

Classic Poetry Series

**Henry Louis Vivian Derozio**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

# Henry Louis Vivian Derozio(18 April 1809 – 26 December 1831)

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a fiery Indian teacher and poet. As a lecturer at the Hindu College of Calcutta, he invigorated a large group of students to think independently; this Young Bengal group played a key role in the Bengal renaissance.

Derozio was generally considered an Anglo-Indian, being of mixed Portuguese descent, but he was fired by a patriotic spirit for his native Bengal, and considered himself Indian. In his poem To India My Native Land he wrote:

"My Country! In the days of Glory Past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow  
And worshiped as deity thou wast,  
Where is that Glory, where is that reverence now?"

## <b>Early Life</b>

The son of Francis Derozio, he was born at Entally-Padmapukur in Kolkata on 10 April 1809. He attended David Drummond's Dhurramtallah Academy school, where he was a star pupil, reading widely on topics like the French revolution and Robert Burns. Drummond, "a dour Scotsman, an exile and a 'notorious free thinker'", instilled in him a passion for learning and superstition-free rational thinking, in addition to a solid grounding in history, philosophy and English literature.

He quit school at the age of 14 and initially joined his father's concern at Kolkata and later shifted to Bhagalpur. Inspired by the scenic beauty of the banks of the River Ganges, he started writing poetry. Some of these were published in Dr. Grant's India Gazette. His critical review of a book by Emmanuel Kant attracted the attention of the intelligentsia. In 1828, he went to Kolkata with the objective of publishing his long poem - Fakir of Jhungeera. On learning that a faculty position was vacant at the newly established Hindu College, he applied for it and was selected.

This was the time when Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing considerable turmoil. In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Brahma Samaj, which kept Hindu ideals but denied idolatry. This resulted in a backlash within orthodox Hindu society. It is in the perspective of these changes that Derozio was

appointed at Hindu college, where he helped released the ideas for social change already in the air.

### <b>Hindu College and Social Backlash</b>

In May 1826, at the age of 17, he was appointed teacher in English literature and history at the new Hindu College, which had been set up recently to meet the interest in English education among Indians. He was initially a teacher in the second and third classes, later also of the fourth, but he attracted students from all classes. He interacted freely with students, well beyond the class hours. His zeal for interacting with students was legendary.

His brilliant lectures presented closely reasoned arguments based on his wide reading. He encouraged students to read Thomas Paine's Rights of Man and other free-thinking texts. Although Derozio himself was an atheist and had renounced Christianity, he encouraged questioning the orthodox Hindu customs and conventions on the basis of Italian renaissance and its offshoot rationalism. He infused in his students the spirit of free expression, the yearning for knowledge and a passion to live up to their identity, while questioning irrational religious and cultural practices.

Derozio's intense zeal for teaching and his interactions with students created a sensation at Hindu College. His students came to be known as Derozians. He organised debates where ideas and social norms were freely debated. In 1828, he motivated them to form a literary and debating club called the Academic Association. In 1830, this club brought out a magazine named Parthenon (only one issue came out).

Apart from articles criticizing Hindu practices, the students wrote on women emancipation and criticized many aspects of British rule. He also encouraged students into journalism, to spread these ideas into a society eager for change. In mid 1831, he helped Krishna Mohan Banerjee start an English weekly, The Enquirer, while Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee and Rasik Krishna Mallick began publishing a Bengali paper, the Jnananvesan

He took great pleasure in his interactions with students, writing about them:

"Expanding like the petals of young flowers  
I watch the gentle opening of your minds..."

He was close in age to most of his students (some were older than he was). The motto of the Derozians was:

"He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot reason is a fool, and he who does not reason is a slave."

So all ideas were open to challenge. Many of his inner circle of students eventually rebelled against Hindu orthodoxy, and joined the Brahmo Samaj, while some like Krishna Mohan Banerjee converted to Christianity, and others like Ramtanu Lahiri gave up their sacred thread. Others went on to write in Bengali, including Peary Chand Mitra, who authored the first novel in Bengali. The radicalism of his teaching and his student group caused an intense backlash against him.

### <b> Expulsion </b>

Due to his unorthodox (legendarily free) views on society, culture and religion, the Hindu-dominated management committee of the college, under the chairmanship of Radhakanta Deb, expelled him as a faculty member by a 6:1 vote, for having materially injured [the student's] Morals and introduced some strange system the tendency of which is destruction to their moral character and to the peace in Society. In consequence of his misunderstanding no less than 25 Pupils of respectable families have been withdrawn from the College.

