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Edith L. Tiempo's *His Native Coast*

David A. Genotiva



Edith L. Tiempo is the country's foremost practitioner of the art of fiction which once moved Joseph Conrad to call Henry James, "the historian of fine consciences." That phrase was praised by Walter Allen for "being superb . . . the richer for its ambiguity since one is uncertain whether Conrad was using 'conscience' in its normal English sense or with its French meaning of perception or consciousness": Evident in *His Native Coast*, a novel of "fine conscience" is Tiempo's mastery of controlled ambiguity. This could be largely explained by Tiempo being principally a poet—poetry, being a craft which demands a special suppleness and subtlety in the use of language.

Edith Tiempo once considered using "The Dear Resemblance" as a title but she settled on "His Native Coast." Both are derived from the same line in Homer's *Odyssey* which serves as an epigraph: "Yet had his mind through tedious absence lost/The dear resemblance of his native coast." Like E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Tiempo's title comes from a poem with a journey motif. But this surface-similarity also supports a deeper kinship, for both works articulate a common concern: a vision of life as a journey of initiation which brings the protagonists into a confrontation with experience and how this confrontation leads to a definition of man's relationship to self, to other men in society, and to the Transcendent or God. The initiation-motif works within the narrative-scaffolding of the Ulysses myth. And this myth says that life is a journey, a journey of transformation, where the *apeiron* or terrain of possibility it offers rests as much on the awareness of the hero as on the physical or geographical setting.

The divisions or chapters bear names of places or insinuate a state of mind and mood: I (Pagatban); II (Viñas); III (Columbus, Ohio, et al.); IV (Revisited); V (Un Bel Di); and VI (His Native Coast). The characters are haunted by the archetypal quest and question: "Where is one's native coast?"

In contemplating the dramatic design of *His Native Coast* one recalls a phrase which Professor R. W. B. Lewis used in his study on the Adamic mythology in American letters: "a controlled allegiance." While the novel narrates a single dilemma, it is lived in two qualities of awareness, Marina's and Michael's. The allusion to the strong and wily Ulysses is poetically apt, for this Greek hero, as James Joyce saw him, epitomizes the Compleat Man. In the Greek myth, Odysseus exemplified the unified sensibility of heart and mind, strength and wisdom, matter and spirit.

Initiation and Denitiation

The ancient drama of a character's introduction into the ways of the world is a perennial theme in myth and literature. From Homer to Hemingway, the story of innocence in collision with evil, whether it assumes the aspect of organized society, another individual or an aspect of the self, works as a medium through which the imaginative artist consciously or unconsciously communicates his aesthetic and ethical vision.

In her novel, Tiempo provides a twist to the basic initiation theme by presenting two seemingly opposite responses to what is otherwise one experience. One response initiates a character into society. The other leads a character away from it, in what Lewis has called, in another instance, a "denitiation." Both reactions are the culmination of a decisive struggle of consciousness within the initiated and "denitiated." Marina's and Michael's journeyings literally and metaphorically range across an area of transformation which ends in what seems to be, on one hand, an acceptance, and on the other, a rejection. But from the perspective of the underlying theme, both responses, the positive as well as the negative, are really a "coming home" for each one of the characters.

If it is true, as William of Thierry once said, that every individual is a person of passage, then Marina and Michael are Edith L. Tiempo's fictional configurations of every-man-as-a-pilgrim, a pilgrim who is embarked on a journey towards his native coast, like Forster's "India," another metaphor for experience or life or one's identity.

The action centers on the lives of Marina and Michael who resolve the dilemma of experience by heeding the call of his/her unique moral sense which defines each one's being and identity. Marina leaves conventional or "civilized" society to return to her mother's

land and her own ancestors in the mountains of Lagawe. Michael, an American, decides to stay in the town of Santa Rosa in Negros and hold on to his job as personnel manager of a sugar mill after helping to flush out a racket which involved Marina's husband. Michael's reason for staying in the place where evil was seen to have thrived in an atmosphere of gentility and good manners was that "one need not always be rooting physically or metaphysically in any one place. After all, one's identity was something that was, in many ways, frankly ubiquitous" (Tiempo 1979, 279; all subsequent references to the novel are from this edition).

