

An Elementary Rondo: It's About Time

Chris Miller

Opening Volley

As I expect every rookie **literarian** does ("rookie" in my mind being guys in that purgatory time before the first paper), I have pondered a plethora of paper proposals. "Play to your strengths", the competitive person in me says. So I've considered singing to you, playing an interlude or something else musical; even having my own small Greek Chorus here on my left to comment on situations in my paper or to highlight transitions, or even as a diversion to the glitches in my story line or to cover awkward syntax. But any of that kind of **shtick** for a first paper would be gauche. A first paper needs to have a purity about it, along with "markers", if you will, that tell something about the writer's personality, idiosyncrasies and such.

Back when Bob **Kaltoff**, bless his soul, and my colleague and friend, Hal Porter, started steering me towards membership, I thought, "Well, pretty funny. I've never written anything other than a mission statement, program note or a letter. But this club of erudite movers and shakers, who epitomize intellect and tradition, wants me?" That's when I started trying to sabotage my admission. For example, on my application for the club, I intentionally tried writing illegibly; hoping bad hand-writing would keep me out. (I should have known better - with so many **M.D.'s** in the club.) Not having any published works, let alone one in Japanese or in its third edition; I thought **might** bring up a blackball. But, obviously not. Finally in this bastion of testosterone I thought, "What if I only list women writers as my influences?" So I listed Annie **Dillard**, Margaret **Attwood**, **Denise Levertof**, Barbara **Kingsolver** and Mary Oliver. Not a single **Hemingway**, Faulkner, Whitman, or even a **D.H.** Lawrence (although I like those guys too). Surely neglecting the dead white guys would be the *coup de gras* and seal my fate. But...no!

So it's finally happened. After being a guest for several years, becoming a member over two years ago and putting together three nifty holiday chorale programs (which I had secretly hoped would somehow count as a presentation of sorts that would assuage the Literary Club paper police), yes, the *dies irae* is here; the time of reckoning. No eleventh hour call from the governor; no reprieve.

Did I say yet what a privilege it is to address you captains of finance, medicine,

law, industry, religion, art and academe? Well, it is. The idea that we all leave our honors, titles, awards and pretense "at the door" of this historic place is admirable. This club is special; a group of men who holds writing in such high esteem that they've literally built an institution around it. Did I mention the full and open bar, snacks, and light repast along with lively and sometimes interesting, but more often enlightening conversation? And our stewards are as deferential and as great a group as you'll find. Yes, it was and still is an honor to have been asked to be a member of this club.

I've noticed in the couple of years thinking about this night that the more ideas you have, the greater penchant for procrastination. So with all this time, I've only just started assembling my thoughts together a few weeks ago. I'm guessing there are a few kindred spirits out there in the club who wait 'til the eve of the deadline (what an appropriately descriptive word!) to start writing. More likely, a high percentage of you all have papers ready and waiting on a shelf, like a minister's old sermons. I'd even planned to look into the club's literary archives for titles related to procrastination - but I have to admit, I didn't get around to it.

Well as they say, "fail to plan, plan to fail". So I needed a plan. This was my idea. Since I'd never done any writing other than the [afore-mentioned](#) letters, mission statements and program notes (which all in turn can be entertaining, not so entertaining, and mildly entertaining), and also since I'd recently read a sermon from the [Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church](#) pulpit by friend Rick [Sowash](#) on the subject of creativity which used a Picasso quote that, paraphrased, goes "inspiration won't find you unless you're already working"... I started a self-imposed Monday afternoon "creative writing for one" class, the purpose being a vehicle for gathering material for a story to present to the Club. I figured that if I started in the winter, by fall I'd have enough scraps and [musings](#) to edit into something that could hold your interest for at least 36 minutes (Herb's idea of a perfect paper length).

