

The Vessels of His Meaning

by David R. Slavitt

"There is nothing so likely to hand down your name as a poem: all other monuments are frail and fading."

—Pliny the Younger

Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance

by O.B. Hardison

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 360 pp., \$42.50

To say that O.B. Hardison, Jr., who died last August at the age of 61, was a poet is in some respects to diminish his memory. "Poet" has become a hollow accolade, a label with an honorific charge that is not unrelated to the disesteem in which most poets are actually held in a society that distrusts and resents poets and has little patience for what they do. Poetry is often demanding, after all, and it requires on the part of its audience a degree of attention and cultivation for which Jacobin egalitarianism has neither capacity nor patience. But in a larger and less polemical way, there is a sense in which that grandiose label is stylistically confining, suggesting—let us admit—a degree of withdrawal from the great issues of the culture. Poets sit on the sidelines, scribbling and entertaining themselves, while the important work of the culture goes on, strenuously elsewhere.

It was not always thus. There is another model, the all but forgotten idea of the poet who, like Chaucer or Raleigh, could be involved in affairs of state, active in exploration and military adventure and, as a paragon, tossing off a poem now and then. There have been poet-diplomats in our time, too—St. John Perse, Octavio Paz, and Basil Bunting come immediately to mind.

O.B. Hardison was a poet, then, in the strict and neutral meaning of the term—he published two collections, *Lyrics and Elegies* in 1958, a part of the Scribner's "Poets of Today" Series, and *Pro Musica Antiqua* (L.S.U. Press, 1977). One might regret that there wasn't more poetry, that there



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weren't more pages and volumes of his suave, elegant, witty, but often deeply felt and abruptly moving work, but that would be sentimentalizing and would get the shape of Hardison's career wrong. I was at a center for scholars and artists not so long ago, where there were a couple of poets in residence, and it struck me as off and, finally, unhealthy that writing poetry was all they did. They woke up each morning, consulted their mood, and played with their impressions, thoughts, and feelings, as if these were thermometers by which the temperature of the world itself was to be determined—and as if the world was either an invalid or at least something of a hypochondriac.

That is finally silly and not what Hardison did. Quite the reverse, actually. His engagement with the world, as a scholar and as an administrator (notably of the Folger Shakespeare Library),

but primarily as a thinker, was too burly and energetic to be comprehended by the usual limp suggestion that the word "poet" carries. His poems were a part of his larger work and of a piece with it. To get some sense of how this is so, we might consider one of his early pieces, from the 1958 collection, a poem called "Bernini's Colonnade." It comes with a note that tells us,

Each arm of Bernini's colonnade before St. Peter's is composed of three parallel rows of columns. The two arms are laid out along the circumference of an ellipse, and the columns are placed behind one another on lines drawn from the foci of the ellipse. Thus, if one stands at the north focus, he has the illusion that the north colonnade has only one row of columns; but if he turns, he sees all three rows of columns in the south colonnade. Conversely, if he stands at the south focus, the south colonnade seems 'simple,' while the three rows of columns in the north colonnade are visible. This arrangement forms the basic image of the poem: to me, it suggests the relativity of truth as we know it.

My guess is that, later on, he might have suppressed the explanatory last sentence with its suggestion that the poem itself makes abundantly clear. And if we are in the explaining mood, I suppose I ought to make it plain that I advert to this particular piece not because it is necessarily Hardison's best but because I find it peculiarly characteristic. It begins:

This great ellipse contains two
jarring centers
From each of which one
colonnade is pure,
Its other, further twin, irrational,
Making the form a tension,

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no idea.
 Here, where I stand upon the
 artist's point
 (That's reason) watching the
 frigid north
 And world's epistle side, what's
 faith to me
 But art to see a single curving
 row
 Of pillars close the mental
 hemisphere;
 What's faith, that is, but our
 perimeter
 Of something
 transcendental . . .

Some of this density of hypotactic elaboration is not altogether Hardison's own but belongs to that baroque moment of the 50's when James Merrill and Richard Wilbur were astonishing us all with "The Black Swan" and "Ceremony." It is the intellectual play of which the syntax is a mimesis, the conjuring of the architectural, mathematical, and religious monument into another dimension, that seems to me to carry Hardison's own signature. The dazzle of the flights of fancy and insight in *Entering the Maze* (Oxford University Press, 1981) and *Disappearing Through the Skylight* (Viking, 1989) is already established here as the domain—or demesne—of his fancy.

