Henry Derozio’s Manifesto on the ‘New’ Indian Aesthetics, 1830

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The paper concerns the Eurasian poet Henry Derozio who believed that modern Indian aesthetics should have a didactic purpose and must acquire the ability to address larger social and political issues. His manifesto on aesthetics draws attention to the responsibility of literature to improve and elevate the moral and intellectual life of society. Condemning the role of the Elizabethans and English Romantics in leading mankind into a cesspool of despondency, Derozio exhorts future Indian-English poets to acquire “buoyancy and clarity” so that they could direct the hearts and minds of the Indian youth on a voyage of self-discovery and happiness. Though he was critical of Romantic poetry per se, he nonetheless appreciated their anti-establishment stance and religious mysticism. His ideas were influenced not only by the Christian devotional mysticism of the English Romantics but also by the Scottish skepticism of David Hume. Derozio could, therefore, employ the various moods (rasa) of Indian aesthetics and also claim the emotive dialectics of western aesthetics, especially the emotions of love and compassion tempered by truth and reason, in his poetry. He felt that the social purpose of his ‘new’ aesthetics would allow poets to eradicate social evils like widow burning (sati) and bring about social change. During the early stages of British colonialism in India Derozio also used the ideas of aesthetics and literary representation to forge the identity of a motherland (matryabhumi) and the Indian nation (bharat rastra). He was the first social activist and literary artist who laid the foundation of a new aesthetics for Indian writers to use and develop. In his fervor to create the identity of the Indian nation Derozio anticipated Indian writers and poets like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Bishnu Dey.
In the first half of the nineteenth century, Henry Derozio became the first Indian writer in English to deliberate upon the nature of aesthetics that should be employed in Indian writing in English. He was of the strong opinion that Indian aesthetics should possess a moral purpose and encourage the writing of literature, which gave hope and happiness to people. This was a marked shift from the literary writings of late Elizabethans and early Romantics, which showed signs of despondency, and was, therefore, considered unfit for the project of nation building or social improvement. Though Derozio rejected the poetic content of English Romantics he was nevertheless attracted to their criticism of the Anglican Church and belief in the Christian devotional mysticism, something that was once a part of early English Protestant practices. Drawing upon indigenous practices of devotional mysticism in Sufi and Bhakti traditions, Derozio attempted to create a syncretistic culture that could bridge the gap between adversarial communities in India. During the rising tide of British colonialism Derozio also found the radical and revolutionary ideas of the Romantics like Byron and Shelley quite compatible with his own thinking. The strong anti-status quo position of the Romantics, especially their criticism of the policies of the British government, the position of the Anglican Church and the exclusionary politics of the English elite, was effectively used by Bengali intellectuals like Derozio to create their own discourse against colonialism. Derozio was however cautious in acknowledging the greater emphasis of the Romantics on emotion rather than reason, sympathy rather than judgment and pleasure rather than self-denial. This had to do with his attachment to the skepticism and atheism of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, though Derozio was aware of argument in favor of theism.

Scottish Enlightenment

The influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on important figures of the Bengali
Renaissance including Derozio had been profound. From the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries the Scottish educators like David Hare (1775-1842) and David Drummond (1789-1843) began to provide an egalitarian and democratic education, which fostered a questioning mind and a democratic intellect amongst the Bengali elites. It was Derozio’s early training with Drummond that made him into a free thinker, suspicious of Kantian aesthetics and British phrenology.

Derozio wrote on the influence of poetry on society in the India Gazette dated January 22, 1830. The essay has become a manifesto of new aesthetics, a standard for future aesthetics and a touchstone for Indian writing in English. In the essay Derozio argued that the influence of poetry on society is tremendous and, therefore, it was the responsibility of the poet to elevate and improve “man’s moral and intellectual nature.” Derozio felt that much of English poetry written by Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Burns, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Campbell tended to be despondent when life itself was “invested” with “buoyancy and elasticity.” He argued that most of English poetry up to now has flowed through “poisonous channels.” It was time that it opened new springs and engaged the mind in “voyages” of “discovery and “happiness.” Derozio’s emphasis on the improvement of man’s moral and intellectual nature was based more on the ideas of the Scottish philosopher David Hume and less on the schema of the German thinker Emmanuel Kant. Being a social activist, Derozio was rather critical of Kantian aesthetics of disillusionment that ran contrary to his ideas of social improvement and change. His attempt to embody human passion in poetry without eschewing reason was a reflection of these two contrary influences on his new aesthetics.
European and Indian Aesthetics

