Between

«But I'm wandering –»: H.L.V. Derozio's Poetic Revolution, Dashes and Global Romanticism

Simona Beccone

Abstract

H.L.V. Derozio has often been seen as the «Indian Keats» and an imitative and conventional Romantic poet. However, textual analysis has revealed an extensive use of dashes in all this author's works, including recently discovered texts. Dashes are used to insert ongoing incidental remarks that emphasise truths not yet recognised by the dominant British and orthodox Brahmin canons of the time, subverting these ideologies and aesthetics. Rather than passively imitating a model, this author then appropriates, transforms, and transcends dominant cultural canons, articulating early nationalistic sentiments in nineteenth-century India and contributing to Indian literary modernity. Derozio's counter-gaze is notably cosmopolitan, highlighting the transcultural literary scene of the 1820s and 1830s Calcutta that shaped his brief, though significant, career, thus illustrating what Gottlieb refers to as «global Romanticism».

Keywords

H.L.V. Derozio, Indian poetry in English, Romanticism, Authorial punctuation, Global Romanticism.

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Introduction

This essay examines the appropriation, transformation, and overcoming of the Romantic canon in English-language Indian poetry written in Calcutta during the early nineteenth century (1820s-1830s). More specifically, I would like to present some unique aspects of H.L.V. Derozio's poetic production, as this phenomenon remains largely unexplored by critics.

This endeavour is driven by the recent discovery of new, previously unstudied works by this author in the archives of colonial literary journals from that period (Chaudhuri 2008: xiii-xiv, xxiii-xxiv). These works reveal the profile of a more complex and multifaceted author, contrasting with the stereotypical image we are accustomed to, that of the melancholic «Indian Keats» (Gibson 2011: 2, 64) who incarnates early India's patriotic voice, nostalgic for the past but not yet revolutionary, as it emerges in the well-known "The Harp of India" (1827) and "To India My Native Land" (1828), and subservient imitator of more famed British, Irish and Scottish authors such as Byron, Shelley, Burns, Moore and Scott (Chaudhuri 2008: xxxiii-xxxviii, liii). As I will try to show, Derozio is rather a self-aware poet who appropriates and abrogates the British Romantic canon to become an early interpreter of the nationalist urges of early-nineteenth-century India to cosmopolitism and independence from the British hegemony, anticipating Tagore, Aurobindo and even Gandhi, and contributing to sowing the seeds of Indian Modernity ideologically and aesthetically.

The research presented here contributes to redefining Romanticism beyond the outdated Nationalist and Eurocentric boundaries established by Abrams (1953, 1971) and Bloom (1970), and in some ways also the postcolonial critique (Gibson 2008: 4, 64). Indeed, Romantic scholarship has recently broadened the margins of the phenomenon to include different

perspectives, above all the Asian one, where authors operated simultaneously and, in most cases, independently of Europe, influencing the worldwide canon, rather than being influenced by it (Gottlieb 2015)

Now, it is widely recognised and demonstrated that the East has deeply influenced the British Romantics of the First and Second Generation, not to mention the proto-Romantic Blake, in ways that go well beyond Said's «Orientalism» but rather extend to the very ideological foundations of the Movement (Gottlieb 2015: xi-xiv). Consider, for instance, Byron's mythographic tradition, which has been deeply influenced by Indian traditional philosophy (David 2003), Shelley's ecopoetics and its Upanishadic influences (Beccone 2022), as well as the influences on his *Prometheus Unbound* (Drew 1987: 232-282), not to mention Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (183-227) and Keats's *Lamia* (Warren 2014: 231-261). However, there is still a significant amount of scholarly work, particularly through the analysis of previously unstudied texts emerging from local archives, revealing that Eastern authors actively participated in and influenced the Romantic international debate by focusing on specific, crucial themes, more specifically, the issues of revolution, liberty, and political upheaval (Gottlieb 2015: xii, Watson and Williams 2019: 1-35).

