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L. M. Grow

Of all the predominantly prewar poets, Angela Manalang-Gloria has struck many readers as perhaps the most enigmatic.

Gemino Abad, one of the premier critics of Philippine poetry, credits her with "some of the finest love poems in Filipino poetry" (71), an impression that has lingered since her early works and, certainly, has persisted mostly because of her early works. That it should be so is hardly surprising, granted the level to which she took the subject of love:

Delilah, Heloise, Jezebel, Helen, Francesca, Magdalen—allusions to these women in her love poems give them a mythic scale that is imposing and impressive. Not for Angela the subdued albeit passionate tone of some of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets that speak of a love that meets the level of each day's quiet need. For a high romantic like Angela-the-poet, love was grand passion or nothing (Manlapaz 38).

In the early going, it is no wonder that T. Inglis Moore could conclude that "Mrs. Gloria is our Sara Teasdale—sweet without being sickly, melodious, and charming" (467).

Yet indications of a deep-seated, anti-romantic stance seem to abound. The much ballyhooed reaction Manalang-Gloria had to Baltazar Villanueva's love letter is a case in point (Alegre and Fernandez 52–53). Why Manalang-Gloria would, in response to a love letter, write a poem about hate so acerbic that it was censored by the Bureau of Education might be a question to be asked. And it is hard to overlook Manalang-Gloria's assessment that "Cementerio del Norte" "is the best poem I wrote. . . . The others are all sophomoric gooey-gooey" (Alegre and Fernandez 61). Manlapaz and Pagsanghan go so far as to suggest a feminist orientation in the works, a protest against traditional romantic notions of male and female roles. They see "Revolt from Hymen" as "one woman's revolt against dominant male culture" (404) and

"Old Maid Walking on a City Street" as "woman dismissing love/marriage as a mere concupiscent episode" (407).¹

Both impressions—that she was romantic and that she was anti-romantic—are simultaneously supportable. The "romantic" motif is present when love brings with it expansion of the self, even to the point of deification, and merging of self with other. The "anti-romantic" motif is triggered by a sense of "love" as an oppressive, imprisoning presence. It is interesting in this respect that Manalang-Gloria's almost shocking over-reaction to Villanueva's attentions was provoked by the latter's response to "Yellow Moon" (Alegre and Fernandez 53). The poem thrice expresses the speaker's fear of the moon: "Why do you frighten me so . . ." (line 6); "You are ghastly, spectral tonight" . . . (line 17); "I am afraid of you, yellow moon" (line 24) and twice refers to imprisonment: "You captive of the coconut glade" (line 7) and "Behind your prison bars of coconut trees" (line 19).

Yet the speaker has "flirted with you on many a night" (line 9)—here there is no rejection of love—

But you were a dainty whiteness
That kissed my brow then,
A gentle, pale flutter.
That touched my aching breast (lines 12–15)
(*Complete Poems* 43)

The white, gentle moon evokes tenderness and affection, which the speaker's breast aches for; the yellow moon symbolizes danger, possibly even death, in its "ghastly," "spectral" aspect; this the speaker fears.

Did Manalang-Gloria associate the menace of the yellow moon with the man who responded to it? It would be interesting to see whether Villanueva's letter contained any possessive expressions, all that might have been needed to set Manalang-Gloria off.

"Song of Awakening" (*Poems* 40–41) perfectly articulates the potential of love to either enlarge or restrict the self. When the putative Samson awakens the speaker, he enables her to be nearly coterminous with Nature and to merge with him, the transformation being signalled by the initially confusing shift in pronoun reference from "me" in line 1 to "She" in line 5:

She heard your voice across my mountain fastness,
And freshly limbed with morning . . . (lines 5–6)
The sun was in her lighting up and racing
Past all the gateways of the sacred self; (lines 9–10)

And wind was in the heart of her, and laughter
 Fell from her limbs as lightly as mountain dew;
 And lo, she stole my days so incoherent
 To weave their dreams into the locks of you. (lines 17–20)

But abruptly, the last stanza reverses the polarities:

You woke in me a slumbering Delilah
 And girdled her with passion and with lies,
 You took her by the hand, and now—behold her
 Drunk with the shameless folly of your eyes! (lines 21–24)

Unfettering love for Manalang-Gloria can be expensive, even cosmic, rather than pinching, which is why many poems are exclusively “romantic” and filled with the conventional love lyric hyperbole:

But I can love you with a love
 As finite as the wave that dies
 And dying holds from crest to crest
 The blue of everlasting skies.
 (“To the Man I Married,” *Poems* 28)

Though the lover is subject to mutability, the love equates to “everlasting skies.” Stanzas 3–5 of “Ten Years After” (*Poems* 29–30) go so far as to approach blasphemy:

Eternities that surged and met
 Inexorably drawn:
 I am Beginning . . . I am End . . .
 Light of primeval dawn:
 So deep the caves of loneliness,
 The rims of dream so high,
 Before a stark omnipotence
 Godded my earth and sky:
 And wider far than genesis
 The onliness that grew
 Beyond all height, beyond all breadth,
 Beyond the primal two . . . (lines 9–20)

Though the back formation of the verb “Godded” is the most jolting of Manalang-Gloria’s technical means to reinforce the hyperbole, others are called upon as well. The suspension points in lines 11, 20, and 24 connote endlessness, the state of the Creation, “Beyond all height, beyond all breadth” (line 19), depth being specified in line 13. The “omnipotence” referred to in line 15 is emphasized by the capital letters in

"Beginning" and "End" in line 11. "Beyond the primal two" (line 20) refers simultaneously to the lovers ("Eternities that surged and met" (line 9), "Beginning" and "End" (line 11), earth and sky (line 16), height and breadth (line 19), and, by implication, Adam and Eve). Subtly, the "loneliness" of line 13 becomes the "onliness" of line 18, creating, perhaps, another merging—in this case linguistically—of a primal pair, in the way that "primal dawn" in line 12 slightly shrinks into "primal two" in line 20.

Another poem with a hazardous proximity to being overweening is "To An Idolater" (*Poems* 38), owing to the aggrandizement of the mortal: "You gazed at me/That was enough. Today / I was the god for one immortal while. . . . In you I who am human turn divine" (lines 7–8, 11). The definite article before and the lower case "g" in "god," along with the oxymoron "immortal while" prevent "To an Idolater" from being more than poetic hyperbole, however, especially since "Lord" (line 1) and "Magdalene" (line 14) are capitalized.

More defiantly aggressive in the deification category is "Heloise to Abelard" (*Poems* 39):

There is no god to make me now surrender

Forbidden lips forever haunting mine!
 If to my hunger you are fruit from Eden,
 If to my thirst you are nepenthean wine,

If this is sin, then never will I be shriven
 Who, drunk with hell, now dare the ruse of heaven! (lines 5, 10–14)

Again, as the closing stanza of "Until You Came" iterates:

How passing strange that you who are
 Not more than sod
 Have pushed my heart to heights no star
 Can touch, nor god. (lines 14–17; *Poems* 42)

Even in a poem precious to the point of verging on fluff, Manalang-Gloria can depict the deifying capability of love: "Now with mischievous intent/Pan and I will walk together" ("May," lines 3–4; *Poems* 45).

Self projected into another with the result of expansion rather than constriction is a related Manalang-Gloria motif. Cf., in "Don Juan" (*Poems* 36):

Yet when you looked at me, your looking
 Opened a kingdom to my eyes.

.....
 I only knew one shining instant
 You held my earth, you held my sky. (lines 2-4, 7-8)

Again, in "Because" (*Poems* 37):

... you who are my tropics,
 ... you who are my south!

The other can even be envisioned as the repository of reality itself. Cf., "To A Lovely Woman" (*Poems* 49); "And I, who know you are the undefined/ Reality of all unreal things" (lines 11-12; *Poems* 49).

The anti-romantic treatment of love is present in relatively few poems, but "Revolt from Hymen" (*Poems* 106) is so strong and well-known that it creates the perception that Manalang-Gloria's poetry adopts this tone more than in fact it does.

