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## **To Be Free: The Edge of Greatness**

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

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## Review Article

### TO BE FREE: THE EDGE OF GREATNESS

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

TO BE FREE. A novel by Edilberto K. Tiempo. Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1972. 334 pages.

*To Be Free* is Edilberto Tiempo's third novel. *Watch in the Night* was published in 1953 (published abroad under the title of *Cry Slaughter*) and *More Than Conquerors* in 1964. But his latest novel is far and away his best and gives promise of the greatness that is still to come.

In working with his material in *To Be Free* Tiempo had to make, perhaps only on the level of the creative unconscious, several choices which determined the shape of his novel. He had to decide whether to emphasize theme or character. He had to choose between writing about one central character or the whole Alcantara family. In the technical jargon, he had to choose between writing a heroic or a dynastic novel. And finally Tiempo had to make some pragmatic decisions about the form of his "vision," decisions concerning length, chronology, and genre. These are basically questions of Theme, of Character, and of Technique, the traditional categories of criticism, and I would like to discuss them in that order.

#### *The Freedom Theme*

Tiempo's novel is the story of five generations of the Alcantara family of Nueva Vizcaya, from the patriarch Capitan Lucas Alcantara to his great-great-grandson Ruben, and of some 60 years of history, from about 1890 to the early 1950s. But, more than that, it is a story of freedom. Tiempo has given us the creative artist's picture of freedom in all its manifestations, what Teresita Rodriguez calls a "panoramic definition of freedom." The novel is the story of people struggling against domination in all its forms.

There is national freedom, first of all, pictured on three levels of foreign domination and in three historical epochs — the colonialism of Spain and the United States and the military domination of Japan. There is also the

fourth level of economic colonialism that is expressed so vehemently in the speeches of Remegio [*sic*, p. 126] Salazar in chapter 15 on American economic imperialism. Tiempo also outlines a picture of internal national freedom in the three postwar elections that he describes in some detail. Bettu Alcantara wins the first election because he compromises principles in the service of the good and engages in some not so subtle political maneuvering and vote buying. The pragmatist in him tells him that the end justifies the means. He wins reelection four years later because he won't, or doesn't need to, buy any votes. Bettu's party loses the third election because this time he refuses to compromise. On Tiempo's score card, one win for political freedom, one loss, and one draw. But the reader has the nagging suspicion that all three should go in the loss column.

The second face of freedom is cultural. The symbol of that freedom for Tiempo is the Gaddang custom of the groom's service in the home of the bride before he can marry her. Lamberto observes the custom with five years of service before he marries Luisa. His daughter Teodora marries without observing the custom, and his granddaughter Consuelo Luisa majors in Victorian literature and writes a research paper on the custom of servitude (pp. 202-3) but has a child outside of marriage. The observance and nonobservance of the cultural servitude is thus critical in the three middle generations of the Alcantara family in 1895, 1921, and 1947 — in Spanish times, under American rule, and in the first years of Philippine independence.

Cultural freedom also appears in two other areas, in the characterization of Padre Pascual in chapters 6 and 7, which is reminiscent of Rizal's portrait of the friars, and in the struggle to integrate the cultural and social minorities — the Igorot and the Arian (in the past, the servant class in Nueva Vizcaya, p. 332; Tagalog *alipin*?). It is ironic that in the very act of becoming free from social inferiority, the Arian Nieves Lariola insists on the ritual washing of feet that the culture demands. Tiempo seems to be saying that man is not even free to be free!

Finally, Tiempo's novel pictures the implications of freedom and non-freedom on the personal level. For Hilarion, as all the critics have pointed out, freedom is an abstraction. He goes to Europe in 1917 to fight for a principle, and he demands that elections be won on principles. For Lamberto freedom is a more concrete thing. It is pragmatic, a twisting abstraction that must be pinned down in personal action. For Lamberto it means not philosophy but a series of personal choices — to submit to the demands of servitude or not, to stand idly by in the face of injustice or to oppose it, to win an election by any means whatever or to lose it honestly, to retreat to the hills in the face of military might or to stay in the town and collaborate, to accept a changing world or to fight for the old way of doing things. "Hilarion lived in the dreadful loneliness of believing ahead of his time," but for Bettu "living was now and here, following a rule of conduct rigid [*sic*.] enough to allow for errors" (p. 330).

In the final analysis, Tiempo seems to be telling us, freedom is not something outside us, but the personal integrity within us. As Rubio says, I am free "inside me," and that is what makes all the difference. "What mattered finally was preserving a bedrock decency that would be honored

no matter what the time or place. It had taken him all his lifetime to see it that way" (p. 329).

### Character

There is a subtheme which runs through the novel — the theme of change which is held together by the permanence of the individual. But that is more properly an aspect of character or in the no man's land between theme and character. By choosing to emphasize theme, Tiempo has had to sacrifice character, since the choice for theme having been made, character must be bent to serve the theme. In Aristotelian terms, *mythos* must precede *ethos*. That choice of theme over character is not necessarily a bad one, but in my view it has weakened this particular novel considerably.