Ironically, Marina's reason for her "retreat" from "civilization" (as the society she knew represents it) is expressed in the more practical and rational awareness of Michael. Marina, the intuitive-artist-intellectual, cannot or does not verbalize or explain anything because her action is more instinctive than logical. Michael's thoughts on the kind of life which Marina chose also show the sympathy and understanding that he, Michael, felt for it:

Michael saw the primitive existence here but didn't feel that it was uneasy with itself. Like most mountain places this region went by the essential rhythms of nature, but more than this, there was no hint here of apology, none of the hovering embarrassment of a life squatting on the fringes of a civilized town . . . They [the mountain folk] acted firmly but with a peculiar slant—it seemed that because action to them was a bedrock expression, and often most devoid of articulated reasons, because action was still so basic, for them it carried the inherent commitment to the pain and hazard of dying or giving birth (p. 286).

Psychologically however, within the decorum of the novel, the reader is prepared for Marina's decision. Her developing sense of estrangement as a selfconscious guerilla and a returnee to the town after the war, a respected member of a social club points to an alienation deeper than boredom. Even her expression of dissatisfaction with art (and not just her own poetry either) reveals a longing beyond the longings of the ordinary. In a conversation with Michael, which moved from the personal to politics and poetry, we sense intimations of Marina's disquiet and nostalgia:

"You don't like any of it, it seems. I'm referring to the general situation."

"No," she said reluctantly. "It's true that somehow the picture is not in focus; or maybe, it's more likely that I'm not in focus. That sounds terrible—unfocused."

"A country changes, any country. Nobody can go back to—what-ever still remains as, well, points of reference. It doesn't matter, what you feel about it; you are born to this, you can't be better off somewhere else."

"About going to another country, the choice occurs to many Filipinos. It should be easier perhaps if such decisions are made without being self-consciously Filipino."

"Must we split the Filipino from the plain person? I was talking of you, or for any person; that is, one who is without an immediate and overwhelming reason to scoot off. Would you feel better anywhere else than right here? I'm speaking in general now. About the fact of social change, I guess you're stuck with it."

"A point of no return. Useful cliché." She laughed. "Some have bucked it, you know."

"Yes, like the dodo bird."

"You have charming analogies."

"Accurate, though, don't you think?"

"And I'm born to this, you say. What precisely is this, I'd like to know. My woman's club modest heroics, I suppose. Or our rickety 'first families'? Or that heap of a workers' manor back there?"

"Perhaps it's something like your teaching or your writing."

"Fine. Of course that would be it." She thought, for some reason some obscure fount of pity—self-pity—not excluded—seems excessively gushy today. "Anyway, the so-called poetry is only a sublimated form of thrashing around."

"I thought that was the way it was supposed to be?"

She shook her head at this mild mockery. "Someday when the art won't have such a selfish function, I shall write other poems and shall probably be proud of them" (pp. 220-21).

Marina's melancholy is not dissipated even by her poetry, for she considers the art (despite her obvious pride in it) as simply a diversion or distraction (a "thrashing around") to still a turmoil inside her, or as Reinhard Kuhn (1976, 110) puts it, to help make bearable "an existence that is preyed upon by desire and by the desire of desire."

As the story opens, Marina is a member of the guerilla band which had gone to the mountains of Negros to wage resistance against the Japanese. Even among this ragtag group of soldiers and civilians Marina feels keenly the anomaly of the whole thing; of how "humiliating [it was] to skulk around . . . fugitives in our own land." She complains bitterly about being "reduced [by invaders] to adopt all kinds of disguises [with] the prudence of hunted animals." The "hunted-animal" figure clearly describes Marina whether she finds

herself as a reluctant guerilla in the mountains or a proud woman suffering in silence a husband's perfidious doings and even as she single-mindedly goes to Lagawe, pursued by Michael.