We know that Derozio was aware of the ideas of western aesthetics through his Scottish teachers and Indian aesthetics through his own. The history of western aesthetics is not as old as Indian aesthetics, though western philosophers like Plato and Aristotle have written individually on notions of beauty, the dangers of the poetic medium itself, the effects of music and tragic drama on the individual and society. Western aesthetics, however, had not been treated as a unified discipline until the beginning of the eighteenth century. It arose with the works of eighteenth century British thinkers like the Earl of Shaftsbury (1671-1713) and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746). Shaftsbury expanded modern aesthetic theory by introducing the notion of disinterestedness in the aesthetic attitude. Both Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer realized that the element of disinterestedness was an important aspect of literary analysis when arriving at an aesthetic judgment. Though thinkers such as Benedetto Croce, Edward Bullough, David Prall, Harold Lee and Jerome Stolnitz developed the ideas of Kant and Schopenhauer, it was only in 1735 that Alexander G. Baumgarten coined the word ‘aesthetics’ using the Greek word aisthanomai which meant sensory perceptions. After this the western world began to see a philosophical unity amongst the fine arts.  

Indian aesthetics on the contrary dates back to 300 BCE. As early as 100 BCE Bharata wrote The Natya Sastra where he identified nine rasas or moods that a work of art might incorporate or possess, namely love, humor, pathos, anger, heroism, terror, disgust, wonder and serenity. Even two thousand years later western aesthetics was preoccupied only with the idea of beauty and terror. Kant recognized the emotion of wonder but did not elaborate on it. Bharata on the other hand felt that a work of art embodied a feeling and not just represented a reality. Indian aesthetics was more of an expressive theory of art when compared to the Western aesthetics, which was more mimetic or representational. Only
when we reach the English Romantics we find some notion of the expressive form in aesthetics. Bharata went on to reflect upon the emotion embodied in a work of art and the way this emotion impacted upon the reader. We had to wait till the middle of the twentieth century for New Criticism, spearheaded by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, to enunciate the twin concepts of affective fallacy and intentional fallacy.

Affective fallacy highlighted the possibility of misjudging a text if evaluation was based solely on the emotional effect of the literary work on the reader. Wimsatt clearly enunciated this concept in his book *The Verbal Icon* published in 1954 and expanded it to include all kinds of criticism that relied on the emotional response of readers triggered by a literary text. He felt that the evaluation of literature based on affective fallacy would encompass not only Aristotle’s notion of catharsis but also Longinus concept of transport. Wimsatt also included some of the critical works of the nineteenth century belles letters and the Chicago critics. Wimsatt felt that any emotional reaction triggered by the text was rather subjective. It had the possibility of mystifying the reader rather than clarifying the text. A lot many critics such as Arthur Quiller-Couch and George Saintsbury indulged in emotional relativism and their assessment of literature was far too subjective to be reliable.

Likewise to assume that the intention of the author is hidden in the text and this intention is most important in evaluating a text is a fallacious argument. For, according to Wimsatt, neither the intention of the author is available nor desirable. An objective interpretation of a literary text must be based on evidence, which Wimsatt divided into three categories namely, internal evidence (words and their meaning), external evidence (statements made by the author) and contextual evidence (inter-textual references). The first category was quite
reliable but the second and the third should be used judiciously as there is a tendency to move away from the iconic nature of the text to the intended meaning of the author.

Evidently, within a decade a reaction set in against the concept of affective fallacy. Many thought that Wimsatt's notion of the iconic nature of the text was rather narrow and his use of the work 'fallacy' far too combative. The dissatisfaction with the notion of the text as icon was partly responsible for the rise of the reader-response theory, which focused on the interactive process of the text and reader to arrive at a meaning. Unlike western aesthetics which had gone through a whirligig of taste and changing philosophical predilections, Indian aesthetics had remained relatively stable and complex.

A New Moral Aesthetics

Derozio felt that poetry as it was conceived and written during his lifetime needed a "radical reform" which must allow it to shift from unhappiness and despondency to hope and discovery." He continued,

Let the poet abandon war, misanthropy, romances and false feeling and let his enthusiasm be on that side which espouses man's best interest; let it be his object to improve, while he delight, and to promote the advancement of society, while he scatters flowers along its path; and he may rest assured that fame will not only await his steps but that he will attain a high rank among the best benefactors of mankind. Hearts that are now dead to the duties which they owe to society will spring, starting at his call, and sympathizing with the world while they take a more active and just part in its concerns will melt.
Derozio charged poets with the duty of improving society and promoting its advancement. His aesthetics had a moral purpose. He felt that poetry must improve individuals by instilling in them feelings of love and duty towards others. He showed the way by selecting social and political themes in his poetry ranging from the abolition of sati and British rights for Eurasians to widow remarriage and free thinking. Derozio attempted to blend both the expressional notion of Indian aesthetics and the representational aspect of western aesthetics in his new aesthetics.

