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Edith L. Tiempo



In artistic literature the realm of the paradox and the paradoxical is always rife with magic. In front of one's very eyes—so it is often said of any miraculous happening—a plain and honest word transforms into "something rich and strange," like Prince Ferdinand's father in Ariel's "Full fathom five." Although this phenomenon may be observed in all forms of creative writing and is recognized in a variety of implementations, it is in poetry where the transforming function is easily at its most versatile. The transformation is achieved through the refined art of disclaiming, where the obvious meaning of the poem is subtly changed, and even irrevocably reversed, by the action of certain words or other poetic components that disclaim in a casual or "invisible" way, while apparently claiming not to be disclaiming at all.

An initial bit of disclaimer must be made here. The four poems included here for illustration are not claimed to be the best, or even among the best, of the respective authors, although it is true these are aesthetically solid in varying degrees. We have included them for the clear examples of disclaimers they provide and particularly, for their original and skillful use of this poetic practice.

The more familiar uses of the disclaimers today are just briefly mentioned, and in passing, since the concern here is centered on its more unusual implementations as an enriching instrument.

Poetic Disclaimers

The artistic disclaimer is a potent device for at least two reasons. First, although functioning on an obvious level, in an apparently straightforward fashion and in "open" view as a constituent of the poem, its disclaiming operation is absolutely *sub rosa*. Intentionally, its negating and qualifying properties are not pressed as such. Second, despite its unremarkable manifestation, the disclaimer, upon

examination, is found to enrich and make complex the poem's total communication because it forcibly alters the more overt projection of the poem by its powerful (because furtive) capacity to qualify or negate.

What makes the device so potent is not anything inherent in it. That is to say that any constituent of the poem (diction, rhythm, tone, structural sequence of details, meter, rhyme, dissonance or euphony, among others) may become a disclaimer, may be the secret agent to obliquely reverse the poem's more obvious communication, depending on how the poetic strategy positions this element in the text.

At its most unique, this transforming device goes beyond the tactic of ambush and is so constituted that its operation demands the total risking of the whole context; meaning, that the more valid the disclaimer's negation, the greater the risk of its undoing the entire poem because of its contrary nature. And therefore the more outstanding is its performance in ultimately reconciling itself to its context, in not undoing it but rather even magnifying the total communication. This is saying of course that it is again the poetic art itself, the strategies and decisions, that finally creates the magic of enrichment-by-complexity in this camouflaged manner.

The subtle invasion of complexity and ambivalence in the poem is merely the poet's attempt to approximate, or capture, or extend that which is authentic: the richness and intricacy of experience. (A so-called simple experience actually dredges up phalanxes of feelings and sensations in a packed moment of complexity.) The artist's inclusive vision, therefore, is said to be the articulation of the poetic insight in its full and poignant truth-telling; and this "full vision of life," using a term of Allen Tate, is avowedly the poem's enterprise to convey.

Since the fuller vision requires a variety of facets, an uncluttered poetic presentation runs the risk of an overly neat and ordered sequence of development. The disclaimers and their covert interjections and transformations serve to obviate such a calibrated order of development. As a consequence, too, the disclaimers perform a decisive role in the emergence of deeper insights in the poem resulting from the infusion of the fresher and richer complexity; new meanings evolve out of the disclaiming act, that reverses and otherwise alters the textual meanings—performing the change in deliberate and hidden fashion—and the change being done without destroying the more obvious meanings asserted by the poem.

Today the disclaimer is most commonly used just to insure that the poem does not fall into sentimentality. In this, its mildest role, it makes use of casual diction to generate the tough or offhand tone that balances the oversimplified view. The latter is so often productive of glib insights and the superficialities that we may find even in sophisticated works.

This note, however, is not concerned with the disclaimer in this role of agent for evoking a tempered poetic tone. Our present enterprise takes the less usual employment of the disclaimer today. Specifically, we present the covert way it rejects the established conclusion of the poem while apparently preserving that conclusion in all its pristine utterance; how it creates a totally new and deeper insight out of the materials of the "discarded" conclusion and generates complex insights in the process; in other words, how it becomes the clincher for the poetic rendering of a significant experience in its intricacy and variety.

