



# WRITERS' FORUM

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## Strunk and White Died for Our Sins

*Stephen K. Tollefson*

Time will assuage.  
Time's verses bury  
Margin and page  
In commentary.

For gloss demands  
A gloss annexed  
Till busy hands  
Blot out the text,

And all's coherent.  
Search in this gloss  
No text inherent:  
The text was loss.

The gain is gloss.

—J.V. Cunningham

"I'm off to MLA!" Myrl would announce every December 23rd. Although Christmas was coming, it was really a minor inconvenience to her, a day that interrupted her preparations for the Modern Language Association conference.

"I'm off to the Four C's!" she'd exclaim in the spring. The mysteries of the swallows' regular return to Capistrano is really

nothing compared to Myrl's spring migration to the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

"Really looking forward to NCTE this year," she said every year. The janitor in her building didn't know about the National Council of Teachers of English and thought that every year she went off to the NTSB, the National Transportation and Safety Board. He thought she sorted through the wreckage of plane crashes.

Myrl didn't just love going to conferences. She loved thinking about them in advance. She studied the programs as if they were the Dead Sea Scrolls, at first handling them gently, gingerly, lovingly, until lust took over and she practically ripped them apart to get at their innards. She swooned over the list of pre-conference sessions, becoming nearly faint in a proper, Victorian sort of way from over-stimulation. She deeply appreciated the fact that conferences had expanded and that there were now pre-, during-, and post-conference activities, meetings, colloquia, seminars, workshops, round-tables, working groups, committees, sub-committees, symposiums, task forces.

D-day. The war in the Pacific. Neither was less complicated, or more thoroughly strategized than Myrl's attack on a conference. She studied the various hotel floor plans with all the care of Patton studying maps of the coast of North Africa, finally selecting the room that was just right: close to the action, but quiet, something with a view—of the ocean, or mountains, or roller-coaster she would never visit—and a writing desk. For this reason alone, she considered the internet to be one of the greatest boons to humanity: she was able to call up floor plans of nearly every hotel in the area of the conference, print them out, and plot, often with a protractor, and sometimes a compass the route from room to session to lunch to session to break to session to dinner to late evening session.

The descriptions of the keynote speaker and the plenary session gave her palpitations.

But Myrl was truly transported, as surely as if Captain Kirk had beamed her aboard, as surely as if her soul had learned astral projection, by the pages and pages of concurrent sessions. Whenever a colleague would happen by her office, she'd call out, through her open door, "What do you think? I'd really like to attend this session called 'The Textless Pre-Text Text and Its Relation to the Post-Text,' but it's at the same time as 'Watching the Fur Fly: Jane Austen's Cat Phobia as Catalyst for Her Reliance on Hidden Puns.' I'm at my wit's end!" The more gracious of her colleagues would spend a few minutes debating the pros and cons of the sessions, she'd thank them, and they'd take their leave. Often, when she called out this way *in flagrante delicto*, it was the janitor who was standing there, and who would always reply, "They all sound good to me."

A conference program lying open on her desk looked like the Miami Dolphins' playbook. There were so many notations, circles, stars, underlines, and arrows (not to mention double underlines—very significant!—and exclamation points—truly extraordinary!!) that a successful Super Bowl victory could probably be carved from the pages of a teachers' conference.

Like all true lovers, Myrl loved conferences not just for what she would learn—that is, not for their virtues and vices—but for the conferences themselves, for the entire gestalt of the Idea of Conference. Like a child who is not invited to many birthday parties or sleep-overs, when Myrl found something that she could go to, she grabbed it with gusto. And Myrl went to conferences.

Her return from any given conference was as triumphant as a ticker-tape parade, as she marched back to her office, her face flushed, not from the long flight but from the sheer glory of it all.

"Clarence Bosworth gave the best keynote speech I've ever heard. He talked about how we are not living up to our responsibility, not only to our own students, but to the street children of Brazil. I think the best thing he said was that essay development cannot come at the expense of third-world development. I tell you, it really made me think. Why bother with teaching fragments? I think my whole life has been a sham. I think I'm going to revamp my course, make it more relevant, more interesting."

