

Mortal Vision: Toru Dutt's Translation of French Poetic Meditations on Life and Death

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Abstract

Death has been a perpetual theme with the Indian poets in English: From Derozio to Dutt, from Tagore to Aurobindo, from Ezekiel to Mahapatra, from Daruwalla to Bhatnagar. Except, perhaps, Toru Dutt, Tagore and Aurobindo no one treats Death with epical grandeur and felicity. But yet, the images of death, decay and darkness are interspersed so much so that they often remind us, at every turn, of our mortality and instill in us a sense of glory of being the homebound pilgrims. Death is a way of reflecting on life. The view of life is best at a backward glance when the destination has arrived. Any midway looking back may invite the curse on Eurydice. Life in other words turns out to be a forward gaze to death to reflect upon itself in a backward glance. Death therefore has given more life to literature than any other theme engaged by the literary imagination. Toru Dutt skillfully treats life and death as natural and inseparable aspects of existence. In her poetry, we encounter profound reflections on the realities of life and death, their mysteries, the divine presence, the finite and the infinite, and the harmonious bond between the human and the divine—everything connected to human existence and its ultimate destiny. This paper explores how Toru Dutt's poetry embodies the intertwined themes of vitality and mortality.

Key Words: Death, life, separation, loneliness, lost hopes

Humanity is always made up of more dead than living. If a man writes about man, his life, his love, eventually he has to deal with the end of his life, death. No author can write about life and ignore its end. Due to this inevitable juxtaposition of life and death in the world, they are ever present in literature. They are not disjointed but are intertwined themes.

It is also certain that one who thinks about death nevertheless, one may understand the mysteries of life within the limit of the power of one's mind, but one can hardly go beyond conjecture as far as the mysteries of death are concerned. However, it is the poet who traverses the unknown regions of death through imagination. It is of little importance whether the poetic treatment of death is correct or false. Poetry, however abstract it may be, treats the reality of life irrespective of its aspects-physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. This sort of treatment cannot ignore the end of reality, which is death.

In fact, in the presence of death the sense of life becomes heightened. One does not, any longer, discuss questions of what ought to be done, one broods, rather, on the ultimate facts, and the ultimate mysteries of existence.

Toru Dutt explores life and death with subtle artistry, presenting them as integral truths of human experience. In her poetry we find the realities of life and death, its mysteries, the God, the finite and the infinite, the cohesion between human and divine everything that is related to human existence and its ultimate destination.

Like Hardy and French existentialists Camus and Sartre the dark image of an incomprehensible fatality and absurdity of life seems to have become a permanent part of Toru's consciousness. Her outlook upon life had been pessimistic and gloomy. It appears from her works that the pathetic incidents of life moved the poetess most; the comic and the heroic rarely appealed to this 'fragile exotic blossom of song.' The main reason for this outlook was that she saw a number of tragedies at home, and that she herself hardly enjoyed a healthy life.

Her sad life reminds us of the great romantic poet Keats. Abju, Toru's only brother died in 1865 at an early age, plunging the entire family into misery and disappointment. Thereafter her loved sister, Aru, an adept in poetry and painting, died of consumption in 1874. This made the sensitive poet sad and companionless. On the death of Aru, Toru wrote to her dear friend, Mary Martin as follows- "I could not write to you before. The lord has taken Aru from us. It is a

sore trial for us, but His will be done. We know he doth all things for our good. She was very peaceful and happy to the last, we feel lonely without her, who was the life of our small family. She was so cheerful and happy always.” One of Toru’s most beautiful translations, perhaps, also expressed her own sorrow at losing her sister, is a poem by de Parney entitled **The Death of A Young Girl**:

She died in earliest womanhood;
Thus dies, and leaves behind no trace,
A bird’s song in a leafy wood, —
Thus melts a sweet smile from a face.

Over time, Toru’s physical condition worsened as she suffered from persistent episodes of fever and spasmodic coughing. The continual loss of blood through expectoration rendered her severely weak and debilitated. **The Fall of the Leaves** by Charles Millevoye translated by her expresses the sad feelings of Toru Dutt:

Our leaves are yellow, see they die!
They vanish; take a last long look,
Thy night of death, too, draweth nigh;
More pale than autumn, like the brook
Thou glidest onward to the sea
Wild- heaving of Eternity.