The following are the characteristics of poetic disclaimers:

1. They are regular constituents of the poem but they also perform other, more hidden functions in enriching and transforming productively the obvious and simplified concept.
2. Being disclaimers they take on radical, contradictory, and negative qualities and can produce inversion, paradox, and the complexity of real life.
3. They operate in a subtle and covert manner; their disclaiming is not signaled openly.
4. Any aspect or device of the poem could act as disclaimers, whether diction, rhythm, rhyme, allusion, repetition, narrative or descriptive detail, tone, symbolic image, or other poetic constituents, the required disclaiming roles being defined by the meaningful strategies and decisions employed by the poem.
5. The poetic concepts and other ideas that the disclaimers modify or reverse are indeed destroyed, but do not become discarded or nullified elements in the poem; they are rather preserved as the crucial points of departure for the purposeful action of the disclaimers.
6. Despite their crucial negations and other contrary functions, the disclaimers are so crafted that they are firmly reconciled and contributory to the context they serve. They disrupt; but they belong in the poem and fulfill it.

7. They function crucially in directing the progressive development of the poem toward the final form and content of its resolution.
8. They keep the poetic structure from an overly neat and calibrated development; they lend spontaneity and a sense of randomness to the growth of the concept because of the shifting insights and meaningful interruptions they introduce.

The Individual Poems

We now proceed with concrete examples showing how poetic disclaimers operate.

The Bells Count in Our Blood

By Merlie Alunan-Wenceslao¹

*Every night at 8:00 we shall
ring the bell for Father Romano,
and we shall continue to do so
until he is found.*

— The Redemptorist Community
Dumaguete City
September 1985

Every night just as we settle
To coffee or a mug of cold beer,
They ring the bells —
A crisp quick flurry first, then
Decorous as in a knell, ten counts.
Into the darkness newly fallen
The cadence calls for a brother lost.

At home as we try to wash off
With music and a little loving
The grime of markets from our souls —
The day's trading of truth for bread,
Masks of honor, guises of peace —
The clear sounds infusing the air
Deny us the salve of forgetting.

We know for what they lost him,
Why expedient tyrants required
His name effaced, his bones hidden.

As we bend over the heads of children
 Fighting sleep, not quite done with play,
 The bells vibrating remind us how
 Our fear conspires to seal his doom.

We could say to the ringers:
 Your bells won't bring him back.
 But just suppose that it could,
 What would you have?
 A body maimed, perhaps, beyond belief —
 Toes and fingers gone, teeth missing,
 Tongue cut off, memory hacked witless.

The nights in our town
 Are flavored with the dread
 The bells salt down measured
 From their tall dark tower.
 It falls upon our raw minds wanting sleep.
 Shall we stop them? Though we smart
 We know they keep us from decay.

Shared in this keening
 A rhythm beating all night long
 In our veins, truth is truth still
 Though unworded. The bells
 Count in our blood the heart of all
 We must restore. Tomorrow, we vow,
 Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

In the poem, "The Bells Count in Our Blood," the townspeople take the church bells' nightly ringing as a constant reminder, a prick at their conscience, a prodding for them to protest the outrage of the untimely disappearance and/or execution of the activist-priest, Father Rudy Romano. In response to the bells' repeated tugging at their sense of honor and justice, the townspeople acknowledge it as their duty to protest his martyrdom, however threatening and dangerous such an undertaking would be to their own safety. So no matter how the tolling bells assault their conscience, even breaking into the homely joys of their daily routines, they live with the constant reproach of the bells ringing in their ears: "Shall we stop them? Though we smart / We know they keep us from decay." This is the affirmative response to duty (no matter how unpleasant), since it acknowledges that it keeps the people from moral weakness and decay.

The disclaimer, "tomorrow," comes in to complicate this affirmative resolution by subtly introducing a contrary attitude: "Tomorrow" is when the people will take action. Thus, "Tomorrow, we vow,/ Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow." These disclaiming words indubitably introduce a negative element to the townpeople's response.

What happens then to the poetic concept? From "Accepting unpleasant but moral duty is good for the soul" it broadens out to reveal a paradoxical and sad truth about human nature: In difficult and crucial decisions, man's nature is such that his "yes" and "no" are interlocked in one operation: "a rhythm beating . . . in our veins"; "The bells count in our blood." Hence, it is poetically justified that the very bells causing the affirmative response ("yes") should also lend their repetitive tolling rhythm to the negative element ("no") that has been introduced, thus: "Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow." (Maybe, just forget it?)