Michael, an American, was a member of the advance U.S. army signal-corps in the Visayas-Mindanao sector who had joined the group of Marina. After liberation, this group returns to town and tries to pick up the pieces of their interrupted lives before the war. Michael proposes marriage and asks Marina to go with him to America. But without giving explicit reasons, Marina refuses. The impression one gets is that Marina's refusal to commit herself stemmed from a deeply-felt knowledge that she could not—should not—complicate her "incoherent" sense of self with a relationship which means a clear and total commitment to another person:

"Why not, girl?"

"Because it won't work. There was a time not so long ago when I wanted to go back to Lagawe, that's my mother's town . . . All my life I've consumed myself with dreaming. I've been spent with watching, concerned with the forces in my blood, in my bones, with being true. I feel I haven't been able to do or be. It's as if I wasn't really sure who I am, why I am. Do you understand that?"

"Not really. It's not an answer, Marina. I've just asked you to marry me."

"What can I tell you? You see, Michael, dear, I'm not ready, perhaps not fit in my nature, to do as you want. I have to stay. Loving you would increase my confusion

You don't want to love a bundle of uncertainties. You want a wife and if I can't be that to you I won't marry you at all" (pp. 112-113).

This early, we see how Marina's confusion, or rather, her sense of a divided self, "the incoherencies of her life"—war, heredity, her tribal and borrowed values—get in the way of her "integrating" into or with another person or a group. But Marina hardly ever explains this feeling of "otherness." It is Michael who is perplexed by Marina's paradoxes and the images in which she enwraps herself.

Trying to understand what she said was very much like straying into a cave's mouth that was washed with sunlight—he saw clearly enough to enter into a place of shadows (p. 113).

Michael returns to America where he reassumes his position at Suttan's, the firm where he was employed before the war. One year

later, he receives news from a friend that Marina has married a man named Paulo Lacambre who was chief chemist at the Santa Rosa Sugar Central in Bagacay, a town in Negros. Marina herself writes him about her marriage and how she had left her teaching at Silliman to live in the Santa Rosa mill community with her husband.

Eleven years later, Michael returns to the Philippines to accept Don Gonzalo's offer to be personnel manager in the mill where Marina's husband worked. Unknown to Michael then, the shrewd but good man Don Gonzalo had chosen him because he, Don Gonzalo, believed that a man like Michael would be able to bring about the condition which would help bust open the corruption going on in the mill, a racket in which Paulo Lacambre was chief suspect. True enough, Michael succeeds in forcing open the tight conspiracy of silence which had stumped the authorities and the mill-owners in their efforts to gather evidence especially as it concerned Lacambre. Owned and managed by Spaniards and mestizos, the tightly-knit community seemed to consider it a kind of vulgarity to openly expose one of their own, Lacambre being of their breed. They would rather maintain silence, even if an uneasy silence, and condone evil than give rise to a messy scandal by speaking up. Steeped in the ways of an older world where the observance of refined and gracious manners was a value in itself, the owners of the mills became helpless before the new breed in the person of Lacambre whose smooth and suave appearance hid a crude and crooked ambition. It was as if vulgarity was an evil more to be feared and contained than Lacambre himself. But the sensible Michael, unhampered by such a quaint code, finally brings to the open the corruption in the mill.

After the exposure, Lacambre escapes and Michael is commended by Don Gonzalo. Concerned for Marina's welfare, Michael seeks her out and he learns that she had left, but no one was sure exactly where. Michael tracks her down but never sees her again for she has returned to the mountains of Lagawe. Michael returns to his job in Negros presumably to continue his work among the sugar-mill workers.

