

## **Bliss, Eliot (2015). *Spring Evenings in Sterling Street. Poems*. Edited by Michela A. Calderaro. Kindle Edition, 128 pp.**

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Born and raised in Jamaica, the daughter of British officer John and Eva (née Lees) Plower Bliss, Eliot (née Eileen) Bliss (1903-90) spent her childhood in the Caribbean island. Raised a Catholic in a context where she did not belong to the white wealthy coloniser's, black's nor planters' communities, and never settling down in a conventional marital relationship, Bliss felt fleeing was the only possibility before her. Thus, as a young adult, she moved to the United Kingdom in search of a long-sought-after life, which she in fact achieved for a limited number of years, always struggling to stay afloat in a world she did not thoroughly belong to – as much as she did not feel she belonged to Jamaica (which she returned to for a brief period of time) either –, before definitely entering an undeserved oblivion.

The collection of poems edited by Calderaro sheds some light on a widely unknown author whose work, in fact, is as important and crucial to understanding the West Indian panorama as other postcolonial writers', such as Jean Rhys and, more recently Opal Palmer Adisa, Jacqueline Bishop and Lorna Goodison, to mention but a few. As it happens with virtually every author, her production, both in prose and poetry, is infused with a variety of autobiographical elements which recount the fascinating yet torn story of what it meant to be neither this nor that. Bliss was neither wealthy nor poor, neither English nor Jamaican, neither free from the cage of marriage nor openly a lesbian, in a world which was only then beginning to acknowledge deviation from tradition, but still failing to realise the blowing wind of change.

While the book is indeed a collection of poems by Eliot Bliss, it would be as accurate to state that without the work of reconstruction carried out by Calderaro – who was shown the poems disseminated all over the poet's apartment by Bliss's life-long partner Allan-Burns – the collection itself would have never come to light. Calderaro has, in fact, read, catalogued, and chosen the poems Bliss had kept in her Bishop Stortford apartment for several years, and which would have lain there for ever, had they not decided to undertake such enterprise. Not only did Calderaro sort the poems out and had them literally polished by a professional restorer, but

she also provided the readers with a fundamental introduction to ‘who’ Eliot Bliss was and ‘how’ we should read this collection.

In her life, Bliss has seen only two of her works published, namely two novels whose contribution to the literary scenario is manifold. With a wide range of autobiographical references to her sex, her gender, her heritage, her descent and her land, Bliss collocates herself within a blossoming tradition of postcolonial, gender and ultimately even queer studies which cannot deny Bliss a certain importance within such literary studies, if one is to take into account the absolute contemporaneity of her writings. The fact that Bliss was a white, lesbian Creole woman whose relationship with her native land and her parents’ descent, as well as with her place within standard gender roles, was never really solved, opens up a number of possible readings of her so-far unpublished poems which is potentially enormous and thoroughly deserved.

The collection of poems is divided into three sections named “Miscellaneous”, “Selection of Poems: 1922-31” and “The Wild Heart. To A.M.G., 1868-1922. A Selection over 7 Years Work 1922-9”. Of these sections, the last two are named after actual collections Bliss herself intended to publish. The two collections were found almost ready for publication, whereas those poems which Calderaro and Allan-Burns felt belong to neither group were then gathered under the first section of the book. The dating of most poems posed a number of issues, as it was necessary to relate the contents to the relative period in Bliss’s life, a task whose successful outcome Calderaro attributes to Allan-Burns.

The first section, as stated, gathers loose poems found in various parts of the author’s apartment which the editor and Bliss’s partner could not place in either group of poems Bliss had already arranged other poems in. The setting is “[g]rey-deep, sea-deep” England, where Bliss spends “these deathly English hours” (“The Scent of the Sun in Darkness”) and through which one clearly perceives a longing of the native land, which is at the same time sought after and yet, obscure, and ultimately as unwelcoming as the European refuge. The coexistence of these two lands is excruciating within Bliss:

I have brought into my room  
 The yellow flowers of life -  
 To dispel the November doom  
 Of perpetual night.  
 On the lush south coasts they bloom  
 In rich black soil and warm white rain - [...]  
 O I were wise to shun the scent of the sun!  
 That brings such gold remembrance to my pain  
 Of darkness - in a bowl of flowers!  
 (“The Scent of the Sun in Darkness”)

The flowers, which brought back to mind her native land, contain features of both countries, such as the soil being defined as “rich” and “black”, and the rain as “warm” and “white”, and at the same time they pave the way for a possible juxtaposition, only to ultimately surrender to a good/evil dichotomy, in which the sun prevails over pain and darkness.