Extraordinarily, sensitive and touching poem, it brings in front of our eyes the last journey of the leaf, which is identical to the last journey of a human being. Here death is portrayed as a soother or comforter, not cruel or harsh. There is no fear or horror of death.

Toru was compelled to keep herself within doors on account of her illness and even writing letters was an effort she could not stand. It is harrowing tale indeed. How could a girl constantly attacked by disease and suffering be of optimistic nature or paint the comic and sunny sides of life in her work? Toru’s poetical compositions bear out the above statement.

The subjects, however, which were dearest to Toru, were pathetic ones, “those that spoke of separation and loneliness, exile and captivity, illusion and disappointment, loss and bereavement, declining seasons and premature death.”

In both **A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields** and **Ancient ballads** there are so many poems dealing with the buffets and sorrows of life, with death and disease, with lost hopes and suppressed feelings. The captives and the prisoners, the down trodden and the poor also attracted Toru's attention, and there are certain poems on these themes, too. No doubt, Toru's inner susceptibility to the pathos of life has manifested itself.

In the **Sheaf**, we have poems like **The Peasant's Dilemma**, **The Young Captive**, **The Emigration of pleasure**, **My Vocation**, **The young Girl**, **The Lost Path**, **Morning Serenade**, **The Death of a Young Girl**, **The Captive to the Swallow**, **Sonnet-The Broken Bell**, **Loneliness**, **On Desert of the Heart**, **The Rose and the Tomb**, **The Political Prisoner**, **The Death of a Wolf**, **Sonnet-A Dream**, **The Death of a Daughter**, **Sonnet- Isolation** and **The Tears of Racine**, which are all based on unhappy and none too fresh conditions of life.

The first poem in the earliest edition of the **Sheaf** is **The Sleep of the Condor** by Leconte de Lisle, on whom Toru had authored an article in December 1874 for the *Bengal Magazine*. The poetess was, in her own small way, inspired, like Lisle, by a longing for the sublime and realization of the infinite. There are the same surrender to and even rejoicing in death. But Toru's surrender to death was her faith in rebirth, as it was the conviction of a number of Victorian writers. A sweet and almost melodramatic resignation always accompanied the far too frequent tragic incidents that took place, both in the reality and fiction of that straitlaced age.

Here is a beautiful poem about a lover's wish after death. The treatment of death is all positive though a tint of jealousy is mixed with it:

In **A lover's Wish** death is treated in a romantic vein, the lover is not sad about death, but he thinks it -as envious, death is personified into a jealous person that snatched away the two lovers. Still the lover wishes that he would reunite after his death with his beloved. Apparently, death snaps off the bond between the lover and the beloved. But in reality, death intensifies the relation and invisibly strengthens the bond.

Among the anthology of poems, **The Young Captive** translated by Aru, to be marked out for its deep pathetic feelings. In it the captive says thus:

O Death, thou canst wait; leave, leave me to dream,
And strike at the hearts where Despair is supreme,
And Shame hails thy dart as a boon!

For me, Pales has harbours unknown to the throngs,
The world has delights, the Muses have songs,
I wish not to perish too soon.

Padmini Sen Gupta in her book **Toru Dutt** remarks “Some critics even think that Toru’s poetry is appreciated because it is so closely associated with her sad life. ‘Beauty and tragedy and fatality crisscrossed in the life of Toru Dutt And it is difficult, when talking about her poetry, to make any nice distinction between poetry and what C. S. Lewis would call “poetolatry” ...When we read Emily Bronte’s poems or her novels, Wuthering Heights, speculation starts and makes all kinds of guesses, and the “might have beens” both fascinate and depress us. So, it is with Toru..... Toru came across a poem that she herself may have sung in the first instances. The translation was most tremblingly articulate, like, for example, **My Vocation** by Beranger:

Love cheered for a while
My morn with his ray,
But like a ripple or smile
My youth passed away.
Now near Beauty I sigh,
But fled is the spring!
Sing –said God in reply,
Chant, poor little thing.

