

# *A Goodly Garlande*

*in onore di*

SERGIO PEROSA

*a cura di*

ALIDE CAGIDEMETRIO

e ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI

Editoriale Programma

# ANNALI DI CA' FOSCARI

RIVISTA DELLA FACOLTÀ  
DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
DELL'UNIVERSITÀ CA' FOSCARI  
DI VENEZIA

XLII, 4

2003

Editoriale Programma

"TO BE SEXLESS, CREEDLESS, CLASSLESS, FREE."  
ELIOT BLISS: A CREOLE WRITER

Between February and March 1959 Eliot Bliss<sup>1</sup> and Jean Rhys exchanged letters on the meaning of "Sargasso Sea."<sup>2</sup> The two West Indian writers knew each other well and would often meet in Rhys's apartment in London. At the time of this correspondence however Rhys was in Cornwall in a place so "cold that freezes your heart and marrow,"<sup>3</sup> struggling to write her masterpiece, plagued by the flu and caring for her sick husband; while Bliss was in London, also struggling with poor health and financial difficulties.

In her letters to Bliss, Rhys thanked the lesser-known writer for sharing her knowledge of what the "Sargasso Sea" was; and on March 16th she acknowledged Bliss was the first to have understood the meaning of those words. A year earlier, talking about a possible title for the book, she had written Francis Wyndham that she "thought of 'Sargasso Sea' or 'Wide Sargasso Sea' but nobody knew what [she] meant."<sup>4</sup>

In one of her letters Rhys mentioned that she was keeping all of Bliss's cards, and jokingly added that she was going to frame them all once she became rich.

A chain of friends and contacts led Bliss to Rhys. First was the poet Anna Wickham in 1926 who drew Bliss into the

<sup>1</sup> Her Christian name was Eileen Nora, but she changed it to Eliot in 1925, upon her final return to London, after T. S. Eliot and George Eliot whom she admired.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished correspondence between Eliot Bliss and Jean Rhys here and below. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa (Tulsa, OK). The consultation of the correspondence and of "The Eliot Bliss Diaries" was made possible thanks to *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* Travel-to-Collection Grant.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Selma Vas Diaz, February 5th 1959.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Francis Wyndham, March 29th 1958.

Modernist literary circle headed by feminist activist Natalie Clifford Barney. In her 1966 unpublished memoir, "A First meeting with God," Bliss describes how meeting Anna changed the whole course of her life:

for me the world because of and through her opened and flowered. [...] I was in the presence of an extraordinary person [...] a kind of major star, [...] a tremendous electric force [...] emanated from her. (Pringle xvii)

Through her, Bliss met the much admired Dorothy Richardson. At the age of seventeen, reading Richardson's first volumes of *Pilgrimage*, she felt she was in the presence of a kindred soul and that Richardson was "the only person who [was] writing a real book." (Pringle xi). Richardson used to surround herself with young promising writers, and Bliss was a devout friend who loved her deeply. However, although influenced by Richardson's style and feminist ideas, she also sensed in her friend a "curious blind spot," a certain "area of insensitivity to others' needs and feelings" (Pringle xvii). Later, Richardson introduced her to Horace Gregory<sup>5</sup> and through him Bliss met Jean Rhys.

The intellectual connection between the two women was stronger than one could infer from the vague references to Bliss in Rhys's collection of letters. Eliot was a good friend indeed. Their friendship, begun in 1936, was never actually severed. Eliot travelled to America, and then to Hertfordshire, but the correspondence went on, even after the war. She was always sympathetic and understanding, even during what Carole Angier defines as Rhys's "very drunken moments":

She would rail at Eliot for being an 'unfeeling aristocrat', accuse her of belonging to the snobs and and prigs and respectable people [...]. But here was the key to their friendship, and to why it ended only because Eliot left for America: *Eliot didn't mind*. 'Jean didn't mean it' [...] 'she wasn't attacking me, she was attacking the world. [...]' This was the sort of understanding Jean needed. (362)

Carole Angier stresses that "Eliot's glimpse of Jean in 1937 is important. Without it our picture [of Jean] would be different, and darker" (361).