Though facing penury, he continued his interaction with his students, indeed, he was able to do more, helping them bring out several newspapers, etc.

### <b> Death </b>

However, at the end of the year, he contracted cholera, which was fatal at the time, and died on 26 December 1831 at the age of 22. Being a Christian apostate, he was denied burial inside South Park Street Cemetery; instead he was buried just outside it on the bust was unveiled at the Esplanade.

### <b> Poetry </b>

Derozio idolized Byron, modeling many of his poems in the romantic vein. Much of his poetry reflects native Indian stories, told in the Victorian style. The Fakeer of Jungheera(1828) is a long lyrical poem, abundant in descriptions of the region around Bhagalpur. The melancholy narrative involves a religious mendicant, who saves his erstwhile lover from satihood, but comes to a romantic end fighting her pursuers.

Among his short poems, there are several ballads, such as The Song of the Hindustanee Minstrel:

"Dildar! There's many a valued pearl  
In richest Oman's sea;  
But none, my fair Cashmerian girl!  
O! none can rival thee."

Fired by a patriotic zeal he also wrote a good bit of nationalistic poetry, some quite openly rebellious, as in *The Golden Vase*:

"Oh! when our country writhes in galling chains  
When her proud masters scourge her like a dog;  
If her wild cry be borne upon the gale,  
Our bosoms to the melancholy sound  
Should swell, and we should rush to her relief,  
Like some, at an unhappy parent's wail!  
And when we know the flash of patriot swords  
Is unto spirits longing to be free,  
Like Hope's returning light; we should not pause  
Till every tyrant dread our feet, or till we find  
Graves... "

This anti-imperialist fervour also separated him from the Anglo-Indian (then Eurasian) community, who were overwhelmingly pro-British. At one point, he urged his fellow Anglo-Indians that it would be

"in their interest to unite and be cooperative with the other native inhabitants of India. Any other course will subject them to greater opposition than they have at present."

Despite his poetic bent, and his flamboyant dresses, he never showed much interest in women, though he was a strong advocate for female emancipation. The women in his poetry also appear "a little wooden and lacking in individuality". A 1905 biography subtly hints that his expulsion may have had some underpinnings of homophobia; all his student meetings were exclusively attended by young male students.

**<b> Influence </b>**

His ideas had a profound influence on the social movement that came to be known as the Bengal Renaissance in early 19th century Bengal. And despite being viewed as something of an iconoclast by others like Alexander Duff and other (largely evangelical) Christian Missionaries; later in Duff's Assembly's

Institution, Derozio's ideas on the acceptance of the rational spirit were accepted partly as long as they were not in conflict with basic tenets of Christianity, and as long as they critiqued orthodox Hinduism.

Derozio was an atheist but his ideas are generally believed to be partly responsible for the conversion of upper caste Hindus like Krishna Mohan Banerjee and Lal Behari Dey to Christianity. Sameran Roy, however, states that only three Hindu pupils among his first group of students became Christians, and asserts that Derozio had no role to play in their change of faith. He points out that Derozio dismissal was sought by both Hindus such as Ramkamal Sen, as well as Christians such as H. H. Wilson. Many other students like Tarachand Chakraborti became leaders in the Brahmo Samaj.

# A Walk By Moonlight

Last night - it was a lovely night,  
And I was very blest -  
Shall it not be for Memory  
A happy spot to rest?

Yes; there are in the backward past  
Soft hours to which we turn -  
Hours which, at distance, mildly shine,  
Shine on, but never burn.

And some of these but yesternight  
Across my path were thrown,  
Which made my heart so very light,  
I think it could have flown.

I had been out to see a friend  
With whom I others saw:  
Like minds to like minds ever tend -  
An universal law.

And when we were returning home,  
'Come who will walk with me,  
A little way', I said, and lo!  
I straight was joined by three:

Three whom I loved - two had high thoughts  
And were, in age, my peers;  
And one was young, but oh! endeared  
As much as youth endears.

The moon stood silent in the sky,  
And looked upon our earth:  
The clouds divided, passing by,  
In homage to her worth.

There was a dance among the leaves  
Rejoicing at her power,  
Who robes for them of silver weaves  
Within one mystic hour.

There was a song among the winds,  
Hymning her influence -  
That low-breathed minstrelsy which binds  
The soul to thought intense.

