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Maria Elena Barretto-Chow

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## Edith Tiempo and the Problem of Language in Philippine Poetry

MARIA ELENA BARRETTO-CHOW

An earlier article in *Philippine Studies* (37 [1989]: 255-82) attempted to outline the poetic theory of Edith L. Tiempo. The present note is a summary of her position on the use of English in Philippine poetry.

In a 1966 essay on "Philippine Poetry in English," Philippine poet, critic and novelist Edith Tiempo wrote of the difficulties encountered by the Philippine poet who seeks to express Filipino experience in an alien tongue (in this case, English). One appreciates the significance of the discussion for Tiempo is herself one such poet, in fact one of the better known Filipino writers in English.

### LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

The problem of language, according to Tiempo, is a problem of incongruity between the native substance and the foreign medium.<sup>1</sup> There is much contextual reality involved in language. On the surface, it seems to be simply a store of words governed by rules of pronunciation, syntax, usage, etc. However, Tiempo states, there is a need to recognize that most words acquire a host of associative meanings, inseparable from the word and resulting from constant use in various situations. Moreover one should not lose sight of the fact that a language is born out of a particular context (of geography, race, culture etc.) and therefore, there is also a need to consider "the way of thinking that has begotten it."<sup>2</sup>

The Filipino who opts to write in English must grapple not only with the foreign tongue but also with that larger reality—the network

1. Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry in English," *Silliman Journal* 13 (1966): 617.

2. *Ibid.*

of connotations and the entire complex of thought, feeling and experience that has shaped it. This he must do, while simultaneously grappling with the experience he wishes to communicate, born out of its own unique cultural womb. Tiempo thus underscores the complexity of Filipino poetry in English. The act of poetry is complex enough as it is; it is made even more so by the issue of language. The Filipino, writing in English, must discover a way to make his words reveal "or dramatize an older, indigenous way of dealing with concepts."<sup>3</sup>

Tiempo offers examples of the difficulties inherent in this situation. These are taken from an article she published as early as 1954, under the title "The Use of English in Philippine Creative Writing." Reprinted with some revisions under the title "English in the Craft of a Filipino Fictionist," it explores the language problem faced by writers of the short story. It discusses the fiction of Manuel Arguilla, in an attempt to show how he devised ways of responding creatively to this problem. Despite this focus on fiction, however, it incorporates insights relevant to other literary forms.

One aspect of the language problem is that there are certain English words or phrases blatantly incongruous with Philippine experience

because they are used to depict non-existent equivalents or falsify the parallel situations they intend to depict . . . Such phrases as "singing lightly as a lark," "black as a raven's wing" (*there are neither larks nor ravens in the Philippines*) and colloquialisms and slangs as "I can lick you" . . . "it's not worth a rap" . . . are eminently incongruous because they smack too much of special foreign backgrounds to be applicable to markedly indigenous material.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty is clear, but it does not pose too serious a problem, for a writer intent on depicting Filipino experience in his work could conscientiously avoid ravens, larks, snowflakes and the like.

There is, however, a more serious difficulty involved. For there are certain Filipino experiences which, due to their cultural uniqueness, are difficult to express in English. An example would be the experience conveyed by the word "irap." One may try to define it as "a sullen look," a definition that tries to convey the mixture of resentment and withdrawal therein but which does not manage to communicate the true texture and dimensions of the original. Tiempo herself attempts to define the word; but although she comes up with a definition that is three lines long, the experience still seems inade-

3. Ibid.

4. Edith L. Tiempo. "The Use of English in Philippine Creative Writing," *Silliman Journal* 1 (Jan. 1954): 1.

quately expressed in the translation. (Tiempo's definition reads: "a particular look or way of looking which contains a mixture of hurt, reproach, fondness, mild anger, passive concern; the feelings vary slightly with the situation and the individuals concerned."<sup>5</sup> The writer, conscious of the economy and precision required in poetry, may be hard-pressed to communicate the "irap" experience in English. Perhaps, the lack of a linguistic equivalent is due to the fact that the Anglo-Saxon psyche makes little or no room for such a behavioral pattern.

The point, however, is not to account for the missing equivalent but to emphasize the serious implications of this and similar situations. This illustrates that there may be areas of knowledge and experience so unique to a certain culture and life-style that difficulty arises in the effort to express these particulars in another tongue. Granted that this is so, it would follow that a poet may be unable to speak of certain experiences precisely because the foreign language "gets in the way" of the utterance.

