

# Giving the Dead Their Living Voices: On Writing Biography

A Conversation with Paul Mariani

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OWENS: So, one of the things that has struck me about the subjects of your biographies in the past – William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Robert Lowell, Hopkins and Berryman – is that most, if not all of them, suffered from depression of some sort. Is that a poetic license of sorts? Is that an affliction that poets deal with more than other people? In your biographical work, how do you see the relationship between depression and creativity?

MARIANI: What I think happens is that those who are creative and also are prone to manic depression find in poetry or writing or art or music a way of stabilizing that. It becomes a help for them, and it evens out the effects of some of their highs and lows. There are levels of manic depression, some more severe than others. Lowell, of the five that I've done, suffered the most the highest manic episodes and the lowest depressions. Once he underwent medical treatment, he would struggle courageously to get out from under the depression, and that's when a lot of the poetry came to be written. It was a way of stabilizing himself by profoundly searching himself. If you were to put it into spiritual terms, it was a kind of kenosis or emptying of the self and then trying to fill that void with something larger than one's self-preoccupations.

For a time in the 1940s, Lowell was a convert and then had – after his divorce – left the church, and a kind of existential nihilism came to take its place, so that his vision of the world and of the self got darker and darker. Poetry served as his mainstay. If he couldn't have religion, at least he had poetry and could shape an inner order for himself. This is what he tried to do over and over again, including writing a book of blank verse sonnets modestly called *History*. In it he asks: how do I shape human history? How do I shape it from a perspective which seems true to my own experience? It's a very dark perspective, but there it is.

At least four of the poets I've written about did suffer from manic depression, or what we call now a bipolar disorder. I wonder how many people, though, don't experience some kind of deep depression in their lives. I think we all, at some point, experience a sense of major loss, etc. And there are points where we feel ebullient, too. I'm not saying that that's clinical manic depression, but at least we understand something of what those states are.

OWENS: Does the creativity precede or stem from these periods – the depression and recovery and ebullience that you speak about? Are they tethered together? For

me, to the extent that I've felt those emotions, it hasn't resulted in an extraordinary flourishing of my own creative work.

MARIANI: That's well put. What I'm talking about here are writers. The urgency of creativity has to be there. In each case, of course, these were writers before the onslaught or the visible onslaught of manic depression episodes. Lowell was already writing for a number of years before he suffered his first manic depressive bout, and I think that's true of all of these. Hopkins speaks of melancholic fits. Hart Crane and Berryman of being in hell and part way back. The thing is, they ask, is this: how can I use this ordering of words to order a world vertiginously and terrifyingly going out of whack?

I don't know if you're born a writer, but these five were writers before they experienced these manic episodes. Now, a clinical psychologist might say that the manic depression or the bipolarity was there. That it just hadn't manifested itself in a clinically recognizable form yet. I don't know the answer to that. Was it there in some nascent form, perhaps? The thing is that they are poets and identify themselves as poets, and then they have to find a way to deal with their condition in and through their poetry.

OWENS: One of the things that struck me in some of your work is that you have such a thoughtful perspective on the art of biography. It makes me wonder if you – as a religious person and as a biographer – have a trajectory or a tone to your way of seeing? Like colors that work together in a large canvas to present some sort of a coherent or meaningful picture or a feeling or a meaning to a life? Is there in fact coherence to a single life that can be seen only by someone else looking back over that life, when in fact it is the very lack of coherence that constitutes the human condition on a day-to-day basis?

