

# On Poetry: A Capsule of Consciousness, Reality and History

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Then he stops and says, with tears streaming [*lacrimare*] down his face: “What place, Achates, what region on earth is now not saturated with the story of our pain [*labor*]? Look! It is Priam! So you see here once again that things requiring praise have their own reward. There are tears [*lacrimae*] that connect with the real world [*res plural*], and things that happen to mortals touch [*tangere*] the mind [*mens*]. Dissolve your fears: this fame [*fama*; = the fame of the story of our pain] will bring for you too a salvation of some kind.” So he speaks, and feasting [*pascere*] his mind [*animus*] on the insubstantial picture [*pictura*], and he groans over and over, flooding his face with a vast stream of tears.

-Virgil

When you do things from your soul, you feel a river  
moving in you, a joy.

-Rumi

In the Sufi tradition, both artistic and divine, the concept of “oneness” is the key to unlocking universal truth. *Allah* is more than a God in the heavens, but an entity that embodies everything in the universe—a system. Hence, the experience of the individual is both an exercise in trying to understand the system as well as an illusion that inhibits discovering the personal connection to the macro-cosmos: the ego impedes the individual’s ability to recognise its insignificance. Virgil’s *Aeneid* serves to communicate a similar notion to the modern reader. As Aeneas waxes lyrical that there are tears connecting with the real world and mortal phenomena touching the mind, his audience is led to question the connection between the real and the cerebral. In an *ars poetica* fashion, the exploration of

consciousness is also extended to studying poetry as an example of shared experience. More importantly, the sharing of such experience violates the supposedly inherent physical and temporal divisions among generations of humankind. As a result, literary masterpieces serve both as timeless intellectual stepping stones of humanity, and as historical artifacts, as exemplified by Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Insofar as the human experience of ancient empires is preserved in poetry, so too is the reality of the era: History and Literature might not be as distinct a pair of disciplines as is often accepted. It is possible to argue that the purpose of poetry is to offer an original portrayal of reality—Aeneas' *pictura*, perhaps—and thus to connect its reader to the physical universe through abstraction. That is to say, one who reads the poetry is able to glimpse the world through the eyes of another. Every word is charged with novelty, and despite the poet's absolute authority over artistic vision—as it is an individual endeavour to write it—the poem is in essence a shared experience. The poet has an inherent relationship with his audience. Thus, returning to the notion of scale and reality, the micro-cosmos of the poem, or rather the poet's vision, contains in it the macro-cosmos of the era.

For this reason, poetry and, more broadly, art can and should be considered as historical artifact. Virgil and Homer offer humanity much more than a fossilised urn can offer in that their words are not only a gateway into the past, but are also a window into the *mentalité* of their time. Moreover, the argument that art harbours interpretation or exaggeration due to personal bias can be refuted easily with the idea that the bias and exaggeration—manipulation of scale, for example—only contribute to the emotional depth of art that “historical artifacts” often lack. Just as a journalist records the news in opinion pieces, artists capture the mood and opinion of the masses in their masterpieces, be they visual, literary or aural.

In the passage from *Aeneid* verse 183, the notion of scale, both emotional and physical, is quite prominent. The last line of the excerpt presents a weeping Aeneas, overwhelmed with

emotion, as his face “floods” with a “vast stream” of tears. Virgil’s diction is delicate: not only is Aeneas’ pain inflated to larger-than-life proportions with hyperbole, but all of nature manifests itself in his body, as his vast stream of tears floods his face. This in part serves to clarify the previous line: “There are tears that connect with the real world.” The tears that Aeneas is shedding in this moment even if for a moment represent the floods and streams of the physical world, decorating it in his own powerful emotions. Thus, the macro-cosmos, the physical universe, is beheld in the single act of human emotion—the world is contained in the micro-cosmos of Aeneas’ tears. Thus, returning to the idea of scale, both in literal meaning and implication Virgil’s words describe something much larger than meets the eye. Furthermore, the passage offers its audience a view into the ancient perception of the imperial project—be it Roman or Trojan—and the grandeur associated with it. Aeneas asks Achates if there is a region left on earth that is “not saturated with the story of [their] pain.” Such a question, even if a product of Virgil’s imagination, reveals the cerebral scale of empire: the entire world belongs to the architect and conqueror of the land.

Thus, it emerges that poetry is just as instrumental in connecting the sparse dots of history as are objects we extract from the ground. Much more personal is a line of emotionally charged poetry than a disintegrating sword, and perhaps more potent in triggering our imagination, which is the basis of historical reconstruction. The micro-cosmos of an individual’s experience, even if fictional, can ultimately serve to create the landscape of the macro-cosmos. As a result, *Aeneas* for history functions in the same way that Rumi functions for divine discovery: a poetic gateway into reality.