The Ordeal of Consciousness

It has already been remarked that the consciousness of the characters is as much the setting and terrain of actions as the geographic locale. Inevitably, therefore, the characters who must faithfully capture the essence of experience are those with sensibilities which, like

the "huge spiderweb . . . suspended in the chamber of consciousness" in James's famous essay, catch "every airborne particle in its tissue" of the life around them and "convert the very pulses of the air into revelations." Such characters embody the Jamesian idea of the people "on whom nothing is lost." This is specifically true of Marina whose full-vested consciousness is at once her strength and the source of her vulnerability. Consequently, she suffers more and her return to Lagawe mirrors the extremity of her suffering. This is not to say that Michael's awareness is coarse or even inferior. Rather, it is simply to discriminate among superior sensibilities and mark the degrees of intensity among these characters of fine consciousness.

The figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part of the complication exhibited, forms for us their link of connection with it. But there are degrees of feeling—the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who "get most" out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also get most. Their being finely aware—makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them (James 1987, 399–400).

Marina is a poet, a teacher, and an offspring of two disparate origins—a Christian politician from Batangas and a mother who belonged to a primitive tribe in Northern Luzon. As a poet and artist, she "lives" on land (reality, practical matters) and on sea (ideas, abstractions, the imagination): a divided self nurtured by and nurturing opposing allegiances. As the kind and urbane Don Gonzalo tells her:

"But the artist?—that is the one who is both man and fish! In this world and in the world of his mind. And thus it should be" (p. 254).

.....

"Your life is best when it is reaching, as the poets say, for the undiscovered worlds. All unhurried. One discovers and creates. Reading. Speculating. Writing. All unhurried (p. 253).

In the context of *His Native Coast*, to live on land is to be both practical and pragmatic, or at least, to forge a viable compromise between the ideal and the actual. To live on sea is to inhabit a realm

of the imagination and the spirit, to be prey to "vague yearnings," never to be caught in a net of viable set-ups, not to be labeled at all. Love, marriage, religion, social commitments and her poetry—all these ought to have given Marina the means with which to weave the "rainbow connection" wherein her separate selves would find a home. But as the full knowledge of evil assails her as objectified in the wicked acts of the man she married, she realizes the irreparable estrangement that is her fate and her heritage. Her understanding that the best poetry is where the personal does not intrude into the impersonal (like a God lost in the radiance of His Creation), or in the "cloud of depression" which gripped her after listening to Lucrecia Aurois' exquisite singing of *Un Bel Di* ("Lucrecia's fine day didn't linger"), the simple realization of how ineffectual her woman's club activities were in meeting the real needs of the recipients of their concern—all this converges in an acute sense of melancholy, "the demon of noontide," that lies at the root of Marina's being. Her marriage (a barren one, for they are childless) reveals to her how she had committed herself to a man who took advantage of the genteel and decorous lifestyle of the Southern gentry which, far from purging evil, actually made it thrive. Terror and violence crouching in the midst of tradition, evil seated at ease in a system of order and decorum—this, Marina sees clearly. Marina's ultimate realization of the evil that has crept into her life is telescoped in the scene where Michael watches her inside the barrio-chapel as she dances before the pygmy-god of the natives. After Lacambre's exposure, Michael goes to see Marina, hoping to soften the impact of the scandal. He stops by the chapel upon seeing lighted candles flickering inside it:

He saw nothing unusual. The altar and the crucifix on it, the brass vases, one on either side of the crucifix. The image of the young pygmy-Christ on its stand two steps from the chancel down to the ground. The lighted candles flickered on the stand, three on either side of the black Christ figure. Then he saw her.

She came slowly into his line of vision. She was lifting her arms and letting them drop as if she were unbearably tired. She was barefooted. He realized she was doing a trance-like ritual dance. She moved her planted feet from side to side in small sharp intricate steps in the earth-floor, hardly leaving the one spot, and her wrists and hands jerked like mechanical spare parts attached to the ends of her extended arms. She kept her face turned toward the black statue draped in the robe that glittered with spangles and gilt. Her breaths came deep, and her body moved as though she had been drugged.

Marina, he called but his cry had no voice. And he would not call her because he knew very well how she has gone there, in her proud pain. She was there, where else, to place her burden on the shoulders of the Christ, that black brooding stranger in the chapel.

