HENRY DEROZIO AND THE ROMANCE OF REBELLION
(1809-1831)

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In Indian-English literary history, Henry Derozio often occupies a position of primacy both as the origin and as one of the most highly regarded practitioners of this literature by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics. For example, K.R. Ramachandran Nair writes in *Three Indo-Anglian Poets*, his study of Derozio and the two most famous Indian-English women poets of the nineteenth century, Toru Dutt, and Sarojini Naidu:

The history of Indo-Anglian poetry begins with Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. He was born on 18th April 1809, in Calcutta. His father, Frances Derozio was Indo-Portuguese and his mother, Sophia Johnson was English. Thus Derozio had very little Indian blood in him. But he was born and brought up in India, he taught Indian students in an Indian college and was inspired by Indian themes and sentiments in his poetry. So we consider him as a great Indo-Anglian poet. In the nineteenth century parlance he was also called a Eurasian poet.¹

In Nair’s formulation, Derozio is Indian despite his race, which included “very little Indian blood”. Other factors such as place of birth and upbringing, friends and professional affiliations, and the “themes and sentiments” of his poetry instead supposedly mark him as Indian. In a common misconception, race is thought to have been a fluid and non-hierarchical category in the early-nineteenth century, yet the very fact that Derozio’s mixed blood crucially identifies him as other than white (whether as “Portuguese”, “Eurasian”, “native”, etc.) in critical

literature published about him both during the early part of the nineteenth century and after, shows that racial classifications mattered.

Such an extended justification for including Derozio among the pantheon of recovered Indian-English poets illustrates the contentious definition of “Indianness” itself. In a country that only officially came into existence in 1947, over a century after Derozio’s death in 1825, who or what was “Indian” in the early part of the nineteenth century seems to be necessarily at odds with “Indianness” as a criterion indicating nationality or national origin in the middle half of the twentieth century.

Just as Derozio’s critics claim him as Indian, Derozio himself claimed India. His second and last collection of poems, *The Fakeer of Jungheera, a Metrical Tale, and Other Poems* (1828), begins with an untitled poem later titled by Francis Bradley-Birt in his 1923 collection of Derozio’s poems as “To India – My Native Land”:

My country! in thy day of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast —  
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?  
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,  
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou:  
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee  
Save the sad story of thy misery! —  
Well — let me dive into the depths of time,  
And bring from out the ages that have rolled  
A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime,  
Which human eye may never more behold;  
And let the guerdon of my labour be  
My fallen country! one kind wish for thee!2

The subject of this poem, the purported reason for this sonnet, is not the one addressed here since the poem refers not to an actual India, a concrete place territorially demarcated, but to an ideal that can only come into being through the invocation of the speaker. Yet the speaker

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