



Susan S. Lara

Dwelling in Possibilities

An Interview with National Artist Edith L. Tiempo



"Before sundown," Edith L. Tiempo always says to anyone who is visiting her for the first time, at her home in a place aptly named Monteray in Sibulan, Negros Oriental. For the many writers, students, and friends who seek out the National Artist for Literature the Tiempo residence, fence-less and sprawling, is much larger than the total area of its rooms. The floor-to-ceiling glass walls dissolve the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, making the vast surroundings a part of the house; in front, the breathtaking view of Tañon Strait and the neighboring island of Cebu, and at the back, solid and majestic Mount Talinis. Looking at the sea from the front porch, you feel your soul expanding as far as your eye reaches. On someone who spends every single day under the shadow of skyscrapers the effect is incredible.

For much of her life, since she settled in Dumaguete City in 1940, Edith seldom strayed too far from the mountain and the sea, one emblematic of rationality, abiding presence and rootedness; the other open and receptive, signifying the unconscious. One tries to overlook the too-obvious symbolism, but with Edith's own account of her creative process, the temptation is difficult to resist.

In an essay she wrote for *A Passionate Patience*, an anthology of essays by ten Filipino poets on the writing of their poems, Tiempo affirms the role of both reason and intuition in her creative process. Beginning with the title "The Transformation from Dream to Design," Tiempo confirms the presence of "inner" and "external" agencies at work in a poet's personality, and that "the poet's discipline is to learn more and more naturally how to recognize and respond to the materialized promptings of that inner agency; the subconscious, as it is ideas and sensibilities break into the more consciously guided evolution of the poem."

Chaos (Dionysian impulse) and control (Apollonian elements) are always battling for the writer's attention whenever she puts pen to paper. Learning to recognize this battle and respond to it is only the first step to the creation of a fully realized literary work. Undue attention paid to only one of these aspects to the exclusion of the other would result not in poetry but in what Edith calls

"pathogenetic vase" or, in the other extreme, "adult eated rhetoric."

The more crucial step for the poet, Edith says, is to learn "how to sustain a working relationship with the subconscious (or the intuition, as it has also been referred to), so as to achieve the balance between prodding and controlling it, on the one hand, and being led and transported by it, on the other."

Edith has taken a long journey to be able to forget his happy marriage between these two seemingly clashing elements.

ITINERANT CHILDHOOD

Edith Lopez was born in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, in 1919, the first of what became known as the Interwar Years, a season of relative peace and harmony that would last until World War I broke out in 1940.

The daughter of an auditor whose job took the family from place to place, Edith led a peripatetic childhood starting from the time she was only nine months old. By the time she turned thirteen, she had been to the country's three main islands; she had lived and studied in Laguna, Baguio, Zamboanga, Surigao, and Samar, where the family was staying when her father died.

She went back to Nueva Vizcaya for her last two years in high school, where she studied under Felix Umag-ing Bawner, who would turn out to be one of her early major influences, and who would later become the Department of Education's superintendent of schools in Baguio and Benguet. Bawner introduced the young Edith to the works of great masters like Honoré de Balzac, Maxim Gorky, Anatole France, authors who inspired her to take her first tentative steps toward a literary career, her first short story, of which she could clearly remember only the title, "The Fan."

Before Bawner, her main literary influence was her older sister Arlyne. Arlyne was "the writer in the family," while Edith was the budding movie actor. Arlyne not only "developed" Edith's literary taste, giving her books like *Crime and Punishment* to read; she was also instrumental, albeit unwittingly, in Edith's meeting the greatest, most enduring influence on her life and her writing: Edilberto K. Tiempo.

MEETING HER TWIN SOUL

Writers who have been under the Tiempostutelage know the story by heart. It has been told countless times, by now an indelible part of Philippine literary lore. Sometime after a story by Arlyne came out in *Philippine Magazine*, another story with a female protagonist named Arlyne Lopez was published in the same paper, written by a man none of them knew. It was a love story, and it so distressed their mother, Teresa, that she told Edith to write the author and demand an explanation. The author of the story, Edilberto K. Tiempo, a native of Masin, Leyte, where he was then teaching, wrote back to explain that he liked Arlyne's

story so much that he named his main character after her, ending the letter with profuse apologies. The family thought the episode would end there, but the exchange of letters between Ed and Edith continued to her mother's utter vexation. They were staying in Manila then, and their mother tried to put an end to their correspondence by sending Edith away to another older sister in Nueva Vizcaya. It was heret hat tenacious Ed, who was by then already teaching in Silliman, went to see Edith, unannounced.

