

INTERNATIONALISING THE SONNET: TORU DUTT’S “SONNET – BAUGMAREE”

By Alison Chapman

And o’er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red, – red, and startling like the trumpet’s sound.
–Toru Dutt, “Sonnet – Baugmaree”

Making Something of Toru Dutt

“WHEN THE HISTORY OF THE literature of our country comes to be written, there is sure to be a page in it dedicated to this fragile exotic blossom of song” (Dutt xxvii). This sentence is Edmund Gosse’s famous final flourish to his memoir of Toru Dutt, which introduced her posthumous volume *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, published in 1882, five years after her death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-one. But what would Dutt’s page look like in the history of “our country,” by which Gosse means of course England? This question is a tricky one, because placing a late nineteenth-century Bengali who was a Europhile, a Christian convert, and an English-language woman poet within a British Victorian tradition is a simplistic, if not a problematic appropriation of a colonial subject into the centre of the British Empire. Where Dutt belongs has long preoccupied critics who try to recuperate her poetry for an Indian national poetic tradition, or for a transnational, cosmopolitan poetics. The issue of placing Dutt allows us also to press questions about the conception of Victorian poetry studies, its geographical, cultural, and national boundaries, not just in the nineteenth-century creation of a canon but in our current conception of the symbolic map of Victorian poetry. But, while recent critics have celebrated her poetry’s embrace of global poetry as a challenge to the parochialism of national literary boundaries, Dutt’s original English-language poetry also suggests an uneven, uncomfortable hybridity, and a wry, ironic interplay between distance and proximity that unfolds through her use of poetic form. This essay investigates what it means to “make something” of Toru Dutt, in the nineteenth century and in the twenty-first century, what is at stake for Victorian poetry studies in privileging Dutt and her multi-lingual writing, and whether her celebrated transnationalism might not also include a discomfort with hybridity that reveals itself through the relation between space and literary form in her poetry.

For her first British critic, Edmund Gosse, Dutt is a “fragile exotic blossom of song,” a colonised Sapphic poetess whom he boasts to have discovered. As he relates the story, in

August 1876 (a traditionally slow month for literary publications), William Minto (editor of the *Examiner*, for which Gosse reviewed) passed to him Dutt's *Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*. Minto also passed on the challenge: "There! see whether you can't make something of that." Gosse tells how the prospect seemed unappealing, with the volume's unpromising arrival in a "thin and sallow packet" (although conceding that the Indian postmark was "wonderful"), and the volume itself "a most unattractive orange pamphlet," leading him initially to dismiss it as a "shabby little book" with "queer type," destined for the waste-paper basket (viii-ix). But Gosse took up the challenge to "make something" of Dutt, opening her volume to "surprise and rapture" (Dutt ix), throughout his critical assessment holding the delight at her poetic gifts in tension with her difference, her otherness, her "queer turn of expression" (Dutt xxvi) that he attributes to her non-native English. In fact, Dutt's queerness – an adjective in this period, according to the O.E.D. denoting strange, odd, peculiar eccentric, but also carrying an additional meaning of out of sorts, unwell – has structured her place in "the history of the literature of our country." Dutt's page in English literary history is, Gosse implies, grounded on her queerness, her exoticism, her difference. The physical description of the *Sheaf* reads like an assessment of Dutt herself: foreign, racially other, and yet also curiously interesting and deceptively brilliant.¹

Indeed, Gosse's review of the *Sheaf*, in the *Examiner* for 26 August 1876, praises the "remarkable volume" that is so tantalising with its "roughly printed" pages from an "obscure Indian press" (966). He admires the translations in the volume (some of which were signed by Dutt's sister Aru, who had died of tuberculosis on 23 July 1874) for their "absolute and unaffected exactness" and their "ambition" (967). The original French poems, which he terms so "intricate in form" and "perplexing in matter," are for him translated astonishingly well: "[t]his amazing feat she has performed with a truly brilliant success" (967). And yet there is a ripple of anxiety through this otherwise glowing review. Firstly, Gosse criticises Dutt's metrical dexterity: "[t]hat the authoress is not an Englishwoman is only painfully felt in those pieces in which she has attempted to reproduce the Alexandrine couplet. Her ear has not been able to detect the true value of the accentuated syllables, and the result is rarely agreeable" (967). Thus, her non-native language ability blunts her ear to the iamb, "kindred to the genius of our language" (967). Secondly, the review registers what Tricia Lootens terms his sense of the "dubious authenticity" of the volume ([2006] unpaginated).² Dutt herself humorously picks up on this anxiety in her letters, when she quips that "[p]eople sometimes think Toru Dutt is a fictitious person, and that the book is the work of some European!" (Loguké 320). On the one hand, this doubt is mitigated by his praise for the astonishing achievement of the translations from someone so young (and so foreign), but on the other hand Gosse questions whether such a performance can be genuine, as if covering for himself if the authorship later proves a fraud. He does this in two places: when introducing the volume, in his surprise that apparently no "European person" has encouraged or corrected the translations, and in his final assessment when he praises this "important landmark in the history of the progress of culture," making the admiration contingent on taking the book "for granted that it really is what it seems to profess to be, a genuine Hindoo product" (964). Gosse's praise is dependent on the volume as authentically colonial (and as a "product" that implicitly equates country, ethnicity, and language with religion), its contributions to "the progress of culture" – European culture – grounded on the genuine otherness of the translator. But his criticism of the lack of iambic facility in the Alexandrine couplet implicitly proves the volume's legitimacy as a foreign object. Thus,