As he walked back to the car Michael realized that he wasn't shocked. He understood absolutely how Marina happened to be there: she had to shift a weight that had grown unbearable for the moment. And knowing the kind of friends she had in the community, he saw how she thought she had no choice—she, who had not danced or even seen the old dances in a long, long time was being driven by her need to find recourse again to these deep pounding rhythms of the blood, to wash away the pain, to lift up the worldless petitions of the heart, to shift or at least share a shame and a hurt not easily defined or articulated to a fellow human being.

Surely, Michael thought, the pleas she expressed in that brief reversion to the pagan dance of her mother's people would not be rejected by the dark and bespangled Christian God of that chapel (pp. 258-59).

This act of reversion, a seemingly blasphemous primitive dance before the image of the Christian God, is actually a return to Religion before it lost its substance and meaning. It is a going back to an older and bigger religion, greater than any institutionalized religion which has become a hollow matrix of empty gestures and rituals. It is an effort to relive the faith of her mother (which is also, the Faith of our Fathers), or in Pascal's impassioned cry: "Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Religion to medieval man was not so much a theological system as a solid psychological matrix surrounding the individual's life from birth to death, sanctifying and enclosing all its ordinary and extraordinary occasions in sacrament and ritual. The loss of the Church was the loss of a whole system of symbols, images, dogmas, and rites which had the psychological validity of immediate experience, and within which hitherto the whole psychic life of Western man had been safely contained. In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. But he was bound to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of the spirit. A home is the accepted framework which habitually contains our life. To lose one's psychic container is to be cast adrift, to become a wanderer upon the face of the earth (Barrett 1990, 24-28).

Marina's supplicatory dance is a coming home of a consciousness which could no longer bear to wander adrift in a world where values

have lost their permanence because they have turned into rhetorical platitudes. Her going to Lagawe defines her identity: leaving husband, a good man who loved her (Michael), her belongings. Bequeathing the land she inherited to a younger brother, Marina empties herself of every earthly possession to begin a new life. To borrow Camus's words on suicide, "An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art." Marina's decision may not be impulsive but it is an enigma to the world and to the sympathetic Michael. Disappointed in his love, Michael interprets Marina's choice as also a "defection" even if he, Michael, claims to "understand" her:

Did you have to run and give up? And yet he felt her weakness as surely as if it was in his own bones, and he wished keenly that she could accept reassurance then and there—to make her see the waste in the kind of retreat that refuses life, or maybe, is just a choice for barren living; to let her know that in any case he did understand (p. 297).

Marina's "defection" is less of a turning away since it is a returning to that which would give wholeness and peace to her divided self and resolve its agitations. Pascal reduces this human impulse to a few words: "Return inward toward yourselves; it is there that you will find repose." Since olden times when man in the mythical Garden felt God's presence "in the cool of the day," Nature has served as a refuge for scarred and weary souls. But Marina's act is not a mere "romantic" retreat from a cruel world, for her return is permanent. We, the reader (like Michael), don't see her or hear her after she leaves Santa Rosa. Her leaving is just reported. The shoe which she left at old Simeon's shack (as a snake sloughs off an old skin) prefigures her bent to tread a new path—to step out, to exist within the "precarious stability" (but paradoxically, the real permanence) which the mountain and its people in the land of her mother's ancestors would give her. Marina's turning away from a previous life reminds one of Milly Theale's act of "turning her face to the wall" in James's *The Wings of the Dove*, as interpreted by the Jamesian critic and scholar, Darshan Singh Maini (1973, 72), thus:

There is, of course, some force in the view that in turning her face to the wall, Milly opts out of the "absurd" world of man, but most of these retreats are, in fact, efforts to live life at higher altitudes of consciousness, to draw breath in a rarefied air. Whilst the immediacy of

life is missed, the intensity of introspection is gained. It is the life of the spirit, and the intelligence is seen at its most luminous. One hears the music of the mind in a world within world.