<sup>5</sup> "The Horace Gregory Collection." Eliot Bliss's letter to Horace Gregory, 15th September 1936. Courtesy of Syracuse University Library, Special Collections, Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY).

But there is no description of Eliot that *we* can glimpse: her figure, like her writings, is overshadowed by her more famous contemporaries. Yet, she wrote and published three books: *Saraband* (1931), *Luminous Isle* (1934) and *The Albatross* (1935).<sup>6</sup> She also wrote a play in 1937 that a producer liked and said was "playable"<sup>7</sup> – but was never actually produced. She wrote extensively throughout her life, but published little (besides the three novels, only a few poems were published, in the 1920s).<sup>8</sup> When she died, on December 1990, she left behind unpublished completed works that included a few collections of poems, three plays and at least three novels, one of which, *Hostile Country*, she strongly hoped to see published in her lifetime.<sup>9</sup>

Besides Jean Rhys and Anna Wickham, Eliot Bliss had other famous and supportive friends, such as Romer Wilson, whose generosity allowed Bliss to write *Saraband*, and Vita Sackville-West, whose assistance was essential for the publication of *Luminous Isle* by Cobden Sanderson. Still, her work remains practically unknown.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1903, the daughter of Eva Lees and John Plower Bliss, an English army officer of the West Indian Regiment who was stationed in Jamaica and later in Sierra Leone, Eileen (Eliot) Bliss found herself torn between diverse cultures. In England, where she was sent with her brother John to receive a Catholic education, she would spend

<sup>6</sup> The only reference regarding the publication of this work is to be found in *Who Was Who Among English and European Authors*. So far it has proven impossible to find a copy of the book or discover where it was published and by whom.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Horace Gregory, 2 March 1937. Special Collections, Syracuse University.

<sup>8</sup> "Conspiracy" appeared in the *New Age* when A. R. Orage was the editor, and a few others were published in *The Planters' Punch* in 1922-23.

<sup>9</sup> Often confined to bed by severe arthritis, subject to frequent bouts of depression followed by high state of euphoria, feeling "hollow inside" and "angry about life and work", she would repeatedly write in her daily diary that only a new book would help her come out of the isolation in which she was spending her life: "life would change if I only had *Hostile Country* [...] published – life would look up – it always does with a book. [...] life would begin to 'move' again if I had a book out – and [...] would bring also some new or old friend into my life". "The Eliot Bliss Diaries." Entries dated 20 April 1974, 31 August 1975 and 1 March 1971. Special Collections, McFarlin Library, Tulsa University.

her vacations with her much loved grandmother and a circle of "countless, unmarried aunts and uncles," enjoying an "extensive, eccentric family" (Pringle xiv). In Jamaica, she had to abide by the stiff, restrictive, and often boring code of military behavior. But in Jamaica there were also her black friends whose home in the mountains became her secret refuge.

From 1923 to 1925 she was back in Jamaica with her brother. Her journey there and the final decision to leave are the subject of *Luminous Isle*, together with memories of her Jamaican childhood. Bliss's return to London in 1925 meant severing ties with her family, which was later to move to South Africa. A new life was opening up for her. Like Emmeline Hibbert in *Luminous Isle* she "was going towards the future" (LI 302).

We know now that the future did not hold much happiness for Eliot, but back then she felt she had a full range of choices open to her. Not only did Eileen become Eliot, she also "left the Catholic church, she cut her hair in the then fashionable Eton crop" and shared a studio with a girl she had known since her years in a Highgate convent and who would be the inspiration for the characters of Louise's friend Zara in *Luminous Isle* and Emmeline's friend Cenone in *Saraband*:

She was a pianist; she was very, very beautiful. In school we always made up our minds we would live together and have a home together. (Pringle xvi)

In 1929 Anna Wickham, always present when Eliot was in need,<sup>10</sup> introduced her to Patience Ross, a literary agent who became her friend and had *Saraband* published by Peter Davies in 1931. The book was a success.

