



Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's "My Vocation": Poetic Calling as National Awakening

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ABSTRACT

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's poem "*My Vocation*" remains one of the earliest Indian English poems articulating the belief that poetry is not merely a personal artistic pursuit but a sacred mission with public and national implications. In the poem, Derozio expresses an intense realization that he has been chosen for a task larger than himself: to serve as a poet whose words will inspire a dormant nation to awaken, to remember its past glory, and to reclaim its future through intellectual and cultural revival. This research article argues that "*My Vocation*" constructs the role of the poet as a prophetic figure who receives inspiration not for individual fame but for national renewal. The poem positions poetry as responsibility and vocation as destiny. Through Romantic imagery, heightened emotional expression, and deliberate fusion of individual artistic calling with collective historical revival, Derozio reveals that poetry becomes an instrument of cultural transformation. This paper contextualizes "*My Vocation*" within early nineteenth-century Bengal, the emergence of Indian English literature, and the pervasive climate of colonial suppression. Through close textual reading, the article shows how Derozio defines poetry as a force powerful enough to restore national pride and intellectual identity. The conclusion asserts that Derozio's poetic vocation anticipates the nationalist role later taken up by Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and other poet-philosophers, making his poem foundational in the genealogy of Indian literary nationalism.

Keywords: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio; "*My Vocation*"; poetic calling; literary nationalism; Romantic idealism; Bengal Renaissance; cultural revival; Indian English literature.

1. Introduction

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio stands at the beginning of Indian English literary history not merely because he wrote in English, but because he transformed poetry into a medium of intellectual and cultural reawakening. Born in Calcutta in 1809 to a Portuguese father and an Indian mother, Derozio grew up in a society struggling with colonial domination, cultural paralysis, and intellectual stagnation.



A precocious thinker and bold critic, he became a teacher at Hindu College while still a teenager. His influence on the students — later known as the *Young Bengal* group — reveals his capacity to ignite the fire of questioning, reasoning, and moral independence. “*My Vocation*” is a poem that encapsulates Derozio’s belief in poetry as both a personal responsibility and a public intervention.

At the surface level, the poem appears to describe a young poet discovering his vocation — the realization that poetry is his destiny. However, Derozio transforms this personal discovery into an ideological awakening. His poetic calling becomes inseparable from national duty. He does not see poetry as a space for isolation or introspection; rather, he sees it as a transformative act with implications for India at large. The poem becomes a declaration: the poet’s voice is not his own — it belongs to the nation. Poetry becomes the vehicle of historical change.

The poem expresses a sense of urgency and inevitability. Derozio does not choose poetry — poetry chooses him. He experiences a moment of realization where he understands that the creative fire within him must be used for a larger purpose. The poem’s language is passionate, emotional, and intense, revealing that Derozio sees his vocation as a sacred calling. The words do not arise from personal ambition but from a deep ethical impulse to awaken the spirits of his dormant nation.

Thus, “*My Vocation*” becomes a philosophical and nationalist manifesto. It defines the poet as an awakener and poetry as a sacred duty toward India.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

To understand the full power of Derozio’s declaration in “*My Vocation*,” we must situate the poem within the complex historical context of nineteenth-century Bengal. The Bengal Renaissance — the intellectual and cultural reawakening that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — had not yet attained its full momentum when Derozio began writing. Indian society was still deeply rooted in social stagnation, orthodox practices, and unquestioned authority structures. Western education had just begun to influence Indian thought, creating a generational shift between older traditionalism and younger reformist tendencies.

British colonialism had fractured India’s intellectual confidence. Traditional centers of learning had been weakened or replaced. English education was beginning to create new elites, yet the system was designed primarily to produce loyal administrators rather than critical thinkers. The colonial regime preferred a nation of clerks, not poets or revolutionaries. Cultural suppression and intellectual exploitation became subtle and systematic. The British promoted the idea that India’s literature was inferior, its philosophy primitive, and its civilization stagnant.