#### SUBJECT AND POET IN CONTEXT

Reflecting on the language problem and on the Filipino poet's response to it, Tiempo draws a relationship between the problem and a sacrifice of subject matter which these poets have been performing. She describes this sacrifice thus: "reading through any anthropology of Philippine poetry . . . one is struck by the scarcity of material that deals squarely with the socio-political concerns of the country."<sup>6</sup> It is Tiempo's belief that the lack of attention paid these issues may be traced to the fact that such subjects are highly particularized and deal with specific national situations, which poets find difficult to express in the foreign language. The latter's response to this difficulty is a compromise which entails the retention of the medium and the avoidance of such subjects in favor of more viable ones. These latter are neutral, private experiences which are devoid of any particular national or indigenous character. As Tiempo explains:

. . . at present the Philippine poet writing in English seems to feel safer dealing with the "inner man" when the material does not demand the projection of a very particularized social experience; when it does not

5. Edith L. Tiempo, "English in the Craft of a Filipino Fictionist, *General Education Journal* 16 (1968-69): 149.

6. Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry," p. 618.

require the definition of a specific pain that is felt in the national marrow and seared into the national flesh.<sup>7</sup>

Tiempo's idea of poetic subjects that are indigenous, that are Filipino in character, seems to involve those which deal with sociological and political realities; perhaps because these pierce the very core of the national situation; perhaps because they speak not of one individual feeling a personal pain but of "the predicament of the collective man" in a specific national context.<sup>8</sup> This is significant—that Tiempo defines a poem's national character by the attention that it pays contemporary societal problems and issues.

On the other hand, she gives examples of the neutral, private poetry she mentions:

... the most impressive poetry in the Philippines today is usually about a neutral situation that becomes charged and significant through the sophisticated insights of the poet. This is very fine . . . Emmanuel Torres writes about a woman at the window; Fidel de Castro speculates on the house mouse; Leonidas Benesa has a soliloquy on the stranger at the gate . . . these and many others of their kind show how the poetic sense encompasses an innocent situation and transforms it into an experience that generates some truth about human conduct. This is very good poetry, and most of the finest poems anywhere are of this order.<sup>9</sup>

Tiempo's unmistakably positive assessment of such poetry is based on her articulated norms. She praises the poet's ability to approach a prosaic, ordinary circumstance, fashion it into an experience which the reader can undergo and thus lead him beyond the prosaic-ness into an awareness of a valuable insight.

These virtues notwithstanding, Tiempo recognizes that the success of such poetry is purchased at a price: the sacrifice of essentials whose absence affects the quality of the poem in a very real way. She explains: "One can see that for this compromise, the poetry has to pay dearly . . . [it] is not full-bodied; it is probably becoming more ivory-towered than it should be."<sup>10</sup> Neutrality, therefore, causes both isolationism and incompleteness. The ivory-tower image depicts this type of poetry as being cut off from the mainstream of communal life and reality. It is held aloft, indicating that it is beyond the comprehension of the masses since it deals primarily with very private and personal experiences. One should, perhaps, think of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, beautiful and tragic, captive in her tower, severed from all that was

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 620.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 619.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 621.

living and vital. The restriction is not one of *vision*, for the tower may have, in fact, does have its windows;<sup>11</sup> it is, rather, a restriction of *engagement*, of involvement in that which lies beyond and below.

The effect of the isolation is a lack of body, an incompleteness. Such poetry fails to depict many other (and perhaps, more important?) facets of reality. It sorely lacks a sense of national character and identity, which would endow it with uniqueness in the midst of poetry from other nations and cultures. Tiempo refers to a comment made by a visiting lecturer from the United States, who remarked: "I can't see any difference between this poem and a poem written in Greenup, Kentucky."<sup>12</sup>

Aside from affecting the poem in this manner, neutrality of subject also affects the writer himself; it leads him to an evasion of "the responsibility of asserting for others . . . [the poet] speaks only of his own esoteric insights."<sup>13</sup> This statement implies that Tiempo believes that a poet must act as a voice for his people. Endowed with the gift of vision and articulation, he must use this gift for others. To deal with personal experience and esoteric insights alone is to evade his responsibility.<sup>14</sup> In this, Tiempo sounds almost like Salvador P. Lopez who insists that literature commit itself to society. She seems to imply that it is not enough for a poem to be a beautiful, well-constructed, aesthetically breath-taking whole.

Tiempo's insights in this regard are significant and perhaps rather unexpected. She reveals an awareness of context on two levels: first, the context that surrounds language, which is the poet's major tool; and second, that which surrounds the writer and his work. She apparently wishes to bring to the fore the idea that while a text may be understood, appreciated and evaluated in itself, it is also inevitably part of a larger reality, the human community, the milieu within which it was created.