*Saraband* takes its title from a 17th-century dance. Music plays a crucial role in Bliss's writings; it is a life-giving gift,

<sup>10</sup> The friendship with Anna Wickham's family continued even after Anna's suicide in 1947. Anna's sons John and George Hepburn kept visiting and writing to her frequently. In what she calls an "Extranote" laid between the pages of one of her Diaries, Eliot describes her relationship with the Wickham-Hepburn family: "Awake in the early hours, I think how my relationship with the Hepburn family is an 'organic one' similar to a family tree. In one way I need them in my life. Perhaps they too, to some extent - feel this about me. because of Anna - and also because of our long association from youth to now." "The Eliot Bliss Diaries." Entry dated 31 December 1974. Special Collections, McFarlin Library, Tulsa University.

and the saraband comes to signify the moment of revelation, of recognition and self-awareness.<sup>11</sup>

It was welcomed as "a first novel of unusual power" (Moods 8). Bliss's prose is clearly influenced by the Modernist, and feminist, literary ideas of 1930s London – by Dorothy Richardson's experimental realism, by Virginia Woolf's use of interior monologue – but her style owes more to Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. In her novels, too, things seldom *happen*; all powerful feelings are hidden, though sometimes summoned up in flashbacks. Here, too, the old world is collapsing; it is actually the same old world, with the same set of worn-out old codes, with the same 'good people' as protagonists. The events recalled in *Saraband* take place before and around WWI, when the world was changing and a new order was taking shape. A new order where women could find their own place, perhaps. Bliss's heroines understand in full the magnitude, the tragedy of what is happening around them. The end of the old world, both in England and in the colonies, is seen and told from their point of view, a woman's point of view, in a society where the pain that tears the soul might be inflicted in the softest tone:

The end of the world was in the parlour with the stiff-backed chairs. It had been brought to her by the most civilised of people. (S 99)

She wanted to go. To escape [...] Behind this kind of life from which she had come – the suave, elegant exteriors, the charming but vacant whole, was a tragedy; small, pitiable, a skeleton hidden in a decently narrow cupboard of the soul. (S 255)

In a review of the 1987 *Saraband* reprint, Robin Bromley described the book as a "wonderfully impressionistic account of a young English girl's struggle to grow up in World War I England" (Bromley 44) and accordingly:

There is no plot [...] there is not much incident. What there is for the reader is a successions of moods, of delicate and lovely emotions:

<sup>11</sup> In *Saraband* Tim's performance would bring what Louie had been waiting for: "He began playing a saraband, soft and slow with a swinging movement accompanied by little trills in the treble. [...] he had brought with him the long looked-for stimulation of the mind." (49) In *Luminous Isle* the role is taken by Cenone: "Life entered through Cenone's finger-tips [...] A world of life and sound, [...] Drops of crystal water dripping slowly into a gradually filling pool...." (52)

Miss Bliss [...] is keenly alive to atmospheres; the country house, the convent, the commercial school, all arouse in her a multitude of sensations. But she does not make the mistake [...] of tearing passions to tatters: Her emotions are all recollected in tranquillity. (Moods 8)

Indeed, borrowing Conrad's words on the impressionistic writer's task, Bliss's accounts make you see and above all *feel* the inextricable knot of pain and the turmoil of a girl torn by passions she can only vaguely understand and certainly not master yet. Though recounting her own life, Bliss succeeds in keeping her voice outside the narrative and letting Louie's voice emerge with such authentic timbre that it does make you *feel* her emotions as separate from her author's.

Her prose was said to show an "astonishing maturity" and indeed her skill in creating "young women in a state of subdued, but actual rebellion" is remarkable. Just as remarkable is the way she conveys the sense of foreboding doom without being melodramatic. Both Louie, in *Saraband*, and Emmeline (Em) in *Luminous Isle* embark on a journey where they will face difficult, yet inevitable, choices. As Paul Bailey puts it:

They are remarkable creatures [...] because they are not flamboyant, not theatrical, not prominent – as yet – in the battle for the rights of their sex. They are both possessed of loving feelings [...]. With the awareness of those feelings is born a set of values – values, Eliot Bliss implies, that may not be so socially acceptable. (vii-viii)

The two novels are largely autobiographical. They can be read as a whole, covering various periods in Eliot Bliss's life – her education in England, her childhood in Jamaica, the years she spent there before leaving the island forever. Characters seem to float from one novel to the other, almost undistinguishably, chatting and drinking their tea as if the world outside didn't exist. They form a large canvas of characters which constitute a perfect portrait of an era.

