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Angela Manalang-Gloria, by Manlapaz

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Angela Manalang-Gloria: A Literary Biography. By Edna Zapanta Manlapaz. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1993

The promise shown by Angela Manalang-Gloria was disappointingly cut short. In *Angela-Manalang-Gloria: A Literary Biography*, Edna Manlapaz attempts a possible explanation.

Biographies satisfy the "gossip in us, but we also read them for aesthetic reasons. A well-written biography is like a novel with compelling characters, complex situations, and a "good story." Literary biographies show how a writer's life shapes his or her art. Manlapaz's book, which is an excellent companion piece to Manalang's collected poems, has a graceful and readable style that moves the narrative along even when interrupted by the poems used to illuminate various stages in the poet's life. However, Manlapaz is careful to warn us that the book "is not the story of the life of Angela Manalang-Gloria. It is *my* story of *her* life" (author's italics). Comparing the biography of a film, she adds, "The eye of the camera is I [sic] . . . what you will see is only what the eye of the camera allows you to see." (Manlapaz includes a Prologue and Epilogue that are script directions in an imaginary film of the poet's life. I found these self-conscious, even melodramatic. Their presence might be justified if the book had been presented like film, i.e., select scenes and images as, for example, Denise Levertov did in her memoir, *Tesserae*).

The author's disclaimer is an explanation for the limitations in the making of her book. As she decried the paucity of Angela's published work, she discovered that the same was true in the details about the poet's life. The usual resources that help document a person's external and internal life (e.g., personal letters, journals, diaries) were not available. That there are diaries is certain, but they were not shared. Angela is a very private person, a recluse known for turning away would-be visitors and turning down requests for interviews (the author was finally granted one after waiting for two years). Deprived of data that would reveal more fully a pattern in the poet's life and work, Manlapaz knows only too well "that bits and pieces of a puzzle are all that any biographer can ever arrive at." Still, she has pieced together an interesting and informative account of the poet's life.

Angela Caridad Legaspi Manalang (born 1907) was the third of 11 children of Felipe and Tomasa Manalang of Pampanga. Her father rose from humble beginnings to become one of the wealthiest men in Albay where he settled his family in 1919.

A loner from the start, Angela developed a voracious appetite for reading which steeped her in the English language. In elementary school, she got her start in poetry when, "I just wanted to write lines that rhymed because the teacher told us to do so. We were studying poetry, so we were told to write lines that rhymed."

Her siblings would remember her "always bent over a table, scribbling," often at night when the rest of the family were already in bed. She was serious, seldom smiling or participating in activities. In addition to reading, piano lessons occupied her young life.

Angela soon learned that once she put her mind to a task, she found success. She graduated valedictorian of her elementary school, then finished high school at St. Scholastica College in Manila. In high school, she found further encouragement for her writing and was hailed as the class poet, although her classmates found her too reserved and "not friendly." She would always have a reputation for being aloof, even arrogant sometimes.

She enrolled at the University of the Philippines in 1926 to follow her father's wishes to study law. But a *Basic English Composition* class derailed this plan. Never afraid of a challenge, Angela signed up for the class of Prof. C. V. Wickers, then reputed to be "the most strict and demanding" of American professors in Composition. Her themes so impressed him that he advised her to switch her major. He became her mentor, and Angela would repeat, "If it were not for him, perhaps I would be in the law profession now."

Always prolific then, her work started appearing in the school paper, *The Philippine Collegian*, and national publications like *The Sunday Tribune Magazine* and the *Philippines Herald Magazine*. Around this time, two episodes took place that have become classic stories among Philippine literati: Manalang's temper and coldness showed when a young aspiring poet wrote her a love letter after reading one of her poems. Interpreting his letter as "presumptuous" and an "unsolicited advance that reflected badly on her own good moral character," she summoned the hapless fellow and "berated him severely and spitefully, saying she never wanted to speak to him again." Narrating the incident decades later, she would still recall her displeasure "*Ay, nalintikan na Baltazar Villanueva na 'yan..*" and thus would Baltazar Villanueva be immortalized in Philippine literature.

The other incident involved Jose Garcia Villa, then another well-known campus writer who, in person and works, was her opposite—flamboyant, loud, brash, and shocking readers with his experimental "obscene" poems written in the "modern style." He and Angela were vying for the position of literary editor of the *The Collegian*. As Manalang would later tell it, she got the position and casually mentioned the fact to Garcia Villa who was then with a friend. "Jose glared at me; he was about to stand, hissing, *I could scratch your eyes out*, but Arturo [Rotor], his arm around him, held him down. *Ay*, I left. I was scared." Garcia Villa would never forgive her, and would openly blast her poems which he judged as "pretty and pleasant" but weak and inconsequential. She and Villa would become well known to readers all over the Philippines, among the first important Filipino writers in English in fact and Garcia Villa would go on to greater glory abroad.