Suffering and the dark sense of an incomprehensible fate were Toru’s constant “shadow companions.” One therefore feels that the following lines reflect as much of the translator’s own sensibility as they do that of Victor Hugo or Eugène Manuel.

The tomb said to the rose-
Of the tears the night strows,
What makest thou, O flower of the dawning?
The rose said to the tomb, -
Of what falls in thy womb
What makest thou, O gulf ever yawning?
The rose whispered-O tomb!
From those tears shed in gloom,

Is the scent famed in song and in story.
 The tomb said-O my pet!
 Of each soul that I get
 I create a winged angel of glory.

And look at this extract of Eugene Manual:

Along the green sward of the Bois, the child
 Begged. She had veritable tears in her eyes
 Humble her air, a face modest and mild,
 And hands clasped tight, to wake men's sympathies.

Heart-rending and pitiable description of a baby girl who is begging for a farthing (a coin or a penny) and a bit of bread and her parents were sick and invalid. Her brothers were in cradles and there was nothing to eat for them. Beggar's sad and pitiful condition reminds us of any beggar child of Indian street. A universal appeal to all heart, nothing artificial or affected, the sentiments expressed here are pure and refined. The last few lines are stirring when the poet passes comments about her pitiful condition:

Thy parents taught thee, and these tears are lies,
 I heard thee sing, this woe is stratagem!
 The girl said simply, lifting up her eyes,
 'I sing for myself, my tears are for them.

Instances like this can be multiplied. This time we are taking up **On The death of His Daughter** by Victor Hugo. Here the father of the child pours out his sad feelings; there was no ray of hope for him. Just like a madman after the death of his daughter he wept out bitterly for three days as he has been bereft of all hopes and happiness. At that moment, he experienced profound grief, with no one to share it with. His utter despair turns into anger and frustration and inspires him to show his insurgency against God's will. He questions, 'does God permit such misfortune, nor care that our souls be filled with utter despair'? Even if he feels the presence of his daughter:

It is a touching poem; the father is unable to sustain the loss of his daughter. Have we not here the same cry that thrilled the hearts of hearers three thousand years ago!

To some extent it also resembles to the condition of Toru Dutt's father and mother after her death. Imagine the mental state of her parents, who were left alone in their old age, in a house empty and desolate, where once they heard the voices of their three children. Her father wrote after her death, "why should these three young lives, so full of hope and work, be cut short, while I, old and almost infirm, linger on?" still he hopes that "there is a fitness, a preparation required for the life beyond, which they had and I have not."

Valmore's poem **The solitary Nest** is again on the thought of death where the poet wishes for her soul's full freedom and ease. Death is welcome as a reliever of the pangs of life. The poet longs for 'Isolation and rest—a rest from all strife'. Only death can make it possible:

The age flows like a river-on, on, and alas!
It bears on its course, like dead sea weeds a mass
Of names soiled with blood, broken vows, wishes vain,
And garlands all torn, that shall bloom not again.

The collection of the poems in the **Sheaf** suggests that Toru was much influenced by the French Romantics. In romantic literature, for example, love is often treated as a solution to the enigma of death. It is regarded as a force providing a new hope of life against death. Life is agony and death is soothing lies at the core of the French Romantic poems.

Her romantic temper gets reflected when, out of disgust, agony, misery of life, the poet wistfully seeks an escape. Thorns of life make him bleed, like Shelley; and therefore, such willing acceptance of death as the saviour, justifies his escape. Toru willingly accepts her doom: A good number of poems that Toru selected for her translation from the original French are actually of the same nature, having intensity of emotion and tenderness of feeling.

I am tired my mother, and the day is ending;
Let me lie softly on thy dear, dear breast,
But hide thy tears while thus above me bending:
Sad are thy sighs; they do not let me rest.