MARIANI: Wow! I think most people have a sense that they're on a journey of some sort, that their life is unfolding into something like a recognizable shape, or so they would hope. That's why stories are so important to us. Everybody wants to tell his or her story, or—if not their own—then the stories of others. Moses, David, Achilles, Ulysses, Julius Caesar, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, Augustine, Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln, Jesse James, Teddy Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, McCain, Obama. We never get tired of stories, do we? And some of the stories are really way out to lunch, like the stories of mass murderers or serial killers or con men or flesh eaters, and then there are other stories that from the outside look as if nothing happened, where it's all an interior drama. Take, for example, the life of Hopkins or Emily Dickinson or Wallace Stevens, where a great deal is happening, but in the interior space of the mind and the heart. On the other hand take Villon or Rimbaud or Hart Crane or Berryman or Dylan Thomas or Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, where much of the drama unfolds out there, on the streets of New York or Paris in the 1920s, or Mexico City in the 1930s, to be set down and recorded. Those poets are living on the edge, and we find their broken, Romantic lives pulling us after them. Most people think of such lives as a kind of journey,

even if a journey over the edge into the abyss. If you lose the sense that life is worth living, if the quotidian becomes a dizzying randomness for you, if it really does devolve like a flushed urinal into chaos, there's a very good chance that you'll go down with it.

OWENS: So, how does this relate to the Beat mentality in terms of a journey in life, a progress, as opposed to serendipity that might not be progressive, that may be instead somehow random?

MARIANI: You know, I'm not so sure that the Beats really did live random lives. If you look at Ginsberg or if you look at Kerouac or if by extension Robert Creeley or if you look at Gary Snyder – I'm not sure which ones you want to go with but – Beat doesn't just mean a kind of empty vacuity. You get that with minor figures, but for them the word is informed with the sense Kerouac gave it: of a kind of beatitude. So, there's a kind of journey implied there, towards Nirvana or some safe haven.

Now, at one level the journey may be that you get in a car with Kerouac and Cassidy and you drive from New York out to the West Coast. When you get out to the West Coast, what can you do but drive back to the East Coast. But I don't think that's the deepest Kerouac. That's certainly not the deepest Ginsberg. There is a sense of a journey, of an unfolding. Now, I can't say specifically or deeply what it is in each of those cases. I would have to spend a lot of time before I felt confident to say what that journey was, but I'll tell you this. In all five cases, in all the biographies that I've done, I have found that there was a journey, a sense of journey. Surely in the directions they saw their poetry unfolding.

The biographer can articulate that. The biographer can stand back. He can see, or she can see, what's happened in 20, 30, 40 years and see a trajectory. Is the trajectory nothing more than a rocket burst in its randomness? I don't think so. Certainly what the poet wants is to be able to write the lines that need to be written, and written with an urgency most people will not understand. But those lines are what give the poet the sense that something significant has been said. Even when Berryman didn't feel as comfortable with his later work as he had with the best of his Dream Songs, he needed something, it was very important that he still be a good teacher, and when he felt he'd lost even that, that's when he ended his life.

So, there has to be a sense that life has meaning – that one's life is moving in a direction towards something. Or that it has arrived, and can bask in the comfort of that. Now, does that mean that the journey is going to move toward some kind of paradise? No. It just means that the journey has in some sense been worth it, or at least that the poet has borne up under the stress of living. That he or she will try to do the best they can with what they've got. If even that begins to really to unravel, then you're really in trouble. I think we all need a sense that, as bad as things are – and I'm talking about alcoholics, cocaine snorters, etc., they have to hope that somehow there's a chance that things can somehow turn around, that innocence can somehow

be glimpsed again. If not tomorrow, then maybe the next day. And if they really lose that, there's a good chance that they'll just call the whole game quits.

OWENS: In your own life and in that of the people you've written about, how important is religion in that process of an unfolding narrative and of thinking that there's a better day ahead?

MARIANI: For them or for me?

OWENS: Whichever you choose. Whichever you want to talk about.

MARIANI: Well, I think that I feel closest to Hopkins. For me, the underlying Christian story or Christian mythos – whatever you wish to call it – is what in fact informs my own life. That means not just because it feels comfortable putting that on as if you could put on a coat, because often, it doesn't feel comfortable at all. But at a certain point – at some crossroads – you find the courage to go on in that direction. You can even try to fake it. But at some point, you either go over or you jerk yourself. I did say yes, Hopkins wrote. I DID say YES.