In college, she met Celedonio Gloria, a law student, who shared her interests in poetry and literature. When she decided to marry him after graduating summa cum laude, she gave up a Barbour Scholarship to study at the University of Michigan.

Her new life and career were promising. As an editor of *The Philippines Herald Magazine*, Manalang Gloria would try her hand at writing prose, including an article about the renowned Spanish guitarist, Andres Segovia, whom she had interviewed. But she was uneasy with the medium, telling an interviewer later, "I cannot think in prose."

Tuberculosis however, would cut her newspaper career short, plunging her understandably in a state of depression. Her state of mind was caused in part, Manlapaz conjectures (based on certain poems and the poet's statements), by sexual problems in her marriage, and not helped by a critique of her work by Tom Inglis Moore. The Oxford-educated Australian cited her poems as examples of the "two chief weaknesses" of Philippine literature in English: sentimentalism and formlessness. Manlapaz thinks this made Angela reevaluate her work, and convincingly documents the improvement in craftsmanship in the poems written after this period, especially those written five years later. Prof. Moore did not wait that long to change his view of her poems. Less than two years after his negative review (March 1929), he wrote another essay (January 1931) on the state of Philippine poetry. This time, he would include Manalang Gloria "among the writers [Villa, Daguio, Pedroche, S.P. Lopez] whose poetry he thought had matured enough to have developed 'a style of marked individuality,' singling her out as 'our Sara Teasdale—sweet without being sickly, melodious, and charming.'" Manlapaz does not say so, but I find this amazing since Angela had published only four new poems between the first and second reviews. Only two of those ("The Invalid Looks Towards the Window" and "Tabernacles") are strong poems. Were they enough to have convinced Moore to change his original opinion?

The following years saw the birth of her first child; a relapse from TB during which time she wrote most of the poems that would appear in her self-published collection. Manlapaz rightly calls *Poems* "a watershed in Filipino poetry in English in that it was the first and only prewar collection of poetry written by a woman." Moreover, she went into a partnership with her father dealing in abaca products where she discovered her affinity for business. Her astute business sense extended to her poetry. When asked about the sales of her book, we are told, "Angela snapped, 'Of course, I got back my investment.'"

Information about the poet's life covering the war years was not available to Manlapaz, an unfortunate gap in the biography. We learn that her second child, a girl, was born a few weeks before the Japanese entered Manila. But the Glorias remained in Manila during the war as the abaca business prospered. As Manalang Gloria said, "We never wanted for anything," a significant fact considering that the majority of her fellowmen were struggling to

survive. Toward the end of the war while she was pregnant with her third child, the retreating Japanese killed her husband. Their oldest son survived the ambush, but would undergo a long traumatic healing period.

At 38, the widowed mother of a newly born baby boy as well as a three-year-old daughter and a physically and emotionally battered 14-year old son faced many problems. Liberation found her bankrupt. In her words, "I was as poor as a rat; everything I owned was wiped out, *ako'y walang-wala*. All I had was a 20-peso Philippine bill." With help from her father, she moved her family back to Albay. One feels the poignancy of her plight, especially her having to transport the baby in a makeshift crib, an empty Carnation milk carton.

At this point, Manlapaz explains, Manalang Gloria abandoned her poetry: "Angela promised herself that never, never again would she allow herself and her orphaned children to be poor. . . . She knew of only two ways she could ensure this . . . to work hard and to be frugal." Her husband's death and her circumstances would change her priorities. "With love gone, what else was there? Only duty . . . her duty as daughter to her elderly parents, her duty to her young children as their mother. She acknowledged no other allegiances. . . . With characteristic thoroughness, she went full time into business."

In 1946 Angela published a poem in her husband's memory showing her resolution to "Let the mind be steel and the heart be fallow." A short poem came out in 1947, and another in 1950, her last known new work. Then, also in 1950, she prepared a revised edition of her 1940 collection with the view to have the book adopted for use in schools. Given her independent spirit, one wonders how she could have meekly accepted the changes suggested (for moral consideration) by the Bureau of Education, including changing lines/words ("bores" instead of "whores"), and deleting whole poems, though we are told that "To camouflage the retention of some controversial poems, she changed their titles." Among the deleted poems are some of her stronger work ("Soledad" and "For Man Must War").

Perhaps Manalang Gloria's view in an earlier interview sheds light on this matter: "When the question of publication comes, I am no longer a writer but a businesswoman with a commodity to sell to the highest bidder" although was careful to differentiate "between writing for money and publishing for money. I never do the former; I am heart and soul for the latter." (The revised edition of *Poems* sold quite well until the remaining stock was lost in a fire at Alemar's).

After this, her last publishing venture, she no longer sent out letters to the world who still would write to her, if she allowed it. That stage in her life of prolific creativity, interrupted by her first illness, then the war, came to a complete stop, considered "ancient history" by her whose "heart [was] an extinct species, and the world a tangible vacuum that has long ago ceased to sing." Explaining further, "This is what happened to me. I don't have a heart any more . . . when I went into business. No more heart."