Toru's non-native English is authenticated by the "rarely agreeable" (965) metrical mishaps of her foreign "ear," and these infelicities, although a failure "to detect the true value of the accentuated syllables," confer instead cultural value based on the book's foreignness. The bluntness of Dutt's Indian ear to the English language's rhythms allows her translations, paradoxically, to take their important place as a landmark in Gosse's own culture, a culture that is implicitly predicated on multilingualism, foreignness, and the subaltern.

The relationship between poetry and the centre/periphery of Victorian Britain, as well as the politicised representation of space and place within poetry itself, is emerging as a vital aspect of Victorian studies. The theoretical stakes implied by this shift are tied both to how we read Victorian poems politically, and also what poems we study. In Victorian poetry studies, the argument that poetic language is inherently political, and that poems perform their political and cultural engagements through deep language structures, has been influenced in particular by the work of Isobel Armstrong (who insists on the play between the epistemological and expressive in the Victorian "double poem") as well as E. Warwick Slinn (in his conception of poetry's discursive action and performative function that enacts a cultural critique). More recently, the sense of Victorian poetry's inherent linguistic and formal engagement with the political has shifted from the sense of a poem's hermeneutic and self-conscious play with the expressive and the epistemological, toward an interest in the nineteenth-century cosmopolitan play between identification and detachment. In turn, the canonical range of Victorian poetry has turned outward from British poets to those from other cultures writing in the English language. Toru Dutt's poetry has been emblematic of this critical change, representative of Victorian poetry's shift from Anglo-centrism. Indeed, the sudden attention given to Dutt has been dramatic. Although Dutt has not been represented in some of the major Victorian poetry anthologies of the last twenty years (for example, she is absent from *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*), her work has drawn increasing attention, including Chandani Lokuge's 2006 scholarly edition of her collected prose and poetry for Oxford University Press, a special panel on Dutt organised by Chris Foss at the 2011 MLA convention, and ten academic articles on Dutt since 1999 indexed in the MLA International Bibliography (at the time of writing).³

The critical challenge to the conventional Anglo-centric bias of the understanding of Victorian poetry is also revealed in the way the concept of cosmopolitanism opens up an often complex and knotty poetic engagement with other cultures. Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance*, for example, although based on prose texts, unravels the Victorian construction of "cultivated distance" in terms of a dialectic between detachment and engagement that is largely predicated on forms of European cosmopolitan identities. For Anderson, the Victorian cosmopolitan subject position is ambivalent, valuing transformative encounters with another culture, yet insisting on individual and elitist self-cultivation. In *Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism*, Christopher M. Keirstead develops Anderson's argument in terms of Victorian poetry's deep and wide investment in Europe in literary, aesthetic, and political terms. In particular, Keirstead examines what he terms "border-crossings" in Victorian poetry that translate notions of geographical and cultural mobility into poetic form. Other recent critics have expanded the national, geographical, and political borders of Victorian poetry beyond Europe, challenging the conception of Victorian poetry itself as a static, nation-based canonical category, whether through the trans-Atlantic and indeed global circulation of print (such as work by Meredith McGill on the movement of

poetry, by Caroline Levine on national literature as world literature, and by Meredith Martin on prosody and colonial education).

