

## *Boyhood*

**A**ngelo Bartlett Giamatti—Bart to everyone—was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 4, 1938. He was named for his two grandfathers, Angelo Giamatti on his father's side and Bartlett Walton on his mother's. Angelo was an Italian immigrant from a small village near Naples. He settled in New Haven, Connecticut, where his son Valentine, Bart's father, was born and raised. Bartlett Walton, whose daughter Mary—always called Peggy—was Bart's mother, raised his family in Wakefield, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Angelo Giamatti was a laborer at the New Haven Clock Company, and the family—there were five children, four girls and a boy—lived in modest, even straitened, circumstances on Lilac Street in New Haven, then an enclave of Italian immigrants. The Waltons, by contrast, lived in relative affluence in Wakefield, for Bartlett Walton's father was the founder of a successful shoe manufacturing concern, and there was a substantial inheritance for Bartlett, his wife, and three daughters.

Valentine Giamatti—Val—attended Hillhouse High School in New Haven, then located near the heart of the Yale University campus. He excelled academically and earned admission

to Yale as a day student on one of the Sterling Memorial Scholarships, for which preference was given to New Haven high school graduates. His academic success continued at the university, and when he graduated as a member of Phi Beta Kappa in 1932, he qualified for a fellowship that permitted him to become a graduate student at Yale in the field of Romance languages. At the beginning of the subsequent academic year of 1933–34 he sailed to Italy to continue his studies under an exchange fellowship at the University of Florence. On shipboard he met Peggy Walton, handsome, charming, and smart, traveling to spend her junior year at Smith College abroad in the study of Italian language and literature. There began a courtship that continued through Peggy's senior year at Smith and a year beyond, while Val was back at Yale continuing graduate work. The culture shock of introducing Peggy to Val's immigrant parents and him to her Yankee family was successfully overcome, and in July 1936 Valentine Giamatti and Peggy Walton were married.

Giamatti had reached an impasse with Yale over the choice of a subject for his dissertation—exacerbated, perhaps, by doubts of a conservative faculty member as to the academic commitment of a man who had decided to marry and begin a family before completing his Ph.D.—and he did not return to New Haven. Instead he accepted an offer to teach Romance languages at the newly established Vermont Junior College, and the Giamattis spent the first three years of their married life in Montpelier. It was during this period that Bart was born.

Valentine Giamatti knew that he needed a Ph.D. to progress in the academic profession. On the suggestion of a colleague he applied to Harvard, which agreed to accept all of his Yale course credits. Harvard also approved the dissertation subject that Yale had rejected, an account of the service in the American Revolution of one Chevalier Luigi Antonio Cambray

Digny, a Frenchman born of a Florentine family, based on an archive made available to Giamatti during his year in Florence. So the academic year 1939–40 was spent in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the end of which he had earned a Ph.D. in Romance languages.

In the spring of that year the phone rang in the Giamatti apartment in Cambridge, and a stranger, the head of the French department at Mount Holyoke, the distinguished women's college in South Hadley, Massachusetts, inquired whether the young Harvard Ph.D.-to-be would be interested in joining the faculty as an instructor in Italian language and literature. Giamatti had to ask his wife where South Hadley was, but it was a splendid and wholly unexpected opportunity. So the family, which now included a baby daughter Elena Maria—always Elria after her brother Bart had so dubbed her—moved in 1940 to the small New England college town on the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts, and Valentine Giamatti began the career which was to extend without interruption until his retirement in 1973. After a couple of years in rented quarters, the Giamatti family bought a comfortable Colonial house on a corner lot on Silver Street north of the campus, with a fine view over its playing fields down to the cluster of weathered nineteenth-century red brick buildings along College Street that define the college. A second son, Dino, was born in 1943.

Giamatti was a commanding presence throughout his teaching career at Mount Holyoke. The warmth of his outgoing personality and his capacity for friendship attracted the young women of the college: he was the marvelous Mr. G., and they flocked to him. His lecture course on "Dante and His Times," conducted in English, was a rite of passage for those who were not students of the Italian language, and for those who were, there were the seminars on Dante in Italian, which

met in his living room on Silver Street. For several years in the late 1940s and early 1950s he and his students organized a so-called Dante Fair in the spring on the large lot behind his house to benefit a home for poor and wayward boys north of Rome. Students marched from the center of town behind a fire truck, and people came from miles around to participate in a program of games and other attractions, including fortune-tellers, a spike-driving contest, turtle races, and horses for children's rides.

