

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

The Complete Poems, edited by Manlapaz

Review Author: Myrna Peña-Reyes

Philippine Studies vol. 49, no. 1 (2001): 143–146

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

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-

ing so. Manalang Gloria provides a good lesson for not rushing to publish. Understandably, most readers would gladly skip the first works and, if they have not been completely turned off, go on to the poet's "second phase."

Still, even in the earlier pieces, glimpses of a genuine poetic talent already emerge. Manalang Gloria is a born poet. She has a wonderful sense of sound, a test of true poets, albeit at first often marred by an excess of emotion ("Dry twigs in the desolate/ gardens of my being"). Many of these early works are loose verse forms used in certain lyric or songlike contexts. The few in tighter verse forms show the influence of Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and St. Vincent Millay. Moreover, for a poet of that time, Manalang Gloria was "modern" in her frank expression of female yearning and sensuality. And just as Gémino Abad singles out her "fresh and original" images, what struck me immediately while wading through the banality of the earlier poems are the unexpectedness and accuracy of some of her imagery: "silver square/ of lunar lace," "mothwings of velvet," "metal of moonlight," "butterfly hour," "the petal moon is faded," "a cobweb stains the grasses/ with a splash of silver threads."

Also striking is the authority of some poetic lines: "The crevassed deep is treacherous tonight," "the fathomless silence of sands/ In the depths of the deepest sea," "Night is imperative." Most impressive to me is her sometimes unexpected modern turn of phrase: "Coffined in this monotony," "This sanctuary of fold/ on fold of umber hush," "In the blue valley known of the dawn."

In her "second phase" which started when she was 25, we see a poet who harnessed more the strengths glimpsed in her earlier work and, more important, starts to rein in her wildness. As Manlapaz in her critical introduction points out, after a devastating critique of her poems by Tom Inglis Moore, Manalang Gloria followed the lead of Sara Teasdale in her attention to the metrical demands of the poetic form, "song: a musical poetry based on directness, simplicity, and emotional intensity for which the main model was Sappho," discovering that "the value of metrical forms lay precisely in their containment of strong emotions which, unrestrained, threaten to spill over into mere sentimentality. . . . Possibly, to her own surprise, she discovered that the containment of passion within compact metrical forms actually added to the emotional intensity of the poetry." This time, she "was now using poetry not merely as catharsis for pent-up feelings of frustrated longing, as she had done with the early poems, but as a means of deliberating on life and defining the self."

With competent versification and her inborn sense of sound, Manalang Gloria turned out some of the best lyrics by a Filipino poet. A sense of irony came more into play in her poems, echoing the work of her strongest influence, Emily Dickinson. And we find more of those striking images and phrases: "one so carved from pride/ And glassed in dream," "pillars tangent to the sun," "Morning hid under a fern," "White tombs so desolately splen-

did," "you have vanished through your body's door/ And stolen past your ghost," "The arms of darkness, great and silent lover," "It rolled the lid from off my night/ And burned my coffin into day," "vandal hands," "carrion hate," and that great line from one of her last published poems dedicated to her husband who died an unexpected and violent death—"The mind is steel and the heart is fallow."

No question about it, she was a maturing poet. For sure, she could not escape the popular poetic conventions, but although steeped in their style, she was learning to employ a fresher more "modern" diction. She also adopted Dickinson's epigrammatic forms. Perhaps remembering the wild excesses of her earlier poems, she could now write with self-deprecating wit:

For love as trivial as a wink
 Has made me prate so wondrously
 To hear me babble one would think
 It meant a coronet to me.
 ("Addenda to History")

Manalang Gloria was mainly a lyric poet whose poems sought to convey the immediacy of an experience—joy/sorrow, an insight—but without being didactic. In fact, she was suspicious of moralizing:

By all my fathers' wisdom
 I could have truly sworn
 Death was the gallant flowering
 Of midnight into morn,
 A mystic thing and lovely,
 Until I saw you die . . .
 Now do I know as truly
 My fathers told a lie.
 ("The Lie")

The narrative was not her interest either. Thus it is not surprising that, for all her musicality, she did not use the ballad. Her impulse was for the brief lyric and shorter forms.

In her critical introduction Edna Manlapaz cites the limitations in studying Manalang Gloria's work: her small body of work (113 poems, the majority of which were published when she was between 18 to 33 years old—only three poems after that), and their "relatively narrow range . . . dealing mainly with aspects of emotional life centered on love." But Manlapaz also sums up Gémino H. Abad's observation regarding a wider variety of themes: "For contrary to a popular impression perpetuated by textbook anthologists, only about half of Angela's poems are on love, the others being on such diverse themes as illness and death, poetry and criticism, faith and unbelief, and sexuality and war." Abad adds that in the poet's few attempts to deal with social themes and issues, the poems are less successful, failing as works of art. Such

subjects did not seem to concern the poet at all. But at her best, when she wrote on things that mattered to her she showed an inventiveness of mind, wit, courage, irony, grace and compassion and, above all, honesty.

Jose Garcia Villa dismissed her poems as "pretty, pleasant," and albeit "polished," possessing "no energy, no passion, no drive," having "only a feeble nostalgia" which "never disturb" so that one "reads them and is through with them." But as Manlapaz points out, Garcia Villa made this assessment based on Manalang Gloria's early works and may not have read her later poems which include some very fine ones—"Soledad," "Apology," "Cementerio del Norte," "Ten Years After,"—as well as "The Tax Evader," here cited in full:

Perhaps the years will get me after all,
 Though I have sought to cheat them of their due
 By documenting in beauty's name my soul
 And locking out of sight my revenue
 Of golden rapture and of sterling tears.
 Let others give to Caesar Caesar's own:
 I have begrudged the dictatorial years
 The right usurious to tax me to the bone.

Therefore, behold me now, a Timon bent
 On hoarding each coin of love that should be spent
 On you and you, and hushing all display
 Of passionate splendor lest I betray
 My wealth—lest the sharp years in tithes retrieve
 Even the heart not worn upon my sleeve.

I think it regrettable that she later changed the poem's title to "I Have Begrudged the Years." The original title has an edge, wit, a boldness and directness lost in the revision, which is a "safe" title but skirts sentimentality. I like the idea of the tax evader/misanthrope-miser who, by withholding her heart holds back on life, and thus wastes life.

Although the preceding poem shows Manalang Gloria at her strongest and best, a general perusal of her work gives the overall impression that it is dated, often sentimental, and derivative. But considering that English was just introduced in the Philippines in 1898, it is remarkable, to say the least, what she at her best was already doing from 1935 to 1940, when she was between 28 to 33 years old. She had the capacity for striking, original imagery and expression. She was a young poet just coming into her full strength, establishing her voice among the celebrants of the country's young literature. One wonders how far she may have gone in her art if only she had continued to write.

Myrna Peña-Reyes
 Poet
 Eugene, Oregon