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S.J. Galdon

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Joseph A Galdon, S.J.

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## Edilberto Tiempo: Romantic Realist

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.



**Snake Twin And Other Stories.** By Edilberto K. Tiempo. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992. 152 pages.

Edilberto Tiempo, long time Professor and Administrator at Silliman University in Dumaguete, founded the National Writers' Workshop at Silliman thirty years ago and has coordinated it since then with his wife, Edith Tiempo, poet, fictionist and critic. Over that same span of years he has been teacher, Chairman of the English Department, Graduate School Dean, Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Writer In Residence at Silliman. "In the workshops of Silliman, as well as in Philippine journals and anthologies," Leonard Casper writes in *Solidarity*, "Tiempo has urged the self-less discipline of the New Criticism on writers: respect for character which forestalls manipulation by giving precedence to the truth of person in all his coordinates, before the dogma of the writer; positioning the art of presentation foremost, the craft of representation later. . . . In Tiempo's metaphysical 'undeveloped country,' detail after detail offers a gift of splendor to man, the possibility of being fully humanized by all that surrounds and interpenetrates him. As Franz Arcellana has said: 'The places are real, the people authentic, the life rendered with authority.' Yet they constitute more than rich documentation; by implication, they are an act of faith" (pp. 149-50). That act of faith in humanity, as well as in the writer's responsibility to picture that humanity with literary accuracy, skilled art, and compassionate understanding, is at the core of Tiempo's contribution to Philippine writing.

Literary critics have listed Edilberto K. Tiempo among the four or five best Philippine fiction writers in English. Alfredo Yuson says that "Tiempo ranks highly in the company of Bienvenido Santos, N.V.M. Gonzalez, and F. Sionil Jose who have earned for themselves an honorable niche in Philippine literature" (p. 150) Francisco Arcellana, dean of Philippine story tellers and critics, confirms "his (Tiempo's) position among the country's leading fictionists along with Joaquin, Gonzalez and Bienvenido Santos" (p. 149). One should almost certainly add Linda Ty-Casper to that pantheon of writers who have earned a place for themselves among the best of Philippine

writers in English, both for the breadth of their canon, the number of their works, and for the quality of their writing. Ophelia Dimalanta writes that "Tiempo is truly a fictionist's fictionist. All the devices one learns about the art of fiction, all the tricks it takes a whole lifetime to learn are there. . . . Each story is well-wrought, well-baked fiction, as can be written only by one consciously honed in the craft. . . . Here is indubitably fiction that is reflective of a literary decorum in the strength and discipline, the able balance of history and fabulation, exalting life without diminishing art, serving art without rejecting human contingencies elevated into memorable experiences" (pp. 150-51). Tiempo's National Book Award Citation by the Manila Critics Circle says that in Tiempo's case, "Age means maturity rather than decline. His mastery of craft is, indeed, its own reason for being, and reason enough for championing the older verities of the well-made plot and the well-defined character" (p. 151).

### Tiempo's Works

Tiempo's canon and critical acclaim is impressive. His first novel, *Watch In the Night*, was written as an MFA thesis at the University of Iowa, and was published under the title *Cry Slaughter* by Avon, New York in 1957 and by Alan Wingate in London. It has been translated into French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Danish and Norwegian. *More Than Conquerors* was awarded First Prize in the University of the Philippines Golden Anniversary Literary Contest in 1959. It was re-issued by New Day Publishers in 1981. *To Be Free* (1972) is a revision of *Daughters of Time*, which was originally serialized in *Women's Magazine*. It is perhaps one of the most impressive Philippine novels in English. It is an epic novel that chronicles the Filipino search for freedom in all its multi-faceted dimensions—individual, social, and political. After the publication of the novel, the jury appointed for the Cultural Heritage Award informed Tiempo that he had been chosen to receive the award for literature for *To Be Free*, but at the Malacañang ceremony in the first year of Martial Law, perhaps because of the novel's title, the award was given to a dead poet. *Cracked Mirror* (1984) won the Grand Prize in the Cultural Center of the Philippines literary contest in 1984. Alfredo Salanga wrote of it: "It is a gripping tale, at times whimsical, but always and everywhere stamped with the style and craftsmanship for which Tiempo has always been noted." Leonard Casper called *The Standard Bearer* (1985), which was awarded a Palanca special prize in 1983, "a notable achievement and its own reward." The documentation for *The Standard Bearer* comes largely from *They Call Us Outlaws*, a book Tiempo wrote for the USAFFE when he was head of the historical section of the Seventh Military District. Portions of *They Call Us Outlaws* were used by the American prosecution in the trial of Tomoyuki Yamashita, commanding general of the Japanese imperial forces in the Philippines during the Second World War. Cirilo Bautista says of the novel:

