ("If aught of oaten stop, or pastoral song / Could hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear"), he stretched out his left hand and tapped the surface of the desk with the pads of his long fingers, as if to feel the vowels. Vowels are one of the parts of the music of poetry, and in his view, it is the music of poetry that makes us love it.

He showed that to the music of poetry when he translated Virgil's Georgics, a long poem ostensibly about the life of the soil that mixes appreciation of hard work, sympathy with suffering, and admiration of those who strive to stand up again. Those who work the soil know better than others how temperamental the gods can be and also how temperamental nature can be. They know both floods and windstorms, and they know also that political changes resemble those floods and windstorms. They know that the passage of time is a slow destroyer, because that beloved fiery horse will inevitably get old. In this acceptance of disappointment, they are sometimes akin to "the old frogs in the mud [who] croak out their song / Of their ancient grievances." But those of the soil know some other thing, too. They know how to be clever in devising new tools for their work, and they also know hope. Above all, alliance with nature has taught them to be patient, because, the deep recesses of time, nature has shown herself to be reliable: "Parnassus's laurel begins / A little thing in the great shade of its mother," or "Sometimes, amazing to say it, when you cut open/ The rotting stump of an old dead olive tree / Lo and behold, a new young olive root/ Has thrust its way forth."

Ferry's translation of the Georgics is a great balm for the reader who harkens to its music, as Ferry taught us to do. In moving from what is happy to what is to be mourned and then to what can only be endured, it is a song of appreciation and sympathy and comfort. Ferry lived to the age of 99. Somewhere in his long life, he learned the right pitch for Virgil's great poem. In 1992, he gave a poetry reading at the University of North Carolina, and listening to him speak with his self-effacing quiet, I thought, "Here is a poet that Virgil must be happy to have had as his translator," for Ferry understood what it was to "soothe the modest ear" in pastoral song.