They saw each other more often and regularly when they both enrolled in U.P.—Edith to study law, on her uncle's urging, and Ed to take up his M.A. Neither of them finished their courses—they got married after a semester, went to Dumaguete, and settled there. When Edith graduated from Silliman, *magna cum laude*, in 1947, Ed had been in the States for a year, on a fellowship at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop.

"I could have left with Ed, you know," Edith said, "but I was held up here for a year because of my German class. Our professor had to leave mid-term, and you know at that time, the brightest students were allowed to take over when teachers left. Now, I and one of my male classmates were at the top of that class, but the man was chosen to take over, on the mistaken, traditional assumption that a man was better than a woman. This guy gave me an A-, which made me angry, because I had to have straight A's for Silliman to recommend me for a fellowship abroad. I wanted to confront this guy and fight for a higher grade, but my brother talked me out of it. He said 'no sister of mine will make a spectacle of herself!'"

THE MOTHER OF ALL WORKSHOPS

Gentle in manner and speech, Edith does not strike first-time acquaintances as feisty. Yet Ed himself often conceded that "only a bull can't are a lion," alluding to their zodiac signs—Ed was a Leo; Edith is a Taurus. When she followed Ed to Iowa in 1947, and Paul Engle welcomed her to his fiction workshop but not to his poetry workshop, her stubborn streak kicked in. As Edith relates it, she said "I didn't come ten thousand miles just to bet old I can't even sit in." Despite Engle's cool reception, she persisted and continued to attend the poetry workshop as an observer.

Edith's experience as a writing student may not be as lively different from other beginning writers: her poems then were what she would later characterize as mere assertions, presenting only one side of the picture, without the complexities created by ironies, paradoxes or ambiguities. She could not see that back then, but was determined to learn, and seriously took Paul Engle's suggestion to read Cleanth Brooks's *The Modern Poet and the Tradition*, Brooks's and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, and Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn*, in that order.

Edith's learning curve was short. By the next semester, she was officially part of the poetry workshop, and when Robert Penn Warren came to Iowa to

read their poems the first three that he picked to read and comment on were hers, to the discomfiture of the rest of the class. Edith believes it was because Robert Penn Warren saw a new insight in those three poems, having been written by someone steeped in another culture.

SUBSTANCE AND ARTICULATION

For Edith, two elements always got together in the making of every poem or story: fresh insight into familiar ideas and situations, and craftsmanship in articulating this insight. Her creative works are testament to this guiding principle, which runs like a leitmotif through all her critical works: essays, lectures, and speeches.

In her book *Six Poetry Formats and the Transforming Image: A Monograph on Free Verse*, Edith shows through her close reading of poems by Alfred Yuson, Rowena Torrevillas, Gemino Abad, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Jennings, and Denise Levertov, among others that it is the fusion of these two elements that spells the difference between poetry and "prose preening a poetry."

While she gives equal weight to both conceptualization and articulation, lately she has been driven to harp on content by the undue importance placed on form by many writers today at the expense of content. This concentration on form, though, is quite understandable: at the outset, she said in a recent lecture "I just don't forgive poets that the writer has something to say; the content is therefore easily established and takes a backseat while the form and its craftsmanship gets the writer's prominent attention."

The young writer who is told in a writers' workshop that plain statements written in verse form do not constitute poetry, learns to use poetic devices such as "indirection, tone control, suggestiveness, ambivalence and ambiguity, thematic tension, understatement, among many others." As the writer attains more sophistication, this attention to poetic form sometimes becomes inordinate and overshadows content. Edith deplores this trend, and feels the need to bring the poets' attention back to content. She couldn't have been more emphatic than when she said, in a speech at the 56th Carlos Balanca Memorial Awards for Literature in 2006, that "fine craftsmanship and thin substance is actually much ado about nothing."