The reality of death's coldness is transformed into the myth of death's solacing warmth. Sometime the protagonist accepts this myth and enters into death's dream kingdom. The last journey of an infant child, the sighs of a mother, the somber atmosphere, all these things made

the poem very pathetic and touching. Here the reader identifies himself with the mother of the infant and feel the same pain and anguish as the mother of the infant felt at the time of his death.

Some poems of the **Sheaf** also deal with the feelings of separation, lost hopes and suppressed desires. **A La Grace De Dieu**, is a farewell song of a mother to her child. The helpless, poor mother bade adieu to her daughter with these moving lines:

Life's voyage here begins for thee,
Ah! If thou ne'er shouldst come again!
And thy poor mother—how can she
Bless thee, oh darling, in her pain?

Even after a long time the mother could not get any information about her daughter who went away 'to gain her bread 'neath other skies.' She stayed patiently with eager eyes:

But when her bitter grief no more
Her child might witness—then there came
A shower of tears, that showed how sore
The heart was tried—and still her name
Came from afar—adieu!
Oh mother—and adieu!
Adieu under the grace of God!"

Whatever expressed here by a mother is not confined to only one mother, but it has a universal appeal, the mother presented in the poem can be of any country of the world whose only child went abroad to earn his or her living. The advice given here are profoundly emotive and overwhelming.

Xavier De Maistre's **The Butterfly** expresses the poignant feelings of a prisoner, who has no hope of being freed again. According to the poet Butterfly is not only a small insect with beautiful wings but it is much more than that, it is sharer of the feelings of pain and sorrow of the prisoner. The prisoner addresses the butterfly as "dweller of the ethereal plain" and asks "hast thou from Nature, wise and great / received a heart to friendship prone? / By pity hither art thou drawn / to share the sorrow of my fate?"

He appreciates the freedom enjoyed by the butterfly and compares his slavery or imprisonment to her freedom. Addressing her as ‘Gay darling of the meadows’, he sadly expresses his deep sentiments:

My prison is no place for thee!
 Short lived but freest of the free.
 Enjoy the blessings as they flow;
 Out of this place of endless sights!
 Where life is one long torment still!
 And then, no chains may bind thy will,
 No walls enclose thee but the skies.”

In the next stanza, the prisoner desired in a very poignant manner that Perchance someday, while fluttering glad, she must have got the opportunity to meet his wife and two children. He requested her to console them ‘and tell her all, yes, all I feel.’

At once the prisoner became sad as, how she should be able to reveal his sentiments to his family members. Then he finds a solution and advises her to ‘display her richly- glided wings/ At least before the children’s eyes.’ And he hopes that:

Soon shall they follow thee in chase,
 With shouts- ‘Tis here –‘tis here-‘tis gone!
 From flower to flower allure them on,
 Until thou lead’s them to this a place.

The prisoner is confident that the butterfly would surely attract his family members, and they would come to meet him but at once the clanking chain dispels his dream as the butterfly was but a gleam and it flutters far! Away before he behold it.

In a very vivid and pictorial manner the poem expressed the deep despair of a prisoner. His utter hopelessness reflects through his words, which are pregnant with gloomy thoughts and painful feelings.

Another poem, **Romance of Nina** is of shorter length and wrought with such exquisite beauty that it deserves full attention.

When back the well-loved shall return
 To her who pines though once so dear,

The spring from its abundant urn
 Shall scatter blossoms far and near.
 I watch, I wait,—in vain, in vain,
 The loved and lost comes not again.

There is a piercing cry of the beloved in it; she is totally broken and dejected at the disappearance of someone 'loved and lost.' Her stung heart springs its sorrows in every line and in every phrase.

The note of disappointment and longing has been reflected in many other poems of the volume. De Musset's **Chanson De Fortunio** presents the sad condition of a lover:

"The pain that springs from silent love,
 A love unknown,
 Tears—tears this heart that seems above
 As cold as stone.

But much, too much I love, to say
 Who lights my flame;
 I'd rather die and pass away,
 Than breathe her name."

To the swallow presents the yearning of the poet for 'free life and love unchangeable':

Like thee, my soul triumphant soars
 On dream-wings borne by worlds of light;
 Like thee it stoops and skims the shores;
 Alike our tastes, alike our flight!