She would live the life of a shrewd businesswoman, successful beyond her wildest dreams, letting nothing get in the way of her "rice-milling and warehousing" business, "as ruthless with people as with trees and pythons." She became more reclusive, and took her frugality to unreasonable miserliness (for a long time she lived in a section of the noisy, dusty rice mill, the better to guard her assets), depriving herself of normal comforts and pleasures, even the books that were once her passion. Her reading became limited "to the daily paper and weekly newsmagazines that the rest of the family read." With cataracts, her reading became curtailed. Today, "she has retired from any active business except for looking after her investments in real estate and stocks." She spends most of her days sleeping, getting up only for meals. Only music remains, but not the piano which she abandoned along with her poetry, just old recordings of Liszt and Chopin and the Mabuhay Singers.

As much as she could, Manlapaz has painstakingly followed the course of Manalang Gloria's known life along with discussions of her poems written at corresponding stages of her life. They include not just the published work but also the fragments and beginnings of poems—some abandoned, some polished into finished versions—from the poet's notebooks. Still, how much "autobiography" is in a work? While one may be able to show the importance of a personal event in imaginative literature, can one pin down creative cause and effect? Can we know *why* a story or poem was written? Writers are always in danger of seeming to expose personal and family secrets, whether intentionally or not. (One remembers the embarrassing dilemma of Philip Roth when people conflated the character of—gasp—Portnoy with the author).

The fact is, the persona in a work is not necessarily the writer. And yet as Manlapaz tells us, in a recent interview when the poet was asked, "May the reader assume that the voice speaking in the poems is Angela's own authentic voice . . . Angela's unhesitating response was an unequivocal yes." That she feels ambivalence on this may be truer. Other interviewers report her strong protestations: "No, no, no! . . . because I am really conservative, a prude, really."

Literary biographies will always be needed, not only for students of literary history seeking a glimpse into the genesis and process that shape a creative work, but for anyone interested in the life of a special fellow human being. There are questions that are perhaps impossible to answer. Could Angela have achieved more with her work? Where would she have gone had she continued to write?

We are not told which modern poets she was familiar with other than Dickinson, Teasdale, St. Vincent Millay, Amy Lowell, and "other Imagists." Later, she would mention Thomas Merton and Federico Garcia Lorca, confessing a preference for Spanish poetry over the "cold English writers." Decades after Garcia Villa's scathing evaluation of her poems, Manalang would dismiss his poetry in several interviews: "His 'modern poetry' is not poetry that you can understand—the commas, the blanks, the coconuts. I don't like his 'modern poetry.'"

Could she have become unfortunately suspicious of "modern poetry" because of "his Garcia [Villa's] 'modern poetry'"? By choice, she was isolated from those with whom she could have discussed literary matters, including certainly "modern" poetry. Her isolation was exacerbated when she abandoned reading. If she had given herself the time and chance, what she might have "learned" from Hopkins, Yeats, Dylan Thomas (even e.e. cummings whom Garcia Villa adored); Elinor Wylie, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, not to mention our own Carlos Angeles, Edith L. Tiempo, and others. Her more mature work strongly hinted that she had the sensibility, a sense of irony and paradox, with, and toughness of mind that could have led to work other than just those lyrics she proved she could do so well. Made curious and challenged, this woman, who once lived and breathed poetry, might even have found time from her business to turn out more poems, liberating her and her reputation from the dated and the easily forgotten.

Edna Zapanta Manlapaz has competently discussed the material available to her. Her labor would have been more significant if the material she was given was not a case of too little poetry, too little recorded life.

Myrna Peña-Reyes

Poet

Eugene, Oregon

The Complete Poems of Angela Manalang Gloria. Edited by Edna Zapanta Manlapaz. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1993.

Angela Manalang Gloria needs to be introduced to current readers (not just in women's studies) and reintroduced to those who knew her work before the war, and to those who, like me, studied a few of her poems in the *Philippine Prose and Poetry* series popularly used in high schools after the war. For the scholar and the serious student who wishes to trace the development of a writer's art, Edna Zapanta Manlapaz has gathered together a valuable collection of not only one of the important women poets but one of the first Filipino poets in English.

The poems are organized chronologically by year of publication, representing the "two discernible phases" of the poet's work: "the early phase (1925–1930) which coincides with four years of college life and a year as the literary editor of a metropolitan newsmagazine; and the later phase (1934–1950), with life as wife and mother who wrote poetry while aggressively engaged in the abaca business."

For sure, the selections in the first section are painfully immature and embarrassing to read, with unrestrained language and its florid flaws ("When my heart, ever throbbing, ever listless, / Had pined for the moonlight to calm it"). One can understand the young poet's impetus, for who has not once felt and sometimes expressed such excessive emotions that are the blessing and bane of youth? However, not everyone writes about them, or is exposed do-