#### POETIC COMPROMISE

There are certain portions of the essay which are intriguing because they seem to deviate from the intent of the rest. First, subsequent to her analysis of the language problem and its various impli-

11. Tiempo maintains that the neutral poet is not unaware of such realities; he has insight into them but finds difficulty in appropriating such subject matter for his art.

12. Jesse Stuart, quoted by Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry in English," p. 620.

13. Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry," p. 619.

14. The very use of the word "esoteric" suggests that by nature, these insights are understood only by a select few.

cations, Tiempo takes a step backward to reflect on this situation of compromise. In this process, she seems caught between her understanding and appreciation of the poets' reasons for the compromise and her awareness of its "debilitating" effects. Thus, toward the end of the discussion, she refuses to categorically judge the rightness or wrongness of the move:

I have indicated how a number of poets have deliberately pitched their nets into neutral waters, avoiding the deeply indigenous materials. I do not know if this decision is wise or unwise, finally. To them it is the only procedure under the circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, Tiempo seems to be applying some kind of "braking" mechanism. After having proceeded forward in an interesting and rather surprising direction, she now stops for something close to a reconsideration. She appears to be pleading the case of the poets in question, describing the compromise as being the only course they believed was open to them at this time. It is interesting to note, however, that no reference was made to the possibility of these poets turning away from English and towards the vernacular, a course of action which would resolve the incongruity between language and material. In fact, the use of English seems to be considered a *sine qua non* in this regard.

In another essay, however, Tiempo asks a question relevant to this point. "If we find difficulty with the foreign tool, why use it?"<sup>16</sup> Her reply underscores the value of the English language in the Philippine context. It emphasizes the fact that English has become a tool for the growth of the Filipino sensibility, by providing the venue for expressing ideas and experiences which cannot be embodied in the vernacular. (Such insights are presumably those of a foreign or international character.)

... the problem is not so easily solved by a simple rejection of the English medium because if there are native nuances that cannot be expressed in English, so are there new concepts opened up to the Philippine sensibility by the English tool, rich mines of ideas which are impossible to explore in their vernaculars. The English language has made it possible for the Philippine outlook to grow toward directions as yet unassimilated into the semantics of the vernaculars.<sup>17</sup>

The rejection of English, therefore, would be a very real cause of impoverishment.

15. Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry," p. 621.

16. Edith L. Tiempo, "English in the Craft of the Filipino Fictionist," p. 150.

17. Ibid.

Second, Tiempo concludes the piece with the assertion that the poets in question face a concomitant problem of audience. Following is her analysis of this problem:

Because of this direction, because of the nature of the poetry that they write, the poets are wistfully wanting an audience outside of their country. One can see their problems regarding audience and publication. The most widely-read poets in the Philippines today are those who write in the excessive and emotional style of the last century. And those who write in the new restrained fashion are accused of being obscure and probably snobbish. The serious poet's resort is to look for an audience elsewhere that would understand and listen.<sup>18</sup>

These statements are laden with implications. Tiempo merges her observations regarding two distinct matters: the substance of poetry (whether indigenous or neutral; private or social) *and* the manner by which that substance is communicated (the style of the last century as against the newer mode.) Second, she speaks of three groups of poets in the Philippine mainstream: one, those who write the neutral poetry previously discussed; two, those who write in the mode of the last century (she does not specify the subject of the poems produced by this group, only the manner in which they write); and three, those who subscribe to the contemporary style characterized by restraint and discipline (which the reader recognizes to be in accordance with Tiempo's own poetic theory.) Third, she equates the first group and the third on the basis of their common problem of audience. In this manner, she points out two reasons for the problem. One is that the content of these works is too esoteric to be appreciated by the majority of Filipino readers. A second reason is that such poetry is written in a style that may be too difficult to understand. (One recalls that a poet achieves restraint through indirection, ambiguity, rendition and a keen sense of aesthetic form.) There is, therefore, a double barrier between the poets and their audience: the esoteric subjects of the works and the rather sophisticated manner of presentation.

The intriguing portion of this paragraph is found in the last statement which speaks about the *serious* poet's last resort. Tiempo's use of the word "serious" may be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, she could mean that these poets are *intent* on reaching an audience and are seriously trying to get their works published. On the other hand, it could be a value judgment on her part, consistent with her articulated poetics. She is therefore evaluating poets of the neutral and restrained tradition as serious artists, as writers who live up to

18. Edith L. Tiempo, "Philippine Poetry," p. 621.



her requirements and expectations. If this is so, then it would mean a recognition that the kind of poetry which she espouses is not read by the community within which it is created. It is not widely-read perhaps because the majority of the audience find difficulty in understanding such works.