In trying to correct the imbalance, Edith takes every chance to share with young writers some of the ways they can enhance poetic content:

- by reverberating the theme of the poem, through the use of details or situations that do the meaning of the poem.
- by the use of indigenous wit, which entails paying attention to the earthy humor of folks we deal with every day. She cites as an example the family's former cook, who once quipped, when Edith came home worried about a razzle-dazzle: "Budlay gayod maghimo'g ta-e" (It's always wearisome to be making shit).



- by using erudite terms and allusions, culled from religious texts and classical myths from ancient civilizations.
- by adopting an unusual and startling idea to serve as the core of the poetic content.

"The poem owes its significance mostly to the use of its unusual core idea," she said in her lecture "Enhancing the Poetic Content." The lecture first given in Cebu in February 2008, was sponsored by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and the UP Institute of Creative Writing. She reprised it for the benefit of fellows to the 47th National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete three months later.

FRESH INSIGHT

Every writer who has ever attended the Workshop has heard Edith's delightful "Robert Frost moment," which she often recounts to illustrate insight that is fresh, startling, and totally unexpected. While Ed and Edith were in Iowa, Frost went there to give a lecture, and was invited to a dinner with the international students afterward. The students clustered around Frost and asked him about other famous writers, while Edith just wanted to ask him about one of his poems. She inched her way along the wall until she got close enough to him to say, "Mr. Frost, what do you really want to say in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening?'" He simply said, "Easy does it."

"His answer annoyed me at first," Edith recalled. "I thought, 'This man is pulling my leg! Then years later, I realized what he meant, and I felt honored that he trusted me enough to give such a cryptic answer. Pay attention to the last two lines' [Edith would then recite the last two lines of the poem, exaggerating the long vowel sounds]:

"And milesto go before I deep
And milesto go before I deep!"

"You see, we thought the persona was saying 'I wish I could stay and enjoy this scene, but I have promises to keep, obligations to fulfill, so I should be running along now!' We thought that the speaker is thinking not only of the many little things he has to do before he can rest for the night, but of the bigger things he has to achieve in his lifetime, and that he had no time to lose.

"That would have been fine, of course, but not very startling, not extraordinary at all. But listen again—why do long vowel sounds resonate in those lines, giving them a leisurely pace? Why not short vowels, which would have given the lines a galloping rhythm, the appropriate tempo for that popular interpretation? Because what Frost was really saying is, 'Sure, we have duties to attend to, but there's time enough for them, and we don't have to do them right this minute. We don't have to sprint in a burst of speed. We can stay awhile and appreciate life's beauty, explore its deep, dark mysteries. Easy does it!'"

Thus the poetic meaning emerges through the various and often conflicting elements operating in the poem itself. Edith's poems in her five collections—*The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems*, *The Charmer's Box and Other Poems*, *Beyond*, *Extensions*, *Marginal Annotations and Other Poems*, and the new *Commend and Contend*—are models of organic unity, each word inevitable, each line earning its keep. As Gemino H. Abad points out in his essay "Edith Tiempo, Exemplary Poet," Edith has established a tradition in writing with "two distinguishing marks: a fine critical sense of language and poetic form, and a ceaseless quest for that synergy of idea and emotion by which the Filipino sensibility is most fully expressed."

In her fiction, Edith is just as exacting, her characters complex and memorable, a confluence of conflicting impulses and principles. She always starts with character, even in *The Builder*, which she calls her most plot-driven novel. The character she created, Lawanagan Gimod, is a good person, "but capable of murdering a tribal man who was sent to the States and trained there to be a Christian preacher, but could not entirely throw away his tribal instincts." His nemesis, a physics professor-turned-reluctant detective, is brilliant, and "quickly responsive in some way as to make (him) vulnerable as a victim."

If Edith's characters jump off the page when we read her fiction, it is because they come to life before her as she creates them: "I shape (the character) and then he is on his own. Not me anymore. The character acts on his own without my interference. It's hard to explain because I don't know the point exactly when I believe he's acting on his own and not me shaping him."