Romanticism, if seen through Asian lenses, becomes a cosmopolitan frame of mind and representational system, a «worldwide consciousness» (Gottlieb 2015: xvi) and a «global imaginary» (Steger 2008) in which shared values and ideologies propagate in ways that, far from being static and unidirectional, from the Eurocentric core to the colonial periphery, are more dynamic, multidirectional, thanks to new and intensified frameworks of communication (pedagogy, translations from Hindi to British and the reverse, English-language literary journals) which begun to spread in these countries and all over the world, at the time (Watson and Williams 2019: 5-13) According to Makdisi, Romanticism is indeed a participative, collective phenomenon that transcends culture, nationality, and continents, as it is «global» instead of being only and limitedly «worldly» (Makdisi 1998: xii), and can then be studied through the lens of Globalisation Studies (Gottlieb 2015: xvi).

Calcutta (1820-1830) and H.L.V. Derozio (1809-1831)

> [A] little London in Bengal
> A microcosm; loose, and yet compact;
> A snug epitome, a capital
> Concentrating every folly; brief, abstract,
> The essence of all worldliness, in fact
> A wonder
>
> (Atkinson 1824: 11)

With these words, Atkinson attempted to capture the complexities of early nineteenth-century Calcutta – a vibrant, modern, polyglot, cosmopolitan, and multi-ethnic milieu. Here, new forms of transportation and communication emerged, along with rapid economic growth, unprecedented social mobility, and distinctive changes in customs, clothing, and home furnishings. Emma Roberts, the first woman poet to write in English in India, lived here and was one of Derozio's most beloved friends. The same can be said of the patriot Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the first Brahmo reformer, who lived in the city.

Here, Romantic works on the themes of revolution and liberty (Byron, Shelley, Moore and Scott) were read and widely discussed in intellectual circles and local journals such as *Indian Magazine*, *The Kaleidoscope*, *The Helter-Skelter*, *Bengal Annual*, *Indian Gazette*, *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, along with the works of the Scottish Enlightenment by Hume, Smith, Paine and Locke (Duff 1839: 614; Chaudhuri 2008: LIII). The Bengali peculiarity stands in the fact that the international debate on these themes often uses poetry as a vehicle in public discussions (Kaul 2000: 4-5; Chaudhuri 2008: XXIII). Calcutta is so 'poetical' that the editor of the *Indian Gazette* (8 March 1824) playfully suggests, in an editorial that celebrates its distinctiveness as an extraordinary cultural phenomenon, that the Bengali city

> ought to have its name changed. Instead of being called the city of Palaces, it should be denominated the city of Poets. Parnassus is no longer the haunt of the muses. They have fled to Calcutta[.] (*Ibid.*: 9)

Secondly, as we will see with Derozio, the Bengali debates maintain a two-channel dialectic, simultaneously involving resistance to British Rule and Brahmin orthodoxy. Both are perceived as hegemonic ideologies to be

overcome to build Indian modernity as ideological and political self-sufficiency. The Bengali Renaissance debate stems from these early years of the nineteenth century; its political and ideological issues propagate also orally, in public debates, and in writing, through literary journals or literary sections in widely-read periodicals, such as the *Indian Gazette*, where transcriptions of these debates and literary pieces, often in verse, appeared (Chaudhuri 2008: 67-91, 377-86).

Derozio is, at the time, the living epitome of this vibrant 'milieu'. A *bhadralok* (member of the Bengali intellectual middle class), of Indo-Anglo-Portuguese origins – the son of a Christian Indo-Portuguese office worker and Sophia Johnson Derozio, an Anglo-Indian woman, whose family name was originally 'De Rozario' (Madge 1904 2001: III) – the young poet was a prodigious talent from an early age. As a brilliant student at Drummond's Academy at Calcutta, his academic excellence was mentioned in the notices in the *India Gazette* and the *Calcutta Journal* (Chaudhuri 2008: XLIX-L). At the age of 16, he had already published his first poetic pieces and articles in several literary journals and periodicals; at 17, he was appointed a teacher in English literature and history at the prestigious Hindu College; and at 18, the editor John Grant offered him the opportunity to publish his first collection of verse. At 22, he died from cholera, not before having manifested all his potential as a poet, influential columnist, beloved teacher, and political activist.