A lot of his poems might sound immature and hedonistic but they have a unitary wholeness about them and seem to be striving more towards a social sensibility and less towards a social language. We must remember that Derozio was quite young and did not have an established literary tradition in India to guide him. Though his “Ode From the Persian of Hafiz” has an epicurean slant it is also tempered with love and duty: Derozio wrote,

I have felt love’s fatal pain
Such—I cannot tell again
Absence poisons every bliss
Such as—ask not what it is.

I have roamed the world around,
And at last a treasure found,
One without, or blight or blame,
One whom—ask me not to name.11

Having felt the sense of loss, the poet transcends physical love into a love of the divine—“One without, or blight or blame.”
His love for others was an abiding quality in his poetry. Just before his death he wrote a poem to his pupils where he stands above them as a gentle presence guiding them and helping them unfold their potential:

Expanding, like the petals of young flowers,
I watch the gentle opening of your infant minds,
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers,
That stretch, like young birds in soft summer hours,
Their wings, to try their strength. O! how the winds
Of circumstances, and gentle April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions, shed their influence:
And how you worship truth's omnipotence!
What gladness rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you are doomed to gain—
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.12

This is the poem of a teenager, without formal schooling, but it carries within it the maturity of thought and feeling of an adult. In the poem the poet nurtures the "infant minds" by gently persuading them to see things in a new way—develop "new perceptions—"and helps them to realize their "intellectual energies and powers." The poet feels that only when these "young birds" can fly freely in the skies of reason and truth, his mission will be complete—"And then I feel I have not lived in vain." Derozio's aesthetics always emphasized the feelings of love and compassion tempered with reason and truth.

Derozio felt that Indian aesthetics must possess a social purpose in order to
eradicate social evils and foster amelioration and change. In his long poem *The Fakeer of Junghgeera*, 1828 his love for others turns to indignation when he sees injustice in society especially the ill treatment meted out to Hindu widows and the detestable practice of sati. In this poem the beautiful Brahmin widow, Nuleeni, falls in love with the fakeer of Jungheera who lives in a fantasy world located in an inaccessible rock cave. But the cruel hands of a bigoted society overpower them both in the form of her father-in-law. The tragic end where Nuleeni embraces the mortally wounded body of the fakeer and burns out the eloquence of her heart may be reminiscent of the English Romantics but unlike the Romantics it has a social purpose. In the early nineteenth century no writer had ever attempted this kind of work. The brave rebellion of the weaker sex drew the attention to the inequality of the sexes and the social malaise rampant in Bengali society of the time. The poem marks an important stage in the use of social themes in literary texts endorsing a syncretistic tradition that was popular in nineteenth century Bengali vernacular. In fact Derozio did live to see the abolition of sati when in 1829 Lord William Bentinck (1774-1839) declared it illegal.

One of his early biographers, Thomas Edwards, concluding his assessment of the Fakeer poem in 1884, highlighted the moral purpose in Derozio’s poems. Edwards wrote,

Derozio has felt and expressed, not only the close affinity of the varying moods and the life of man with the changeful phases of nature, but also the sympathy that links together all created things, and that throws the beams of a warm human love around on all Nature.\(^{13}\)

His love and concern for others fired his imagination to create a new discourse
for the enslaved nation.

National Glory and Nationalist Fervor

Interestingly the 1828 edition of *The Fakeer of Jungheera* published by Samuel Smith and Company had a poem about India written by Derozio. In the poem Derozio laments the lost glories of his “fallen country” in the following manner:

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 groveling 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! 14

Derozio delves into the past to recreate the glory of a nation now “groveling in the lowly dust” and implicitly wishes the “beauteous halo” and godliness to return. The belief that literature must have a social purpose and must be employed in the process of nation building was significantly different from the notion of art for art’s sake. Both Derozio and later Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) found it hard to reconcile western notions of democracy and freedom
in the shadow of imperialism and colonization. In the fervor of creating a nation, Derozio not only anticipates Tagore but also other writers like Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) and Bishnu Dey (1909-1982).

