

Dulce María Loynaz, the "grande dame of Cuban letters," received international recognition 1992 for her nearly century-long contributions to Spanish letters when she was awarded the Cervantes Prize, widely recognized at the highest prize in Spanish Literature. As a poet, Loynaz is frequently mentioned in the same breath as the other great Latin American women poets of the twentieth century, Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou, Alfonsina Storni and Delmira Agustini; to these, some would add the name of another American poet, Emily Dickinson.

Loynaz is known for two prose works—the travel memoir *Un verano en Tenerife* (1958) and the novel *Jardín* (1951)—and several volumes of poetry: *Versos, 1920-1938* (1938), *Juegos de agua* (1947), and *Poemas sin nombre* (1953), along with a handful of published chapbooks. Her collected poetry has been published in the 200 pages of *Poesía completa* (1993). The parsimony of her publications reflected her firm belief that writing should be, above all, "clean and concise."¹ She also declared that writing should say something new. In explaining why she had left a second novel unfinished, she wrote that "I understood that my book was superfluous, that it did not add anything, and anyone who writes should at least aspire to be original."² Her works, and her words, are few but well chosen.

Loynaz was born in Havana, Cuba, on 10 December 1902, and died in the same city on April 27, 1997. Her father, General Enrique Loynaz del Castillo, was a national figure, having fought under Antonio Maceo in Cuba's war for independence (1895-98); he was also the author and composer of the *Himno Invasor*, the "national anthem" of Cuba's rebel troops. Her artistically and musically talented mother made the Loynaz household a vibrant center of arts and letters. Dulce María and her three younger siblings were never sent to school, but instead were tutored by a series of instructors at home in their ancient mansion full of paintings, sculptures, and baroque furniture, with its garden overlooking the sea – the model for the house in Loynaz's novel. This home education was sufficiently rigorous for Loynaz to receive a law degree from the University of Havana in 1927.

Loynaz and her siblings (all of them poets, though only Dulce María published) learned several languages, discovering the French poets Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Baudelaire. Translating the works of the French symbolists into Spanish served as Loynaz's apprenticeship in poetry, and they together with Indian poet Tagore deeply influenced her style. In the 1920s and 30s, the Loynaz mansion became the stopping place in Havana for Federico García Lorca and Juan Ramón Jiménez of Spain and Gabriela Mistral of Chile on their several visits to Cuba. Several critics have assumed that Loynaz's poetry was formed under the influence of the illustrious Spanish poets, but Lorca and Jiménez insisted her style was already fully developed when they first met.³

¹ "Mi poesía: Autocrítica," lecture before the Lyceum of the University of Havana, August 1950; printed in Pedro Simón, ed., *Dulce María Loynaz: Valoración múltiple* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1991), p. 93. All translations are my own.

² "Conversación con Dulce María Loynaz," in *ibid.*, p. 65.

³ María Asunción Mateo, "Introducción," *Dulce María Loynaz: Antología lírica* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1993), p. 19.

Loynaz traveled widely in her youth, visiting the United States in 1920 and going on an extended tour of the Middle East in 1929, where she saw the newly opened tombs of Luxor and wrote her extraordinary "Love Letter to King Tut-Ank-Amen." It was in this period that she wrote and published her first collection of lyrical poetry, *Versos 1920-1938* (1938, 114 pages). There was an apparent lull in her activity during her first marriage (1937-1943), but she returned to traveling, and publishing, on her second marriage in 1946. It was in the late 1940s through the 1950s that she published her most accomplished works, including her second collection of lyrical poems, *Juegos de agua: Versos del agua y del amor* (1947, 97 pages) and her magisterial book of prose poems, *Poemas sin nombre* (1952, 170 pages). Her last publication in these years was the seemingly prophetic long poem *Últimos días de una casa* (1958, 31 pages).

This period of activity was followed by nearly three decades of virtual silence, from the 1959 Cuban Revolution to the gradual relaxation of ideological control over the arts on the island in the mid-1980s. The revolution had left Loynaz in an incongruous situation. The great majority of Cubans of her social class had left Cuba by the early 1960s (her own husband left in 1961, returning only in 1972 in order to die in Havana). Loynaz abandoned her legal practice and her writing, but she refused to leave her island, her country, her city, her house. "The daughter of a general of the War of Independence does not abandon her country" was her characteristically terse explanation. She continued to serve as president of the Academia Cubana de la Lengua, which met in her house, and to deliver talks on Latin American poetry, but she herself never again wrote a poem. In that sharply divided era of Cuban politics, Loynaz fit into no category and her contributions to Cuban letters were widely ignored. In Cuba, her deeply personal style and themes did not fit the politically conscious mold of official letters; in the exile community, the fact that she had remained in Cuba sufficed to consign her to oblivion.

The changes in Cuban society since the 1980s have gone hand-in-hand with a reevaluation of the importance of Dulce María Loynaz. A book of her selected poetry (*Poesías escogidas*) was published in Havana in 1984, and a collection of previously unpublished poems written in the early 1920s, *Bestiario*, came out in a Cuban magazine in 1984 (27 pages). Over the following years a large volume of critical pieces by and about Loynaz was compiled (*Dulce María Loynaz: Valoración múltiple*, 1991), and a collection of previously unpublished prose poems, *Poemas naufragos*, came out in 1992. When Loynaz received the Cervantes Prize later that year, it was as if permission had been granted to admire her once again. In Cuba she was admired for having remained; outside of Cuba, for having maintained her silence; and among the younger generations both within and outside of Cuba, she was valued for the emphasis she placed on the intimate secrets of the heart, and for the cleanness and concision of her writing. These artistic precepts of hers were also, she had insisted, "democratic" values,⁴ ones that once again seem to be calling for their place in Cuban life and literature.

⁴ "The poet should not be excessively obscure, and above all should not be deliberately obscure. Veiling the poetic message, establishing a monopoly over it for select minorities, is a way of producing it antisocially; and, to use another current term, antidemocratically." In "Mi poesía," p. 82.

Dulce María Loynaz's "lyrical novel" *Jardín (Garden)* consists of forty-four short chapters divided into five parts. The novel is framed by two evocative vignettes that paint the mythic setting for the narrative, and is preceded by an author's "Prelude."

In the Prelude, Loynaz explains the concept behind the novel, "the disjointed and monotonous story of a woman and a garden" – woman and garden being two key symbols (as Loynaz points out) that have been with us since the dawn of human history, or human myth.

The woman is Bárbara, introduced in the opening, framing vignette along with the garden from which she looks out onto (and then turns away from) the swirling world of traffic and modernity beyond. The dreamlike action of this scene tells us that we are not in any ordinary novel: Bárbara watches the moon, "the secret of Night," tear loose from the sky and crash to the earth in her garden, where she plants its cold shards "in the place where the earth [is] warmest."

Chapter One opens with Bárbara in her room, looking through piles of old photographs. She finds a bundle of photographs of a young girl, who turns out to be her own great-grandaunt, also named Bárbara. In the succeeding chapters of Part One, these photographs come to life one by one in Bárbara's vivid vision; the girl Bárbara fuses with the character of the woman Bárbara, her grand-niece. The sample translation includes the first two of these photographs (Chapter Two).

To recount the remaining action of the book is in a sense to betray it, for the book is about time, eternity, and solitude, not action; but for all that, the action of the book in brief summary is as follows. In Part Two, Bárbara leaves the old photographs and, returning to the present, explores the old house, the garden, and the city; she discovers a cache of old love letters between her great-grandaunt Bárbara and the mysterious young man of another old portrait. In Part Three she reads the letters, one by one, just as she had looked at the photographs in Part One. In Part Four she meets a young sailor, leaves her garden, and (with the words of the old love letters reverberating in her mind) sails with him "into the world." Part Five moves swiftly; one of the chapters is even titled "Speed." Bárbara, now "in the world," becomes accustomed to "civilization," has children, sees them grow up in the blink of an eye, comes to know war and its devastation, and finally returns to die in her ancient, overgrown garden.

In the final, framing vignette, civilization is encompassing the garden. Hotels and spas are being erected in steel and concrete along the beach. A worker, digging a foundation for some new building, discovers the moon Bárbara had planted in the opening vignette. He looks at it for a moment in fascination, then tosses it aside, while Bárbara looks on from the eternal garden.