Toru Dutt's poetry has been made to bear much of this interest in challenging geographical and national boundaries in the conception of Victorian poetry beyond British writers and the British Isles. For Lootens, Dutt's poetry puts into play the relationship between the tradition of Victorian poetry and nationalism, insisting on multiple identifications, challenging the Englishness embedded in Victorian poetics and traditions through its relationship to the centre and periphery but also other cultures such as France: "[f]orget peripheries and centers: Dutt needed neither the British Empire nor the English language in order to claim her place in an increasingly global culture" ([2006] unpaginated). Mary Ellis Gibson contextualises Dutt's metropolitan and colonial "triangulations" of English, French, and Indian nations (a term borrowed from Lootens), through Dutt's poetic revisions of the tradition of poetic piety in her family, exemplified by *The Dutt Family Album* (1870), authored by her elder male relatives. For Gibson, Dutt is able to refashion the Christian tropes through a cosmopolitan playfulness, allowing "multiple languages, locations, and religious and ideological claims [to] compete" (*Indian Angles* 225). Key to the recent recuperation of Dutt's importance, as Gibson notes, is her poetry's negotiation with and assertion of female agency as it embraces instability, multiplicity and what Alpana Sharma terms an "in-between position" and Natalie A. Phillips terms (after the nineteenth-century critic James Darmesteter) a non-hierarchical "blending" of identities into a "hybrid subjectivity." Dutt's cultural multiplicity is summarised by Gita Sheth, who terms her "the mother of Indo-Western literature."⁴ Placing Dutt within Victorian poetry is a messy business, and critics have celebrated her poetry's refusal of a stable national literary affiliation as a proleptic and prophetic signifier of contemporary critical investment in postcolonial and cosmopolitan internationalisms.

The critical treatment of Dutt's literary career has certainly over-determined Dutt's negotiation between multiple homelands, languages, and traditions. Her two volumes of poetry explicitly market her poetry's negotiations between cultures: *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) enact a blending of traditions, national affiliations, and subjective identities, as well as of translations and original lyric poetry. She is thought to be the first Indian woman to write a novel in French, *Le journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879), and she is also remarkable for writing in English (her second language), including her incomplete posthumously published novel *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* (1878). Her multi-lingual, Francophone, Anglophile family enthusiastically embraced European culture, especially following their controversial conversion to Christianity in 1862 when Dutt was six years old. The conversion ostracized the Dutt family from the conservative Hindu community in Calcutta, as Dutt herself says quite openly in her letters (see Lokugé xvi). The Dutt family's affiliations to European culture were deepened by their travels. Between 1869 and 1873, the family were in Europe following the death of Toru's brother Abju (in 1865, aged fourteen), where both Toru and Aru were educated, first in a French school and then in their attendance of the Higher Lectures for Women at Cambridge University. A letter to her cousin Omesh Chunder Dutt from England on 22 November 1870 outlines how intense was their education: Dutt comments "our time is entirely given up to study," and then lists her educational timetable, which started with the piano before breakfast, then Bible study, followed by the piano again, then the daily newspaper (she was avidly following the Franco-Prussian war), then her governess taught

her from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., after which she read with her father or had singing or music lessons, and then again finished the day with more piano practice (Lokugé 219).

While the Dutt household in Calcutta was very westernised, it was also socially isolated from the British in India who, in Toru Dutt's words, were "generally supercilious and look[ed] down on Bengalis" (cited Lokugé xvi-xvii). But the family's embrace of European languages, which Toru's father enthusiastically encouraged in his children, and especially of English, positioned the Dutts as cosmopolitan in a colonial city where the politics of language was complex. Meenakshi Mukherjee comments that "[b]ilingualism was the norm in the Calcutta where Toru grew up, English being the language of education and administration, Bengali the language of resistance and creativity" (208), but the implied binary between English and Bengali languages is problematic. Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) is associated with promoting the tongue of the colonizing nation in order to nurture an anglicised class of Indian colonial administrators, and with devaluing classical oriental languages. But there was already by this time a strong tradition of upper-class Bengalis learning English and contributing to English-language literary culture as amply evidenced by Mary Ellis Gibson's recent work on Anglophone poetry in colonial India. As Gibson argues, the traditions of English-language poetry in India, conflating as they do Indian and British literary genealogies, "complicate traditional narratives of literary history" as the poets "engaged in intricate networks of affiliation and disaffiliation, and their poems challenge simple periodization and nationalist narratives" (Gibson, *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India* 1).⁵ The Dutts were thus in a privileged cultural position in Calcutta, capital of British India, a city where different languages were heavily freighted with political associations, but also where languages and cultures collided. Toru Dutt's Indo-Anglo-Franco-cultural, linguistic and educational hybridity has made her an icon for what Lokugé terms a "'third space' identity at the point of cultural crossings [that] charges Toru Dutt's writing and makes it a site for an enriching postcolonial experience" (xiv). While many recent critics have placed Dutt's poetry in the canon of Victorian poetry, in a celebratory move to challenge its traditionally narrow geographical, national, and cultural boundaries, and have made Dutt herself into a signifier for cosmopolitanism, there is a danger of ignoring the uncomfortable and often ironic tensions of her poetry's hybridity, an uneasiness which the poetry itself often explores through a relation between place and literary form.