The brilliant first chapter of *Entering the Maze* that considers the philosophical claims of the architecture of Washington, D.C., is figured here, and if some of the verse later on in the piece pushes too hard and tries too strenuously for its effects, that is, in a young man's work, an admirable fault. Later, in *Pro Musica Antiqua*, Hardi-

son was able to look at a mathematical subject (as how few poets would even dare to do) and quite breezily suggest:

Pythagoras knew the world is
 symbols.
 Knew beans are evil.
 Knew (as all lovers know) sheets
 after sleeping must be
 smoothed.
 Measured the trembling of
 those strings
 That tie the mind to the sky
 In halves and demi-halves until it
 sings.

Never pick up what has fallen
 (pass it by).
 Leave no mark on the ashes
 (you will not return).
 Taste only bread that is shared.
 And never, O never, look in a
 lighted mirror:
 Those eyes will dazzle;
 You will die in that radiant net
 if you come nearer.

The square of two arms on fire
 Forms the hypotenuse of desire:
 Become through others.
 Never eat your heart (you were
 made for pleasure),
 Or let swallows nest on your
 roof,
 Or being infinite, accept a
 measure.

It is a breathtakingly assured piece, a playful brooding on mensurability and harmony and their moral and spiritual dimensions and limitations. It is what the thinker of "Bernini's Colonnade" might have figured out, but it goes far

beyond the early work in its grace and *légèreté*.

The sense of fun and even giddiness of the extravagantly wrought turn is part of Hardison's personal treasure, and he could do the Wallace Stevens kind of capriole without ever seeming *précieux*, for, as with the best of Stevens, there is a touch of sadness to his ebullience, a minor interval in the harmony. Thus, in "In the Palazzo of Pellucid":

Wherever he walked they talked
 in whispers
 For his words were goblets of
 finest crystal
 Each engraved with his initial,
 the famous crested P.
 They were vessels of the wine
 of his meaning
 Subtle vintages of red and white
 Laid down from the good years
 of Pellucid. . . .

Stevens, in Hartford, imagined an elsewhere, a fanciful Guatemala or lush Key West, from which vantage points the dreary Connecticut city of small arms manufacture, actuarial tables, and the pettiness of state politics seemed reduced and amusing. Hardison is able to suggest distance in other, more taxing ways (which Stevens does, too, at his best). The end of the poem is much less blithe than what we might have expected:

You, too, know Pellucid, passed
 by his house last night,
 Heard the resplendent agonizing
 cry of strings,
 Moved forward, moved by that
 thought,
 Into the shadow of his
 desolation.
 Still he paces the floor, waiting,
 Knowing duty and the tears of
 things:
 Carthage to be destroyed, pieties
 served.
 Also humble things:
 The gods of threshold and of
 hearth
 To be honored in a dark time.

Days he walks in the gallery.
 Night in another place, always
 playing.
 Ignorant neighbors say,
 "Pellucid is playing.

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He lives next door to Walter R. Clydesdale III."

The authority of that last surprising move, the gloominess and sharpness of the joke, is characteristic of Hardison's poise in the work of his maturity. He had a sure instinct and a remarkable ear, as keen as that of any poet I know. It was this otic acuity that informed and enlivened what may be his most important scholarly work, *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance*. The syncretic work he'd done in *Maze* and *Skylight* was much flashier and deserved the attention it received, but this more narrowly focused book on metrics and the development of blank verse in English is magisterial, original, and, I believe, will shape all discussion about the heartbeat of English poetry for as long as anyone cares to attend to such a subject.