And rethink and revamp she did, with fervor and regularity. Once she overheard a colleague say that her courses had more make-overs than a week of *Jenny Jones* re-runs. But she didn't take offense.

Myrl was a good teacher; she knew it and her colleagues knew it. She welcomed students whenever they dropped by, was evenhanded when marking their papers, demanding but kind. She knew her way around a freshman essay and a freshman class. She was loved. Not beloved, but loved nonetheless. She often thought of herself as Maggie Smith in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, but without those unfortunate fascist leanings. *Il Duce* for her was still John Wayne.

She always had the outlines from concurrent sessions she wasn't able to attend; her battle plan was to scurry from the Coral Room, to the Azure Room, to the Oak, Redwood, Pine, Fir, and Maple Rooms, scooping up materials as fast as she could, before settling, just a little late, in the back of the Hemlock Room to listen to the panel on "Huck's Conversations with Jim: A New Paradigm for Engaging Students in the Discourse of Academia." Post-conference, Myrl would sit in her office, mumbling to herself, rummaging through stacks of papers. She would shout "Ah ha!" as if she were Sherlock Holmes and pull out a piece of paper. "This is what I want to try this term! I'd never thought of organizing students into teams to debate grammar issues. I think it will make it more real for them,

don't you?" Sometimes there was someone in the room when she asked the question, and sometimes there wasn't. But if the janitor was passing, he would nod in approval.

For her vacations, Myrl would seek out smaller, off-season conferences and workshops: "Vision Quest: Students Writing in and about the Wilderness" at the Chateau Lake Louise in Canada; "Ambassadors without Portfolio: A Critical Reexamination of Current Trends in Classroom Portfolio Use" at the Disney World Hotel in Orlando; "Writing Around the Edges: The Importance of Students' Marginalia in Understanding their Writing Process," at the Westin Kauai. Each new conference or workshop was like the beginning of a love affair.

Then something happened.

The Seven C's (The Co-terminal Colloquium and Conference on College Composition, Communication, and Comprehension) was being held in Honolulu and one of her more forgetful colleagues asked if they might plan to go together.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said. "I've already got my ticket! I wouldn't dream of having waited this long. You know that. But I'll certainly see you there. The topics of the concurrent sessions are amazing. I just don't know how I can choose between them! 'Little Read-Writing 'Hood: Using Fairy Tales to Engage Inner City Youth in Writing.' Doesn't that sound interesting? But here's one I know I could learn a lot from, because I really don't understand post-structuralism: 'Recapitulation of the Hegemony: Rehistoricizing Fundamentality in Basic Writing Courses.' Choices, choices. I'm just foundering," she said happily. And she was off down the hall, *post-its* falling behind her like petals from a flower-girl's basket.

To see Myrl just before the opening meeting ( she called it the "pituitary" session rather than the "plenary"—it was a private joke) was to see a dervish. She already had a stack of papers clutched to her breast and was looking flushed and distracted and unequivocally thrilled by, well, just by life and composition studies.

And at the pituitary session, she happened to sit next to Clarence Bosworth, the very man whose comments about street children in Brazil, and universal liberation through ignoring grammar errors in freshman writing, had so enthralled her only the year before.

"You're Clarence Bosworth!" she said in a stage whisper, indicating that he might have forgotten himself. "I'm just a huge fan of your work. When you gave the keynote last year, all my years of teaching just fell away, and I decided to start over. You changed my life!"

Now Clarence Bosworth was basically a kind, if unfocused, man, and at any rate few people get to hear such things about themselves, so he replied,

"How very kind of you!" He honestly didn't know what he had

talked about last year, and was uncertain whether this woman was someone he should know, or had known, and whether it had been Biblically or professionally or both. Clarence, you see, was as wedded to conferences as Myrl was, but sought a different kind of enlightenment from them.

After the keynote speech by a rather impressive woman from a university, Myrl turned to "Clarence," as she now called him, and said, "I'm off to a session called 'Semper Fido: Writing Companion Animals into Essays.' Perhaps we'll run into each other. I've certainly enjoyed our conversation."

Her words mystified him (but only slightly) because they had spoken no more than the three sentences to each other. Nonetheless, he saw what he must do:

"And so have I," he said. "Perhaps we could continue to talk later. Over dinner? I find myself free this evening."