Yet this very nature takes a twisted turn in the second section, “Selection of Poems: 1922-31”. Infused with much darker, bleaker and more evil images, nature is now associated with death, with decaying love, and decaying manhood. The constant picture of death, so yearned for, this peculiar *trait d’union*, hovers all over the poems and touches all: a lover, a child, a leaf. There is no salvation for the child who will become a man, for the new love which will soon rot because of jealousy, nor for any floral, stellar or earthly symbol that would convey some sense of hope in the previous section. The portrayal of nature is, at times, cruel and wicked:

I stood among its many spiked leaves,  
 They made metallic noises among themselves  
 For the wind had beaten them and the rain spat upon them.  
 (“The Tree Gives Counsel”)

If nature is ever to convey blissfulness, that is only allowed if and once death eventually comes:

I would pass over into a clear country  
 Where the trees give even shade -  
 Where one may see the flower of the grass grow -  
 Spreading its luminous beauty blade by blade.  
 O breathe on me - breathe on me - breathe on me -  
 That I may pass over into this clear country.  
 (“Clear Country - Song”)

Bliss’s painful condition - she suffered from arthritis - is more and more evident throughout her lines and God, when not likened to earthly, mundane, anthropomorphic issues, is longed for only as an unholy conveyor to the other side:

Curl me into your embrace,  
 Good ancient earth,  
 Plough me with human hearts,  
 and with the silly mirth  
 and tears of God, reduce me to an end.  
 (“Awake at Night”)

The last section, "The Wild Heart", is dedicated to a mysterious A.M.G., whose identity Calderaro and Allan-Burns could not reconstruct, yet the dedication must not be there in vain, as it brings about a distinctive sense of hope, of joy and joke which the previous section clearly lacks. Therefore, although these poems cover almost the very same period as those from the previous section, the tone is quite different and it oozes a distinctively positive attitude Bliss must have somehow felt in independent time spans in those very same years. If the first and second sections manifestly display the dichotomous relationship with her native and adopted lands, and the sorrow and despair respectively, it is only fair to acknowledge the lighter, merrier flavour of this last collection. While religion and nature still play a considerable role in most verses, love and love-lovers find room to emerge and to convey a distinctively jolly – quite a recurring adjective – attitude. In addition to the above-mentioned dedication, tributes to Anna Wickman and Renée Vivien are being paid, the former being one of Bliss's closest friends and a mentor and the latter a famous poet, whom Bliss renders homage to by translating one of her poems and by dedicating one of her own to her.

In these verses lesbian love is not a taboo anymore and Bliss extensively discusses the struggle of

an existence  
 Sharpened by want and endless striving,  
 Exposed to the prejudice  
 And oppression of ignorance.  
 ("Spring Evenings in Sterling Street")

The poem's persona and her friend are caught up in detailed and careful observation of a couple living at the opposite window, whose same-sex relationship – if that might be the case, it is in fact left unsaid – is not fully disclosed as they are given the names of Theo and Louise but both being referred to by use of the possessive adjective 'her'. Of Theo and Louise, the two 'spying' friends envy their lives

lived as it were  
 Inside a beautiful casket,  
 Perfumed with the security and sweetness  
 Of the mind at peace, in love  
 With its best object.

As Calderaro points out when referring to Bliss's novels, nature is obviously present in these lines as well, and acts as a "co-protagonist [...] marking a total identification with the female protagonists" to the point where we can no longer tell whether the poet is addressing a lover or nature itself, whether a lover is a nature-like entity or nature is anthropomorphised into a lover:

Impassioned grass – farewell,  
 With daisies interlaced – dear daisy – flower  
 My love, my mistress, for an hour  
 Trees I have kissed whose eyes now watch and say –  
 ‘Keep your heart clear for us another day.’  
 [...]
   
 If I ever return to you  
 To lie beneath you, grass and dew,  
 O daisies, kiss my eyes, O trees,  
 Lean down and smile above my knees.  
 (“Farewell to Friendly Fields”)

What about men? Is their presence ever to be felt in Bliss’s poems? As in her novels, where men play a marginal role and never a sexual or physical one, the same can be maintained for poems like “The Blue Hyacinth” where the stiff, upright plant with blue petals clearly stands as a not-too-concealed metaphor of the male-like figure, which the poet observes at a distance, both attracted and repelled by it, both yearning to see more of it and at the same time loathing its sight:

‘I shouldn’t dream of letting you inside,  
 I won’t change places with you for the world.’  
 [...]
   
 There’s something very queer  
 About the tall blue hyacinth standing there,  
 With such a fixed and penetrating stare.  
 (“The Blue Hyacinth”)

However, she will not concede to it and asks her lover Clara to put it out of the window.

So much is left to discover about this fascinating, indeed multifaceted insight into the poet’s life’s ups and downs, but thanks to Calderaro’s patient philological work, the audience can eventually get a glimpse of yet another author whose voice had been silenced for too long, and whose work surely deserves to be thoroughly investigated.