In any case it is plain how the disclaiming voice has replaced the obvious concept (accepting unpleasant duty) with a subtle, rich, and broader comment on human nature: . . . man's nature is such that his "yes" and "no" are interlocked in one operation, one is not evoked without the other.

TOTEM: On Eastern Island

By Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas²

Stranded between the waves
And the seamed green hill,
At what we call the world's high
Noon, rises the imperturbable enigma:
Easter Islands's bronze sun and
The Faces solemn on the sand.

You almost wish
They were planted there only
By the wind's brusque lines,
These faiths of our fathers,
Emerging like a half-told truth:
Rocks with lips too straight
To be accidental, they remain

Faces only —
Their absent feet
Walk deep within the hillsides,

Their groins partake of the roar
Of hidden fires, their knees join
At the roots of rivers;

Resurrection came early at Easter Island.
These Faces rise
Haphazard with ancientness,
Almost gay, almost
Triumphant in their merest secret
(Earth is the body, and we
The imperfect gift);
Their shoulders are the shores we stand on.

When a poetic concept is revealed through a simplified and predictable development the insight is bound to be bromidic, at best. A poetic truth cannot be a bare assertion but a demonstration, and its authenticity is supplied by the various facets and contrapositions out of which it is finally revealed. In "TOTEM: On Easter Island," the diverse facets of the poetic concept are shaped by the disclaimers, propelling the poem from phase to phase in the growth to its final resolution.

The poem dramatizes the introspected reactions of a civilized person (represented by the persona) when confronted with the eroding specters of mankind's prehistoric beginnings. These unknown and fearful beginnings are manifested by the half-buried statues that had been prehistorically dispersed on a long hillslope on Easter Island.

Three disclaimers create the different shifts that shape the final resolution of this poem: "feet," "Faces," and "shoulders."

First, the disclaimer, "feet," quickly moves from its negative position of nullity ("absent feet") to assume a positive function; that is, it operates as the crucial symbol representing the creative life-power, the Source, the very foundation of man's being—for the absent limbs still walk deep in those regions of furious creation, where they "partake of the roar/of hidden fires."

Second, we note likewise, that "Faces," in its progressive operation as disclaimer, also assumes ambivalent functions: something to fear and to understand: "the imperturbable enigma"; a mere imperfect manifestation of the creative power that shaped them ("they remain/Faces only—"); the acceptable, though imperfectly understood point from which to view man's history; and the "shoulders" being offered as the "shores" to serve as the viewpoint. Thus, "shoulders" functions more as a symbol within the final disclaiming-asserting line of the poem.

In this manner the three disclaimers, particularly "feet" and "Faces," move the texture of the meaning into this sequence of shifting resolutions:

1. The first confrontation with mankind's prehistory (as represented in the faces of the totems) exposes it as an enigma, dark and unknown.
2. The buried "feet" give an idea of the great Source of power from which man emerged, and thus, in contrast the "Faces" appear now as the (imperfect) manifestation of that creative power, with which the "absent feet" are still in contact.
3. The "Faces" become understood finally as the "resurrected" or discovered relics of our beginnings. The final acceptance and understanding grow out of the awareness that these totems, after all, do expose the "faiths of our fathers," for they were crafted out of the vision and inspiration of our prehistoric forebears, with the ungainly totem-vision "emerging like a half-told truth." With the now acknowledged "Faces," the "shoulders" are likewise recognized to serve as the vantage point ("shores") from which to view man's prehistory. Mankind's understanding being now enlightened, we can affirm not only the prehistory, the past, but also whatever we view of the present and the foreseeable future ("the shores we stand on").

The way the poetic insight is developed in this poem preserves an evident approximation of the mind's grasp of an insight as a "simultaneous realization." In other words, the disclaimers have obviated a calibrated orderliness with their creative disruptions, thus allowing for the impression of simultaneousness in the way the cluster of ideas come together in the poem.

Prayer

Myrna Peña-Reyes³

Father,
Wind breaks a world
Outside my window,
But thunder is slow
To crack the light.

I do not crouch
 At your side —
 I remember cold
 But do not feel
 The wet wind.

In nightmare
 Lions bored me
 At a show
 Where I
 Was lion tamer.

So show me
 Show me where
 The naked children sing
 And race their leaf boats
 In a muddy stream;

And burn me
 Burn me, Father, so
 I'll play with lions
 And still know
 The terror in a claw.

