

## Giving the Dead Their Living Voices: On Writing Biography

Remarks by **Paul Mariani**  
Professor of English,  
Boston College

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE  
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS  
November 19, 2008

Well, friends, we're going to be talking today about 40 years of writing. The Hopkins biography, which just came out this month from Viking Press, is the fifth of five biographies I've published. Four American poets and now Gerard Hopkins. William Carlos Williams was the first in 1981, followed by John Berryman in 1990. Then Robert Lowell, followed by Hart Crane in 1999. And now my oldest love, going back to my first book, which was my dissertation heavily revised into *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, which Cornell University Press brought out in early 1970.

But that was the age of the New Criticism, when one looked at the text rather than at the life. For myself, I've always been fascinated by the correlation between the writing and the life responsible for writing the poetry or the fiction, and early on I promised myself that I would come back to Hopkins and do a full fledged biography of the man. He's had, I think, the deepest and most profound impact on my own life. I don't mean just as a poet, but as a presence, as a Jesuit presence. It's, in fact, one of the most profound

*\*\* Do not cite without author's permission \*\**

One of the major turning points for me in terms of finally coming to write this biography was a 30-day Jesuit retreat I made at Eastern Point (Gloucester ) back in January and February of 2000. It's funny how these things come about, but I'd been asked by an editor at Viking to write about the Thirty Day experience from the perspective of the layman. There were many, many books by spiritu0 0 1 8.p( )-10(md-20(i)17(r)-2(e)3( )3(e)-22(o))-7(s)8(p)9(t)-20(k)19( )-



For example, the last biography written of Hopkins was written by an avowed atheist who has been fascinated by Hopkins as long as I have. I mean Norman White, who taught at Hopkins's old school, University College, Dublin. I remember him beginning an essay by saying something like, Face it: Hopkins is dead. They planted his body in Glasnevin Cemetery and we don't even know where he is any more, because the site is one common burial ground, with no individual crosses or anything. He's just dead. To begin that way is to present a rather dark perspective of Hopkins. For me, on the other hand, Hopkins is very much alive. He even seemed to be with me at moments there at Eastern Point. So, the two biographies offer a very different take on Hopkins. What I wanted to do

such a place on such and such a date, died on such and such a date, taught at such and such a place, did this, did that, and is well known for the 26 books that he or she published. That kind of thing. But that won't give you the living, breathing interior life that the biographer—if he or she is going to be successful—has to give you. It's risky, such an approach, but that's what the stakes are.

I tried to do that with every one of my five biographies, and each brought me to a different place. Why did I begin with Williams? In part, I see, because my mother's family was from New Jersey, in fact, from around Paterson. So, here I am, going for my Ph.D. and writing my dissertation on Hopkins. And one day I walk into a bookstore near Queens College and I see a book called *Paterson*. And I think, who the hell would write an epic poem about Paterson, where my grandmother used to work in the silk mills along the falls there, and where my mother grew up.

So, I pick the book up and of course I don't understand it. It's a complex book, but it fascinates me. So, I keep going back to it over the years, and back to William Carlos Williams. And so, when I start teaching at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst back in 1968, I have a Ph.D. in Victorian Literature, and I think I'm going to be teaching Victorian Literature for the next forty years, although what I really want to teach is Modern Poetry. The thing is, I'd been advised not to try and get a degree in Modern Lit. Everybody wanted Modern Lit, so I went back to so go back to the Victorians.

So, here I am at U Mass and the first thing the department says to me is, *we'd like you to come here, but we already have someone doing Victorian*. So, would you mind teaching (you don't get this kind of a chance anymore) Modern Poetry? And I said, *mind?! Oh, please*

don't throw me into the briar patch. I could hardly wait to teach the Moderns, and so that change in teaching assignment (I would have that summer to prepare) gave me the chance to go back to William Carlos Williams. And of course Pound and Eliot and Stevens and Crane.

I remember a very nice teacher, a British woman, saying to me early on, *Paul, we like you here and we understand that you want to do a book on William Carlos Williams. I wish you'd rethink that. He's really a minor poet and you don't want to go in that direction, not if you're hoping for tenure here. Think of Eliot or somebody like that.* Well, that's all you had to do was challenge me like that. And that only stiffened my resolve to write the book and try to put Williams on the map. And that's just what I tried to do. Richard Ellmann had already had a profound impact on me – his biography of James Joyce, in particular, and then the one on Oscar Wilde. And here was this epic-sized biography of Joyce, one of my favorites, and I thought. Wow! That's what I want to do for Williams. Which explains why the book is so big.