*The Standard Bearer* illustrates once more Dr. Tiempo's prolific imagination and strong position in Philippine letters. With his stories, he proved himself a master of artistic compression; with this novel, and others before it, he shows a fictive vivacity coupled with linguistic dexterity that tells his reader, "Make no mistake about it—you have a significant work in your hand." For *The Standard Bearer* is a departure from most stories using the war as a groundstone. It is really a story of man's tenacious attempt to defend the honor of his humanity and all that it stands for—love, peace, family, the grace of inner life. Thus, as a treatise on the human conscience, it succeeds especially on the level of art. (*Rainbow For Rima*, p. x)

*Farah*, Tiempo's latest novel, has been serialized in *Women's Journal* and is soon to appear in book form.

Tiempo has four collections of short stories. *A Stream At Dalton Pass And Other Stories* (1970), Emigdio A. Enriquez says, is "a collection of scrupulously documented experiences of universal strain, deftly polished by a sophisticated and professional hand. . . . (It) is a perceptive study of the Filipino soul in proper perspective" (p. 150). *Finalities* (1983) is a collection of five short stories and a novelette. Alfredo Yuson says that "Tiempo is clearly at the peak of his powers with *Finalities*" (p. 150). *Rainbow For Rima* (1988) was written for Tiempo's granddaughter, and Dimalanta says that the stories "speak of the fairy tale side of life and they tug at the reader's sensibility with their own special cord" (p. 152). *Snake Twin* is Tiempo's fourth and latest collection of stories.

Tiempo has also collaborated with his wife, Edith, prize-winning poet and fiction writer as well as literary critic, on four textbooks, *Introduction to Literature*, *College Writing and Reading*, *Forms and Purposes*, and *A Handbook of College Composition*. He has collaborated with Valentino Sitoy and Crispin Maslog on a history of Silliman University. Tiempo is presently at work on a volume of essays, *Essays, Mostly Critical*, which is soon to be published.

### Snake Twin

Edilberto Tiempo's fourth volume of short stories brings together seven short stories set mostly in Dumaguete, Siquijor and Maasin in the central Philippines, which are loosely united by a snake theme which is either folkloric or metaphorical, at the heart or on the periphery of each story in the collection.

The title story, "Snake Twin," is the most obvious of the snake stories. Dr. Klaus Peter Lembke, from Tubigen University in Germany visits Silliman University in Dumaguete as part of his research on snake twins—"persons born with a snake for a twin" (p. 8). Ariston Paler, a Mathematics professor at Silliman University, meets Lembke on the plane to Dumaguete

and plays the role of host while Lembke is at Silliman pursuing his research. This simple framework of East meeting West provides a structure for Tiempo to hang a collection of myths, folktales and scholarly (?) research on snake twins in the Philippines. Lembke is the "scholar" foil from the West who is confronted with and then awed, if not converted, by the "mysteries" of the East. Once again East apparently triumphs over West, or is the story an ironic commentary on the myths and superstitions of a still folkloric people?