But these novels are also more than just autobiographical. Their genre may be defined as something between a memoir and a philosophical treatise, an intellectual discourse on Art and a feminist pamphlet on women's possibilities and prospects in the 20th century. The idea of a feminist perspective runs through both narratives. In a world where one "almost had to have permission to exist if one was a woman" (S 238), where her "talents and gifts" would be "wasted [...]; utilized only in their least productive sense" (S 257), the Bliss heroine's main



desire is to be "her own mistress" (S 52), and in order to be so she is willing to change her physical appearance, cutting her hair and robbing "herself of a characteristic feature of feminine abandonment" (S 127).

Bliss's ideas on the woman-artist of the new century, who is capable of offering her own outlook on the interrelation between Art, love, feelings and emotions, are expressed by Zara in *Saraband*:

Feeling [...] emotions. After all, feeling can't be entirely ignored. It's out of feelings that things get made. I think one ought to feel things – as well as do them. [...] it's love, not ambition, that makes an artist. (S 89)

Em and Louie are mostly, but not completely, self-portraits. They are said to be "nearly, but not quite, asexual" (Bailey vii). Indeed, far from being asexual, the protagonists of Bliss's works display a somehow elusive sexuality, some inner quality that makes them "exciting and secret, different from all those other people" (LI 302). They are girls with passionate hearts and strong feelings whose emotions and passions – banned by social conventions – are never openly expressed.

Consequently, the underlying homosexuality of the characters is never spelled out; it remains unuttered, and the intricate implications of the relationships between Em and her cousin Tim, Em and Zara, Tim and Bernard, are never fully explained.

Indeed, though Tim may be perceived at first as Louie's potential lover, it is clear that their relationship is devoid of physical aspects. It is, rather, a relationship of intellectual fulfillment and communion. Tim is a completion of Louie, to her he is "the height of human achievement [...] a work of art, [...] something marvellous and holy, [...] the thing she could never be." (S 41)

While *Saraband* is set in England and chronicles Louie's coming-of-age with a diachronic movement – interrupted by epiphanies, and with flashbacks from the Caribbean bursting unexpectedly into the narrative – *Luminous Isle* is set in the Caribbean. It opens with Em as a child (the first chapter, "Ambrosia"), and moves on (the second chapter, "The Western Path") to Em's return to the island after her school years in England – years that will return in flashbacks as Em ponders her possibilities, her choices, her "destination" (LI 50). The

prose in *Luminous Isle* is richer, more sensual, and the soft, dreamy stream of consciousness of *Saraband* gives way to a more voluptuous language where Eliot's Creole inner self can soar freely.

Passion, which in *Saraband* was "relegated to a place beneath the surface of everyday discourse" (Bailey vi), is conveyed in *Luminous Isle* through the description of natural elements and landscape. While the opening of *Saraband* and its sophisticated description of the smell of winter had a sort of hallucinating, rarified, dream-like quality, *Luminous Isle* opens with violence and a sense of danger, with the noises and smells of the Caribbean night invading Em's room.