As in the two preceding poems, "Prayer" also employs disclaimers that shift to ambivalent and even contrary positions as the poem moves progressively from the tentative resolution to the final resolution. Two disclaimers in the poem, "show" and "play" reveal their respective virtuositities in the divergent meanings they generate and in the shifted textual interpretations that result thereby.

The persona is obviously a young girl who must have never really undergone any initiation into life's exciting and fearful hazards, and finds herself disabled in her capacity to respond to the normal world of feeling. Having had no real occasion to feel fear or insecurity she finds life a blasé matter, and even danger evokes neither discomfort nor the cold-sweaty sense of peril: "I remember cold/ But do not feel / The wet wind," and in a dream where she is lion-tamer at a stage show, she is simply bored by the lions.

The main disclaimers of the poem, "show" and "play," assume contradictory meanings that in the end result in a beautiful specie of ambiguity: That is, the persona, even while longing to share in the normal fears and pains of the world of reality, and even asking to be "burned" in the process, also realizes that into this harsh real-

ity she has to incorporate the element of make-believe; and that the essence of "play" (game) with all its built-in risk and gamble and hazard should be introduced into the real hazards one must inevitably encounter.

In effect, she is saying "I would have the real world, but I would like its pains and perils to have the pleasant risk and challenge of a game." So the paradoxical resolution is thus confirmed: For a normal life the element of non-reality is a mandatory component of reality—otherwise, one is either permanently "burned," or suffers the death-in-life of boredom and indifference.

This is the shifting and "contradicting" way the two disclaimers, "show" and "play," function in the poem. "Show" is used initially as a negative element in the dream-nightmare (symbol of non-reality) where she is lion-tamer in a stage show (reality doubly removed at this point, a show within a dream, the unreal within the unreal); unnaturally, she feels no fear and is merely bored by the lions. But "show" makes a turn-about to become the positive element, when the girl prays to be brought to reality: "So show me / Show me where / The naked children sing . . ." She wants to be shown the living world and be in touch with it.

"Play," likewise, moves from the negative position implied in the dream's stage-show (a play) to the positive meaning engendered by the singing children as they play in the stream. The third and final position of "play" is in the ambivalent "play with lions," implying both pleasure and hazard: "... so / I'll play with lions / And still know / The terror in a claw."

Afternoon Gardener

By Alfred A. Yuson⁴

For him, depth is unbecoming.
He'd rather stare down the measure
of brown road
into the green froth of hills beginning
and the finite blue of finished mountains.

He takes his coffee levelled,
musing about the ants
and what he regards
as their honest dimensions.

Someday he'd come right off the ground
 he works and waters in familiar
 genuflection, Come right off and crawl
 down the measure of brown road,
 Crawl right off from his prayers
 With a teaspoon and a hoe,
 Into the finite green and the beginning blue.

The proper crafting of "Afternoon Gardener" depends particularly on the progressive development of its concept. As a matter of routine a poem requires development toward a peak where the poetic intention has been crafted meaningfully to its fullest form, both in the content and in the manner of execution. In moving to a progressive development, "Afternoon Gardener" is at once faced with two areas of difficulty. The first arises from the fact that what the poem seeks to develop is an ambiguous idea, where two contradictory attitudes require equal exposure and confirmation. Without the operation of the disclaimers a unified development would have been hobbled by the contradictory factors of his concept.

The poetic persona here is a humble but very perspicacious gardener who avows a preference for the lower station in life, but who at the same time declares a preference for a more eminent life for himself. Hence, the poem is inherently saddled with the burden of reconciling this ambiguity. In the poem, the contradiction is expressed in the furtively equivocal wording of the persona's declaration to leave the gardener's job and begin a life of higher priorities; that is, his decision is announced in such a way that the same decision is also disclaimed. (Some would simplify the persona's attitude by calling it a specie of considered but wishful thinking.) Ultimately, however, a close examination of the disclaimers' operation proves that despite his announced decision, he indeed prefers the humble life and would not leave it.

The poem's second difficulty in carrying out a progressive movement to its peak is caused by the fact that the poem, through the persona, is ultimately rejecting the higher order of life and resting the actual preference on the lower order. So, how does one reach a peak for the exalting of the low? Again the properly-positioned disclaimers resolve this second concern, as explained below.