As for literary scholarship, Derozio has long been undervalued, sometimes derided, and often misunderstood, especially in India (*ibid.*: XXXIX). Critics (Dahiya 2013: "Foreword") have referred to him as the «Indian Keats», drawing a parallel to John Keats, who died young before he could fully showcase his talents and develop a distinct stylistic voice. This comparison is partly due to the belief that Derozio emulated British poets such as Moore, Scott, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. This stems from a prejudicial perception of early Indian writers among British readers, which was amplified by the incomplete corpus and significant decontextualization from the cultural, literary, and political context of Bengal in the 1820s-1830s. However, new archives and rediscovered texts have led critics in the last 10-20 years to view Derozio and his contemporaries, such as Madhusudan Dutt and Kashiprasad Ghose, through different lenses[1]. Derozio is the poet of a modern nation in the making, a vibrant and eclectic author who antic-

[1] See Mukhopadhyay-Kumar 2000; Mukhopadhyay 2001; Chaudhuri 2008; Gibson 2011.

ipates the modernising spurs of 20th-century India and serves as an early witness and interpreter of the epochal changes underway.

He was not only the conventional bardic author of the melancholic "The Harp of India" (1827), "To India My Native Land" (1828) and "Song of the Hindoostani Minstrel" (1827), but authored effervescent, idiosyncratic, and occasional writings, both in prose and verse, witnessing the growing Indian identity through new social customs and literary tastes. Instances of this are "On Drunkenness" (1824; Chaudhuri 2008: 70-79), a prose vindication of the state of drunkenness, signed under the pseudonym of 'Leporello', and which was seen at the time as an effective form of protest to challenge Hindu orthodoxy, including the practice of abstaining from alcohol. This was a notable part of a movement to revolutionise customs, led by Derozio and enthusiastically supported by his young followers, the members of Young Bengal. Also of note are the "Torn-out Leaves of a Scrap Book" (*ibid.*: 79-91), a series of articles published in the *India Gazette* in the Summer of 1826 under the pen name 'Juvenis' and that discussed, in a very modern way, topics such as colonisation, literature, and education in India.

Derozio actively engaged in the global discourse surrounding universal human and civil rights, often under pseudonyms («Leporello», «Juvenis», and «An East Indian», see Chaudhuri 2010). In the series of his 'Sati' poems[2], composed to advance the removal of the ancient tradition of burning alive the widow with the corpse of the deceased husband, later abrogated through the Bengali Sati Regulation, in 1829, and the Sati (Prevention) Act, in 1987. Although he, for his prose notes of the *Fakeer*'s first Canto (Chaudhuri 2010: 229-230), in which he stated that the practice be gradually abolished so as not to upset the social and religious balance of the time, has been criticised for having taken a milder, too romanticised position (Paranjape 2011: 561; Gibson 2011: 93), he instead showed, in this note, great wisdom and common sense, a strong commitment to women's rights and a deep sensitivity to their psychological well-being in his poetic writings on the theme (Chaudhuri 2008: 229, 284-286). Derozio also wrote poetry to advocate for the abolition of slavery ("Freedom to the Slave", 1827) and to support the Italian Risorgimento ("Tasso", 1827 and "Italy", 1828), as well as the Greek Revolution ("The Grecian Sire and son", 1825; "The Greeks at Marathon", 1825; "Address to the Greeks", 1825; "Thermophylæ", 1827; "Greece", 1827). This young author also produced witty,

[2] The 'Sati' poems are *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1829) and "On the Abolition of Suttee" (1829).

satirical poems that conversed with, and reversed, the dominant British Romantic literary taste of his time, such as the long satirical poem *Don Juanics* (serialised in the *Indian Gazette* from 1825 to 1826), written in imitation (and abrogation) of Byron's *Don Juan* (1819). Finally, almost 138 poems of rare beauty and literary value by this author have been found to date; however, it is not excluded that others may come to light from the archives.

