

*Osborne Bennett Hardison, Jr.*  
1928–1990

O. B. Hardison, University Professor at Georgetown, former director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, and recent president of the Renaissance Society of America (1988–89) died of a cancer-related blood clot on August 5 at Georgetown University Hospital. For those who knew him, the acute initial shock at his sudden death has not yet fully given way to the more familiar permanent ache. O. B., as everyone called him, seemed younger than his sixty-one years. He retained a youthful clarity of vision and intense interest and curiosity, and he saw beyond accustomed categories and stereotypes. In the most recent of his fourteen books, *Disappearing Through the Skylight*, he sees “nature, history, language, and art [as] parts of a wonderfully intricate mobile: touch one and the rest tremble and change position in sympathy.” Poet, prosodist, literary and cultural critic, humanist, and technophile, O. B. was certifiably entitled to the overworked and usually misapplied term “Renaissance man.”

Professor Hardison’s specific contributions to the English and continental Renaissance range from *The Enduring Monument: Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (1962), an examination of classical and Christian influences on Renaissance lyrics, to *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance* (1989). In these books, in studies of Renaissance literary criticism, and in numerous essays, on Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Milton, one senses reserves of learning behind his arguments, which often seem to turn of their own weight, without being pushed.

Hardison’s natural courtesy, his gracious and tolerant humanity, and his *sprezzatura* made him at home in the Renaissance. His first book’s subtitle connects with one of his favorite passages in Sidney’s *Apologie*, which insists that the fruit of learning “is not *Gnosis*, but *Praxis*.” As head of the Folger from 1969–1983, he reminded us that the purpose of publication is to make public, by transforming that once isolated landmark into a lively treasure-house and cultural center accessible to the community of Washington and to a far-flung community of scholars. During his tenure at the Folger, Hardison established a number of auxiliary organizations that continue to thrive: these include the Folger Institute of Renaissance and

Eighteenth Century Studies, a cooperative enterprise combining the educational resources of the Library and twenty-eight universities; the Folger Theatre Group; the Folger Consort; a popular regular poetry series; a docent program; and a series of public programs for area schools. Hardison brought the *Shakespeare Quarterly* to the Folger, and he oversaw the expansion and physical plant improvement of the library. He also became adept at fund-raising. The library's annual income increased from about twenty thousand dollars to more than one million dollars, and he left the institution with an endowment of more than fifty million dollars.

From 1983 until his death, O. B. Hardison was a working member of the English Department at Georgetown University. We who were lucky enough to be his colleagues remember his thorough preparation and generosity in tenure and promotion meetings as well as his cheerful acceptance of committee assignments. (One busy afternoon early in the semester, eager, oblivious freshmen waited in line to add into sections of the introductory English course; the volunteers handling the sign-up sheet that hour were Anthony Hecht, Louis Martz, and O. B. Hardison.) One might think that only those colleagues and students ignorant of O. B. Hardison's achievements—like the freshmen that afternoon—could fail to be intimidated by him. Yet that wasn't the case. Somehow when you were with him you thought less about nouns (the lists of publications, honorary doctorates, association presidencies, the O. B. E., the medals) than about verbs, which better registered his transformative powers. O. B. Hardison lived in the past, the present, and in what is to come. Perhaps it is that ability to achieve temporal concordance that makes him seem to be still with us.