THE NATIONAL WRITERS WORKSHOP

It has been said that every artist needs two teachers first, an exacting mentor who teaches the rules and then, an inspirational guru who gives you permission to follow your intuition, and when necessary, break the rules. But it is important that these teachers come into a student's life in that order. The corporate cliché "thinking out of the box" has meaning only if one has been inside the box.

Writers who have had the good fortune to study under Edith Tiempo get the two teachers in one. These writers were either students of Silliman University, or writing fellows of the National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete, or both.

After further studies and teaching stints in the U.S., Ed and Edith came back to Dumaguete and founded the National Writers Workshop in 1962, now the longest-running writers workshop in the country. Hundreds of writers have since sat at the feet of the masters, learning, during the three-week intensive workshop, the craft of writing, learning to tame and shape their impulses with reason, to enrich reason with intuition.

Edith would reiterate in workshop after workshop, "A thematic statement may be a general and not yet a unique human truth, but the creative work has the obligation not only to make that general statement into a particular experience but most important for that statement to be transformed in the story into an experience that generates fresh and unusual insights.

"The story doesn't move on only as a story. Every incident should be so dramatized so conceived that it contributes to the theme, reveals a truth about the



theme. That's a terrible thing to remember, you know, you can never create an incident until it is a meaningful incident; that is, it helps to reveal your concept."

Edith notesthat many stories that she gets hold of nowadays, are just "stories about what happened. Maybe tragic, maybe comic appealing, maybe something that gives you outrage, but no meaning, no concept." Yet she never fails to see the possibilities of even a story that does not rise above the literal level. In one memorable session, Edith saw, in a piece that was nothing but a blow-by-blow account of a failed romance, three possible concepts:

1. Here is a state of mind engendered by the self in response to circumstances whether human or situational.
2. The battle is always pitched not against the enemy but against one's self.
3. With the pain of losing, one gains an insight into human frailty toward which one learns to become compassionate.

The fellows, and, admittedly, the other panelists, could only look at one another and think, "Where did she see that?"

Ed Tiempo would shake his head and say, "What you are saying is not here (in the text)."

"Yes," she would agree, "it is not here yet, but it is possible."

Edith always sees the potential story alongside the story that is right before her. It was always a point of contention between her and Ed, something that always triggered what we used to call "the showdown": that one session, which usually happened during the third week, when the differences in their approaches would come to a head, with Ed pounding the table and saying, "The trouble with you is you are too kind!"

Her husband never minced words, and Edith always tried to get him to come down his criticism. But whenever someone remarked on Ed's harsh comments, Edith is always quick to say that even his bluntest criticisms "were often garnished with such ridiculous good humor that even the story's author had to laugh at this own expense."

When Ed thought the tandem ended in September 1996, when Ed succumbed to a heart attack. It was a devastating loss for many of us, who call them Dad and Mom. But after the initial shock, Edith said, "He is in me now!" Their daughter, award-winning writer Rowena Torrevillas, affirms this: "Many of his traits are hers now, because for 56 years his breath was hers... so she accepts the rare flare-ups of gout in her knee—and goes on completing Montemar room by room, and restores his program in creative writing, knowing that these are all not just manifestation from Dad, but he, himself, in her."

So the tandem is still there, Ed present in Edith, in every workshop.

A FAMILY OF WRITERS

University funding for the workshop stopped in 1992, and former workshop alumni banded together to keep the tradition going. Over the next 13 years the workshop continued through the efforts of the Creative Writing Foundation, Inc.; CAP College of the Dumaguete Literary Arts Service Group, Inc.; the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA); and various groups and individuals who value our literary heritage.

In the summer of 2008, the National Writers Workshop came home to Silliman University, thanks to SU President Ben Malayang. Plans are also shaping up for the establishment of the Edith and Edilberto Tiempo Writing Center in Montemar, not far from the Tiempo residence, where writers can come for residency, year-round. The building, which will be called Rose L. S. Dorepeña Building, will consist of four cottages for the grantees, centered around a fifth cottage where the workshop will actually transpire.