These varied pieces of writing weave together a common issue that unites them all: they show this author's inquisitive nature (he termed it his «enquiring mind»)[3], which stems from his passion for debate against hegemonic ideologies and discourse, sparing neither British rule nor Hindu orthodoxy. This passion soon captivated his readers and inspired students to appreciate logic, free thought, and liberty — a passion that, however, ultimately led to his dismissal from Hindu College in 1831, for the pressure from the conservative students' parents who accused him of corrupting his pupils by promoting radical ideas, including religious scepticism.

Derozio's approach to the dominant literary taste of the time, British Romanticism, reflects this enquiring attitude and emerges more specifically in his remarkable treatment of the themes and forms of Romantic revolutionary discourse. He employs a dual strategy, which can be described using the two terms employed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as a combination of «abrogation» and «appropriation» (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 37-38). «Abrogation» is «a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words. It is a vital moment in the de-colonizing of the language and the writing of 'English'» (37). «Appropriation», on the other side, is «the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience», through which «[l]anguage is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences» (38). On the one side, Derozio appropriates the Romantic discourse of revolution to subvert the Hindu hegemonic ideology. Here, the English language and Romantic stylistic features are employed to make him understood and heard by international audiences beyond Indian borders, serving as instruments to legitimate his emerging voice and enable him to participate in the global debate on cosmopolitan and revolutionary themes. Romanticism then plays a significant role in the construction of the Indian modern, both as an authorial identity and as a literary identity. On the other side, Dero-

[3] Letter to H.H. Wilson, 26 April 1831 (Chaudhuri 2008: 322-326).

zio's poetic discourse tends to subvert Romanticism, abrogating it through its own formal and thematic means. This subversion of literary hegemonic practices and discourses eventually leads the young author to literary innovation and poetic experimentation. In this context, Romanticism plays a crucial role in engaging Derozio's writing in yet another revolution — this time, an aesthetic one. As we will see, its subversion acts as a catalyst for theoretical reflection and poetic experimentation, leading to a revolutionary form of poetry.

As for Derozio's appropriation of Romantic revolutionary discourse practices (mainly Shelleyan and Byronian) presented in the main poems of the canon, the 'Sati' and 'Greek' series of poems best exemplify this phenomenon. The poem "The Fakeer of Jungheera" (1829) is a long narrative work that tells the tragic story of the widow Nuleeni, who is rescued from her husband's funeral pyre by a band of thieves led by her childhood friend, the titular fakir. The poem includes prose notes that expand on the themes presented in the main text, much like Shelley did in *Queen Mab* (1813). In "On the Abolition of the Suttee" (1829), Derozio uses the Spenserian stanza, which had already been employed by Byron (*Childe Harold*, 1812) and Shelley (*The Revolt of Islam*, 1818). As for the 'Greek' poems, in "Greece" (1827), Derozio resorts to Wordsworthian 4x3 iambic quatrains and employs a rhetoric reminiscent of Shelley's *Hellas* (1821), with its rhetorical questions and exclamatory language, to incite readers to follow the Greek cause against the Turks. In "The Greeks at Marathon" (1825), through the rhyme scheme and theme reprisal, the *incipit* dialogically interacts with the epigraph, which has been taken from Byron's "The Isles of Greece" (1819, publ. 1821):

> *For standing on the Persian's grave,*
> *I could not deem myself a slave.*
> — BYRON
> He who dies his land to save,
> Rests within a glorious grave.
>
> (Chaudhuri 2008: 121)

If this is intriguing, what is most fascinating is how Derozio not only appropriates but also abrogates and subverts Romantic discourse practices, leading him toward poetic experimentation.