It's funny because I often wake up and I'll say something to myself, like: suppose I didn't believe in God, then what? But I can't really go there for long. It's too exhausting, too counter-productive. Like holding your breath while there's a sea of fresh air all around you to sustain you. I'm so deep-wired at this point that I say, well, going in that direction is ridiculous. What am I wasting time for? Let's get on with it. It would be like deciding for the hell of it not to love my grandchildren today. You can try it for a little while, but you know it's a game. Then you come back to the fact that they need to be fed. Or that they might hurt themselves. Or they need advice or comfort, or someone to hold their hand as they cross the street. They need clothes, food, a comforting word, whatever. And so you go back to that pattern of concern and love, and that pattern just becomes deeper and deeper.

There are a lot of people that keep saying, I do believe, I don't, I do, I don't. They can't make up their minds, and at a certain point, I get impatient with that. At some point you say, okay, look, you've been having an argument back and forth about the existence of God. Well, what about your own meager existence? Let's say yes or no to the question and then get on with our lives. For me, the subsequent trip after the honeymoon yes is what has become so very exciting. So, I've said yes, now where do we go from here? Now, let's get on with the day-by-day, the service, the work of feeding the hungry whether by feeding their stomachs or feeding their minds and souls. It means St. Ignatius writing 50,000 letters at the end of his life while he was in his room next to the Gesù there in Rome, or Hopkins teaching elementary Greek to hundreds of students who couldn't care less about what he had to teach them. Your job is to do the work.

At some point you look back and you say, where's it all going? At least in Hopkins' case and in my case and in Berryman's case, a sense of consolation that

it's working out. And that consolation can come at the oddest moment, in the middle of the night, say, or at four in the morning, And it's that which keeps you going.

OWENS: Which came first in your case? Writing poetry or writing about poets?

MARIANI: Well, I wrote a couple of early poems when I was 16 years old. I wanted to win \$10 from the nuns up in Beacon, New York, when I was studying to be a priest. I had a great year in Beacon with the Marianists. And I won that \$10 and I had to go to some English text with a blue cover to unlock the secrets of how to write a poem because nobody there could teach me. And I'd write a poem now and then, but when I got to college, I knew I'd have to make a living, and so the practical aspects came in. So I said to myself, maybe I can teach what I love. So, for years, I just did the critical work while the credits and experience amassed.

Then in my mid-30s I said, if I'm ever going to participate in the actual creation of poems I have to start. I've already lost too much valuable time. Then there was Giovanni Giudici, the Milanese poet. He was staying at my house for a couple of days as my guest while lecturing at the University of Massachusetts, and I showed him some poems that I had in a sheaf in my desk. I hadn't published anything, and he said to me – I'll never forget – he said, Paolo, it is time for you to leave off being an altar boy and to enter into the abode of the high priest. That's what he said, *High Priest*. What a great phrase: so Romantic, so Italian. But it worked its charm on me. It was time to start talking about other people's poetry, and write it myself. Instead of watching the dance from the sidelines, to get out there on the dance floor myself.

OWENS: What are the key themes in your own poetry?

MARIANI: I think all poets have to deal with loss, evanescence, the Heraclitean impermanence of things. You try to hold onto something. And one way of holding onto it is to write about it. Otherwise, it's gone. This is why people keep journals, etc. So there's that: the theme of loss, and the attempt to recover something from that wake. There's also a sense of blessedness, I think, as I've gotten older, a sense of looking at what I've been given. To stop and look at the things around you. A beautiful wife. Kids and grandkids. Friends. And to write about these in the celebratory mode. So, then, there's the elegiac mode and the celebratory mode. Family's very important. In America, I think the theme of the family is absolutely central. I think of all the great dramas – *Long Days Journey Into Night*, which is my favorite, by Eugene O'Neill or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. These are two of my favorites. They're about the tragedy of the family, about the wish that things might be otherwise. Also *The Godfather*, another tale about a dysfunctional family that destroys itself even as it tries to keep itself together. Going over those scenes again and again as in a nightmare has been very important to me.