[Countersubject](#)

Ever so lightly the random sounds of tip, tap, tap, tick, tap broke the afternoon silence as the rain began to fall on the tin roof in Shorty Bright's outside room. Shorty had built the room from his own design with his own two hands during the months before Y2K. The room was mostly cinder block, square with small holes all around for windows. Accommodations in the room were Spartan, with only two chairs: a rocker and

a leather mission-style recliner. He had a small TV and a wood stove in the corner. The room had a trap door to an under-area too small to be called a basement where Shorty had a pantry full of canned goods, water jugs, fuel for the generator and a backup generator 'cause "you can't be too careful". "Shorty" was a misplaced nickname that now had stuck. At 6'2" he was taller than average but his genetics had somehow betrayed him. He had three brothers and a sister, all over 6'4" who could have played forward in the old NBA if height was the only requirement. He did have an uncle under 6-foot. Maybe he was somehow genetically responsible. Anyway, as the rain fell harder, the din in the room began to sound as if Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich and Bill Bruford had gotten together in some wild cacophonous challenge. He had laid down for a nap and often the "gentle" sounds on the tin were somnolent, inducing sleep. Sleep, that elusive mistress, how he longed for a protracted visit with her! These days he was lucky for 20 minutes uninterrupted. Ever since a few months before Y2k things had changed. He had read a semi-scientific gloss from the American Medical Association about human being's under-practiced art of "surface napping", a technique combining aspects of Zen meditation, deep-breathing and relaxation that somehow by manipulating the parietal lobe at the back of the brain extracted "sleep molecules" and saved them for later use. The author had speculated that this method had been used for years by folks who pulled the graveyard shifts, especially young first-year resident Doc's. Yes, the little missive had stuck to some part of Shorty's brain and now he couldn't turn it off. Sure it was great for all the flurry leading up to Y2k. He had needed the extra time to get prepared - the shit was going to hit the fan and he was gonna be ready. But now, years later, as Shorty's grasp on time became a murky soup, the nights just got longer.

A-Prime

The idea of presenting a paper to such a learned, august and intimidating group has given me profound trepidation and angst. Firstly, I'm a much better listener. Hell, it's what I do best, my profession, my bread and butter. Conductors listen - assess instantaneously and make adjustments. For a conductor, listening in a rehearsal is different than listening in a performance, but both ways you must assess and adjust. Adjust either the poor articulation in that third horn, adjust timbre, balance, tonal shading - what specific tone in a chord is most important to the particular voice-leading - or adjusting dynamics within the chord or a flaccid tone, or lack of vertical alignment in the tenor section. Or in a performance situation, an adjustment in the gesture. I listen, then

fix. There's no time to stop and talk through the problem, I adjust my gesture, countenance and overall body language to convey what I want to hear - that, hopefully, through much study and analysis, being the most truthful reflection of what the composer intended.

So what I'm saying is "You guys really need listeners.. I'm a fairly regular attendee.

Maybe we could work something out?" Here's some advice I received from among the

seasoned membership regarding this presentation:

"You've got a strong voice - that's half the battle "(the other half being content, I

suppose). "Your background in music is different. Something the club needed. Don't

worry about your paper". (I guess that came from the Bobby [McFarrin](#) "Don't worry be

happy" school of thought). Finally, "No travelogues please" and "It's got to be over a half

an hour", and "Just make sure it's not too long."

Well, you know those bumper stickers that say "I'd rather be ..."? You know sailing, fishing, golfing, well, fill in the fucking blank, 'cause I'd rather be most anywhere else at the present.

First Return to the [Countersubject](#)

Shorty had an ease of movement, an unrestrained gait, all smooth no hitch that betrayed his laid-back style. As an athlete he was quick, tenacious, and powerful with great vision and an uncanny penchant for anticipation (a tough combination on the tennis court). Playing against him was weird, for he seemed to know what you were going to do

before you did. "It's like he's in my head", his opponents would often say. But it wasn't true. Shorty had no clairvoyance, no sense of premonition, no extra-sensory perception. He was merely a student of the game. He was a man of intentionality, and like everything he did, he meticulously kept mental records. How his opponent stood, moved, reacted - what his tendencies were, his strengths and weaknesses were synthesized in the compartments of Shorty's brain. After a few games he usually had his opponent's number. His vision was such that he could tell in a split second not only the rotation of the ball (by watching the seams), but also the speed and direction of the rotation; the direction of his opponent's lean, eyes, feet, racket speed, face and grip; all while incorporating and factoring in wind direction and speed, court surface and surface anomalies. He had even once written an instruction manual for defensive tennis called "The Wrong Side of Love" that tennis guru extraordinaire and coach of the stars. Brad Gilbert, had cited in his book "Winning Ugly".

The Third Musing

Today is Monday and the writing teacher in my head says, "Tell a story, write about what you know, your personal experience. Describe what you see and feel, your desires". It seems so simple when she puts it that way (I say "she", because I'd prefer her to be a she. Also she's cute with reddish brown shoulder length hair and a nice body and green eyes and flirts with me and if she doesn't stop there could be trouble.) I thought some about research, mostly because it seems like some of the men in the club use their paper as an excuse to travel to some exotic, historic or otherwise interesting place, and I say ANY excuse to travel is great (writing about it doesn't do much for me though). But another thought about research crossed my mind and it comes across as a rant of sorts that goes like this: Research, Smesearch - every book, every concert, every opera, recital, every show, every TV Special on the Learning Channel, every fishing trip, class, lecture, or sermon (and I've worked in churches now for 30 years, so I've heard my share), conversation participated in or overhead, every road trip and vacation, every piece of music, every lesson, literally everything that has ever come through the eyes, ears, taste, touch - whatever it is, is in there processing. Getting it out in some FORM is my problem with writing. When it does come out, is it prose, poetry, or just jumbled shit? If I can't come up with a story from my life experience, then fuck me. What kind of effort was that at life! ?!

Regarding life: I've always thought that childhood was about being scattered.

People sometimes ask what your childhood was like and what I remember are little scenes and mostly, until I discovered the trumpet, I remember playing. From about the third grade on you'd leave the house in the morning with friends on bikes; be gone 'til lunch; then leave again and be gone 'til dusk or when the street lights came on. And you know what, I can't remember much about all those hours except an incident here or there. But mostly blank, lost in the fantasy world of play. Playing war, or army or pickup baseball (the best kind), or building forts or dams or tree houses or elaborate underground tunnels (very dangerous, as I look back). Exploring was always high on the list, especially woods, creeks and new residential developments, where we'd collect bottles for the change to buy cokes and candy.

Another thing I could write about would be my dad, who was an air traffic controller and a radar man for the Air force Strategic Air Command, who flew many flights over the edge of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

When I was only four, I remember, he'd wear his orange flight suit with that cool logo patch on the arm that had a giant galvanized fist coming out of plant earth holding lightening bolts. Those might be a couple of ideas that would satisfy my inner creative writing teacher.

Shorty Returns

Besides music, books, sports and sex (the common man's classic ways of escape and diversion), Shorty had no escape from the psychosis brought on by his sleep problem. Then again here was another activity not really a sport, although some had made it such, that could occupy his time in a way that was like relaxation only with the combination of colorful accoutrements, floating, rocking suspension, nature, sun with the beautiful parabolic shapes created by **monofilament** floating above, suspended in time to finally fall softly into the quiet wet surface of the lake. Yes, fishing was the perfect blend of activity and non-activity; of total rest with heightened senses. Sometimes when fishing for **crappie**, a good fighting pan fish indigenous to almost everywhere, he could focus on a tiny hand-painted balsa bobber encircled by the reflections of trees, brush and sky and in those times he could loose the lock that time imposed and drift effortlessly with the universe; his insignificance to the cosmos not at all lost on him. Indeed, this time warp that held him disappeared in the reflective and elastic surface of the lake. Time, an arbitrary human invention, would melt like Salvador **Dali's** clocks when imposed on that

smooth, soft, expansive, ripple-less space.

Recapitulation

Well, its Monday afternoon, time for my self-imposed, make that Literary Club-imposed, **once-a-week**, one-person creative writing class. Today, my new teacher (Let's call her Stella) has suggested that I talk about a hobby, or a specific event in my life that was transcendent. I like my new teacher. She's very strict and cracks the whip (so to speak). A disciplinarian, I think. She has shortish black hair, in a page-boy cut, I think they call it. She has piercing green eyes, porcelain skin and fair-complexion, full lips that are bright red today with lipstick and with her spike heels she's slightly taller than me. She's very hot with a magnificent athletic body that's easy to see in her skin tight bodice.. .but I digress...

I've been thinking a lot today about time - its fluidity versus its unswerving **stringence**. How is it that, say, three different people can experience a specific period of length of time differently? How often have we thought, "Gee, that hour passed in an instant, while another hour dragged?" How many of you have felt the need to check your watch in the past few minutes for example? How does the what we do effect the outcome of our perception of the passage of time? As a musician I've experienced both time in its most strict and fluid state simultaneously. Almost any soloist with decent technical skills and a consummate knowledge of the fundamentals will tell you that there comes a time in musical situations where you let go of self and become a conduit. At that time the music flows through you and time itself looses its hold. Personally, I've experience this type of musical ecstasy many times as a conductor, but the times I've enjoyed transcendent, timeless, musical ecstasy the most have been as a soloist.