Derozio's use of dashes

A striking aspect of his writings is the frequent use of dashes, which indicate continuous incidental remarks interspersed throughout his work, resulting in a fragmented syntax. This phenomenon is so macroscopic that it is surprising that no critic has noticed it before: of nearly 140 poems known to date, only 18 do not display this feature. Some poems are so full of syntactic interruptions that they seem more like fragments than texts. For instance, "Sweets. No. 4: The Days Gone By!", an 1825 text celebrating the unitive power of poetry, in the space of eight lines (ll. 9-16), presents eight dashes, plus two brackets, which in turn reinforce the effect of the other punctuation mark:

> Yes! – Hope has a smile, but a treacherous smile,
> Tho' sorrow it may for a moment beguile –
> But vain is the promise she'd artfully make –
> 'Tis meant to deceive – it is made but to break. –
> But there is a charm – (and destroy it who can)
> In the past happy times that is pleasant to man,
> A charm ever hallow'd that passes all speech,
> That fancy can't picture – that thought cannot reach. –
> (Chaudhuri 2008: 17)

The result is to formally and syntactically tear off the discourse into pieces, while the poetic «I» is apparently affirming the opposite, that is, the unitive power of poetry, in this case, its capacity to unite what death disjoints.

Derozio uses dashes in a range of different ways, both conventional and innovative. As for the conventional use, which we will not focus on analytically, dashes often have metatextual functions, such as discourse marking of reported speech («And thus, they say, the song doth flow:—», "The Maniac Widow", l. 118) or signalling direct discourse («Said the Prince — ' With joy I go'», *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, II.V, "The Legend of the Shushan", l. 118); thematization («They're gone unto their rocky home —», *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, XXVIII, l. 1; «For loneliness and thought this is the hour —», "Night", I, l. 1); closure marker («—I never more/ Shall pass good night again—", "Good Night", ll. 7-8; «Then—droop to lasting rest!», "Song", III, l. 16); introducing explanations («She stands a wreck—the work of fate, /Majestically desolate —», "The Grecian Sire and Son", ll. 11-12); paratext markers («*The fatal gift of beauty* — /—CHILDE HAROLD,

CANT: 4», "Italy", epigraphic quotation from Byron; «*I could not deem myself a slave.* / — BYRON», "The Greeks at Marathon", epigraphic quotation from Byron). In other cases, dashes signal the poem's structure by scanning the plot transitions («Advancing near, and still more near; — /The crowd gives way: — with aspect high», *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, II.VII, ll. 4-5), the speakers' emotional development («"Are those fond vows which once to me were given/ "Gone like thin clouds by winds for ever driven — /"Has love withdrawn at once his meteor light, /"Or why this madness — why this wish to-night — /"This wish to sever — is thy soul estranged/"From her it cherished, — or am I now changed — /"Well, be It so — forsake me if thou wilt», *The Fakeer of Jungheera*, II.XIV, ll. 31-37); the different sides of a descriptive *tableau* («Now safe on shore, they saw, and they were seen — /Some stared, amazed, and some were in a twitter», *Don Juanics*, VIII, ll. 1-2). In other instances, dashes are conventionally used to expressively visualise a moment of suspension in the discourse or speaker's strain of thoughts («Gaze on — 'tis beautiful as hope's own beam/ On life's untroubled waters: but beneath — / Aye — could you look beneath the deep, and see / Shapes that we see not in fantastic dreams», "Light and Gloom", ll. 1-15) or, in other instances, emotional emphasis («Forgive me, Greece! — I love thy shore— / But still —I loved my darling more», "The Grecian Sire and Son", ll. 85-86).

The less conventional uses are far more interesting. In this case, dashes introduce sudden and unexpected insertions into the main discourse, subverting the monological-assertive hegemony of the typically Romantic lyrical ego through a contrapuntal counter-gaze. This last, in turn, produces a logical-axiological reversal of the main discourse, often contradicting it with a strong satirical effect.