As hard as it was for Myrl to believe that someone as well-known as Clarence Bosworth would be alone for dinner, it was equally hard to believe that she would have the chance to talk more to him.

"I'd like that," she said.

"At eight, then? In the Mele Kalikimaka Bar downstairs?"

"That will be fine," she said and floated down the hallway like a jellyfish floating through a school of sardines which were being chased by a shark, people entering from and exiting to rooms, merging into the mass going in both directions.

Myrl was disturbed that the day didn't fly by as they usually did at conferences, that she found herself fidgeting while listening to the (albeit fascinating) panel on "Writing as a Mobius Strip: Writing, Revising, Writing, Revising, Writing, Revising, Writing, Revising. Writing Revising."

By 7:45 that evening, Myrl was sitting at the bar by the open windows sipping a diet soda, looking quite attractive. But she was nervous with intellectual anticipation.

Clarence spotted her when he entered the bar.

"Good evening. You do look lovely. Shall we go to dinner?" he said as he walked up to her.

Dinner in the Windward Room was perfect, to Myrl's mind. Mahi-mahi with a coconut-orange sauce and Clarence Bosworth on the side.

"Please tell me more about those street children. I'm fascinated by our culpability, especially as writing teachers. Your time with them must have been fascinating. And to connect their plight to how we teach writing! It's so obvious when you say it, but very subtle, too. How on earth did you finally see it?"

This presented some minor difficulties for Bosworth, who may well have implied in his talk, if he could only remember it, that he had spent time in Brazil with street children, when in fact he

hadn't. And he wasn't sure there was a connection to teaching writing. But of course he may have made one at the time. On the other hand, the only way forward was onward.

"Well, I believe that what struck me was my rereading of Paolo Freire," he said, hoping it was indeed *Paolo* and not *Pablo*. "That, and Vygotsky, of course. Always Vygotsky." He laughed a knowing laugh, which Myrl joined, although she often confused Vygotsky, the Russian child development wizard, with Madame Blavatsky, the occultist and founder of the Theosophical Society.

"Yes," said Myrl in anticipation. There was a certain breathlessness between bites of mahi-mahi.

"You see, it's similar in vein to liberation theology." Clarence was warming up, thanks to the charming company and the crisp cabernet blanc.

"How?"

"It is our job as compositionists, which I much prefer to the term 'writing teacher,' to lift up the oppressed."

Myrl wondered briefly whether "lifting up the oppressed" was a liberal or conservative stance, but thought better than to ask.

"To teach is to liberate, to teach is to perform an inherently political act," he declared.

Myrl closed her eyes, her mind savoring each of those words as if it were one of the delicately sautéed *haricots verts* on her plate.

"To tell a student that she—or he, as the case may be—must put a period at the end of a sentence, or must not split an infinitive, is simply perpetuating the hegemony of the ruling class, the oligarchy of the teaching profession. We are no better than those families who have controlled the banana plantations in Central America, and hence controlled those countries."

Myrl opened her eyes, and looked at him with such admiration, such deep intellectual longing, that he took a bold step and asked,

"Perhaps we should continue this in my room, over an after-dinner drink, if you would care to?" As always, he was a perfect gentleman, always leaving room for a graceful exit by all parties.

"Oh!" said Myrl, as if she were Cinderella—and that's exactly who she felt like. "Look at the time! I must be going. There's a seven a.m. session called "Writing out the Storm: Slave Narratives as Beacons" that I promised myself I wouldn't miss."

Not missing a beat, Clarence replied,

"Why, I hadn't realized what time it is. Your charming company has made the evening fly by. I suggest tomorrow evening, then." Clarence Bosworth was, if anything, a charming, well-dressed pitbull who wasn't about to give up, especially after having committed an entire evening, and having to pull from his arsenal the dreaded Vygotsky and Freire, about whom he knew practically nothing.



"Tomorrow evening, then," said Myrl, filled with visions of a better world through destruction of punctuation rules, a brother-and-sister-hood of people that could be achieved if someone with Clarence Bosworth's intellect, conviction, and (she had to admit) personal charm could only rule the world, or at least a part of it.

