

Dulce Maria Loynaz: A Woman Who No Longer Exists

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DULCE MARÍA LOYNAZ, WITH CUBAN WRITER PABLO ARMANDO FERNÁNDEZ AND RUTH BEHAR, 1995

[\[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-97401-und-01/1?subview=detail;view=entry\]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-97401-und-01/1?subview=detail;view=entry)

DULCE MARIA LOYNAZ WITH CUBAN WRITER PABLO ARMANDO FERNANDEZ AND RUTH BEHAR, 1995

In 1993, when I first came to know Dulce María Loynaz, she had already turned ninety. She was frail, almost blind, hard of hearing, and tired easily. But she was still lucid, wry, concise and sharp in her answers to questions, and listened attentively if you sat very close and read poetry to her. She had the kindness to receive me, several times, at her home, a mansion of ravaged elegance on 19 and E Street in the Vedado section of Havana, whose fenced courtyard is famous for its massive stone statue of a headless woman. Our meeting time, arranged in advance with her niece, who acted as Dulce María's manager, was always at five in the afternoon, the sacred hour at which a Spanish bullfighter met his death in the poem immortalized by Federico García Lorca. [1] [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/-dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N1;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1>]

All guests, I learned later, were told to come at five in the afternoon. And there were many guests, a continuous parade of them, especially after 1992, the year Dulce María Loynaz was honored with the Miguel de Cervantes prize, the most prestigious award for writers of the Spanish language, bestowed by the King of Spain (and given only once before to a Cuban writer, the novelist Alejo Carpentier). Yet Loynaz produced relatively little in a writing career that spanned eight decades. Her complete oeuvre consists of one novel, a book of reminiscences about her stay in Tenerife (one of the Canary Islands and the birthplace of her second husband), scattered essays and literary lectures, and a few books of poetry that fit into a two hundred page volume. She is best known for her poems, particularly *Versos, 1920-1938*, *Ultimos Días de Una Casa* (*Last Days of a House*, 1958) and her *Poemas sin nombre* (*Nameless Poems*, 1953), a collection of 124 prose poems, some only a sentence long, which she dedicated to her mother. [2] [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/-dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N2;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1>] Virtually all of this writing was produced in her youth and middle years, and published mostly in Spain, in the 1940s and 1950s, thanks to the efforts of her husband.

What was it, then, that drew journalists, filmmakers, admirers, and fledgling translators to Loynaz's work? What was it that drew more than a few curiosity seekers, both from Cuba and abroad, to the figure of Loynaz herself? Why did so many make the pilgrimage to the mansion of the ancient poet in the twilight years of her life?

One went, preferably with chocolates in hand (which she loved), to render homage to the aristocratic, reclusive, and willful woman who chose a unique and strange double destiny: never to write poetry again after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and never to abandon, come what may, the island of her birth. Loynaz was one among several prominent Cubans, including the ballerina Alicia Alonso and the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, whose class privilege gave them the means and the justification to leave Cuba after the revolution but chose to stay. [3] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N3;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> Even when Loynaz's husband left in 1961 and did not return for eleven years, she refused to leave. Hers was a fierce patriotism for Cuba and a fierce devotion to the intimate world of her house, with its massive interior columns and marble stairways, its stone statues, its spectacular mirrors, its glorious art and porcelain figurines, its brocaded sofas and chairs, its carved Victorian furniture. Already she had lamented the loss of the mansion of her youth in the prophetic poem "Last Days of a House," published months before the Revolution, in which she seemed to foresee how "her genteel world was going to be shattered." [4] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N4;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> She was determined not to abandon the house on 19 and E, the house of her marriage and womanhood, to guard over it, if necessary, single-handedly.

And yet she remained aloof from the "revolutionary project," neither taking a stand for or against, but living parallel to the history that unfolded outside her doorstep. Her poetic sensibility and class position were not "stuff for guerilla poetry and Marxist-Leninist aestheticians." [5] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N5;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> Loynaz herself seemed to fear that her work had become irrelevant in the wake of the transformations wrought by the Cuban revolution. In the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s, she went into voluntary seclusion, like a Cuban Emily Dickinson. [6] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N6;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> She paid a price for this choice, and the price was silence and solitude and oblivion. Her work went out of print and languished unread for close to three decades.

Not until 1984 was a volume of Loynaz's poetry published again in Cuba; the rest of her writing had to wait to find its way back into print after the Cervantes prize in 1992. By then, Cuba was in the thick of the "special period," a time of vast economic and moral changes set in motion by the collapse of the Soviet Union. A younger generation of Cuban poets and artists, searching for fresher language untainted by ideological assertions, searching for neglected literary texts by women, searching for personal authenticity in the face of masks upon masks of guarded public identities, eagerly turned to Loynaz and discovered in her work a sensibility that was sensual, passionate, devastating in its grasp of the contradictions of desire.

This turn toward Loynaz has to be understood in the context of the new culture that has been unfolding in Cuba in the 1990s. After being allowed to fall into neglect, the architecture of Old Havana is being sumptuously restored, in part to attract tourists and their much-needed dollars, but also because there is a need to lay claim to the national patrimony, to the wealth of a nation that will otherwise become a pauper on the world capitalist stage. Loynaz, as the Cervantes prize made clear, had turned into a national jewel, a holy relic of a creole aristocracy sufficiently loyal in its ideals about Cuban national independence that it could respectfully win a place in post-revolutionary Cuba; more so, certainly, than the liberal, wavering, always ambivalent middle class. The 1990s has been a time of soul-searching, and religions of all types, forced to go underground during the years of revolutionary fervor, are being revitalized. Catholicism has made a comeback; masses are now heard all over Cuba. And Loynaz, as she herself was quick to note, was a thoroughly Catholic thinker and writer, who continually returned to the rose as a symbol and the rosary as a poetic form. Finally, the 1990s has seen a huge resurgence of interest in "lo cubano," in all things Cuban—including the Cubanness that takes shape beyond the boundaries of the island and the state. And Loynaz, with her feet planted in the Cuban soil of the house that became her cloister, her refuge, and her shrine of womanist resistance to the male will to power, was as rebelliously Cuban as they come. So Cuban that, like Martí, she is read with devotion both on the island and in the diaspora.

But for a long time—for half her life—she was quietly ignored. Years before her death on April 27, 1997, at the age of 94, Dulce María Loynaz described herself as "a woman who no longer exists"—the title of a film documentary made in 1987 by Vicente González Castro for Cuban television. [7] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrq;id=N7;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> That was the title Loynaz announced, a decade ago, she would give to her autobiography, the story of a life lived between memory and forgetting, between presence and absence, the story of a woman who felt she had ceased to exist long before her physical death. Seeing her, at the age of 84, still robust, the irony in her voice still crisp in the interviews on film, I realized how fully the last ten years had wasted her strength, and how different a woman she was by the time I met her. Little did she imagine that just before her death she would experience a resurrection, such as few writers have known, coming into fame and glory as she approached, birdlike and delicate, almost a century of life.

Dulce María Loynaz was born on December 10, 1902. She was the daughter of an illustrious general, Enrique Loynaz del Castillo, who fought for Cuban independence from Spain alongside the great national heroes José Martí and Antonio Maceo.

Much of the aura surrounding Loynaz had precisely to do with her status as the daughter of a rebel general, for the Cuban Revolution of 1959 came to be scripted as the culmination of Cuba's unfulfilled struggle for freedom at the end of the last century. Her mother, María de las Mercedes Muñoz Sañudo, was a talented pianist who had an artistic spirit. Loynaz grew up with her brothers, Carlos Manuel and Enrique, and sister, Flor, who were also poets, in an old house which had a garden and looked out onto the ocean, and later became the setting for Loynaz's only novel, *Jardín* (*Garden*, begun in 1928 and published in Spain in 1951 and never translated). Loynaz described her life growing up as lonely and austere and kept in order by the military discipline of her father. Few people were allowed to visit the house, and the only other young people the Loynaz siblings saw were the children of her father's comrades in arms. After their parents divorced, their mother took control of the house and gave more freedom to Dulce and her siblings, who created a lively and imaginative world for themselves, filled with music, exotic animals, and poetry. Into that world came such renowned guests, in the 1930s, as the Spanish poets Federico García Lorca and Juan Ramón Jiménez and the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, like Jiménez a Nobel laureate.

During the last years of her life Cuban reporters never seemed to tire of asking Loynaz about her memories of those years and those celebrities, demanding continually that she revisit a time long gone and barely imaginable, demanding that she exist only in the past. Her admirers in Cuba seemed to have an insatiable desire for the nostalgia that only she could gratify as a living anachronism. Loynaz was right: she did not, could not, exist in the present. Indeed, the final colloquium offered in her honor in Havana on the occasion of her 94th birthday in December of 1996, widely publicized on Cuban television and radio, was entitled "Una mujer en el jardín" ("A Woman in the Garden"), an allusion to her novel and the life of a woman who in her youth inhabited a yet more majestic house, now crumbling, long since divided into a jigsaw puzzle of pieces to serve as modest living quarters for several families. At the colloquium, and later at a joyous *tertulia* at her home, she was garlanded with tributes by poets, musicians, sculptors, artists, architects, literary critics, and filmmakers. A pianist played a *bolero* for her on the piano that had once felt the hands of García Lorca upon its keys. Loynaz smiled and clapped her bony hands at all the right moments and then readjusted them on her cane, inherited from her grandfather. She took real pleasure in the festivities, but I noticed that she barely uttered a word. People spoke to her, for her, about her, and her strength permitted her nothing more than to take it in, to be there, to try to exist.

Educated at home, Dulce María Loynaz did not enter an academic institution until 1927, when she took her exams at the University of Havana and received a doctorate in law at the age of 25. She began writing poetry at the age of ten and by the age of seventeen was publishing poems in Cuban newspapers. Although precocious, she wrote slowly, quietly, destroying more than she kept of what she wrote, and without any rush to publish. In the decades before the Revolution she also traveled extensively through Europe, the Middle East, South America, and the United States. She was invited to lecture at Columbia University in 1952. So fully did she see herself in the role of the wanderer that she wrote a stunning poem, "Viajero" ("Traveler"), about the traveler who "arrives at the port and no one awaits him."

But the journey that made perhaps the deepest impact on her work (with the exception of her stays in Tenerife) was the trip she made in 1929 with her siblings and mother to Turkey, Syria, Libya, Palestine, and Egypt, which inspired her to write a love poem to King Tut-Ank-Amen, dead for thousands of years, whose excavated tomb made a lasting impression on her. The theme of death and resurrection—which she came to experience in her own life—would haunt her, and she also wrote *La novia de Lázaro* (*The Bride of Lazarus*, which remained unpublished until 1991), a prose poem in short chapters in which she imagines the resurrected Lazarus coming back to life in order to tell his bride, the woman who has patiently waited for him, that death is as tasteless as water; and in which she also imagines the bride telling Lazarus that her vigil, earned with the blood of patience, was longer than his "innocent and passing siesta." [8] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchiv:g=mqrq;id=N8;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1>

After the Revolution, Loynaz herself was forced to learn patience. She no longer traveled, but she remained closely connected to Spain through her appointment as president of the Cuban branch of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, which held its meetings at her house. It became her job—when she no longer could bring herself to write poetry—to keep the sassy street language, ribald humor, and African-inspired turns of phrase and rhythm that are so much a part of Cuban vernacular speech from totally overturning the established rules of the Spanish language, still so jealously guarded by the mother country.

Only once did Loynaz speak at length about her own philosophy of poetry—in a guest lecture delivered in 1950 during a summer course held at the University of Havana. [9] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchiv:g=mqrq;id=N9;note=ptr;rgn=main;view=trgt;xc=1> The poet, she said, should never be "excessively obscure" and she underlined that "above all the poet should never be so deliberately." And she continued: "To veil the poetic message, to establish a monopoly over it, which is open only to a select minority, is to produce . . . poetry anti-democratically." Loynaz's literary themes could never be called populist, but she did believe in, and practice, the ideal of poetry as speech without presumptions. Poetry, she felt, should be understood by everyone, have an electric charge, and be concise, exact, and pure in its expression. Her poems, she claimed, were like bread, and "bread is served at every table." And prose poetry, which she excelled at, she felt was the easiest to abuse as a genre, because of its lack of established poetic measures and rhythms. "The prose poem has had its wings cut and it still has to

rise to the same heights as its angelic brother." She needed the prose poem, she said, because some poetic ideas must be expressed in prose, though she herself could not say exactly why. That same ineffableness made it impossible, much as she wished at times, to write poetry on demand, even to benefit the best of causes. She recalled the request of a mother whose son had died and asked Loynaz for some verses in his memory. Says Loynaz, "I couldn't do it! I tried, there was an emotional vein from which to write something, but I couldn't. . . . I never gave that mother the solace she sought. All my life I will be haunted by the bitterness of that incident."

On the one occasion when I asked Loynaz to say what advice she would give to a beginning poet, she replied in four precise words, "*Leer más, escribir menos*" ("Read more, write less"). She was aware of her predilection for pruning her language, both spoken and written, and often addressed this theme in her work, especially in her prose poems in *Poemas sin nombre*. Poem CXI consists simply of the line, "I've been stripping the bark of my poetry so much, that I got to the seed without savoring the pulp." [10] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrg:id=N10:note=ptr:rgn=main:view=trgt:xc=1> To me, many of her "Nameless Poems" read like meditations, some almost like mantras, which bring to mind sharp clear images and, at the same time, a resounding sense of loss. I find the style and the voice of these poems so beguiling that, rather than analyze them, I have written my own "Nameless Poems," in English and Spanish, which I presented to Loynaz on her 94th birthday, not knowing it would be her last.

Loynaz's sensibility could be called womanist, in its awareness of the work in which women must engage to maintain life, and in its awareness of the futility of that work, the tired evanescence of that work. Her prose Poem LVIII, made up of two sentences, reads: "I am bent over your memory like the woman I saw this afternoon washing at the river. Hours and hours on her knees, bent at the waist over that black river of your absence" (my translation). But in contemporary terms, the poem that could most easily be read through a feminist lens is her well-known, "Canto a la mujer estéril" ("Poem for the Barren Woman"). The poem's fierce words, not so easily uttered in the 1930s, are impressive in the way they turn around the biblical assumption that barrenness is the worst fate that can befall a woman. Proudly says Loynaz, who herself was childless, to the barren woman: "May God rot the tongue of whoever directs it / against you. . . . Those who want you to serve for what / other women serve / don't know that you are Eve . . . / Eve, uncursed, / Eve, white and asleep / in a garden of flowers, in a scented forest! . . ."

With the passing of Loynaz, Cuba lost, finally, one of its most original, iconoclastic, and confident poetic voices. It was a voice that was lost just as it was being found, just as it was finding a place of resurrection in the new post-revolutionary island.

How well can this voice carry over into the English language? It is a voice of such apparent simplicity that most efforts to render it into English fall terribly flat. Dulce María Loynaz is virtually unknown to poets of the English language. Hardly any of her work has been translated into English. [11] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqr/act2080.0036.401/--dulce-maria-loynaz-a-woman-who-no-longer-exists?c=mqr;c=mqrarchive:g=mqrg:id=N11:note=ptr:rgn=main:view=trgt:xc=1> Three years ago, in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, her work was given one of its few homes in the English language in our special double issue on Cuba. Here, in this issue, in fresh translations by David Frye, Judith Herman, and myself, we offer her poems, traveling now on their own, a port at which to stop and, this time, be awaited.

NOTES

1. "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca* (New York: New Directions, 1955), 134/5. ♣ [\[#\]](#)
2. All of her poetry has been collected in Dulce María Loynaz, *Poesía Completa* (Havana, Cuba: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1993). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
3. An interview with Dulce María Loynaz is included in a volume that honors various Cuban luminaries as patriots for choosing not to leave the island. See Luis Báez, *Los que se quedaron* (Havana, Cuba: Editora Política, 1993). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
4. For an insightful analysis of the life and work of Dulce María Loynaz, see Alan West, *Tropics of History: Cuba Imagined* (Westport, CT: Bergen and Garvey, 1997). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
5. West, *Tropics of History*, 98. ♣ [\[#\]](#)
6. The intriguing parallels between the poetry of Loynaz and Dickinson are explored in Pablo Armando Fernández, "Bridges of the Heart," in Ruth Behar, ed., *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
7. Vicente González Castro, *Un encuentro con Dulce María Loynaz* (Havana, Cuba: Ediciones Artex, 1994). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
8. Dulce María Loynaz, *La novia de Lázaro* (Havana, Cuba: Editorial José Martí, 1993). ♣ [\[#\]](#)
9. All the citations in this paragraph are from Dulce María Loynaz, "Mi Poesía: Autocrítica," in Pedro Simón, *Dulce María Loynaz: Valoración Múltiple* (Havana, Cuba: Ediciones Casa de las Américas y Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1991), 79-97. The translations from Spanish are my own. ♣ [\[#\]](#)
10. Translation by Alan West, in *Tropics of History*, 96. ♣ [\[#\]](#)

11. The best translations are those of Alan West, included in the anthology edited by Marjorie Agosín, *These Are Not Sweet Girls: Poetry by Latin American Women* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1994), 42-47. *Poemas sin nombre* was translated into English by Harriet de Onís in 1958; the translations were published in a bilingual edition in Cuba in 1994. I hope these poems will one day be retranslated. Onís's translations are adequate, but at times too literal to communicate the full emotional weight behind the deceptively simple language. ♣ [\[#\]](#)

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