Two examples illustrate this first expressive use of dashes well. In a passage of *Don Juanics* (XXIV.3-8), a British dandy, empty, stupid and indebted to the neck, is waiting for an acquaintance to give him a cash loan. His psychophysical tension is visible outside in the comical description of his attitude, provided by the speaker, as «he held his head/ So stiff and high, it surely must have paid/ His collarbone» (ll. 4-6). The motto which precedes it in line 3, «Philosophy his dignity sustained», highlights the comic effect due to the contrast between the highness of thought and the lowness of the character's material needs, in fact reversing dignity into debasement. In line 4, a dash appears to change the comical effect in satirical, while a disjunctive «but» highlights this axiological/stylistic twist of thought in the speaker's voice, marking the difference between the first and the second part of the passage: «— But, it may well be said/ That he

who wears, in pain, a smiling face/ Fights fortune bravely, and with most success» (ll. 6-8). This attitude reminds the reader of the typical attitude of the Byronic hero, who bravely faces an adverse fate. However, the context of action reminds us that in this case, the act of fighting 'fortune' means both 'fate' and 'money', as the character's heroic action is motivated by personal gain rather than high ideals. This is a satire on Byron himself, whose conduct was not always disinterested nor free from egotistic spurs.

In another example, a dash introduces a sudden, witty satirical aside, twisting the course of the speaker's thoughts and revealing his true feelings on the subject. In "Poetry" (1824), a comical, playful poem on the poetasters who lived on the scrounge in the Writer's Building, the official secretariat building of the state government of West Bengal in Calcutta. From line 14, the speaker's critique against the utilitarian use of poetry by «The Bards who rat for lucre or from whim», the example of Southey is suddenly introduced («pension'd Southey, for his dear-bought laurel», l. 16) as a token of the kind. This happens as it is well known that he abandoned his former radical positions in favour of a more conservative one when he was named poet laureate in 1813. The speaker must not have forgiven the British poet, as he has sold himself for a «dear-bought laurel» (l. 16). The result of this kind of artistic prostitution appears after the dash, which in turn marks the turn of the poem from playful to severe, from the comical to the sharp invective: «— /Inditing Epics, Odes, and such like things, / Abusing freedom, and bepraising Kings» (ll. 22-24): a betrayal of the ideological purity of revolutionary Romantic poetry, which cannot be forgiven.

In some cases, dashes introduce metaliteral statements through the speaker's voice, illustrating Derozio's ideological and aesthetic positions in relation to the Romantic canon. For instance, in "The Poet's Habitation. A Fragment" (1826) after a long (conventional) preamble on the gifts of poetic imagination, a typical Romantic theme, a dash appears to introduce the speaker's dismissal of what has been said before: «— 'Tis all a poet's dream» (l. 71). Other Romantic *topoi*, such as the themes of parting and the Englishness of the poetic «I», are similarly devalued through the reversal introduced by elements of punctuation having the same function of dashes: parentheses. In *Don Juanics* (V.1), for instance, the speaker proudly affirms, «Even I (though India is my native Land) / Can picture to my mind a parting scene», then wittingly states his national and artistic identity awareness, as an Indian poet, yes, but also Romantic. Even the Wordsworthian notion of *wandering* has shifted from a spiritual practice of imaginative self-awareness, transcending rational constraints, to a simple diversion in thought—a distraction—resulting in the loss of its noble status as part of

the poetic manifesto of the First Generation. In *Don Juanics* (VIII.1), for instance, the speaker suddenly remembers that he is the narrator of the story he is telling, and after noticing the digression he was into, which he had fallen into while speaking, he resumes the thread of his discourse: «But I'm wandering — We left Juan thinking». In "Philosophical Utopia: A Fragment" (1831), he apologises for the same reason. To do so, he introduces this excuse with another dash: «—I wander from my purpose» (l. 48).