Giamatti's activities were not limited to the campus. He was a familiar figure throughout South Hadley, talking informally with townspeople wherever he found them, and serving at various times as a representative to the town meeting and as a P.T.A. president. He was a popular public speaker to groups of Mount Holyoke alumnae and others. Whatever indignities of prejudice he had suffered as a child of Italian immigrants in New Haven, and there must have been many, had been left behind, overcome by his fundamentally sunny spirit in the liberating freshness of a small New England college town and his pride in the literature and culture of Italy that were at the center of his intellectual life.

He was a teacher first and foremost. His published output was slim: an introductory Italian grammar that arose out of his teaching of the Italian language at Mount Holyoke; a visual rendering of the schematics of Dante's *Divine Comedy* entitled "Panoramic Views of Dante's Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise"; a few translations. His family believes that the small quantity of written scholarship reflected a kind of writer's block in English, which he had begun to learn only when he was a young second-generation immigrant schoolboy in New Haven. Whatever the reason, his intellectual curiosity expressed itself in other ways. He was an ardent collector: of illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy* going back to the

fifteenth century—his collection of more than 140 volumes in twenty-one languages, now in the Mount Holyoke College Library, is one of the world's finest; of Etruscan pottery; of Roman coins. The Giamattis built an addition to their house on Silver Street in the 1950s to maintain these collections in climate-controlled conditions. As his collections reveal, any small interest became an enormous interest, pursued with an all-embracing enthusiasm.

His family adored him. To them he was Babbo—Daddy. When he retired from the faculty in 1973, his family and friends organized a great party, attended by more than a hundred people and extending over a weekend, at the hotel on the Maine seacoast then owned by his younger son Dino. His retirement present was a gray granite bench inscribed with an English translation of lines from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. They come in the second section of the poem, *Purgatory*, where Dante's guide, Virgil, is explaining that when the sinner has been purged of the sin of envy, he is free to seek in fellowship with others those things which, enriching each, at the same time enrich everyone, so that the more that are enriched, the richer is each. Love is such a thing. This is the inscription: "The more on earth there are of loving hearts the more worth loving, and the more the love, which, like a mirror, each to each imparts." Babbo's Bench was originally placed on the lawn of Dino Giamatti's hotel, facing the sea. When the hotel was sold in 1987, the bench was moved to a small plot on the campus of Mount Holyoke, just outside Valentine Giamatti's old office, where it still stands.

Peggy Giamatti was fully her husband's partner in the life of the family. From her came, her son Dino remembers, "our value system, the way we were brought up." Her husband, far from his New Haven roots, adopted as his own the New England identity and lifestyle of his wife. She contributed, too, an

important dimension to the family's cultural life. She was an accomplished pianist; the children's love of opera began with her. She made herself a sophisticated amateur art historian; it was she who organized and led the visits to the treasures of Italy when the family was on sabbatical. Fluent in its language, her knowledge of and devotion to the culture of Italy complemented and enriched that of her husband.

This loving and richly intellectual environment was the world of Bart Giamatti's boyhood. He was a high-spirited and mischievous boy, the ringleader among his best friends Billy Mazeine, Andy Vitali, and Frankie White. There were pranks—his sister Elria remembers the occasion when the boys, posing as itinerant salesmen of Christmas decorations, sold to a distinguished faculty member, the poet Peter Viereck, the wreath that they had stolen from his front door only moments before. There were trips to the movies in nearby Holyoke, sometimes in the high school years with dates, followed by something to eat at Friendly's restaurant. Bart was the entertainer, the actor, on stage with his impersonations, the zany comedian Jerry Lewis and sob singer Johnnie Ray among them. There were periods, especially on weekends, of simply hanging out at the various houses of the boys, or more often, at Hector's pool hall on College Street, where a game of pool was a nickel and the boys learned to smoke. And there were sports, especially baseball, in which Bart did not excel—he was never more than an indifferent athlete—but in which he was intensely interested, finding vicarious participation as manager of the high school baseball team. Long before he became an executive in organized baseball, it occupied a special place in Giamatti's life, for he saw mirrored in it the ordered striving he sought in all things. He saw also in it, ruefully, the inevitability of disappointment inherent in the game's uncertainties.

The Boston Red Sox Giamatti learned to love as a small boy

in the 1940s were in the early stages of living out the consequences, operative until they finally won a World Series in 2004, of “The Curse of the Bambino.” As explained by *Boston Globe* sportswriter Dan Shaughnessy in a book by that name, this was a spell that the Red Sox placed upon themselves in 1920, condemning them to perpetual agonizing failure, when their then owner, a theatrical producer named Harry Frazee, sold star pitcher and slugger Babe Ruth—the Bambino—to the New York Yankees. In 1946 the Red Sox, now a team of stars led by the legendary Ted Williams, won their first American League championship since 1918, but lost the World Series to the National League champion St. Louis Cardinals in the seventh and deciding game under heartbreaking circumstances. Two years later the Red Sox were tied for first place in the American League at the end of the season, but lost in a one-game playoff at their home Fenway Park. A year after that they entered Yankee Stadium in New York needing to win only one of the last two games of the season to become league champions, and lost them both. All of this the young Bart Giamatti suffered through at the end of seasons spent glued to the radio on summer afternoons in South Hadley or at summer camp, following the beloved Red Sox.