The poem uses a group of disclaimers, each one adroitly taking on both the opposing functions required by the contradictory concept. These disclaimers are: "hills beginning" and "finite blue," with

their variants, "finite green," and "beginning blue"; "honest dimensions"; "Someday"; "crawl down" and "crawl right off"; "measure"; "teaspoon" and "hoe," and "depth."

At the poem's peak, all these disclaimers simultaneously forge the gardener's avowal and disavowal. That is, in the first and second stanzas, these words uphold his choice for the humble life. But in the last, the peak-stanza, when he "apostasizes," these very same words disclaim his announced act of departure. "Someday" puts the shifted preference in the realm of the hypothetical; "Crawl down" and the feeble braggadocio in "crawl right off" show an almost craven manner of leaving for the distant heights that beckon; "measure" of brown road suggests no expansive and shining setting-forth; the reductive "teaspoon" and "hoe" are not cast off, but remain the instruments for continuing his present humble life style; and "Depth," the virtuoso among the congeries of disclaimers—for "depth" means both the low and exalted (profound or deep, pertaining to intellectual superiority). So, the very first line "For him depth is unbecoming," means the rejection of either the high or the low, and by inference, the preference for either—all depending on the interpretation of "depth." With this disclaimer the ambiguity is served from the very start.

The following are other disclaimers confirming that despite the persona's declared decision to move, he actually intends to remain the humble (but astute) gardener, who, in the afternoon of his life, hesitates to make the momentous shift:

1. "Honest dimensions" may refer to the ants' big nature, their integrity, and at the same time to their meagerness.
2. "Stare" down the measure of brown road disclaims any bold or definite intention to move—no projected action, only a speculation.
3. Finally, this most furtive of the disclaimers: Despite the gardener's announced "decision," the last line's "finite green" and "beginning blue" actually repeat the "green froth of hills beginning" and the "finite blue of finished mountains" of the first stanza, this reversion being a clear disclaimer indicating that the poetic problem ends where it begins—a status quo, although the persona has surely given his "shift" a good try!

Thus, the poem does reach the required peak of resolution, at the point of the gardener's decision for the heights—in spite of its reversion to the beginning of the poem because of the action of the

covert disclaimers. For in this way, the backtracking dramatizes the true but hidden intention of the gardener to affirm the humble life.

Conclusion

The four poems that have been discussed illustrate the hidden and understated way the disclaimer introduces enrichment and the element of life's complexity and a broadened vision into otherwise generalized and simplified poetic concepts. We note that these enhancing qualities are made possible because of the disclaimer's contrary voice that subtly but definitely qualifies the revelation, and modifies the meaning of the text thereby. We have likewise observed that any constituent of a given poetic text could be used to assume the functions of this contrary voice.

Notes

1. Merlie Alunan-Wenceslao was Coordinator for the Creative Writing Program of Silliman University for five years, while studying for her Ph.D. degree. She is back to her teaching position at U.P. Tacloban and is writing her dissertation paper. "The Bells Count in Our Blood" has appeared in *Versus*, eds. Alfredo N. Salanga and Esther M. Pacheco (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1986). The martyrdom of the activist-priest, Father Rudy Romano, inspired the poem. His body was never recovered.

2. Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas left for the States with her family after earning a Ph.D. in English and Literature at Silliman University. She is now the Program Administrator of the U.S. State Department-sponsored International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. "TOTEM: On Easter Island" is included in the book of her collected early poems, *Mountain Sacraments* (De La Salle University Press, 1991). The poem presages the poet's recent interest in the ethnic arts of some American Indian tribes.

3. Myrna Peña-Reyes was a former staff member of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop and taught for many years in the Department of English and Literature. She was editor of F.S. Jose's *Solidarity* before she married William Sweet, the American poet, and left the country to live in Oregon. She has published in the States a volume of her poetry, *River-Singing Stone*. "Prayer," an early poem, has appeared in some Philippine magazines, including a *Solidaridad* publication, and in *Poetry Through Image and Statement*, by Edith L. Tiempo (in press with Rex Publishing, Manila).

4. Alfred "Krip" A. Yuson is a leading writer of the country. His versatile output includes poetry, fiction, essays, criticism, and reviews. He is the editor of *Caracoa*, the poetry magazine which is the official publication of the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC). Krip Yuson has been a lecturer and panel critic at the Silliman University National Writers Workshop for many years. "Afternoon Gardener," an early poem, is included in his first poetry collection, *Sea Serpents* (Monsoon Press, 1980).