And there was something in the night  
That with its magic wound us;  
For we - oh! we not only saw,  
But felt the moonlight around us.

How vague are all the mysteries  
Which bind us to our earth;  
How far they send into the heart  
Their tones of holy mirth;

How lovely are the phantoms dim  
Which bless that better sight,  
That man enjoys when proud he stands  
In his own spirit's light;

When, like a thing that is not ours.  
This earthliness goes by,  
And we behold the spiritualness  
Of all that cannot die.

'Tis then we understand the voice  
Which in the night-wind sings,  
And feel the mystic melody  
Played on the forest's strings.

The silken language of the stars  
Becomes the tongue we speak,  
And then we read the sympathy  
That pales the young moon's cheek.

The inward eye is open then  
To glories, which in dreams  
Visit the sleeper's couch, in robes  
Woven of the rainbow's beams.

I bless my nature that I am

Allied to all the bliss,  
Which other worlds we're told afford,  
But which I find in this.

My heart is bettered when I feel  
That even this human heart  
To all around is gently bound,  
And forms of all a part;

That, cold and lifeless as they seem,  
The flowers, the stars, the sky  
Have more than common minds may deem  
To stir our sympathy.

Oh! in such moments can I crush  
The grass beneath my feet?  
Ah no; the grass has then a voice,  
Its heart - I hear it beat.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

# Going Into Darkness

'It is that hour when dusky night  
Comes gathering o're departing light,  
When hue by hue and ray by ray,  
Thine eye may watch it waste away,  
Until thou canst no more behold  
The faded tints of pallid gold  
And soft descended the shades of night,  
As did those hues so purely bright;  
And in the blue sky, star by star,  
Shines out, like happiness afar;  
A wilderness of worlds! - To well  
In one, with those we have loved well  
Where bliss indeed! - The waters flow  
Gurgling, in darkest hue below,  
And 'gainst the shore the ripple breaks  
As from its cave, the east wind wakes,  
But lo! where Dian's crest on high appears,  
Faint as the memory of departing years.

## NIGHT

The moon is gone; and thus go those we love;  
The night winds wail; and thus for them we mourn;  
The stars look down; thus spirits from above  
Hallow the mourners' tears upon the urn.  
Some thoughts are all of joy, and some of love;  
Mine end in tears - they're welcome - let them flow  
..... We look around,  
But vainly look for those who formed a part  
Of us, as we of them, and whom we wore  
Like gems in bezels, in the heart's deep core.  
Where are they now? - gone to that 'narrow cell'  
Whose gloom no lamp hath broken, nor shall break  
Whose secrets never spirit come to tell: -  
Oh that their day might dawn, for them they would awake

## DAY



# Song Of The Hindustanee Minstrel

I

With surmah tinge the black eye's fringe,  
'Twill sparkle like a star;  
With roses dress each raven tress,  
My only loved Dildar!

II

Dildar! There's many a valued pearl  
In richest Oman's sea;  
But none, my fair Cashmerian girl!  
O! none can rival thee.

III

In Busrah there is many a rose  
Which many a maid may seek,  
But who shall find a flower which blows  
Like that upon thy cheek?

IV

In verdant realms, 'neath sunny skies,  
With witching minstrelsy,  
We'll favour find in all young eyes,  
And all shall welcome thee.

V

Around us now there's but the night,  
The heaven alone above;  
But soon we'll dwell in cities bright,  
Then cheer thee, cheer thee, love!

VI

The heart eternally is blest  
Where hope eternal springs;  
Then hush thy sorrows all to rest,  
We'll treat the courts of kings.

VII

In palace halls our strains we'll raise,

There all our songs shall flow;  
Come cheer thee, sweet! for better days  
Shall dawn upon our woe.

VIII

Nay weep not, love! thou shouldst not weep,  
The world is all our home;  
Life's watch together we shall keep,  
We'll love where'er we roam.

IX

Like birds from land to land we'll range,  
And with our sweet sitar,  
Our hearts the same, though worlds may change,  
We'll live, and love, Dildar!

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

# The Harp Of India

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?  
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;  
Thy music once was sweet - who hears it now?  
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?  
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;  
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,  
Like ruined monument on desert plain:  
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine  
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,  
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine  
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:  
Those hands are cold - but if thy notes divine  
May be by mortal wakened once again,  
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

# To My Native Land

My country! In thy days of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow  
and worshipped as a deity thou wast—  
Where is thy glory, where the 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 these 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!

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio