

Love Letter to a Dead Pharaoh

by Daína Chaviano

Published at *The Miami Herald*. Dec. 11th, 1992 (Translated from the original article, published in Spanish at *El Nuevo Herald*, Dec. 8th, 1992)

I think that I will never solve the enigma.

I still remember the secret that passed from mouth to mouth when I was a 15-year-old high school student in Havana. I have no idea of the origin of the mystic rite that spread through the school like so many other mysterious notions.

It was a spell, an act of magic – whether black or white magic, I did not know – that anyone could conjure on the privacy of a room.

You had to be alone, with all the lights turned out. At midnight you had to light a candle in front of a mirror and gaze into it intently.

Some students swore that they saw the face of a stranger, whom they imagined to be a future spouse. Others described seeing themselves, 50 years older. A third group halted the experiment when the image started to change into something that they would rather not recognize.

I was in this third group. I never witnessed such a metamorphosis again until many years later. And when it happened the second time, I was in plain light surrounded by people.

The poet and the boy king

She sat under a brilliant light. When she started to read the poem, dedicated to a youth dead more than 3,000 years ago, something magical started to happen: the old woman underwent a transformation. Little by little, her features appeared to mutate as if in a dream.

Dulce María Loynaz was reading in public one of her most beautiful poems: *A Love Letter to Tutankhamen*.



She wrote the poem when she was still an adolescent. It was inspired by a trip that her rich and cultured family made to Egypt solely to see the newly discovered tomb of the legendary ruler.

The image of that Cuban girl standing before the coffin of the Egyptian king – enraptured to the point of writing an almost erotic love poem – always struck me as one of the most surreal and delightful portraits in Latin American literature.

It proves as well that literature is not even remotely the same as the subject usually taught in the classroom.

Literature is a universe of secret passions that academia and government prefer to ignore, because it is peopled by creatures who defy convention and so-called “normal” standards of conduct. Yet civilization is nurtured by these occult, sometimes esoteric, experiences. And so are we as human beings.

What a pity that these academic and governmental institutions could deprive a whole generation of its most sacred nourishment.

All my life I have been a voracious reader. Yet I had never had access to the works of this Cuban poet who still lives in Havana and who just recently received the Cervantes Award, the greatest literary prize of the Spanish language.

The literature courses that I took in high school and the university made no mention of her. Nor were her books available in stores. It was while I was preparing an anthology of poetry during the mid-1980s that someone referred me to Loynaz’s poems.

At Havana’s National Library, I gradually read the aging tomes. They were so dusty that I had to wash my hands after handling each one (only with water, there was no soap).

Despite the depressing environment, I enjoyed the rare pleasure of savoring some of Cuban literature’s most lucid creations.

Dulce María Loynaz was not explicitly banned (in Cuba nothing is expressly forbidden; this way the government avoids the label of inquisitor.) But her poems were not read in classrooms, they were not published, and they were not included in anthologies.

Perhaps responding to a general subconscious demand, a publishing house decided to issue, after many years, a collection of her poems.

It was then, at a reading organized by writers to honor her, that I heard the poem with its millennial charge. And it was there that I saw an amazing metamorphosis under that spell called poetry.



I'm not quite sure what happened that night. There were lights everywhere. People were all around. And there wasn't a mirror in sight. Yet I witnessed the miracle of a love-sick teenager emerging from the shell of an old woman.

It was a spell, an act of magic... I know not whether black or white magic.

I think I will never solve the enigma.

**© 2013 Daina Chaviano. All rights reserved.
No part of this article may be reproduced or copied in any
mechanical, photographic or digital form, including the Internet,
without written permission of the author,
except for academic papers, essays and theses.
To show the contents of this article,
only links directed to this PDF are allowed.**