Tiempo was here confronted with a particularly difficult choice — to concentrate on one central character or to use the whole Alcantara family as his hero. In other words, he had the choice of writing a heroic novel with its emphasis on one central hero, or a dynastic novel, with its emphasis upon generations of the same family. Tiempo chose one hero, for it is Lamberto who holds the novel together. But the problem, it seems to me, is that Tiempo really only half-chose a heroic novel. He wanted to eat his cake and keep it too. And by trying to paint the family as well as Lamberto, he has destroyed the impact of Lamberto on the reader. For two-thirds of the novel we half-suspect that Hilarion is going to be the hero, and it is really only with the death of Hilarion that Lamberto comes clearly into focus. The choice inevitably leads to an artistic dilemma because no matter which character Tiempo chose as focus, the reader would have wanted to know more about the other.

Tiempo could have solved this dilemma by choosing the Alcantara family rather than Lamberto or Hilarion as his focal point. Admittedly this would have made his task much more difficult, but it would have made for a greater novel.

It seems to me that the greatest strength of *To Be Free* is its characters. Tiempo knows how to create characters that are strong and alive. They haunt you even after you put the novel down. I would have wanted to know more about the mestiza Luisa, for example, and her granddaughter Consuelo Luisa. They are interesting women, but Tiempo gives us just enough of them to want to know them better. Capitan Lucas and his wife, sadly unnamed in the novel, deserve a book of their own. And I wonder why Tiempo did not give us Ruben's story and bring the novel down to the 1970s? There are other shadows that merely flit in and out of the novel but deserve fuller treatment, like the generation of servants, Ariston, Rodrigo, Rufio, and Rubio. For, like Faulkner's colored people in *The Sound and the Fury*, "they survived."

Tiempo has a host of characters crying out for expression. Like Hilarion's crickets, they are there when you stop to listen (p. 246). Perhaps he could have done justice to these characters by abandoning Lamberto or Hilarion as his central character and using a revolving point of view to tell the story of the Alcantara family.

*Technique*

Such a shift in point of view, from Lamberto to that of the Alcantara family, would have had its consequences of course on the technical level. Tiempo chose to write a relatively short novel. For most of the novel he has forsaken straight chronology for a rather complicated structure of flashbacks. Finally, he has elected to work within the confines of the historical novel. The first two choices of length and chronology are, I think, unfortunate. The third choice, a matter of genre, was in the right direction, but Tiempo did not carry it far enough.

The novel is too short — a strange criticism to make when we see so many novels that are too long. But as Aristotle points out, a piece of writing must be long enough to tell the story. Longer than that, it is too long; shorter than that, it is not long enough. Tiempo's story is a long one — some 60 years. It is also a big story — the story of a family, and a nation, and of freedom, and time and change. All this Tiempo has tried to put into 330 pocket-size pages. It cannot be done. We have the skeleton, but little more.

Secondly, in this narrow space, Tiempo has adopted a disconcerting system of multiple flashbacks. There are 25 shifts of time in only 104 pages of the first five chapters. The last two-thirds of the novel move more smoothly because Tiempo uses only single flashbacks from the main story line.

Finally, there is the choice of genre. Tiempo is writing a quasihistorical novel. It was the kind of genre he needed to hold together what he was trying to do. But I do not think he has exploited the full potential of that genre which reconstructs a series of events or the spirit of a past age and pays the debt of serious scholarship to the facts of the age being recreated. I think Tiempo wanted to create the spirit of an age but I do not think he was worried about being scholarly about it all. And rightly so. For, it seems to me that what Tiempo really has in *To Be Free* is an epic, but he did not fully realize it.

We have in *To Be Free* a long narrative, a series of episodes that do form an organic whole. At least the "structure of epic length" is there, although as I have indicated above Tiempo has not taken full advantage of the length. His novel needs fleshing out, for there is a certain "epic leisure" which is missing and which would have added immeasurably to the novel. The framework of epic length is there. It merely needs to be filled out, and at least in this critic's mind, the novel fails because that length has not been given to us.

We have a character of high position (if we wish to adhere to the Aristotelian norms), or at least a character of heroic proportions. That character may be either Lamberto or Hilarion, or it might be the dynastic continuity of the Alcantara family. But Tiempo has not made a clear choice of character and the result is a blurred focus. There is no character unity to hold the theme together.

We have finally, a theme of epic scope — a theme important in the life of a nation, "so serious," in E. M. W. Tillyard's words, "as to merit the epithet 'universal'." This novel does give us a "vision of life" (C. M. Bowra) and the spiritual tradition of a people. It captures an aspect of the Filipino

"soul" with commendable insight. But it fails to provide a stage big enough for vision.

In short, we have all the qualities of epic, at least in potential, but Tiempo has not used them to the fullest advantage. I wonder what would have happened if he had enlarged his stage, slowed down his pace and let his pen become a little more poetic?

### Conclusion

The critics have been generous in their praise of *To Be Free*. J. L. Rivera (*Pace*, 16 June 1972) called it "the one good novel of the literary season" and praised its "craft if not its brilliance." Teresita Rodriguez, writing in the *Daily Express* characterized it as "delightful reading." I agree — *To Be Free* is a good novel. But it is not great, and that is sad, because it could have been. It is perhaps unfair to criticize a novel for what it is not rather than for what it is. But one cannot help thinking what this novel might have been. As it stands, it is a novel on the edge of greatness. Let us hope that Tiempo will rewrite *To Be Free* or will write again. He has the talent to write the great Filipino novel.