There were respects in which he stood apart from his peers. He was intellectually inclined from the beginning, quick and able in school, always a reader, often disappearing into his personal domain—his room on the top floor in the Giamatti house—to read in solitude. The Zane Grey novels were a favorite, but he read anything he could lay his hands on. He possessed as a boy a verbal facility beyond that of others his age. As a teenager he was an accomplished speaker and debater. He won oratorical prizes at his high school. One Memorial Day he was chosen from his Boy Scout troop to declaim the Gettysburg Address at the traditional annual ceremony on the town

common. At the boys camp in southern New Hampshire that he attended for several summers, he edited and wrote for the camp newspaper, the *Marienfeld Monitor*, exhibiting in his articles a breezy precocity unusual in a young teenager: at age fourteen, for example, he advises his fellow campers that the pitcher and catcher for Camp Marienfeld in an intercamp baseball game were “through the fray the battery, the whole battery, and nothing but the battery for our team.” But despite all these distinguishing talents, he was to his pals, even to his siblings, an uncomplicated companion, just a normal kid like the others.

His parents knew otherwise, for he was an unusually high-strung child, with an active mind so bursting with nervous energy that he sometimes had trouble sleeping. He was often afflicted, until his mid-teens, with severe headaches requiring special medication and periods of bed rest in a darkened room. He was, his mother remembers, a very sensitive child, a worrier even at a young age. His disposition, like his father’s, was essentially sunny, but his sensitivity sometimes, as in later life, manifested itself in a tendency to withdraw into himself and internalize problems.

The Giamattis were a close family, largely without sibling preferences or rivalries—“our parents let us be ourselves,” Dino recalls. But Valentine Giamatti’s relationship with and influence on his elder son was particularly strong. Its intensity can be partly accounted for by the natural affinity of a father for his first son. They shared similarities in temperament: volatile, verbal, warmly affectionate. These similarities deepened as Bart Giamatti grew in appreciation of his Italian heritage. Babbo became to his son *Il Maestro*—the Master. The Giamatti family spent two academic sabbatical years in Italy. After the second, in 1954–55, Bart had achieved broad competence in the Italian language, and when he entered Yale a year later,



after a preparatory year at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, he began to apply this competence to studies that would lead him to an academic career in comparative literature with a strong Italian component.

It would be too much to say that the career of the son mirrored that of his father. Renaissance English literature was the son's specialty; his father was principally a student and teacher of Dante. We have seen that Valentine Giamatti, free in a small women's college from the iron rule of "publish or perish," was not a productive scholar if measured by published output. His son was not yet thirty when his first important book was published, a study of the garden as a symbol in Western literature—dedicated to his mother and father. A second book—an introduction to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*—and various other writings followed before he left the life of scholarship for the presidency of Yale at the age of forty.

The father was never interested in academic administration. It can hardly be said that a man who progressed from modest immigrant circumstances to a distinguished academic career in a leading New England college lacked ambition—he certainly took advantage of every opportunity to improve himself. But he was comfortable in his good fortune; it was not his ambition to lead. His son, on the other hand, always had an agenda for leadership, in pursuit of which he was ambitious and competitive. Notwithstanding these important differences, the two had much to talk about intellectually, much to deepen the bonds between them. We sense how deep those bonds had become when we hear the son eulogizing the father after Valentine Giamatti's death in 1982:

One of the last, and perhaps the most enduring, of the memories I have of my father is of him walking the beach in the full sun, a memory that is precise and clear and concrete and that is also a general figure for a life lived in every sense in the

open. . . . I shall always see him—in all the million ways we remember Babbo—as in the open, under an open sky; in the open sun which he loved as only one directly descended from the Etruscans by way of Naples can love the sun; with an open heart; and a mind always open—open to new people, new countries, new food, new languages, to new forms of human expression however they expressed themselves. . . . He was open above all to new ideas. He passionately believed in ideas and he spent his life thinking about how he could make ideas real, how he could connect the excitement in ideas he thought and felt to other people.

What a good life and what a good man. How that best of husbands and fathers and friends affirmed life for all of us and with all of us. How fortunate we all are to have walked the beach with him, at the full tide, in the sunshine he always made.