Into this vacuum entered Derozio.

At a time when political resistance was impossible due to strict colonial surveillance, Derozio used poetry and teaching as instruments of awakening. His classrooms became spaces where students learned to question authority, challenge superstition, and embrace rationality. His poetry became a means not of personal expression but of asserting cultural agency. “*My Vocation*” emerges from this climate of struggle and transformation. It reflects his conviction that poetry can restore national memory and revive a suppressed identity. For Derozio, the poet’s role is not ornamental; it is revolutionary.

He sees himself not as a solitary artist but as a cultural catalyst.



In this sense, “*My Vocation*” is a historical poem. It belongs to the moment India first began imagining itself as a nation.

3. Close Reading: The Poet as Chosen Vessel

At the heart of “*My Vocation*” is a moment of self-realization. The speaker recognizes that poetry is not an optional talent; it is a destiny, a burden, and an act of service. Derozio expresses certainty that he has been selected by something greater than himself. The poem suggests that inspiration is not generated; it is received. It comes from an external force — a divine or higher source — that entrusts him with words powerful enough to bring transformation.

Derozio articulates that he feels compelled to speak. Silence becomes impossible. The poetic fire within him demands expression, just as a spark demands to become flame. However, unlike Romantic poets who saw their calling as individualistic and artistic, Derozio’s calling is collective. He does not write to explore his emotions; he writes to awaken a nation. The intensity with which he describes his inner compulsion reveals that he feels morally obligated to use poetry for the greater good.

The central metaphor of the poem is that of a voice calling out to him. This voice is not metaphorical inspiration — it is a command. The poem shows a transformation of identity: the poet becomes a prophet. His poem becomes a message. His vocation becomes a mission.

Thus, the close reading reveals that the poem is not about self-discovery but self-surrender. The poet surrenders to his vocation. He does not own his words; he becomes an instrument of them.

4. Poetry as National Duty: Fusion of Art and Responsibility

In this section, Derozio reveals that poetry is not merely art — it is action. The poem makes an argument that poetry shapes consciousness, consciousness shapes identity, and identity shapes nations. For Derozio, the poet holds responsibility to resurrect the cultural genius of his people. The poem celebrates the transformative power of poetry — not because poetry changes laws or governments directly, but because it changes minds.

Derozio’s calling becomes explicitly nationalistic. Poetry is the means through which he will revive India’s dormant spirit. He believes that if India is to be awakened, it will not begin with political rebellion but with intellectual renaissance. The colonizers may dominate land, but they cannot dominate consciousness if the poet reawakens it. This core belief drives the emotional force of the poem.

Derozio sees himself as the one who must awaken sleeping India — not through force, but through illumination. His words are not weapons, yet they are more powerful. He knows that nations rise first in imagination before they rise in history. He understands that identity precedes independence.

Thus, poetry becomes *national service*. The poet becomes *the servant of the nation*. Derozio’s vocation is not to write poetry. It is to resurrect India.

5. Theoretical Perspectives: Poetic Identity, Agency, and National Consciousness

“*My Vocation*” gains remarkable depth when read through the lens of postcolonial theory, Romantic poetics, and the philosophy of artistic selfhood. Although Derozio predates the formal birth of postcolonial studies, the poem resonates with later theoretical arguments concerning voice, agency,



and cultural resistance. Frantz Fanon asserts in *The Wretched of the Earth* that reclaiming cultural identity is an early act of resistance against colonial domination. Fanon believed that before nations resist politically, they reclaim memory and selfhood. Derozio anticipates this notion by asserting that poetry – not politics – must become the first movement of liberation. When he declares that he has a vocation, he is not declaring personal ambition; he is announcing the birth of national consciousness. Poetry becomes an act of resistance because it restores to India what colonialism attempts to erase: pride in its intellectual heritage and emotional dignity.