In those regards, please indulge this digression: My first experience as a choral singer was in the 9th grade in the Georgia All-State chorus. I had never sung in a group of any kind, but my band director, Dennis **Dixon** (who once introduced me to Johnny Mercer) had heard me sing on the Band bus on one of those long road trips between rural southern towns during Football season. So that year when I auditioned for the All-State Band, he encouraged me to audition for the All-State Chorus as well, since auditions were in the same building. That year kids who could sight-sing were at a premium because **Gunther Shuller** had been commissioned to compose a new work to be

premiered by the chorus that would have to be learned in the three days of rehearsals prior to the concert. I didn't know I could sight-sing, but I could read music and Dennis thought I had a strong voice and a good chance.

That year I made last chair in the trumpet section of the All-State Band and I also made the Chorus. I'll never forget the feeling of the first time I sang in a chorus with all those great young singers. The sound of 250 kids singing all around me made me cry and I was a little embarrassed. I had just never experienced anything so beautiful. I never knew about the transcendent experience of 250 people breathing as one.

A second digression about a recent observation: The past two weeks or so I've been playing (mostly horn) with a great band (the Modulators) at a resort on Captiva Island, Florida - (I know, "it's a hard job but someone's gotta do it"). I'm really just a side man; the band doesn't miss a beat without me. They're all such fine musicians, it's really a privilege. Often these past few weeks when the dance floor is packed with throngs of people moving to the pulsating, relentless beat, and the band is playing so tight and loose at the same time and you feel like a cog in some wonderful turning machine...there's something in those times that's elemental, in the bone, sub-atomic.

Well - those are two examples of transcendence in ensemble.

But, again, as a soloist, I have had the opportunity during an improvised solo on the trumpet to let go and I've become a spectator, kind of above and disconnected from the situation. Once I was listening to my own improvised solo on a gig and thought, "Damn, that sounds like Miles or that sounds like Dizzy. How can those notes be coming from my horn, my lips, my fingers?" Time in those moments is mercurial and as a musician it's as closed to heaven as there is.

A hobby of mine is gardening. I'm not at all very good at it, but working the dirt with a shovel in solitude...well, again here; something weird happens to time. I suppose it has to do with the breath deepening, and the calmness of having your hands right in old mother earth. For me, working my own garden becomes a transcendent experience. Time has a feeling of fluidity, of ebb and flow. My gardening hobby spun out of working professionally with several different landscaping firms. These businesses weren't of the grass-cutting, weed-eating variety; so I learned about shapes, contours, colors, textures, what things went best in shade or sun, and planting a vast variety of bushes and trees.

Over the years, friends and folks who I've done little jobs for, have given me "starts" of things and my yard, like many others, has become a garden of memories. "Oh yeah, I got that bush from so in so or Mrs. [Fill-in-the-Blank](#) gave me those iris."

In our small yard in Dayton, Kentucky, we have six gardens: Five flower and one vegetable (about three too many, my wife says. Although from May through October, she doesn't complain about the fresh flowers and vegetables). Maybe a future paper about gardening might strike a note with some of you [literarians](#).

[Return of "A" Theme](#)

It really isn't that significant but Shorty had met his second wife doing one of the favorites of his varied career. Although teaching a group of [3.0-ranked](#) middle-aged women at the indoor tennis facility is by no means the high point of any coaches day, this group was pleasant and there were a few who were easy on the eyes, if you know what I mean. They had really just begun the session working from Chapter 3 , "Baby Steps" from his aforementioned coaching manual: *The Wrong Side of Love: a Guide to Defensive Tennis*. When she came out onto the court for the first time ten minutes late - "Better never than late", Shorty said with a wry smile (as you know by now. Shorty was a stickler on the subject of time), "Line up with the others at the end of the baseline, [ma'am](#), and observe. We're practicing footwork, just watch at first, then I'll call you out". "[Rochelle](#)", she said, "but my friends call me Rocky." "Sure, Rocky", he said with a sideways glance, and then commanded, "here we go, get ready to move those feet and no lunging - remember we're working on 'Baby steps'!"