"Tierra Encantada" has a similar plot line. Jacques, a Frenchman and maker of documentary films, visits Siquijor which is forty-five minutes by pump boat across the channel from Dumaguete. Siquijor "is known as the land of superstition, (and also) known by three other names—Diwata which is the local word for superstition, Isla Misteriosa, and Tierra Encantada" (p. 34)—to make a documentary film about the moulting season of the snakes inhabiting the island's underwater caves. In the course of making his documentary on the sea snakes, Jacques encounters a number of other "mysteries," "diwatas" and folk tales. "Jacques's auxiliary interest in Siquijor was in the stories of the occult" (p. 34). He films an object, "the shape of a kite four or five meters long" which does not appear on his film when it is developed. In the *convento* where he stays with the parish priest, he is intrigued by a row of nine human skulls perched on a plank which glow in the dark and sometimes disappear in the night. He sees cardboard figures that seem to dance with no mechanical cause or support, and the wizened old man, Manang Loloy, supporting the full weight of Miguel on his frail wrist. Jacques hears music at night in the convento that comes from nowhere, his room door is locked and unlocked with no known cause and for no apparent reason. He encounters lighted candles and a coffin in the middle of the road which disappear when he goes back to look at them. In the course of his adventures in the "Island of Mystery," he meets *Manananbals* (medicine men), *dagun* (sorcerer's magic), amulets, and Silvestra, the snake twin. The story ends with Jacques's cryptic remark to Emile and Carrie: "All I can say is that I am richer by my experience in your Tierra Encantada" (p. 70). Again the triumph of East over West or the ironic commentary on tribal superstition and myth. It is hard to tell where Tiempo stands.

"Amburawan" (the name of the place literally means "the gold") is a more traditional story of politics and human greed in which Commissioner Rafael Aviles uses his office to seduce young girls from among the cultural minorities to whom he grants scholarships with government money, and snakes to protect the gold he hopes to find in Amburawan from other equally greedy and corrupt government officials. The brother of one of his victims uses Aviles's own snakes to destroy the political predator. Bantilan, the brother of Malita whom Aviles has seduced, "half wished the Commissioner had awakened at that moment so he would know why he had to die" (p. 103).

"Roots" uses a sea snake in more peripheral fashion to link together the two parts of the story of Bindoy (Ben Muñoz) who returns to Maasin in Southern Leyte after forty-eight years to receive an award as an outstanding son of the Province. The story allows Ben to chronicle and marvel at the changes that have taken place in Maasin since he was a boy, and to make some pointed observations about politics and modernization in the province.

In "Mr. McLure," "The Amulet," and "Twenty-Seven Days After," the three shortest stories in *Snake Twin*, the snake theme is more metaphorical than real (or imagined). The snake in "Mr. McClure" is an internal demon, perhaps loneliness, depression, or alienation, that drives McClure to drink, to the scandal of all the Americans in the University Town of Dumaguete, and to eventual suicide. But he leaves his money to Silliman University for scholarships for needy students. The snake in "The Amulet" is superstition: "The father placed the necklace around the boy's neck. You are now protected from the evil one. We are all protected, Simon. You can gather mushrooms in the forest or catch shrimp without fear of land or water snakes. You can walk alone at night. And our home, too, is protected" (p. 74). But the whole family is killed by a Japanese patrol when the Japanese soldiers see that the amulet the boy is wearing is made out of an empty M-1 cartridge, and accuse them of being guerillas. In "Twenty-Seven Days After," the snake is the serpent of Eden that lurks in every marriage. After twenty-seven days of romantic bliss, the newly married couple have their first fight. "It's alright, Nick," Sybil tells him. "Things happen to the happiest couples. Including newly-weds. Take it from me, the voice of experience" (p. 46).

Barbara C. Solara of Michigan State University and Boston College writes very perceptively in *Pilipinas* of the Filipino and his relations with his own native land of mystery and his troubled relations with the West in Tiempo's fiction:

In Tiempo's collection of stories one can feel the warmth of sunshine, smell the sea, hear the bird song, and the night sounds, enjoy the panorama of the landscape. The brilliant freshness of the local scene (and its superstitions!) pervades the stories and gives color to the lives of the characters, most of whom seem to have ties, in one way or another, not only with the land, but with the West, with which they seem to endure a troubled relationship. This renders Tiempo's native land mysterious (Tierra Encantada), even sinister, or, at the very least, a presence which one is invited to ponder as characters leave it or return to it. (p. 152)

**Conclusion**

Poet-Critic Ophelia Dimalanta, in the *Philippines Free Press*, calls Tiempo a "romantic realist" who "envelopes his stories in a proper atmosphere of actuality through details drawn from personal experiences, unleashing a spate of a kind of Gothic romanticism, while he keeps on firm ground, constantly aware of life's shadows ever touched by an eternal luminescence. Tiempo is the necromancer writing for the sheer pleasure of it, enjoying the added latitude of creativity allowed by such a genre (as *Snake Twin*), but never really cutting the cable tying this transport of the imagination to the ground of experience" (pp. 151-52).

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