Dutt's Garden

IN THE LEGENDARY NARRATIVE that Gosse creates about Dutt's tragically short life and career, a legend that has become foundational in assessments of Dutt, her father's country garden home at Baumaree is a crucial signifier of poetic productivity and cultural place. Gosse's memoir tells how the return from Europe was to an isolated retreat into the walled garden, a "mystical retirement" in which "the brain of this wonderful child was moulded" (xi). Her last four years, Gosse narrates, "were spent . . . in a feverish dream of intellectual effort and imaginative production. When we consider what she achieved in these forty five months of seclusion, it is impossible to wonder that the frail and hectic body succumbed under so excessive a strain" (xiii). In this biographical account, shadowed by the legend of the consumptive poet-precursor Keats, Dutt's sequestration in her garden home contained and depleted her physically, the price of her final poems. As a mystical retreat, in Gosse's terms, the garden sustained her "feverish dream" of writing poetry writing, as if total confinement

was an essential precondition for imaginative genius. Such a narrative tropes the garden as an inspirational space to be transcended by the imagination, in much the same way that Wordsworth's sonnets on the sonnet make a claim that the constricting space of the form paradoxically allows for escape.⁶ It is no accident that one of Dutt's most striking poems produced at this period was a sonnet on the garden itself that displays a highly self-conscious use of poetic form; her "Sonnet – Baugmaree," published posthumously in 1882 (along with Gosse's critical sketch), suggests that Dutt's poetic hybridity was playfully ironic.

Although Gosse celebrates the feverish retreat of poetic production, with all the implications of a consumptive condition burning the poet's flame too bright in the tragic Romantic tradition, the retreat of the home and garden was an important and problematic cultural signifier in Dutt's Bengali context. In Calcutta's conservative Hindu culture, the home was a sacrosanct and gendered retreat; as Partha Chatterjee comments, the home was "the internal space of culture that must remain inviolate and uncontaminated by the profane activities of the world outside" (239). Dutt directly addresses such Hindu culture in her letters to Mary Martin, which often explain for her English friend the cultural differences between Martin's world and her own. For example, Dutt writes: "Marriage, you must know, is a great thing with the Hindus. An unmarried girl of fifteen is never heard of in our country" (Lokugé 276). Dutt also discloses that, in her Hindu grandmother's circle, the fact she is unmarried is scandalous. The Dutt family's Garden House, as Toru terms it, might have carried connotations of a sacred and safe private space, in the Hindu sense, but it is interesting that Toru's focus is specifically the garden, both in her letters and also in her poems "Sonnet – Baugmaree" and "Our Casuarina Tree." These two poems are placed at the end of *Ancient Ballads and Legends*, with "Sonnet – The Lotus" (on the legend of another favourite flower from the garden) in between.⁷ Intriguingly, this sonnet stages the old poetic rivalry between the lily and the rose, presenting the lotus as "the queenliest flower that blows" (l. 14; Loguké 210), containing both the red of the rose and the white of the lily, supplanting and surpassing – but also simultaneously connoting and containing – the western tradition. While also signifying retreat and restoration, Dutt's garden is not "uncontaminated" from the outside, but rather a place of colliding cultures.⁸

"Our Casuarina Tree" has attracted critical attention, but the "Sonnet – Baugmaree" has been largely ignored despite being a crucial poem for its negotiation of space, place, and poetic form. Dutt adopts and adapts the sonnet genre to engage with a tradition of ironic British nationalistic poetry. In a letter to her British friend Mary Martin in 1874, Dutt quotes the first two lines of Robert Browning's famous and unsettling dramatic lyric "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" of 1845 that satirises nationalism, as I argue elsewhere (Chapman 2012). She writes: "I do so want to see your dear old face again! 'Oh, to be in England now that April's there!' sing I with Robert Browning" (Lokugé 228). Her referencing of an ironic nationalist poem that celebrates and satirises, with typical Browning-esque irony, the romanticized English pastoral as a synecdoche for the best of England, aptly combines desire for her return to England with a speaker who represents the worst of self-aggrandizing English nationhood. In Browning's poem, such a nostalgic longing for England is pitted against the speaker's implied southern European context, which prompts him at the end of the poem to denigrate the "gaudy melon-flower" in front of him in favour of the common English buttercup. The "gaudy melon-flower" assigns the foreign as inauthentic; but it is also, as I note in my essay on Browning's poem and homesickness, a reference to Wordsworth's Advertisement to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, which famously decries the "gaudiness and