Not all writing fellows who come to Dumaguete continue writing. Many have been claimed totally by their day jobs, some have decided they could give more in other roles, but keep writing as an option for a later phase in their lives. But for Edith, whether a fellow continues to write or not, the time spent in the workshop is never wasted, as long as they become good readers; if they learn to see "how a piece works" through close reading and analysis, by looking for complexities, paradoxes, ironies, ambiguities in literary work, and identifying a unifying idea or theme which resolves these tensions.

On the last day of every workshop, Edith usually says, "This is the last day, and my heart aches because I want to give you so much more, and there is no more time for it!" Many find that remark amazing, because she seems to draw from a bottomless reservoir of knowledge, insights, and patience.

But it is never the last day, and the workshop never ends, not for the fellows who keep coming back to Dumaguete summer after summer. Edith surmises that "the reason is that they got something more besides the formidable critique on insights and technique." And that something could be what Dr. Noel Pingoy, a former fellow and one of Edith's favorite doctors, meant when he said, "Dumaguete is not just about writing well, but about treating people well and becoming better persons." Yes, we learn that from Edith too.

For most of us, that "something more" is Edith herself. Another former fellow, Januar Yap, recalls that summer he attended the workshop:

The morning's workshop ended, and when to haul some lunch was my problem. I came up to Mommy (Edith) to ask who was distributing the allowances and she said the secretary wasn't coming until that afternoon. (I said) thanks, and I went out, only to realize Mommy was calling me out from the stairs. She put her hand on my head and asked, "You absolutely don't have any money?" I almost broke down, and ready to give up the whole madness of pursuing what brought me there in the first place. The National Artist took a hundred bucks from her purse and said, "Go get some lunch."



I only saw the old gesture of her passing me, the penniless dreamer years ago the hundred bucks that assured me a good lunch. Misunderstood at home, I found a parent that one lonely summer.

The family keeps growing. On the first day of every workshop, when panelists are asked to introduce themselves, Edith simply says "call me Mom." Not National Artist, not Dr. Tiempo, not even Ma'am Edith, just Mom. "I could not understand," she said, "and had been devastated why Heaven had not seen fit for me to have more children. During the war, all I had were two stillbirths and two miscarriages, and I was shaken with hurt and disappointment."

She later realized why: "Having no child after the war, Ed and I had the time and the opportunity to train intensively in Iowa. Thus, we were destined to be properly equipped to help as many writers as we could."

"One day, about nine or ten years after we set up the Writers Workshop in Silliman, and we had Rowena and Donny and numerous writers calling us 'Mom' and 'Dad,' I thought I heard a Voice saying, 'Now, do you understand?'"

And like a true mother, her word carries a lot of weight, as Ino Habana, writing fellow in 2006, discovered: "For an amateur writer, it would mean a lot for an Edith L. Tiempo to say that she actually believed in you. In her mountain-top home, I was flipping through the pages of some of the books (by her former students) on her coffee table, when Mom Tiempo suddenly tapped me on the shoulder and uttered the words I will never forget: 'If God is willing, Ino, I will like to see the day when your book will be on this table.'"

One can have no greater wish than to be worthy of such confidence, and honor the mandate she so elegantly articulated in her keynote address at the

Philippine PEN Conference in Dumaguete in 2001: "to affirm us, human beings, in all the diversity of our character; to reveal the finite creature that we are, yet constantly reaching toward the infinite as we engage in the transforming of our perishable world into the essence of the permanent as we unravel the enigma of our destiny of disaster and transcendence"

Thus, Marjorie Evasco may call herself old-fashioned but she says it with pride, because she still likes "to read and hear poems that have a beautiful and supple form, feel deeply with mind and sing these feelings with duende, paint significant details sharply, and have new insights that go into the heart of things. Mom Edith's and Dad's poetics and discipline are still my guiding stars."

Marjorie Evasco simply gave utterance to the abiding, unshakable sentiment of Edith's children: "each and every one of us is a portable Edith L. Tiempo, because we carry her around with us wherever we go."

And as time goes by, the home she dwells in grows even larger.

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