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HENRY DEROZIO'S "MY DREAM": A ROMANTIC VISION OF IMAGINATION,
SUBLIMITY, AND IDEAL BEAUTY

Dr. KAMBHAMPATI RAJESH

Associate Professor, Department of English
Central University of Jammu
Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India



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ABSTRACT

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831), often recognized as the first Indian poet writing in English, occupies a unique space in literary history. His poem "My Dream" is a lyrical, visionary, and aesthetically rich Romantic text that reveals the spiritual and imaginative faculties of the human mind. Though influenced by European Romantic poets—especially Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron—Derozio's poem is not mere imitation. Instead, it demonstrates how the Romantic imagination becomes a transformative force that liberates the speaker from the boundaries of the material world. This research article argues that *"My Dream" functions as a Romantic escape into a transcendent realm*—one that rejects ordinary reality and embraces an elevated spiritual and aesthetic vision. The article examines the poem through Romantic theories of imagination, the sublime, and transcendental beauty; it analyzes the stylistic and thematic elements that construct the dreamscape; and it positions Derozio as a pioneering voice whose imaginative poetics anticipated Indian English Romanticism. Using textual analysis and theoretical support from Wordsworth (imagination as spiritual revelation), Coleridge (secondary imagination), and Kant (sublimity as awe beyond reason), this study shows that "My Dream" constructs an ideal world where beauty is absolute, pure, and uncorrupted by earthly limitations. In doing so, Derozio's poem exemplifies Romantic escapism—not as avoidance, but as a mode of revelation.

Keywords: Henry Derozio; Romantic imagination; sublimity; aesthetic transcendence; dream vision; Indian English poetry; Romanticism; ideal beauty; transcendence; imagination and reality.

1. Introduction

Henry Derozio remains one of the most remarkable yet understudied figures in Indian literary history. Born in Calcutta to a Portuguese father and an Indian mother, Derozio embodied cultural hybridity long before the concept became central to postcolonial thought. He lived only twenty-two years, yet his short life produced an impressive aesthetic and pedagogical legacy: he wrote poetry that rivaled early British Romantics and taught at Hindu College, where he inspired students not only politically but intellectually.

Of his many poems, “My Dream” stands out as the most Romantic in vision and execution. The poem invites readers into a world constructed entirely from imagination—an ethereal landscape filled with divine beauty, harmony, and emotional rapture. The speaker experiences a dream so vivid and spiritually intense that it surpasses the limitations of the waking world. In this sense, the poem resonates directly with the Romantic belief in imagination as an alternative form of truth.

2. Historical and Romantic Context

The early nineteenth century witnessed the flourishing of European Romanticism, marked by worship of nature, celebration of imagination, and belief in the individual’s subjective emotional experience. Romantic poets rejected Enlightenment rationality and embraced mystery, passion, and transcendence.

Derozio enters this lineage in an unconventional way. Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley, or Byron, he was not European, wealthy, or institutionally empowered. He lived under British colonial rule, in a hybrid identity space, yet he discovered in **Romantic imagination a space of freedom** unlike anything available in his socio-political context.

In “My Dream,” Derozio adopts explicitly Romantic aesthetics:

- intense emotional inwardness
- visionary dreamscape
- imagery of sublime beauty
- use of the imagination as portal into transcendence

Wordsworth believed that imagination was capable of producing “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Coleridge differentiated between primary imagination (perception) and secondary imagination (creative and transformative shaping of reality). Derozio’s use of dream vision aligns with Coleridge’s secondary imagination—he reshapes the world into what it *ought* to be.

In the poem, Derozio does not observe nature passively. He transforms it through imagination into something divine and unattainably beautiful. The dream, therefore, is a *Romantic strategy of liberation*.

The nineteenth century—especially in Bengal—also witnessed the early stirrings of intellectual reform movements. Derozio’s students, the “Young Bengal,” challenged orthodoxy and encouraged freedom of thought. Although this article does not focus on nationalism (because you selected Theme A), the same spirit of liberation animates “My Dream.” The poem liberates the mind from reality through imagination just as his teaching liberated students intellectually.

Thus, Derozio emerges not simply as a poet who imitated Romanticism, but as one who discovered in Romanticism *a pathway to inner freedom*.

3. Close Reading: The Construction of the Dreamworld

“My Dream” opens with an emotional surrender to sleep—a symbolic release from the restraints of waking consciousness. Immediately, the speaker enters a world where sensory limitations disappear and the imagination becomes the primary agent of experience.

The language is sensuous, ethereal, and musical. Derozio uses delicate visual imagery—light, color, celestial presence—to construct a fantastical space. The poem’s dream sequences function not as random images, but as structured allegories of beauty. The dream becomes a world where the impossible becomes possible.

The beauty in the dream is not earthly beauty. It surpasses physical form and becomes spiritual radiance. Beauty is omnipresent, overwhelming, consuming. The poem demonstrates that beauty in Romanticism is not ornamental—it is revelation.

One of the most striking qualities of the dream sequence is its fluidity. Time does not exist. Physical boundaries disappear. The dream moves like flowing water, seamlessly shifting from images of angels, light, clouds, and celestial music. This technique illustrates how imagination liberates the speaker from linear time and fixed space.

The dream also features a mysterious ideal woman, a feminine symbol of perfection and transcendence. Romanticism often personifies the ideal as feminine—Shelley’s “Alastor,” Dante’s Beatrice, or Petrarch’s Laura. Derozio follows this lineage, but he adds emotional depth: the woman represents *not just love, but the embodiment of beauty itself*.