Derozio's witty dashes spare no hegemonic ideology. In "A Dramatic Sketch", published in 1830 in the *Bengal Annual*, a dialogue between a guru («*Devotee*») and his adept («*Follower*») poetically models the ancient Puranic tradition of the oral transmission of sacred knowledge in the ambit of Yoga, through the open exchange between teacher and pupil. The guru's voice of lines 55-89 manifests the glorious rhetorical high sonority of the Brahmin orthodoxy, through which the values of isolation, mysticism and rigid asceticism promote solitude, emotional detachment and renunciation of human passions in favour of the search of transcendence: «In such a glorious solitude as this, /For prayer, and praise, to him who fix the feet/ Of these gigantic mountains in the earth» (ll. 57-59). On the other side, dashes are often paired with disjunctives introduced by «but» and introduce the opposite point of view of the «*Follower*». The disarming simplicity of the young adept of just 15 years old who acts as a punctual counterpoint with a colloquial language makes him respectfully aware that time has passed without having achieved any effect («— *Follower.* / Your pardon, Sir, / But 'tis two summer now, since last I heard/ A human voice save your's», ll. 89-91), the values of mysticism lead to individualism and separation («A voice, whose tones are not of earth, proclaims/ The dreadful truth, that — I am here alone!—», ll. 110-111), when instead men are made for brotherhood, union and collectivism, values of revolutionary Romanticism which remind us of the radical and libertarian ideology of Shelley: «O Sir! forgive my youth —: but I do think, /That man must be man's brother and his friend» (ll. 135-136).

To the almost stichomythic opposition between the guru's abstract fixation on unattainable dogmatic ideals and the pupil's contrapuntal counter-gaze, based on common sense, follows a comical, abrupt ending. At a certain moment, the guru suddenly interrupts the dialogic exchange by huffingly saying: «So let us to our labour both retire» (l. 151). With this textual shrug, the pedagogical dialogue, which had drifted into an affray between incompatible positions, reveals the definitive loss of authoritativeness by the older man and his lack of power in the dialectic confrontation with the young boy and the advancing modernity.

Later in his life, in the years leading up to his untimely death, Derozio continued to experiment with poetry, seeking a fresh, new nationalistic voice and an authoritative, stylistically strong poetic voice. His last poems[4] are a witness to his aesthetic research on the possibilities and limits of the poetic word, his exploration of the unfathomable depths between sign and referent. Dashes are now used to typographically fragment the poetic text into continuous shards and fractures, which in turn continuously interrupt the linear, monological assertiveness of the poetic voice in a cluster of lyrical, near-impressionistic fragments. In "The Maniac Widow" (1826, 1827), these punctuation marks visually saturate the textual space, manifesting iconically through a plurivocity of emotions, thoughts, and images, which are chaotically bundled in the female psyche shattered by grief over the death of her beloved husband.

In another poem, "A Quiet Place" (1831), Derozio uses dashes as pivotal markers of sudden changes in the speaker's personality. In the poem's closure, the poet's severely depressed attitude, which had led him hoping for death in the previous lines («to be/ In the last home where happiness and worth/ Rest no more calm than vice and misery», III.7-8), with a weak and timid opening to hope and faith, through which he expresses gratitude to God for this («Ha! Mercy Heaven!», III.9) and presumably begins to experience a comforting and relieving realisation of this desired outcome («see—», III.9), is suddenly interrupted by a dash which in turn introduces the abrupt intrusion of a quote from *Hamlet*, I.5 («— behold it glide! / Hamlet, thy Father's ghost is at thy side», III.9-10). The anticipatory vision of possible relief from pain is theatrically severed by the estranging, horrifying vision of death on stage, as a versified image of the speaker's dissociated mind. The dash marks a sudden shift in tone, language, and genre, occurring within a few lines, from the mournful, poetic tone of the previous verses to the sharp, visual language of Shakespearean tragedy. The sense of fragmentation created in this poem, which is intensified by its placement at the end, allows the reader to experience the profound depths of a disjointed psyche. This blurs the lines between reality and fiction, internal and external experiences, thought and action, as well as life and death, poetry and drama.

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[4] The poems are, in the order they appear in the 1831 second issue of the *Bengal Annual*: "Moods of Mind", "A Quiet Place", "Beauty", "Night", "A Soft Voice", "Sonnet. To the Students at the Hindu College", "Grief", "Philosophical Utopia. A Fragment", "An Intelligent Countenance", "Stanzas", "Fears", and "Night and Gloom" (Chaudhuri 2008: 308-318; Beccone 2024).