The next day, Myrl again felt oddly at a distance from the conference she so deeply loved. Her mind wandered during "Travels with Charlie: Using Charles Kuralt's Travel Narratives as a Commentary on Life, Love, and a Mistress in Montana." Instead, she thought (and thought it odd) of Eva Peron, of standing on a balcony with Clarence Bosworth by her side as The People cheered them on, of a ticker-tape parade of commas, periods, exclamation points, and question marks rained down on them in their triumphant drive through the poorer quarters, now liberated from the chains of grammar rules (which she assumed were more or less the same in South America). During "Ex-*pose-A: The Dirt Behind Assigning Grades*," she found herself writing CLARENCE BOSWORTH on her notepad and thinking about what was in store for her that evening.

When Clarence Bosworth met her at the front desk at seven p.m., he was dressed in the kind of white embroidered shirt common in the Philippines and she thought he looked a little like a handsome, Caucasian Ferdinand Marcos, only taller and with graying blond hair, and slightly less swarthy. They made such a handsome couple, she thought, since she had worn a Hawaiian print dress she had bought at a conference in Miami last year, and she had taken the bold step of buying a gardenia for her hair. She was looking forward to more talk. She had not felt so intellectually stimulated since, well, she couldn't even remember how long it had been.

"I've taken the liberty of making a reservation at one of my favorite *boites*," said Clarence. "It's in Pearl City, so I've rented a car."

Myrl was thrilled that Clarence Bosworth (whose name, when she thought it, was always in capital letters) was taking such an interest in her. She was not well-known in the field, after all.

"Their specialties are Kalua pork and haupia. The real thing, you know, coconut pudding."

And so worldly, too, she thought.

Auntie Tita's was rambling, with several different rooms decorated in Hawaii kitsch—tikis, bamboo, strings of Christmas lights in the shapes of Japanese lanterns, hot peppers, hula girls, and surf-boards.

"May I suggest the Lomi salmon?" said Clarence. "It's quite tasty here."

"That would be lovely," said Myrl, not hearing the whisper of an odd inflection on the word "tasty."

"Do you know the story of Pele, the goddess of volcanoes?"

asked Clarence, hoping to forestall, at least for a while, any discussion of Brazil, Vygotsky, the democratization of sentence fragments, or *Frere Freire*.

Both Clarence and Myrl had spent part of their day planning for this evening, beyond sartorial considerations. Myrl had looked up Vygotsky and was anxious to bring him up. However, she hoped to avoid Freire, the Brazilian whose radical theories of education were entirely too dense for her. Clarence had run several scenarios in his head and knew that they needed to finish dinner by nine p.m. if he were to have any hope for the rest of the evening. As fate would have it, their separate planning coincided nicely. Just as they were finishing their haupia and macadamia-flavored coffee, Myrl said,

"I was thinking today about what you said about Vygotsky."

And Clarence saw his chance.

"Ah, that old rascal! Why don't we worry about him over a drink at the hotel?" By "hotel" he meant "my room at the hotel," but he knew that could come later, when they would discover that the bar was extremely crowded and noisy (Thank God academics are heavy drinkers, he thought).

"Oh, dear!" said Clarence with a certain amount of satisfaction when they arrived at the hotel and found the bar to be extremely crowded and noisy. "But we've got Vygotsky to deal with! If I may suggest, we could have a drink, just the three of us, in my room. I believe there may be some wine there, or something."

"The three of us?" asked Myrl.

"Why yes. You, me, and Vygotsky of course!" he smiled.

So charming, and smart, and clever, too, she thought.

As they walked to the elevator, they passed some of the conference area: the Mahalo Room with a handwritten sign announcing tomorrow's early session, "Writing in a Readerless Society: The Death of Words"; the Hana Kolohe Room where at noon you could join in the discussion on "The 'I' of the Needle: Self as Tool for Pricking the Thumb of Power"; and finally the Koolau Room where the panel would discuss "Trying out for the 'Prose': Athletes Writing Better By Writing about Sports." Myrl read each of these with her usual intensity, marveling at the vastness of the world of knowledge, and at her own good fortune at having found a no-less-eager soul in Clarence Bosworth.