O to be free at last, to sleep at last
 As infants sleep within the womb of rest!

 To stir and find no blackness vast
 With passion weighted down upon the breast,

 To turn the face this way and that and feel
 No kisses festering on it like sores,

 To be alone at last, broken the seal
 That makes the flesh no better than a whore's!

The next most explicit statement of this position comes in a piece very little known, "The Score," cited by Manlapaz (56):

I have a standing score to reckon
 With you before I'm done
 With love and all the false pretences
 That holds to the sun.
 Not that you tried to break my body
 With an endemoned lust,
 Nor that you willed to break my spirit
 And pinion it to dust.

But even here, the disclaimer "Not that you . . ." mutes the force of what is really quite close to a prose pronouncement. Again, in "Pronounce the Word" (*Poems* 107) the speaker urges her lover to "Repeat that love is over" (line 5), which will "free my captive days from Babylon" (line 10).

The anti-romantic motif, however, is only a microcosmic manifestation of a larger objection to restriction, especially of the self, in any form and from any source. Boundaries and enclosures—physical representations of limitation—are as repellant to Manalang-Gloria as they are to William Blake—whether these obstacles are presented by lovers, social conventions, or the choices one makes. And transcendence is therefore a celebratory occurrence.²

"Querida" (*Poems* 75) is almost Poeian with its multiple rings of enclosure. Inside a gate, inside a closed door and drawn curtains, and inside one room is a "brilliant question mark of light" (line 2). But outside the room, outside the door and the drawn curtains, and outside the gate "an empty limousine/Waits in the brimming emptiness of night" (lines 3-4). The emptiness of the limousine is of course magnified by its surroundings, "brimming emptiness." "Brimming" suggests overflowing the room, exceeding the boundary, ideal from Manalang-Gloria's point of view.³

The physical barriers to movement, to freedom, frequently either are not connected with love or a lover, or are only incidentally so. In a markedly inferior poem, "Recognition" (*Complete Poems* 54-55), the only lover present is the personified wind:

Somehow it seems to her
That the sea-wind and the breeze are the same,
That the one has tiptoed on the trail of the ship,
Pursuing her like an avenging specter,
.....
Just because it loves her so . . . (lines 43-46, 50)

The valuation of unlimited movement and the detestation of physical restriction—while less horrifying to Manalang-Gloria than imprisonment—show clearly through in "The Invalid Looks Toward the Window" (*Complete Poems* 64).

. . . things I love—what golden trails
My feet have known, what blue my sight
Once caught. But I, now freedom-shown
And tucked within geometric space,
Can only turn a bitter face
From so much mockery and scorn! (lines 11-16)

"Canticle," the opening verse of *Poems* (3), seems to accept the reduction to dust of "These dried and yellow kernels that are now my days" (line 3). But what emerges drifts up from the sides (and thus bound-

aries) of the censer: "I shall but feel the incense warm against my face" (line 4). "Song" (*Poems* 4) describes something similar. The speaker's heart "Had ravelled all along/My old, discarded love and/Re-spun it into song" (lines 6-8). Here, components are fashioned into a larger whole, and song, like incense, faces no tactile restriction.

The speaker in "Virac" (*Poems* 4) is depressed by the non-arrival of "you" in both sections, but in the first she is housebound by falling rain. In section two, her horizons expand because the rain has stopped. Her

... thoughts grow vagrant
On roads that wander past the lonely house,
I shall go down, the stairs and walk with morning
Across the beach. (lines 9-12)

In "April Morning" (*Poems* 5), it is, interestingly, the persona who tries to do the enclosing but is unsuccessful: "I reached for the sky, but it glistened/In whitening unconcern" (lines 5-6); "Morning hid under a fern" (line 8); and

A water hyacinth lifted
Its blue eyes in ridicule
As the shining sun-pollen drifted
Away over grass and pool,
And the spider lilies grew chary (lines 9-13)