The subject is the sources of a metrical tradition that was both rhetorical and syntactical, and with an erudition and a delicacy that are each rare and much rarer in combination, Hardison charts a path through a very dark thicket indeed. There are close readings of Gavin Douglas's and the Earl of Surrey's 16th-century Englishings of the *Aeneid* and of Jasper Heywood's versions of Seneca, and Hardison demonstrates persuasively how, at the moment of its invention, blank verse was a rich and complex system that could be read and heard either quantitatively or accentually. How this system later developed, was misunderstood, forgotten, and then, fundamentally, reinvented by Milton is a fascinating story in itself, and it sheds abrupt flashes of light on the poetry of one of the great periods of our literature. Had Hardison written no other book than *Prosody and Purpose*, his contribution and his reputation as one of the great men of our age would be secure. The combination of this book and the more sparsely speculative works (*Maze* and *Skylight*) and the poetry is, in both senses, awesome. He wrote, in the title poem of *Pro Musica Antiqua*, a line that was mentioned at his memorial service: "Having received, enlarge."

His gifts—those gifts we all received from him—were grand but also grandly demanding. And it is right that they should be.



BRIEF MENTIONS

MAPPING THE MORAL DOMAIN: A CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN'S THINKING TO PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND EDUCATION, edited by Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, and Jill McClean Taylor with Betty Bardige
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 324 pp., \$30.00 (cloth), \$12.95 (paper)

This collection of 14 articles exemplifies feminist scholarship at its best and worst. The core of Carol Gilligan's work has been the conviction that men and women are different morally as well as physically. While men, in making moral judgments, tend towards abstractions and rules-of-the-game sorts of arguments, women are more likely to be more personal, more flexible, more interested in concrete effects than in theoretical rules. In her first book, Professor Gilligan took a second look at such male heroes as Mahatma Gandhi and pointed out how badly they treated their family and friends. Women aren't like that, she argued; a woman's first concern is likely to be for family and neighbors. Let the world take care of itself.

Gilligan has offered the best (the only?) argument I know of for female superiority. This is not to say that there are two mutually exclusive modes of moral reasoning, one masculine and the other feminine. Most people, in fact, employ both types of argument, and some women are just as sublimely stupid as modern men—but then again, a liberal woman is a bad woman, while liberal instincts are usually a good sign in a man. The metaphor that Gilligan and her colleagues like to employ is that of the ambiguous figure, which from one angle looks like a couple kissing and from another is seen as two table legs.

In all of this there is a great deal of wisdom. Unfortunately, Gilligan is not content with wisdom and prefers to dress up her insights in the trappings of science and scholarship, when for the most part neither she nor her colleagues have the discipline or background to conduct either sort of research. For all their elaborate statistical apparatus, the fact remains that they are dealing with extremely small samples and that their "data" are based on little more than questionnaires administered and interpreted by themselves. D. Kay Johnston reports on a project in which fables are read to children who are asked to make moral judgments. The results are recorded under impressive headings like "Moral Orientation of Spontaneous Solution for the Dog in the Manger Fable by Gender," but by her own account the whole thing was rigged to begin with. Children are told the story of the porcupine who goes to live with a family of moles, who find they cannot put up with the dangerous quills. When children quite rightly side with the moles they are asked to come up with another, more cooperative answer. Of course they can; children will generally do whatever the nice lady wants them to do. What is worse, the researchers themselves are so morally obtuse they cannot understand that the mole parents are positively obligated, in virtually any moral system, to protect their family. It is a clear case of right and wrong particularly appealing to the more "feminine" style of moral reasoning, but the feminists never seem to get the picture.

Since a science of morality is probably a hopeless undertaking, Gilligan *et al.* might have concentrated more on historical and literary examples. But here the Harvard education shows. Gilligan devotes considerable attention to the Dido and Aeneas story, but knowing neither Latin nor literary history, she turns to incompetent feminist "classicists" (e.g., M. Skinner), even though there is a wealth of serious and first-rate writing on virtually every aspect of the *Aeneid*. The problem is, none of it has been done by feminists, and here we touch upon the heart of the matter. Women's studies and black studies and Chicano studies are all little universes protected from the standards that should be applied in serious academic disciplines. In another field, an intelligent woman like Carol Gilligan might not so easily get away with the sloppy and inadequate research that is displayed in this volume, and even thirty years ago she would have been forced, if only by competition with men, to have left a deeper and more enduring mark upon ethics and psychology. As it is, she is degenerating into a celebrity and has already experienced the humiliation of a profile in the *New York Times Magazine*.

—Thomas Fleming