inane phraseology of many modern writers,” and instead asserts his poetry’s language of the common man. In Browning’s poem, the “gaudy melon-flower” also connotes the inauthentic, but the joke is turned back onto Wordsworth. Browning’s poem, so full of trite, inane pseudo-Wordsworthian pastoral images, is the inauthentic “gaudy melon-flower.” The contempt of this final line is a contempt for the poem itself, as a parody of Wordsworthian poetics.

Dutt, too, writes within and against the Wordsworthian tradition in her sonnet on Baugmaree. Lootens argues that Dutt enters into a dialogue with Wordsworth in “Our Casuarina Tree” in order to haunt the male precursor’s poetry and transform his bardic nationalism into both a localized and cosmopolitan project, breaking down “the inevitability of primary literary relations between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’” (305). “Our Casuarina Tree,” Lootens argues, appropriates and redefines the Wordsworthian tradition, rendering her Englishness a “choice” and not a compulsion. In “Sonnet – Baugmaree,” however, it is irony that is pressed into service to expose the national hybridity of the sonnet form itself. In this poem, Dutt also has the upper hand over Wordsworthian pastoral, but she revises it in a deft exposure of the nationalist ideology of genre.

“Sonnet – Baugmaree” is usually seen as an audacious attempt to re-fashion the immensely popular European sonnet tradition within an Indian context. The poem works within the Western poetic tradition that twines around the Petrarchan (or Italian) and Shakespearean (or English) forms:

Sonnet – Baugmaree

A sea of foliage girds our garden round,
 But not a sea of dull unvaried green,
 Sharp contrast of all colours here are seen:
 The light-green graceful tamarinds abound
 Amid the mangoe clumps of green profound,
 And palms arise, like pillars gray, between:
 And o’er the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
 Red, – red, and startling like a trumpet’s sound.
 But nothing can be lovelier than the ranges
 Of bamboos to the eastward, when the moon
 Looks through their gaps, and the white lotus changes
 Into a cup of silver. One might swoon
 Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze
 On a primeval Eden, in amaze. (Lokugé 210)

Natalie A. Phillips observes that Dutt’s imagining of an Indian garden is disrupted by the colonial and militaristic sound of a trumpet. This sonnet, formed through a western European tradition yet describing a distinctly Indian Eden, contains, she argues, the hard shrill reminder of empire, which signals Dutt’s own subjugated status. And yet the trumpet is an overt simile – “like a trumpet’s sound” – which surely questions the clarity of any colonial reading. Rather, the poem seems to achieve something even more complex than an embedded reminder of empire: the sonnet satirises the nationalist codes of the genre to expose its hybridity, and ironically gestures to a different kind of politicised sonnet form, much in the tradition of Browning’s dramatic lyric that implicitly imagines a space of cultural contact based on proximity and not distance.

This poem on Dutt's beloved family garden is self-conscious, playful, and knowing, deploying a particular sonnet form that incorporates the Petrarchan (or Italian) and the Shakespearean (or English) forms and which rhymes *abbaabbacdcdee*. Thus, at the very end of what seems like a typically Petrarchan form, that turns its rhyme and argument after the volta in line nine, we get instead of the expected *cd* rhyme the couplet *ee*. This form was not, of course, invented by Dutt; the rhyme scheme is used, for example, in Wordsworth's meta-poem "Scorn not the Sonnet." In the Victorian period there was a flourishing and energetic debate about which sonnet was the most appropriate for the English language, and the debate often centered on issues of legitimacy and authenticity, as Stuart Curran has shown (chapter 3). From the 1790s, commentators on the sonnet largely agreed that the most legitimate sonnet in English was the Italian or Petrarchan form and, in sonnets on the sonnet and essays on the sonnet form, poets and critics deployed the language of national purity when adopting the Petrarchan form (ironically) for the English literary tradition. The Petrarchan form was represented as natural, eternal, transcendent, rather than part of a complex European tradition. It must, as James Ashcroft Noble argues in 1896, have "impressive unity," be "thoroughly homogenous," have "vital organism," and an "imaginative completeness" (22).⁹ Dutt's sonnet is a hybrid form, part Petrarchan and part Shakespearean, part Italian and part English, and challenges the homogeneity of the form as it implicitly questions the nationality of the sonnet.