Nothing about Rocky that day seemed remarkable to Shorty except that she'd been late. Sure she was cute, somewhere in her mid-forties he'd guessed: petite and a decent athlete with a little tennis potential. No, he'd seen cute, petite, athletic-looking middle-aged women every day - hell, most of ['em](#) were of that [ilk - spa'ed](#), manicured, pedicured, [yoga'ed](#), personally-trained and on at least their second husband and third cosmetic surgery. It would be a year before he recognized her winning smile, her pluck and quick wit, her slightly upturned nose - and another year until he held first hand knowledge [other voracious sexual appetite](#). So for him, it had been a relationship that was planted, grew and blossomed - organic like that.

Rocky would tell a different story. She would recall that all the way home from that first lesson she knew that when their energies met, sparks would fly. She

remembered the drive in the car home where she lived with her third husband, Chip, and Matthew and Blake, his sons from a previous marriage.

"Shit, Shit, Shit!!!", pounding the steering wheel. She already knew it was just a matter of time before she and Shorty would be together. "Why pursue him? ", she asked herself. "I'm happy with Chip. He's smart, funny, has a great job, a social conscience. We've got a great house, the boys can be tough, but I love 'em. Why, why? What's wrong with me? Why can't I just leave well enough alone?" All this and more premonitions of the catastrophic life upheavals in store for her invaded her psyche. But to her, Shorty was an aphrodisiac of unprecedented magnitude. From just that first encounter, she remembered how she loved his hands - rugged, veined, but, oh my, how graceful. She loved his gait, his smile, his penetrating stare, his legs, forearms and chest (just enough hair). But she mostly fell in love with his ability to stay for long periods "in the moment". He was confident, self-assured and living in the present. She loved that.

Coda

When you tell a story, usually you've got a protagonist; your main character, and it seems to me that protagonists, especially nowadays, have to be flawed in some way. It also seems that these flaws emanate as internal turmoil from neuroses, to psychoses, abuse as a child to alcoholism, to Vietnam Vet syndrome. Or external turmoil like having a disability, being blind, deaf or any combination of the above. It also seems to me that the most popular protagonists these days are in some ways mentally handicapped: the slow-minded Forest Gump, Billy Bob Thornton's character in Sling Blade, Dustin Hoffman's autistic "Rain Man". There's a somewhat popular TV detective, "Monk", who's obsessive compulsive, and I've recently read a book, "A Curious Incident of a Dog in the Nighttime" about a boy who's autistic who becomes a detective to exonerate himself.

I'm not saying recent popular culture has a monopoly on head cases. Examples in the classic's abound: Rochester's wife in Bronte's Jane Eyre, Steinbeck's Lenny, or Bo in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird", to name a few. It just seems like recently those types of stock characters have moved from supporting to starring roles.

People say that characters, especially the protagonist of a story, take on the personality or character traits of the writer. Well, if that's true, at least a few characters in any story I write will have major hang-ups.

As a child, I almost surely was what folks call today, "ADD". I was, until I found music, specifically the trumpet, a very scattered kid. It wasn't until that trumpet that my activities and play began to have a frame and then I guess it was 6th or 7th grade, I began to stop being a child and although less scattered, life had begun to have meaning, a course, a purpose - childhood's demise.

Now at 48 years, I still feel pretty scattered. And music, thank God, is still my anchor. But writing's not. The idea of development - developing any scene or idea or precept is frightening. I have lots of good ideas. In fact they often come too fast and in such close succession that I can't remember the salient points by the time I get a pencil to paper.

Now I've got some questions like: "Where does Shorty live? Is he still married to Rocky? Is he still sleepy? What about his tall siblings?"

The idea just came to me.. .like musical form. Why not develop a story in a more or less standard or set form, like sonata form, a repeated "A" section followed by a contrasting "B" section, followed by a recapitulation of the "A" section, maybe in a minor key. Or a Rondo form: "A" followed by "B" followed by a recap (sometimes strict) of the "A" section, followed by a "C" section followed by another "A" and so on. I could develop a paper on a variation form or binary or whatever. At least it would give me something to build on, an organizational framework, if you will. In fact, who needs development? I've got an Elementary Rondo right here.

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