All along the road from the river the frost made patterns on the ground, and how beautifully the air smelt... The sharp air hung over one's head like the blade of a knife [...] Winter had a most exciting smell, it made one think of people whom one knew and yet had never met, places where at some time or other one felt sure one must have lived and yet could not remember. [...] The frost hung on the trees, it made them look as if they had gone white during the night from fear [...] smelling the cold air [...] the exciting feeling took hold of her, the feeling that at any moment she was going to meet somebody or something. (S 5)

The North breeze was just beginning. At the end of the garden the mango tree beside the fence trembled **violently**, and several over-ripe mangoes fell to the ground. The air was full of the long shrill humming of the crickets which persisted, never even stopping for a moment, through the otherwise deeply silent West Indian night. [...] Em listened to the **sinister** zing-zinging all round the house, half terrified, half fascinated, [...] she peered into the garden. She would not have been surprised to have seen **evil spirits** standing there in rows [...] The North breeze gently stirred the air and blew in, in little puffs – even through the meshes of the mosquito-net with its starchy clean smell – the smell of the night. The smell of grass, green scented and strong, cut that afternoon, lying in little heaps in the middle of the lawn and already soaked through with night dew; the smell of water dripping on to a flower bed from a tap not quite turned off in the garden, and a faint sweet cold smell from a tree near the bungalow. (LI 3-5, my emphasis)

The reader is thrown into a New World where there is total identification between the natural elements and Emmeline. Each part of the novel, and each phase of Em's life, is marked by violent, relentless natural phenomena (scorching sun, riotous thunderstorms, etc.) against the background of the indomitable Caribbean landscape.

A thunderstorm and the end of a child's dream closes the first part ("a deep and swift exaltation. Sitting shivering in her white muslin dress [...] she felt as if a white fire were whipping the air all around her. [...] The dreams of the past were idle hours which had gone for ever" *LI* 48); a fiery sun welcomes Em's return to the island in the second. Lying in the deck-chair she seems to resume the threads of her childhood thoughts:

The past and the future had ceased, and had become merged into the present; as if one were already travelling in eternity. [...] travelling towards what? Illusion, perhaps, that one ever travels at all. [...] perhaps towards the place one had determined upon long ago. (*LI* 49).

The protagonist's physical journey from and back to the island is really a journey of self-discovery where she feels drawn more and more to the island's black population in a way that has no precedence in the white society of the colony. Contesting the British "spiritual anaemia of only half-conceived emotions" (*S* 242), Bliss's women counter with colors and smells of a place she herself cherished, and longed for, all her life: the Caribbean.

The Blue Mountains [...] Purple peaks going up into the sky. [...] The island lay before one, shaded in green and blue pencil. [...] Smells of flowers, lovely mountain smell, heavy-leafed plants [...] How large and near and blue the mountains loomed. (*S* 193)

The mountains and its black inhabitants come to represent a shelter. Rebeccah, the black nanny in *Saraband*, reappears as Rebekkah in *Luminous Isle*, both portraits of a woman Eliot Bliss met on her journey back to Jamaica in 1923 and who became her friend. Her house in the mountains became a sanctuary whenever Eliot wanted to hide from the garrison people. Blacks offered Eliot / Em / Louie the warmth, the understanding, the closeness she could not find in her own mother. The most violent scene in *Luminous Isle* shows Em being viciously spanked by her mother:

she felt a stinging blow on her back which quivered through the whole of her body. [...] It was not her mother – it was a monster out of some nightmare. (*LI* 33)

Whites are portrayed in the most unfavorable light. They

are violent, superficial or downright racist. At the time of the 1984 reprint of *Luminous Isle* Bliss regretted not having listened to Vita Sackville-West and taken out some of the most racist remarks made by Em's mother (such widespread colonizers' views as "She's only a nigger [...] She'll be getting too big for her boots. I shall have to send her away"). However, while it is certainly true that the whole structure of the book would have benefited from some blue-penciling, from a historical perspective those remarks are important.<sup>12</sup>

The book is Bliss's courageous attempt to distance herself from those views. Creoles, like Bliss, were disparaged by both the white British-born colonizers and the blacks. Their status was even lower than the blacks'. Furthermore, with her father an officer who was not a permanent resident but only stationed on the island, Bliss's family could not be considered part of the island's 'aristocracy' – Creoles who had been there for generations. Not belonging to any of the island's social communities (the black inhabitants, the wealthy colonizers and the impoverished planters) – and being relatively poor on top – she suffered a greater alienation than her fellow Creole writers, Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The problem of de-colonization and the clash between the black and the white communities, foreseen in Bliss's work, would be developed by Dominican writer and political activist Phyllis Shand Allfrey in *The Orchid House* (1958). See Calderaro 99-115.