That Dutt chooses her garden in Baugmaree, a suburb of Calcutta, for such an enterprise is no accident. Her family's garden was a large estate "covering many acres of land and shaded by fruit trees" and was in its quiet seclusion, as Harihar Das describes it, the perfect house for poets (18). Dutt spent the last four years of her life mostly in the Garden House (except for the rainy season) after returning from Europe where she and her family longed to live permanently (for example, Lokugé 224, 228), and she had all the family books transferred from the family's other residence in the city (Lokugé 224). As she details frequently in letters, her garden was a favourite place, and she describes in detail its fruit trees and vegetation: how it is "famed for its mangoes" (224), how she "hardly go[es] out of our limits of our own Garden" (227), its monkeys, fruit, and birds (75, 86): "The moonlight nights are so beautiful and silent and peaceful in the Garden" (157). The Garden, however, was not just Indian in its Edenic retreat: Dutt tells Mary Martin how her mother planted English flowers: "[s]he brought a packing case, full of bulbs, roots, and seeds from England. The hyacinths are just beginning to grow. I hope Mamma will succeed in her attempt to introduce English plants in India" (56). Aru, too, brought back thirteen birds from England, although not all survived the change in climate (Lokugé 223). Dutt updates Mary Martin with the progress of the horticultural and avicultural experiments in transplantation (for example, Lokugé 225, 289). Dutt's letters frequently compare the garden to England, and suggest its complex similarity to and difference from Europe: the house needs to be sold to finance their permanent relocation to England, she tells Mary Martin on several occasions, but she also admits that the garden is "as good as" or rather "better", or maybe even, in some respects, "far better" than being in England – except, that is, for the rainy season (Lokugé 321). The garden, above all, emerges in Dutt's correspondence with Martin as an acute point of reference to England. Das terms this garden as a home of "part exile" (ix), and certainly within the representation of the Indian idyll that she often mentions in her letters there are reminders of the family's Europhilia. For example, although the garden seems lonely and bereft after the death of Aru, she writes of its comforting confines to which she is mostly limited as the antithesis of her concept of

Europe: “[t]he free air of Europe, and the free life there, are things not to be had here. We cannot stir out of our own Garden without being stared at or having a sunstroke” (Lokugé 230). The garden, for Dutt, signifies limits, but also, ironically, freedom within and because of the limits; an Indian pastoral retreat with English flora. It is an Indo-Anglian space where the tanks grow both “white water-lilies” and “blood-red lotus” (Lokugé 224).

Freedom within, despite, and indeed because of limitations, is the rhetorical logic of Wordsworth’s meta-sonnet, “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room,” as we have seen, which influenced the debate about the sonnet’s best form throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. I want to argue that the space of Dutt’s sonnet on her garden, and her description of her garden in the letters, is shadowed by this sense of bounded space as liberating. This is not to deny, of course, that the privileged Dutt family’s garden was expansive; indeed, the extant photograph of the house with the surrounding garden indicates an extensive space, as does Dutt’s description of the landscaping in her letters with the hill, lake, mango orchard, cow-house, and “jungle” that needs perpetually cutting back.¹⁰ Rather, the way the garden is represented in the sonnet, as well in parts of her correspondence, suggests a space with tight boundaries analogous to the ideology of the sonnet form itself.

Furthermore, if the garden and the sonnet, place and form, are related symbolically, so are both related to multiple national identifications. But this is not a smooth, easy relationship. In her poem on Baugmaree, the very space of the sonnet signifies an Indo-Anglian, or rather Indo-European space, but it does so to lay bare the conventional national characteristics of the genre in a way that makes an audacious claim for Dutt’s politicized poetic agency. The precise sonnet form that Dutt chooses, as we have seen, combines the Petrarchan form with a Shakespearean couplet, a hybridity (however recognised as itself a “legitimate” form) which ends the poem with a forceful and witty closure rather than the Petrarchan sestet’s lengthier counter-point (or “wave”, to which it is often compared). Furthermore, the volta in line 8 is emphatically marked with the spondee “Red, – red”, with the hyphen between stresses making the spondee even more emphatic, mimicking the bold colouring of the seemel (the silk cotton tree whose red flowers resemble trumpets). The spondee is followed by the trochaic reversal of the conventional sonnet’s iambic foot, indicating a rising meter that signals Dutt’s ironic subversion of the sonnet’s conventional genre codes. If this volta in line 8 is, as Natalie Phillips claims, the sign of imperial subjugation in the Indian Eden, it is also the trumpet blast of Dutt’s playful but emphatic exposure and reformulation of the genre’s national encoding.¹¹