Derozio's poetic experimentalism then goes beyond the boundaries of Romantic literature to explore new possibilities in textuality and lyrical language. Dashes accompany these explorations, not only by blurring the boundaries between literary genres like the abovementioned intertextual insertion, but also marking the deliberate insertion of whole poems in longer poems, as in *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (XII, 1-14), where an entire and stand-alone sonnet comes into view in the middle of the text, without any apparent reason if not the virtuosity of the speaker's voice continuous musical remodulation for its own sake.

Derozio's deliberate approximation to the poetic fragment genre, typically Romantic[5], is accompanied by a structural and extensive use of poetic fragmentation, where dashes are the primary device, and in the last part of his career, fragmentation becomes both a theme and a formal property of the text. This phenomenon occurs to the extent that he subverts this literary convention to move beyond the cultural dominance of colonial British discourse. He explores broader philosophical, existential, and literary theoretical issues, heading towards a revolutionary kind of poetry, even akin to a proto-modernist poetics.

Poems such as "Beauty", "An Intelligent Countenance", "Fears", "A Soft Voice", and "Grief", all published in the second 1831 issue of the *Bengal Annual*, consist indeed in brief, highly condensed meditations of a few lines (in the case of "Beauty", just *three* lines), which challenge the strict conventions of 19th-century lyric poetry and are rare in the context of East Indian poetry written in English, as critics have observed (Chaudhuri 2008: 310-311; Beccone 2024).

Derozio's approach is, in fact, quite modern and challenges the traditional notion of the poem as a self-contained fictional text around a stable poetic subject, as in the egotistic Romantic model of the lyrical genius, to evolve towards an idea of the lyric as a reality statement by a fragmented mind caught in the unpredictability and irreparable saliency of the eventness of the poetic utterance[6].

Conclusions

Derozio's revolution is fundamentally a revolution of language and poetic awareness. A revolution which involves both appropriation and ab-

[5] See Regier 2010; Stokes 2010; Levinson 2017.

[6] For the notion of lyric as *event*, see Culler 2015 and 2016: 19-25.

rogation, to end in a form of what Gibson would call «recalcitrant mimesis» (Gibson 2011: 145, 161) of the dominant Romantic canon. Gibson has coined this term to describe a layered form of mimicry (in Bhabha's terms). This mimicry involves imitating dominant literary tastes to create a poetic connection while simultaneously expressing a rebellious spirit that seeks to subvert that power by mocking and reinterpreting it. Examples of recalcitrant mimesis can be found in Kashiprasad Gosh's version of the Sapphic Leucadian leap, which imitates Western literature but re-enacts it in Indian ritual terms (*The Sháïr*, 1830), and Madhusudan Dutt's "King Porus, A Legend of Old" (1848), which imitates and remakes Byron (Gibson 2011: 145, 161). As Gibson has argued (142-44, 160, 161), recalcitrant mimesis will also manifest later, in prose, not before the second half of the twentieth century, with Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1955) and Desai's *In Custody* (1999).

However, as we have seen, Derozio does so in poetry and earlier than the other authors, since he writes at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He is then unique in manifesting this appropriative-abrogative attitude towards the British dominant ideology and discourse practices. His poetry serves as evidence of a trend that began earlier. It harkens back to literary history, reflecting earlier moments compared to the initial expressions of nationalist pride and the movement toward modernity in India. For this reason, the young author deserves more critical attention.

Derozio goes even further than his colleagues, as his dashes introduce a rhetoric of intra-saying the interdict to affirm truths not yet acceptable between the lines and spaces of words, but already meandering in the rapidly transforming epochal collective consciousness. They also mark the rhapsodic pace of a fragmented poetic voice, beautifully embodying contradiction, subversion, and alterity. This makes Derozio a precocious interpreter of the innovative impulses of a nation in the making, searching for a modern voice that manifests a new collective literary identity through the revolution of ideology, customs, and language. A revolution that is, therefore, authentically Romantic. A revolution whose mother tongue is, notably, *poetry*.

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