"Mayon Afternoon" (*Poems* 9-10) looked at cursorily, can be one of the pieces appearing to be anti-romantic. But the pivotal stanza three clearly indicates that the lover's advance is only unwelcome because it impedes the speaker's aspiration to merge with the cosmos:

I said, "It is good to be here, to be hourly beholden
to space,
To be earth and though earth, to be sky," and I hungrily
took my fill
Of height-song and wind-song. And all of a sudden your
discordant embrace
Made me startle a covey of echoes beside a slumbering
rill. (lines 17-24)

"Mountain Pool" (*Poems* 20) shows the speaker content because she is the possessor, not the possessed, and what she possesses is absolute: "I know supreme desire—/My heart, a pool demurely/Holding heaven's fire" (lines 6-8).

"Apology" (*Poems* 23) is perhaps the clearest example of self-restriction, rather than restriction by natural forces or restriction by another person:

Too long concerned with marble floors
And pillars tangent to the sun,
I quite forgot beyond my doors
The carnival of life is run.

And if I seem to disregard
Its harlequins confetti-eyed,
It is because I have to guard
The shining palace of my pride.

"To A Cynic" (*Poems* 76-77) is another disapproval of self-restriction, in this case not by the persona, via negative attitude:

A cynic is
No less than this

Flame-eaten tree
That spikes the sky
With irony.
It cannot cry

For birds to nest
Within its hollow
And blackened breast,
It cannot follow

The wind's swift thought,
The lightning call,
The murmured rote
Of showerfall.

And so, bereft
Now of desire,
This tree that kept
A tryst with fire,

This tree that once
Upon a time
Gave utterance
To leafy rhyme,

Blasphemes, hell-riven
The holliest blue
Of holy heaven—
Even as you

With cindered arms
Now barb your mind
Against the charms
Of humankind.

Although "Wisdom" (*Poems* 88) does not specifically attribute the enclosure to love, the last stanza is an expression of regret for its presence:

It took me years of wisdom
To find my world, alas,
Circumferenced with lucre
Within a coin of brass. (lines 13–16)

In sum, although Angela Manalang-Gloria did certainly rail against suffocating and imprisoning manifestations of love and lovers, she also relished the uplifting and expansive aspects. "Poem for Evangelina" (*Poems* 96) is a paeon to revelry, urging Evangelista to "Lean on life as a cushion" (line 2). The speaker notes that "Epicures without misgiving/ Drink the years in much this fashion" (lines 3–4). Then the speaker enjoins Evangelina to "Rim your goblet high with laughter" (line 5) and concludes her advice with an allusive melding of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam":

Gather up your scattered dreaming
Into one such epigram
That the broken heart shows gleaming
Underneath Omar Khayyam. (lines 9–12)

She may not have penned an aubade, as Gwendolyn Brooks did, but just as surely for Angela Manalang-Gloria, an aspect of love remained alive in both the ice and fire.

Notes

1. Style is not a factor in the matter, even though, as Gonzales (99) points out, "Angela Manalang-Gloria developed a style midway between literal statement and figurative description." In fact, Manalang-Gloria's refinements of style sharpened her focus, rather than opening the door to differing opinions about the thematic direction a given poem might be taking. As Manlapaz (65) notes, "Angela pruned her poems of melodious but meaningless diction and stripped their lines of all extraneous syllables. Possibly to her own surprise, she discovered that the containment of passion within compact material forms actually added to the emotional intensity of the poetry."

2. And love is not the only means of achieving transcendence. "In Defense of Poets" (*Poems* 83) valorizes the power of poetry to elevate:

... you and me
 Who conjugate infinity!
 ... you and I
 Can map our country from the sky,
 Discover in a kiss ungiven
 The small circumference of heaven,
 And compass in an afterthought
 Sudden horizons strange to rote. (lines 3–10)

3. Ventura's canard about the negative reaction of the judges in the 1940 Commonwealth Literary Contests would, ironically, not have affected the vehemence of Manalang-Gloria's position: "Perhaps if she had called it "Hospital," nobody would have objected" (120). Elsewhere in her poetry Manalang-Gloria chafes against the confinement imposed by illness, just as she does against confinement stemming from other causes.

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