#### TIEMPO'S RESPONSE

What is Tiempo's idea of a response to this situation? The statement makes clear her belief that if a poet is not being read in his community, he might as well look elsewhere for an audience. But, one wonders, does this not contradict her earlier declaration of the poet's responsibility to his society? One recalls how clearly she has prescribed that a poet must be aware of and write about a reality larger than his personal visions and individual experiences. This reality she describes as social in nature ("community problems like slums and delinquents and beggars . . .")<sup>19</sup> as well as political:

[The Philippine poet] is very much aware of his country's position in the Far East and of his country's international relations . . . [he] is realizing the interesting but peculiar tension of having to deal with the problems of an awakened nationalism and at the same time to reconcile with the equally urgent spirit of internationalism.<sup>20</sup>

These are their social and political issues which Tiempo feels should make their way into Philippine poetry.

In the concluding portion of the essay, Tiempo seeks to apply a second "braking" mechanism. Her suggestion that Filipino poets attempt an adjustment of subject matter (in the light of the need for social commitment) *does not* include an adjustment in the style or mode of writing. She would have the Filipino poet fulfill his commitment to his society by depicting issues and situations of national concern; but she would not have him compromise his adherence to basic poetic procedures such as restraint and rendition, even if this would mean an effort towards making his poetry more accessible to the masses. Thus, Tiempo's definition of a poet's commitment to society is a restricted one.

One is even more intrigued by Tiempo's attitude toward the fact that some Filipino poetry has been published abroad. She comments:

In the summer of 1964, the *Beloit Poetry Journal* in Wisconsin devoted its whole summer issue to the works of sixteen Philippine contemporary poets.

19. Ibid., p. 620.

20. Ibid.

*Poetry* magazine in Chicago has published the poems of at least four Philippine poets in the last ten years or so.

All this is slow but encouraging. It is a small country and must work its way to the mainstream.<sup>21</sup>

One wonders what it is that Tiempo finds encouraging. Is it that Filipino poets have gained recognition in the United States? If so, would this not indicate an over-attention to acceptance by alien readers and critics, especially in view of the apparent indifference to the fact that the majority of Philippine readers do not, can not comprehend these works? It would seem that the Filipino poet in English, recognizing that he is not understood by his own community, turns his back on that society and seeks stamps of approval elsewhere. Furthermore, Tiempo seems to approve of this course of action. In her view, therefore, the poet is not duty-bound to make himself understood by the masses. He is strongly enjoined to write about the situation of the masses but he is not required to refashion his art in order to ensure that he is speaking, clearly and understandably, to them. Tiempo still holds on to her previously established concept of the responsible reader of poetry.

Hence, one is intrigued by the apparent contradictions of thought in this essay. On one hand, it appears to espouse the principle of social commitment. Yet, in other instances, it does reaffirm Tiempo's established definition of poetry as a difficult art accessible to a select few.

Perhaps, however, one should not view these shifts of thought strictly as contradictions. They may be manifestations of Tiempo's willingness to contend with issues that disturb the equanimity of her poetics, with realities that are not easily-reconciled with her fundamental theories. Thus, she reflects on these issues and their implications, and *begins* to work out some feasible modes of adjusting to them. (It must be made clear, however, that most of these adjustments are made implicitly; Tiempo makes no "formal announcements" in this regard.)

## CONCLUSION

One recalls that the essay on the language problem in Philippine poetry was written in 1966, a period of turbulence which Rolando Tinio describes in the following manner:

21. Ibid.

Filipino poetry in English became a hopeful beginning for a dynamic tradition until, by the 1960's, the nationalists came around and arraigned [the Filipino poet] for being more the poet rather than the Filipino, and now, if he is a good citizen, he must decide whether the poem he will write tomorrow should be a good poem no matter what it is about and in whatever language it is written, or whether it should be a testament of love for the motherland, and a contribution to the growing sense of national identity.<sup>22</sup>

In this light, could Tiempo's essay be judged as a concession to the moment? Perhaps. And, one may choose to interpret this in one of two ways. It could be taken negatively as an example of a writer trying to "get in on" a popular trend (in this case, the consciousness of national identity) without much wholeheartedness or sincerity. However, it can, and perhaps should, be interpreted in a positive light. It may be a manifestation of Tiempo's interest in the meaning and value of a particular literary atmosphere. It may indicate her perception of certain insights with which she agrees, but with a corresponding caution (understandable and worthy of respect) regarding the extent to which she shall effect certain adjustments on her poetics.

22. Rolando S. Tinio, "Period of Awareness: The Poets," *Brown Heritage*, ed. Antonio G. Manuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), p. 624.