And then you spend ten years on it, with a little Corona typewriter that your wife lends you, and you've got these little 3 x 5 cards, hundreds and hundreds of them and you're typing and typing and typing. And you do this year after year instead of watching television or visiting the still vex'd Bermudas, and then you're spending weeks in the special collections

*\*\* Do not cite without author's permission \*\**

But what fun it all is, reassembling all this dust into a living figure. Detective work of a very real order. And then after a while, at Yale, for example, Donald Gallup, who head curator down there, says to you one day, *Yes, this is what we have*, and then, once he gets to trust you, he tells you,

*Willie?* It was almost like the next sentence was going to be, *Why don't you write a book about me?* So seventy years had failed to change her. So here was the woman who had rejected Williams to become engaged to his big, handsome younger brother, the artist. In time that relationship also went sour, and she married a minor New York litterateur, and Bill Williams married Charlotte's sister, Flossie, and they were together for fifty years, and there's a really wonderful, complex love story there.

Finally, I told Doc Williams Jr. that I'd learned from the curator at Buffalo that there were these letters which had once been at Buffalo, which Floss had demanded be returned because they were too personal. And they had been. So I asked Doc Williams if I co



*\*\* Do not cite without author's permission \*\**

So, Having those letters of course made all the difference, because when Williams had a breakdown in 1953 during the McCarthy/ Army hearings, and Williams was accused of being a communist and all of that, he suffered a nervous breakdown, and along with the debilitating stroke he had already suffered, was sent away to get electric shock treatment. So, all of this was new information was made available to me, and it gave a whole new dimension to Williams's complex, suffering humanity. With Berryman it was something of the same. I had to go out to Minneapolis, and worked for months on the manuscript collection there at the University of Minnesota, and Berryman's wife, Kate, was living right there in town, about a

And then I saw Fr. Pat Samway, another Jesuit, at the back of the auditorium talking to Flannery O'Connor's cousin, who apparently had authority over Flannery's papers, looking like a character out of one of Flannery's stories, with a rather comic flower hat and all, and she's demanding to know where that young man went off to? He wasn't going to publish that story, if she could help it. And Fr. Samway's saying, look, we're all professionals here, and he has every right to it to publish his findings, and she's saying, I'll stop it, I'll stop it, and maybe she did. And I said to myself, I'm not going into that hornet's nest, I guess, after all.

There are certain things that happen in the world of biography, when you say to yourself, it's not worth five years of my life doing that biography. Sort of like what happened when Ian Hamilton tried to write a biography of the reclusive author of *Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger. Now, Hamilton worked and worked on that life and finally got nowhere. And even when he had permission to use the Salinger papers which the University of Texas had purchased, and had what he thought was an O.K. from Salinger, and the biography was finally in galleys, Salinger's lawyer insisted he could not quote from those letters. So then, he paraphrased the material and had it reprinted, and again he's told that he'll be sued if he tries to publish the life. He was stymied, so what he finally did was write a book called *In Search of J.D. Salinger*. That was the closest he could come. After that, he swore he would never write a biography of another living writer.

When I was writing the life of Robert Lowell (which Hamilton had also done) I went up to Lowell's and his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick's apartment on West 67<sup>th</sup>. And I go there with fear and trembling, knowing she hates biographers. Still, I've got to talk to her. And there she is, in her apartment, watching the tennis matches on TV while I try to interview her. Still, she was very helpful. She called me a number of times and asked if I could help her

with this or that, and I did what I could. And then, when the book was published, I found out that in one of the New York papers, she'd said that Mariani was just an idiot, and the reporter said, you're calling Mariani an idiot? And she said, well, no, he's not really an idiot, but he's a workaholic. And, besides, he shouldn't have written this biography. Too often, it seems, you just can't win.

Hart Crane, of course, was a fascinating study. One of the things it meant was learning more what New York City, especially Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights were like in the 1920s. It meant walking the Brooklyn Bridge and the length of the East River, especially as the last of Crane's associates had just died at the age of 100. Which is both a blessing and a curse. You talk to five or six people, as was especially true with the Williams biography, and you get five or six different stories. And it's not like you can reconcile them. Somehow you have to take one story and not another, which brings us to the question of the unreliable narrator.

A final story, which brings us back to Hopkins. In the biographies of Hopkins, they've always made him more eccentric than he really was, I think. So you ask, What's happening here? Well, Father Schlatter, an 80-year-old Jesuit of the old school, out there in Gonzaga, did us a real service. He started studying the documents to see if there was some kind of source that was creating these debunking

it was time there for the Irish to have Home Rule. He was unhappy with what he saw in Ireland and that there seemed no recourse but to grant the Irish their independence.

But this particular Jesuit started telling stories about Hopkins, essentially being an eccentric and the rest of it. And his stories about Hopkins got into the life, so that what we had to do was erase them like some virus that attacks your computer. And so I had to go through the files and get rid of those stories that Schlatter had shown were suspect, and why, and what you get is a whole different portrait of Hopkins: less eccentric and more stable. It's like a study in blue or green and somebody puts in a red here and there, so that you can still recognize the picture, but you have to carefully take out all of that alien red to get back to the original portrait.