Besides that, of course – inextricably woven into the fabric or text – there’s the spiritual, the deep need to somehow get down on the page something of the ineffable that I have felt. I mean, I know I have felt these stirrings, this sense of the mystery inherent in the quotidian, but how convince others through words that I’ve really seen something or touched something. And so that dimension is also very important. In fact, the whole human God-suffused spectrum of feelings from despair to great joy and ecstasy: they’re all important. And the thing is to get them all down on the page in lyric form.

OWENS: One last question, I think, and this has been so interesting. What’s different about writing a biography of a poet as opposed to anyone else – a writer of prose, a different kind of creative artist, a business leader, the war hero? What makes the poet a special or different kind of subject?

MARIANI: You mean, why am I not ever going to write a biography of Clinton, for example? Or Nixon?

OWENS: Right. Truly, you have a fascination with lives, but not just any life.

MARIANI: But not just any life – that’s right. What was so fascinating about the life of Hopkins is that I’m fascinated by the spiritual life of Jesuits. I never had any formal Jesuit education in college or high school. I never had the Jesuits, but they have become my favorites. Willy nilly, for better or for worse. But then my son never had the Jesuits either, and he became a Jesuit priest. In truth, I love the spiritual exercises. So, I’m very much interested in the formation of the self that occurs through the spiritual exercises. Especially that sense of a composition of place, of being imaginatively in a place with Christ or God, because that’s so much like what the poet has to do to “realize” a situation or a landscape or a complex of feelings.

I remember the poet, Denise Levertov, writing that she never knew that she’d been writing Jesuit poems all along. I never knew, she said, that the Jesuits had something called the composition of place, but that’s what she was doing. And then she read Ignatius, bingo! Realized that was what she’d been doing for years.

Ignatius is a poet. And I’m fascinated by the language of poetry. I’m fascinated by the bendings of language, the nuances, if you will, the over and under readings, the interlacings between prose and poetry. Where does one begin and the other end? How do prose and poetry interlock? Can I make the prose itself sing? This is also a part of what I try to do, so that I won’t bore my poor students when I teach. I had too many boring teachers and I vowed long ago that I would do everything in my power to avoid boring my audience. That’s something I told myself 50 years ago. I don’t know how successful I’ve been, but I never forget what I told myself back then when I teach my students.

It's that sense of engaging them, of bringing them along into a creative space that's so critical. I'm not there to teach physics or mathematics, true, but I am there to engage their minds. I think if they can go away feeling that they're interested in something, in the big questions that the philosophers and theologians and artists have been asking for centuries, then you've done a service and earned your keep. I'm not giving them a final word on anything, as if that were ever possible, but I am saying: look at this, really look at it. Pay attention to it, and perhaps what you learn from this, you can take into your own life when the time comes.

Take William Carlos Williams, for example. Here's a doctor making house calls. Day in and day out down in the Jersey suburbs seventy and eighty years ago. For all the poetry that he's written, I'm most fascinated by a story like this. He goes into a tenement house in mid-winter and there's an elderly woman living by herself, a widow, and she's got a very serious cold, but the house is cold because the furnace isn't working. So, he gives her some medicine, but then he goes down into the basement and gets the furnace working. What good would it do, he says, if I left you here and said have a nice day and you were freezing and I just gave you the medicine? You see what I mean? Just that human aspect, that human touch, somehow deeply touches me.

One other story – Hawthorne, whose daughter, Rose, founded the Sisters of Charity. Hawthorne's in Liverpool working as an American emissary, and he's invited to inspect an orphanage. When he gets there, a little street urchin with snot running down his face looks at him with these big mournful eyes, and it's clear that he wants Hawthorne to pick him up and hold him. But he's so filthy. And dark, brooding Hawthorne picks him up and holds him. His daughter never forgot that story, which is one reason she went on to become a nun working among the poor and desperate. It's those stories, those deeply human stories, which touch me, I think, the most.