In sonnet **Hope**, the hope is personified as a witch, and the poet is completely disillusioned of it. Again, an ironical presentation of a feeling that is so depressing:

Ah me! what pain,
 What suffering it has cost my heart to learn
 That thou, o lovely Hope, art false and vain!
 And so rest here, and from thy witchery turn.

To A Bereaved Mother is a fine piece written by Jeane Reboul, remarkable for its melancholy and pathos. It is rather a philosophical poem on the nothingness of all object of the

universe. here the death is personified as an angel, who came on this earth to take away the life of a child and gives us a message, ‘Only death is everlasting’ and further remarks about the unpredictability of human life:

Here never is an unmixed joy,
Distinct from suffering and from pain,
Nothing, alas, without alloy;
No smile but has its sigh again.

Ah! Not one pleasure here is sure!
The calmest day, —the brightest sun,
A murky tempest will obscure
Perhaps before its course be run.

Another aspect of death is presented in the sonnet of De GRAMONT where he remarks that death made no discrimination between the rich and the poor, death is indifferent to all things of the world:

Death’s hideous face no splendours can conceal,
Nor gold, nor flowers; we see the shade, and start.

In **Sheaf** we can have also a glimpse of philosophical thoughts. In the poem **The Hope in God** we have a lengthy description of many philosophies about God, soul and human being. Here for example a short note:

There exist, it is said, a philosophy
That needs no revelation, but unlocks
The gates with ease, those guard life’s mystery
And softly steers between the dangerous rocks,
Indifference and Religion. Be it so.
Where are these system-makers that can find
Truth without faith? It would be worth to know.

Pantheistic note is also evident in some of the poems of the **Sheaf**. It is positive and indicates the inner potential of a human being. Even though the man is all powerful, he has free will and his course is open, but he cannot interfere in the general plan of Nature. Man is advised not to use natural objects for impious purposes as:

A God dwells in all unseen and unheard,
 Like an embryo eye, a blossom unblown,
 A spirit exists unperceived in the stone.

In **young and old**, a very apt comparison, is made between the two stages of a man's life. The old age presents a contrast in a very philosophical manner to the young age:

Thou mountest joyous up in life,
 And I descend with forehead bent;
 Thou wheelest eager for the strife,
 And I retire with banner rent:
 Thy future has an ample scope—
 How fair the distance seems to thee!
 Not opulent am I in hope,
 But rich, most rich in memory.

Earlier there was a comparison and now here is a point of resemblance between **Man and the Sea**:

MAN, in thy freedom, thou shalt love always the ocean
 As the mirror in which is reflected thy soul,
 For its infinite depths—its waves in commotion,
 Of thy spirit the phases, lay bare like a scroll.

The same temperaments! And yet through the ages
 Fierce, pitiless, remorseless, between you is strife!
 Carnage, death, havoc, seem the work and the wages!
 Eternal gladiators! —Brothers grappling for life!

Toru was much interested in the mysterious working of God, Soul, Universe and its creatures. In fact, her own life, made her acquainted with the mystical relationship of all these things. She finds the presence of an invisible power in the whole world that is reflected through the objects of nature. To find a final conclusion to the question of this power, that is God itself, seems just impossible for a human being.

Another piece the **History of a Soul** is thoughtful, and mind bending and reveals Toru's interest in the mysterious working of God and contact between the finite and the infinite worlds:

The kind of suffering one suffers is immaterial, what matters is how he accepts these sufferings; the kind of death one dies is immaterial, what remains significant is how he accepts death. Toru's ballads and miscellaneous poems do suggest that her thought about life and death became mature day by day and ultimately, she got herself ready for the journey that she had to undertake after her inevitable death. She was not afraid of her approaching death but like a brave warrior she welcomed it wholeheartedly as the will of God on her part.

If to consume us be thy will,
We shall retire within Thy breast;
Send chains and gibbets, famine, war and pest,
We shall adore and love Thee still.
In fears and ills of every sort
We shall obey Thee, long as reason lasts,
Well knowing that Thy roughest blasts
Lead us but quicker to the port.

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