Dutt’s trumpet simile invokes, once more, a reference to Wordsworth’s “Scorn Not the Sonnet.” For Wordsworth, the sonnet is a transformative space which soothes, eases, calms, and cheers. But it also has a spiritual power, thanks to Milton’s reformation of the sonnet into the agency for the angelic host. With a nod to Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, where the trumpet summons the powers of good against the forces of evil, Wordsworth’s sonnet proclaims:

When a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains – alas, too few!

As a trumpet sound, Milton’s sonnets have an agency for Christian good, overcoming religious, political and military oppression. But the strains were “too few.” With a witty

reference to Wordsworth's portrayal of Milton in her own sonnet, Dutt makes a claim that the beauty of her garden as well as her manipulations of the sonnet form are transformative of spirit, politics, and genre. The trumpet blast of subjugation becomes, in the tight but transformative space of her epiphanic sonnet and garden, the sound of her poetic and political agency, completing Milton's project.

In addition, the reiterated synaesthetic redness of the trumpet also references Germaine de Staël's Anglo-Italian heroine Corinne, that superlative hybrid poetess, who signifies the liberal struggle for Italian nationhood and political freedom from oppression, an allusion that reinforces Dutt's blending of nations, cultures, and languages in her global poetics, which so far critics have identified in terms of India, England, and France, but which has an even more capacious sense that makes the concept of cultural "triangulation" seem perhaps too restrictive. Corinne's majestic improvisation at the Roman Capitol, in Isabel Hill's popular 1833 translation of the eponymous novel, "may be compared to scarlet among colors; its words ring like clarions of victory" (26).¹² In her lush Wordsworthian pastoral imagery, Dutt reminds us of the sonnet's inherent hybridity, both formal and national, as she parodies the Victorian anglicanisation of Petrarchanism and thus the very nationalism embedded into Wordsworth's pastoral ideology. In addition, Dutt aligns herself with the transnational figure of Corinne who, as an Anglo-Italian, successfully performs her bicultural identity through her poetry. Dutt's deeply intertextual and wry sonnet, then, acknowledges more than her subjugation to the West: it also imagines a space of national limitations that the sonnet also transcends. In the last couplet – or rather, the last two and a half lines, for in another act of subversion the couplet leaks into line 12 – the sonnet suggests how the pastoral aesthetic can transform into an affective loss of consciousness: "One might swoon / Drunken with beauty then, or gaze and gaze / On a primeval Eden, in amaze." British Victorian genre codes, insisting on the legitimate sonnet's national purity, are laid bare and parodied by the representation of a bounded Indo-Anglian garden that is analogous to Dutt's play with the tight space of the sonnet form. The volta in the final couplet makes such a transcendence conditional – "One might swoon" – and it does so with irony, because that very movement beyond is also integral to the conventional end of the Western form. But the sonnet, while signalling the representation of the garden as analogous to the poetic form, also *at the same time* is careful to separate the garden from the sonnet, hence the hyphen between "Sonnet" and "Baugmaree" in the title, and hence the hyphen between "Red" and "red" in line 8 that signals the constructedness of the startling synaesthetic simile. As the rhetorical deployment of the hyphen suggests, the garden is both connected and separated from the sonnet.¹³ This might be Dutt's wittiest move yet.

And yet the red of the trumpet blast gestures to a further, darker, significance, layering the wit and the playful agency with Dutt's own terrible, terminal illness, from which she also watched her siblings suffer and die. If the synaesthesia of the startling red trumpet blast both connects and separates the garden from the sonnet, in the rhetorical logic of that umbilical hyphen, the coded reference to Dutt's consumption brings Dutt's own diseased body symbolically into the poem, suggesting with dark irony that her feverish swoons at beauty may be pathological. The self-critique both brings Dutt closer to the sonnet and also more distant from it, turning the sonnet's form into an identification with her body, but also questioning the assertive, controlled poetic voice and agency that the poem stakes out as a choice. This layering of readings turns the poem into subject and object, a lyrical expression and an epistemological question, authentic and mediated, which plays with the Browningsque

dance between proximity and distance in similar terms to Isobel Armstrong's conception of the double poem, but to leave the question radically open. While the very status of the "red" of the trumpet is unclear, this is the point of the poem's hybridity: to put borders, cultures, and languages radically, uneasily, ironically into in question. The poem celebrates variegation, gaps, and the process of transformation.