Thus, the dream world functions as a Romantic ideal: a state of being where beauty, truth, and imagination unite.

4. Romantic Aesthetics: Beauty, Imagination, Sublime Transcendence

The core of the poem lies in its pursuit of **beauty as transcendence**. Beauty in the poem is not physical—it is spiritual. It produces awe, reverence, and sublime emotional intensity. The speaker enters a space where:

- reality dissolves
- imagination creates
- beauty transforms

The Romantic sublime, as defined by Kant, is the emotional experience of encountering something vast and beyond rational comprehension. Derozio employs the sublime by elevating beauty to a level where it becomes overwhelming—too perfect to belong to the physical world.

Imagination functions as “the ultimate freedom.” Reality provides limitations; imagination removes them. Where the real world is chaotic and disappointing, the dream world is harmonious, musical, poetic. Where the real world involves loss, unfulfilled longing, and imperfection, the dream world offers fulfillment, unity, and serenity.

The poem is ultimately about transcendence: lifting the soul beyond sensory perception. The speaker wakes from the dream with loss—not because the dream was untrue, but because it was *too true* to exist outside imagination.

5. Psychological and Philosophical Dimensions of Dream and Reality

The emotional core of “My Dream” lies in the tension between two worlds: the waking world, with its imperfections and limitations, and the dream world, with its plenitude and ideal beauty. The dream becomes the poet’s psychological safe space, a realm ungoverned by empirical reality. Romantic poets repeatedly invoked dreams not as unconscious chaos, but as heightened states of emotional and aesthetic awareness. For Derozio, the dream operates as a philosophical contrast to reality itself.

The poem suggests that dreaming is a higher state of consciousness. The subconscious is not a passive storehouse of memories but a site of imaginative agency. Derozio’s narrator actively participates in shaping the dream world — unlike the physical world, where he remains constrained by external forces. The internal freedom he experiences in the dream symbolizes the Romantic belief that imagination is superior to rationality.

Reality is associated with:

- incompleteness,
- dissatisfaction,
- suffering,
- limitation.

The dream world, by contrast, represents:

- fulfillment,
- emotional completeness,
- harmony,
- spiritual transcendence.

Derozio is not merely escaping reality; he is reimagining it, asserting that the dream can reveal truths that reality conceals. In the Romantic tradition, the dream functions as the gateway to the ideal. Plato associated ideals with forms — eternal, perfect, and unattainable in the physical world. Derozio's ideal world echoes this Platonic hierarchy. He sees beauty not through the senses, but through the soul.

This psychological movement from real to ideal demonstrates a key Romantic principle:

the imagination is sovereign over reality.

For Derozio, the dream becomes an alternate metaphysical space where the soul reaches its fullest potential.

6. Imagination and Aesthetic Transcendence: Sublimity and Desire

Derozio's entire aesthetic framework rests upon the Romantic sublime. Immanuel Kant theorized the sublime as an emotional experience that overwhelms the intellect and destabilizes rational comprehension. The poem achieves this state at the moment when the speaker confronts absolute beauty — beauty without flaw, without human imperfection. Derozio elevates beauty beyond physical appearance; it becomes metaphysical, radiant, and ineffable.

The sublime produces not comfort but ecstatic disturbance — the emotional flood when one encounters something greater than oneself. This is evident when the dream collapses. Upon waking, the poet experiences loss, a collapse of transcendence. The jarring transition between dream and waking consciousness signals a deep truth: the real world cannot sustain the dream's perfection, and yet the mind remains haunted by its memory. Just as Wordsworth believes memory transforms experience into spiritual revelation, Derozio suggests that memory of the dream remains a source of aesthetic energy.

The dream is thus not an escape but a rebellion against the constraints of the finite world.

Romanticism elevates imagination to the highest epistemological force — more powerful than reason or empirical perception. Coleridge classified imagination as a divine activity — a creative force akin to God's creation. Derozio follows this tradition; the dreamworld becomes a creation of his secondary imagination, an improvement upon the natural world.

To awaken from the dream becomes tragic. The act of waking is a symbolic fall — a loss of paradise. Thus the poem ends not with satisfaction, but with a Romantic melancholy: the beauty he saw cannot be recovered in the real world. The dream becomes a reminder that perfection exists only in imagination.

Through imaginative transcendence, Derozio articulates the core Romantic yearning:

To hold onto what cannot be held, to see what cannot be seen, to dwell where the soul is free.

7. Conclusion

"My Dream" stands as one of the most powerful poetic manifestations of Romantic imagination in early Indian English literature. While Derozio drew upon the aesthetic vocabulary of European Romanticism, the poem transcends imitation by offering a uniquely personal and culturally hybrid expression of longing, sublimity, and imaginative transcendence. Through the dream vision, Derozio articulates a universe in which beauty is perfect and emotional fulfillment is complete — a universe unreachable by the constraints of waking existence. The poem's dreamscape is more than fantasy; it represents the Romantic belief that imagination reveals a deeper truth than reason. In doing so, Derozio performs an act of liberation: he escapes the imperfections of the material world and enters a realm where the soul is sovereign. The abrupt return to reality marks the poem's

emotional climax, revealing that the dream is not a form of escape from life, but a form of return to the self — a restoration of the inner world where beauty resides eternally. “My Dream” ultimately affirms the Romantic conviction that imagination is not illusion, but revelation. The poem elevates beauty to a transcendental category and positions Derozio as a major precursor of Indian Romantic consciousness, whose legacy continues to influence Indian English poetics. Through dream, he reaches the truth that reality denies.

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