The conception of the past was a necessary condition to understand and shape the present. Derozio was fully conscious of the fact that for Indian writing to achieve recognition and become profound, Indian writers should become aware of the rich heritage and literary resources hidden in the past. He also realized that the new aesthetics should be a healthy combination of the good elements in both the Indian and European civilizations and must, in the ultimate analysis, provide “harmony” and “sweetness.” Both these qualities would then create a “divine music” that could unite the diverse religions and races of India. In a poem, “The Harp of India,” Derozio talks about the rich literary tradition of India withering on a “bough.” He writes,

Why hangs’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
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.15

The poet yearns to create some divine music by playing on the harp so that he could free the soul of India. We must remember that in 1827 there was no sign of freedom struggle, no nationalist fervor that Derozio could have tapped. His was an original voice of revolt to free the nation of its shackles even before it could grip the soul of the nation.

Derozio’s works, both his prose and poetry, revealed his deep-seated concern for society and for truth to prevail. One of his early biographers called him the “Eurasian poet and reformer” while the Calcutta Review, 1852 referred to him as “the oracle of Young Bengal.”16 Since Derozio used his energies as a teacher to create the Young Bengal movement he has also been called “the great Educationist in Bengal.”17 Such praise from Bengali intellectuals is not easy to forget. Derozio functioned both as a prophet and a seer who wanted India to grow and change. At heart he was an Indian with an intrinsically Indian sensibility and a moral vision that both writers and critics have begun to acknowledge. In the India Gazette of August 3, 1826 Derozio wrote,

I was born in India and have been bred here, I am proud to acknowledge my country, and to do my best in her service. But even love of country shall not hinder me from expressing what I believe to be right.18

Undoubtedly Derozio had a social purpose in mind when he wrote “The Harp of India” poem in 1828 and endorsed the moral aesthetics he would enunciate two years later in an essay in India Gazettee on January 22, 1830 called “On the Influence of Poetry.” Derozio strongly felt that poetry was always meant to refine and purify “the springs of life,” and to elevate and improve “man’s moral and
intelligent nature.” The Fakeer was dedicated to his mentor and friend Horace Hayman Wilson, officer of the East India Company’s Bengal Medical Establishment and carried a patriotic poem called “My Country.” In the poem Derozio reflects upon the past glory of a country that was like a beautiful goddess with a resplendent face and soared like an eagle in the sky. Once enchained and enslaved by foreign people, she begs the poet to free her—her “one kind wish from thee.” The poet wants to do something for his “fallen country” but feels helpless. The only thing he can do is to escape into the past and bring back the lost glory, the “wrecks sublime.”

**British Colonialism**

Derozio was deeply exorcised by British colonization and felt that it was responsible for many things including the throttling of the creative spirit amongst the Indians. Two years before the publication of the poem he wrote an essay in *The India Gazette* called “Beginnings—Literature in India—Promises” where he inquired about the reason why literature did not “flourish” in India. He introduced reasons responsible for this problem such as “uncongenial” soil and climate, paucity of talent, lack of literary publications or colonization itself. At this time he still felt that colonial rule was meant to “benefit India beyond all cultivation” but was worried about its “practicability.” By 1929 Derozio began to be convinced that the British Empire was not an “empire of opinion” but an “empire of military force.” He felt that the moment military force was withdrawn the hitherto supportive natives would subvert the empire. Like most Bengalis later in the century, Derozio used the enlightenment arguments of the British enlightenment to critique the system, such as the following,

> Upon the whole, then, we must draw the inference, that colonization would not be beneficial, unless the British Legislature interferes, and
materially alters the present system of Indian policy, by admitting natives and Indo-Britons to a participation of privileges, on a similar footing, as far as practicable and expedient with the Europeans. It is only by such a measure that discontent can be prevented from brooding into rebellion, and the arts and sciences, when established, can produce benefits both to the governors and governed, to Britain, and to this, at present, our oppressed and neglected native country. The basis of good government is, as Jeremy Bentham observes, ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’, and I heartily hope this principle the wisdom of the legislature will see fit, ere any years elapse, to adopt in every measure connected with India.23

Derozio’s own precarious identity coupled with the increasing dominance of the British in India in the early nineteenth century provided the right climate for him to question western aesthetics and formulate a theory of aesthetics based on egalitarian moral principles. When compared to aesthetic theories developed earlier, either in India or in the west, Derozio’s aesthetics was not fully developed. It nonetheless provided a framework in which Indian writers in English could operate.