To return to my initial question: what happens when we place Dutt at the centre of British Victorian poetry? Dutt already places herself there, right within the poetic tradition of perhaps the most popular – and most artistically challenging — poetry of the Victorian period. She positions herself as central to the sonnet tradition in order to untangle its cultural encoding, and in order to open up an audacious political poetics of startling transformation. While critics have situated her poetry in terms of the cosmopolitan, the transnational, and the international, for Dutt these multiple, complex positions test and tug at their own conceptual limitations. This is how Dutt is placed as central to the key concerns of Victorian poetry: not a critical move to appropriate an Indian woman poet, but an exposure of the system in which she places herself and which she satirises. Mukherjee's term for Dutt's bifurcated identity as a post-Romantic Bengali writer – the occupation of a "hyphenated space" – is the very site of such questioning, a space of colliding and reconfiguring politicized structures of power. Dutt's subversions are quite simply radical, for who ever heard of the English poetess blowing her own trumpet, especially in a sonnet form whose Petrarchanism conventionally silenced women?¹⁴ And yet her radical poetics are also deeply ironic and questioning. The Baumgaree sonnet ascribes a transformative agency to the declaration of inherent generic national hybridity, in order to forge her own space for a new Indo-European contact zone, but it is a space of contrasts that is open, variegated, connoting the etymology of the final word "amaze" as an ironic bewilderment and puzzle, as well as a wonder.

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NOTES

I would like to thank the speakers and audience of the MLA 2011 panel on Toru Dutt, organised and chaired by Chris Foss, for their feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. Dutt came across Gosse's review in the *Examiner*, and quotes it to her friend Mary Martin, noting that her volume was afterwards consequently "much in demand." See Lokugé 309–11, 320.
2. Lootens (2006) points out that Gosse's praise, in his memoir of Dutt, for her other volume, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, is thus "a redemption narrative," in which Dutt delivers herself from inauthenticity.
3. The MLA International Bibliography articles are by Mukherjee, Knippling, Chaudhuri, Sharma (2001 and 2002), Narasimhaiah, Lootens (2005 and 2006), Phillips, and Foss.
4. Lootens explores the problems with the tradition of reclaiming Dutt as an Indian nationalist heroine ("Bengal, Britain, France").
5. A recent social history of nineteenth-century Calcutta by Chattopadhyay insists on the complex interactions between Bengali and colonial cultural spaces.
6. Wordsworth, "Scorn not the Sonnet" and "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room." Lootens (2005) discusses Dutt's revisions of Romantic bardism, through her negotiations with Wordsworth, in "Our Casuarina Tree."

7. As *Ancient Ballads and Legends* was a posthumous volume, it is difficult to say if this ordering was Dutt's own intention.
8. Dutt's conception of the garden as her personal space of retreat, even in grief from her sister's death, is highlighted when she narrates to Mary Martin her terrible shock at how the gardener found a man hanging from a tree between the garden and a neighbouring field (Lokugé 230).
9. See also Chapman (2002).
10. For example, see her letter to Mary Martin dated 19 September 1874, where she terms the garden "very extensive" (Lokugé 230).
11. The epigraph to the volume contains another reference to a trumpet sound, in its quotation from Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*: "I never heard the old song of Percie and Douglas, that I found not my heart moved, more than with a trumpet: and yet it is sung but by some blinde crowder, with no rougher voice, than a rude style" (Lokugé 129). Presumably, with its reference to "a rude style," this epigraph is Gosse's defence of Dutt's poetry.
12. While I have found no proof that Dutt read *Corinne* either in French or in English, the novel was hugely popular and influential to European women writers. See, for example, Simpson.
13. In the absence of a manuscript in Dutt's hand, and given the posthumous publication of the poem, it is impossible to know if the hyphen in the title and in line 8 is Dutt's work or the editorial revisions of her father, Govin. Although firm paratextual evidence is lacking, however, Govin himself lived in the tensions of a similar hybridity and was himself a poet. I thank Mary Ellis Gibson for making this point to me. See also Gibson's discussion in *Indian Angles* of the literary relationship between Toru and Govin Dutt (209–23).
14. For women poets' strategies in the sonnet form, including the deployment of silence as a powerful but problematic tool of agency to negotiate the unspeakable, see Billone.

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