"Please make yourself comfortable," Clarence said when they walked into his room. He noticed Myrl's surprise that it was a suite, not an economical room like her own. "I always request a suite," he said. "I enjoy being able to have my colleagues . . . in for a drink or a chat. It's so much more civilized, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," said Myrl. "And it's quite beautiful. The view of the city is breathtaking."

"Let's see," he said, pretending to rummage through the mini-

fridge. "Oh, dear, I thought there was some wine, but I'm afraid there's only scotch or vodka. I'm not a very good host, I guess. But would one of those be ok?"

"If there's some soda, a scotch would be very nice," said Myrl.

Clarence poured drinks and sat down on the sofa next to her.

"To Vygotsky!" he said.

"And those children," she said and they clinked glasses. "But Clarence, tell me something. I don't understand how Vygotsky differs so very much from Piaget." She hoped that Piaget was the psychologist and not an Impressionist, or worse, a wrist watch.

"Well, there are differences," said Clarence, sensing that his response might determine a larger outcome. "But I prefer to think of them as different points of the same star. Not contradicting each other, but simply pointing in different directions we should look." He felt certain that he had perhaps conveyed some meaning or other, and he was right.

"That's so perceptive," said Myrl. "And if I may be so bold, it's beautiful, too. You have such a way with description."

Clarence Bosworth knew that it was then, or never, and leaned over to kiss Myrl on the lips, and then he immediately pulled back, with what he knew was suitable look of shame on his face.

"Clarence!" said Myrl.

"Oh, Myrl, I must apologize. The wonderful dinner, the conversation, the drink. It all just conspired. I'm afraid that listening to you, and admiring your mind so much, I was just swept away."

Myrl blushed, and took his hand. "It was nice," she said, "but a little startling, that's all. And I'm feeling a little swept away myself. 'I taste a liquor never brewed.'"

In spite of himself, Clarence looked at her quizzically.

"Emily Dickinson, my favorite poet," said Myrl.

"Ah, I should have known," he said, "The Belle of Amherst, as spoken by the Belle of the Conference." And he kissed her again, but this time slightly more intently, and with his hands on her waist.

"We really shouldn't . . .," she tried to say, but because his lips were on hers, she was afraid that it sounded more like "Thee weelly woodn." And besides she knew that her soul was on fire, or was it her brain? or heart?

"But do you really think all teaching is inherently political?" she asked as he began sliding her dress over her shoulders.

"Yeaf, yeaf," he said with his face between her breasts.

"And a teacher, then, is responsible for more . . .," she lost her breath for a moment as she helped Clarence undo her bra. ". . . for more than just teaching the subject?"

"The . . . subject . . . is . . . the . . . teacher," he said in quick breaths, looking into her eyes and taking off his pants.

"Oh! Yes!" she whispered as his hand moved up her thigh. "The subject is the teacher! And we're all to blame!"

"The zone of proximal development," whispered Clarence tenderly as his light touch sent shivers undulating through Myrl's body.

She knew that was Vygotsky, because she had done her homework.

"Research!" His voice was getting hoarse. "Theory." His breathing was shallow now. "Theory. And . . ."

"Praxis!" yelled Clarence suddenly and (Myrl thought) perhaps too loudly. "Praxis! Praxis! Praxis!" And he slumped down on top of Myrl. She was stunned for a moment, until she remembered that "praxis" was just a fancy way of saying "putting into practice" and that people who talked about Freire often found themselves saying "praxis," even if they didn't intend to.

Wedge unflatteringly and uncomfortably into a corner of the sofa, with Clarence Bosworth (not a small man) on top of her, she couldn't decide, at that exact moment, whether he was a victim of premature ejaculation or of death. In either case, he wasn't moving and she felt intellectually drained, but strangely unfulfilled.

With some resolve, she managed to work her way out from under Clarence to the floor, and then, standing, she located the telephone. She picked up the receiver and dialed 911. While waiting for the operator, she cried out, in something like despair, or perhaps a leg cramp, to no one in particular, "Strunk! What about Strunk? Strunk and White?" She wished she knew the answer just then. She put down the phone and picked up Clarence's conference program. Tomorrow morning, during the concurrent sessions, there was the answer: 9:15-10:15, The Pele Room, "Syntax or Sin-Tax: Strunk and White Died for Our Sins."