Conclusion
In the last one hundred and fifty years a lot has taken place in the realm of formulating a new aesthetics. New assumptions about art and aesthetics have created a post-modern critique of aesthetics. Benedetto Croce decentered the concept of beauty by prioritizing “expression,” while Marshall McLuhan talked about the power of art to create a counter reality by exposing hidden facets of a society. Theodor Adorno felt that post-modern aesthetics must unravel the ways in which the culture industry appropriates and commodifies art and aesthetic
experience. The shift in global aesthetic standards has also affected Indian writing in English. Tentative post-war experiments have led to bold assertions. Since the 1980s Indian writing in English has matured and moved into different directions from the magic realism of Salman Rushdie to the deracinated prose of Stephanian writers, but still many of the Indian writers in English, canonized in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, do take up a moral position against their own elitist aesthetics and tradition. Much of Indian writing in English still endorses the didactic purpose tempered with love and reason once laid down by Derozio in the nineteenth century.

NOTES

1 Vinay Dhardwaker, “Formation of Indian-English Literature,” in Sheldon Pollock ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, (New Delhi; Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 222-23. Dhardwaker writes that, “The new writers, who define a long nineteenth century from about 1825 to 1925, collectively started a process of inventing Indian literariness in English in a highly aestheticized and self-conscious form, and continued it through several phases until the arrival of the modernist and Progressive Writers’ movements in the last two decades of the colonial period. As some of these writers and their admirers attest, their goal most often was to compose texts that emphasized ‘beauty of expression and sentiment,’ and that produced an experience of linguistic, imaginative, and intellectual pleasure and satisfaction in their readers. Such a shift from instrumental writing to aestheticized expression took place in concrete and often unique circumstances, however, and therefore can be understood only through the details of their biographies and texts.” (pp. 222-23).


4 Thomas Edwards, *Henry Derozio*, (New Delhi: Rupa Paperbacks, 2002). The book was originally published in 1884 under the title *Henry Derozio: The Eurasian Poet, Teacher and Journalist*. Derozio’s response to the charges of the elders of Hindu College for corrupting the religious beliefs of students highlights the introduction of Hume’s skepticism in class. In a letter written to H. H. Wilson on 26th April 1831 in response to the charges leveled against
him by the management of the Hindu College, Derozio argues, "I therefore thought it my
duty to acquaint several of the College students with the substance of Hume's celebrated
dialogue between Cleanthes and Philo, in which the most subtle and refined arguments
against Theism are adduced. But I have also furnished them with Dr. Reid's and Dugald
Stewart's more acute replies to Hume, —replies which to this day continue unrefuted. 'This
is the head and front of my offending.' If the religious opinions of the students have become
unhinged in consequence of the course I have pursued, the fault is not mine. To produce
convictions was not within my power; and if I am to be condemned for the Atheism of some,
let me receive credit for the Theism of others (p. 64).

5 George E. Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth
Century*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1961). Also see Michael Laird,
and related sections in Part II about Scottish influence on early English education in Bengal.

6 One of his early biographers Elliot Walter Madge confirms Derozio's anti-Kantian stance.
Madge writes, "He led his pupils through the pages of Locke, Reid and Dugald Stewart, and
wrote about this time, his 'Objections to the Philosophy of Emanuel Kant' which the Rev
Dr. W. H. Mill, Principal of the old Bishop's College, and afterwards Canon of Ely, declared
before a large audience, 'were perfectly original and displayed powers of reasoning and
observation which would not disgrace even gifted philosophers.'" reprinted in Dr. Abirlal
Mukhopadhyay, Sri Amar Dutta et. al., *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry

7 Dr. Abirlal Mukhopadhyay, Sri Amar Dutta et. al., *Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete


9 Richard McCarty, "The Aesthetic Attitude in India and the West," *Philosophical East and


biography was originally printed under the title *Henry Derozio: The Eurasian Poet, Teacher
and Journalist* in 1884 and was the first biography of the poet.


20 Most commentators have ignored Derozio's corrections in his own handwriting where he
changed the last line. Instead of the earlier line, “My fallen country! One kind wish for thee!” he wrote “My fallen country! One kind wish from thee!” Changing the word “for” to “from” alters the meaning of the sentence completely. What Derozio listens to is the voice of the country beseeching him to take away the yoke of slavery and free her.