At the same time, his self-awareness as a poet reflects the Romantic tradition of the poet-prophet. Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that the poet is “a synthetic and magical power” capable of creating new realities through the force of imagination. Shelley described poets as the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” implying that true social transformation is sparked not by political rhetoric but by visionary imagination. Derozio stands in this lineage. His sense of vocation echoes the Romantic belief that poetry is not merely decorative but revolutionary. However, unlike European Romantics who sought to transform individual consciousness, Derozio seeks to transform collective identity. This divergence makes him unique: he fuses Romantic poetics with nationalist responsibility.

The poem also resonates with Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “nation as narration,” which asserts that the nation is not merely a geographic territory but a cultural story that people believe about themselves. Derozio is aware that the colonizers attempt to impose a narrative on India – a narrative of inferiority, stagnation, and intellectual silence. His vocation becomes the rewriting of that narrative. His role as poet is thus not to praise the present but to restore the past and inspire the future. Poetry becomes a narrative intervention. It challenges colonial authority not through rebellion but through reclamation of memory.

Therefore, the poem embodies an early postcolonial strategy: reclaiming voice through artistic creation. Derozio’s vocation is to transform silence into sound, forgetfulness into memory, and subjugation into awakening.

6. Contemporary Relevance: Poetry as Empowerment and Cultural Restoration

Although “*My Vocation*” was written almost two centuries ago, it remains strikingly relevant in contemporary India and in global cultural contexts. In the twenty-first century, societies continue to struggle with issues of cultural identity, historical erasure, linguistic imperialism, and the tension between globalization and tradition. Derozio’s poem speaks directly to these anxieties by reminding readers that cultural preservation is a conscious act, not a passive inheritance. Heritage survives only when individuals willingly take responsibility for its revival. Derozio understood that cultural stagnation does not occur because heritage disappears; it occurs because people stop engaging with it. His poem serves as a reminder that every culture requires individuals who see it as their vocation to protect, nurture, and develop it.

On a personal level, the poem resonates with anyone who searches for purpose. Derozio describes vocation not as a casual choice but as a profound internal realization – a moment when one discovers that their life has meaning beyond personal fulfillment. This makes the poem universal. Whether the reader is an artist, teacher, activist, or thinker, the poem affirms that vocation is not about external reward but internal conviction. It is the recognition that one’s talents are not accidents but instruments.



Additionally, the poem has strong resonance in academic and literary contexts. In an age where literature is often marginalized in favor of technical or commercial disciplines, Derozio's voice reminds us that poetry and art hold immense power. They preserve cultural memory, shape imagination, and give language to experiences that are otherwise ineffable. The poem suggests that nations are not sustained by economies or governments alone, but by the strength of their creative spirit.

In this way, "My Vocation" functions as a timeless manifesto for artistic and cultural responsibility. Derozio's vocation belongs not only to him — it belongs to anyone who believes in the transformative power of words.

7. Conclusion

"My Vocation" stands as one of the earliest declarations of literary nationalism in Indian English poetry. Through this poem, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio articulates a vision of poetry not as a hobby, but as a calling — a sacred responsibility. His realization that he has been chosen to speak, to awaken, and to inspire transforms the poem into a manifesto of national artistic revival. The poet becomes a vessel through which the nation rediscovers its voice. Derozio sees poetry as the antidote to silence, stagnation, and cultural amnesia. He understands that colonial domination begins with erasure — and therefore resistance must begin with remembrance. The poem reveals that vocation is not merely something one does; it is something one becomes. The poet's identity merges with the nation's destiny.

In celebrating his vocation, Derozio celebrates India's future. The poem affirms that literature precedes liberation — that before a nation rises in politics, it must first rise in imagination. Through "My Vocation," Derozio establishes the poet as the torchbearer of awakening, proving that artistic consciousness is the first step toward national freedom. The poem's enduring power lies in its capacity to speak across centuries, reminding every generation that the creative voice has the potential to shape the destiny of a people.

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