<sup>13</sup> The writings of Eliot Bliss, Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey are part of a West Indian literary tradition that merits greater attention from critics and the general public. West Indian women writers "like Elma Napier and Jean Rhys from Dominica, and Eliot Bliss and Alice Durie of Jamaica, were publishing fiction in the 1930s. By the 1950s [...] the list had grown to include, among others, Phyllis Shand Allfrey (Dominica), Ada Quayle, Vera Bell and Cicely Waite-Smith (writing on Jamaica) and Celeste Dolphin (Guyana)" (O'Callaghan 18). Reading this rich list of names one cannot but notice that Rhys, Allfrey and Bliss are the only *white* West Indian writers. Three women whose writings are the expression of a deep alienation and pain that have not been always fully understood and who "give voice to the agony of the creole's double alienation from 'native' black and European white experience, and detail in a unique way the ambivalence of those just sufficiently colonized to call both England and the Caribbean 'home'" (O'Callaghan 28).

The word to be stressed here is "creole." These writers dealt with problems of racial and cultural interrelation, with the impossibility/possibility of connecting West Indians of African descent to West Indians of European descent, and they are the necessary link between the two. When comparing the books, and hence the vision of the three writers and the destiny of their

In the endless quest for identity, Bliss would choose to be "sexless, creedless, classless, free," (S 371) and in order to do so she had to let her soul "emerge out of the flesh" (S 301) or, better, "shed her body" (S 310) like a mermaid. Like other mermaids in other Creole women writers' works<sup>14</sup> she would "cast off her flesh / [...] lose scales." "The shadow of [her] scales / Will always remain" but "The sea will never take [her] back" (McCallum 84-85).

The allusions to the mermaid, a creature that is neither woman nor fish, that does not belong to either sea or land and in whose eyes one can see the "rich, clear, luminous depth of blue-green, like the colour of the sea" (LI 6), is recurrent in Bliss's novels. She herself did not belong to either Britain or the West Indies, to either the white or the black community. Her choice would take her on a road of no return; it would mark the end of her quest and the end of her journey.

And just like that siren, Bliss would leave her home, Jamaica, in 1925, hoping to find somewhere else (Britain) the real "nature of what [she] wanted to do in life" (LI 50), only to discover in the following years that she was still the alien also on the British Isle.

works, one should not forget the different historical contexts against which each novel was set and written. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in the 19th century and was written in the 1960s; *The Orchid House* is set in the 1950s and was also written in the 1950s, during a period of great change and hope for total independence in the Caribbean islands; while *Luminous Isle* was written in the 1930s, when talks of de-colonization were still in the distant future and when it was quite unpopular to voice such strong criticism of white rule in the colonies. This might explain why the book "did not do well", although it was received with good reviews and had been backed by Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson

<sup>14</sup> See my upcoming *The Mermaid in Caribbean Literature*.

*Works cited*

- Angier, Carole. *Jean Rhys*. London: André Deutsch, 1990.
- Bailey, Paul. Introduction. *Saraband*. By Eliot Bliss. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- Bliss, Eliot. *Luminous Isle*. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- . *Saraband*. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- Bromley, Robin. Rev. of *Saraband*, by Eliot Bliss. *New York Times Book Review* 3 May 1987: 44.
- Calderaro, Michela A. "Beauty [...] sickness [...] horror. L'isola di Phyllis Shand Allfrey." *Merope* IX (1997): 99-115.
- McCallum, Shara. *The Water Between Us. Poems*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999.
- "Moods." Rev. of *Saraband*, by Eliot Bliss. *The Saturday Review of Literature* 8 (1931): 8.
- O'Callaghan, Evelyn. *Woman Version. Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
- Pringle, Alexandra. Introduction. *Luminous Isle*. By Eliot Bliss. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- Rhys, Jean. *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. Eds. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly. New York: Viking, 1984.