In that profound sense we must consider Marina's final act. Clearly, Michael has strong reservations of its wisdom even if his catholic sympathies and lucid intelligence make him "understand." The inevitability of Marina's departure gets further illumination in James V. Cunningham's remarks on the nature of a poet: The wish of the poet is "to be at peace with his surroundings, with this world, and with himself. He requires for this an experience of the togetherness of himself and nature, an interpenetration of himself and his environment, along with some intuition of permanence in the experience of absoluteness" (Blair et al. 1966, 973). In the aesthetic and ethical senses the mountain-image is a felicitous one because, as Alan Paton (1988, 41) once quoted the words of a South African statesman:

The Mountain is not merely something eternally sublime. It has a great historical and spiritual meaning for us . . . from it came the Law, from it came the Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount. We may truly say that the highest religion is the Religion of the Mountain.

Survival and One's Native Coast: A Concealed Metaphor

In one of Edith Tiempo's lectures in a class on Creative Writing at Silliman, she stated that human beings may think of "survival" in two ways: "persistence" survival and "quality" survival. The former refers to the primal tendency of a living organism to protect, preserve and perpetuate itself as a biological entity; the latter, to a fundamental urge to adhere to and pursue a standard or value which satisfies his idea of himself as an intelligent moral being. Clear instances of "quality" survival are those men and women in history and in literature who chose to perish rather than forfeit their convictions and ideals. Antigone and Thomas More, to cite two examples, preferred death in pursuance of an imperative greater than the desire to live.

Marina's and Michael's apparently antithetical attitudes directly relate to the idea of the search for one's native coast. What does "survival" mean to Marina and Michael? Tiempo's artistic vision gathers itself up in the characters' informed awareness, or rather, in the quality

of that awareness of their relationship to themselves, society, and the Infinite. Says Mrs. Tiempo (1981-82, 31:127) in one essay:

We human beings set a great store on our capacity to be aware of our self, our fellowmen in our world, and our God, and we believe that this awareness must be known and recognized by us or we are less than human; thus, we need something to give shape and measure to this awareness, and so we have despair and hope. All knowledge and awareness of our living and dying in this life is thus made possible by these two sounding bars. To sound the writer's depths: this is ultimately the function of these two poles for the writer and perhaps for any human being, as long as we live in the curse of needing not only to know but also to be aware that we do know.

Initiation and "denitiation," acceptance and rejection, Marina and Michael, despair and hope—these polarities or dualities of human responses, Tiempo informs us, define the "shape" and "measure" of the human responses to experience. Taken in this context, Marina and Michael are two sides of one act. It is disingenuous to think of one as better or worse than the other. They are equally valid within the psycho-aesthetic pattern—the "controlled allegiance"—of the novel.

For Marina, the result of a pagan-Christian union and a poet ("half-human, half-fish"), the effect of her despair leads to a turning away from the society or (depending on which pole of vision one is looking from) a returning to a life which she felt would answer her need for a harmony between thought and action, manners and morality, art, and truth. Michael, the American (with a degree in business and the humanities), soldier, businessman, administrator, lover has defined his "hope" within the compass of conventional society, for he believes that "one need not always be rooting physically or metaphysically . . . one's identity was something . . . ubiquitous." Michael's insight that one's identity has little, if any, to do with time and place rings true because it is not culled from a cliché. He has wrenched that truth from a lived experience. It is lived truth. But Marina's inarticulated but deeply sensed fear of society's evil which would destroy her if she does not make her choice is equally valid. Edith Tiempo might as well be saying: "When civilization or a civilized community falls apart, i. e., when the institutions that are supposed to sustain the ideals and values of civilization are exposed to be themselves corrupt and corrupting, the Marinas of this world must transcend the temporal and local to try to understand experience and

affirm their personal identities in terms of unchanging human nature and the permanent conditions of life. Not only should society offer the individual a contact with the aesthetic and social values of history—art and manners—but that these values must be consistent with actual human behavior.”

One would think that Edith L. Tiempo’s persistent portrayal of the tension involved in the effort to find a “connection” or an equilibrium in the relations between the individual and society, the religious and secular, the eternal and the temporal, “turning” and “re-turning” is a concealed metaphor for the creative act itself.

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