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**Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature**

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# AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

## CARTHAGE

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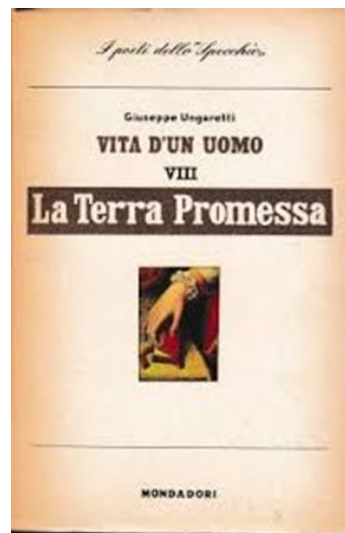
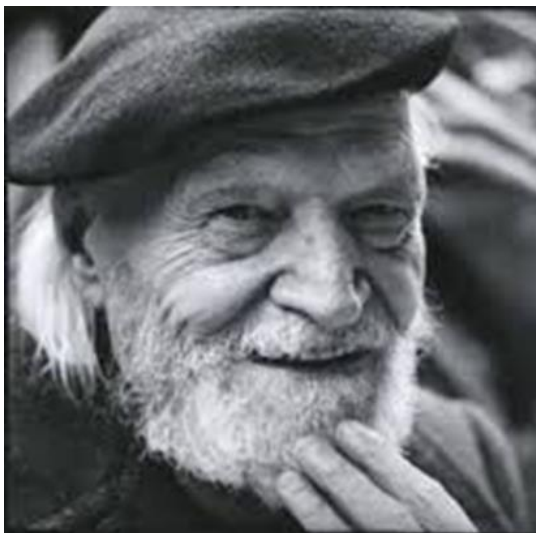
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**1 GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, *DESCRIPTIVE CHOIRS OF DIDO'S MOODS* (1950, 1954)**

III

Now the wind has fallen silent  
and silent is the sea;  
all is quiet; but I cry  
the cry, alone, of my heart,  
a cry of love, a cry of shame  
of my burning heart  
ever since I gazed upon you, and you looked at me  
and I am no more than a weak object.

I cry, and my heart burns without peace  
since when I became no more  
than a thing in ruins, and abandoned.



As of the early 1930s, Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970) began to work on a poem that remains unfinished and fragmentary, *The Promised Land*, the title of which combines the idea of the “land” sought by Aeneas with the idea of the “promised” land, of Biblical memory. As the poet himself stated, “The *Aeneid* is always present in *The Promised Land*, and with the places that were its places”. But it is in the *Descriptive Choirs of Dido's Moods* and in the *Recitative by Palinurus* (see under the heading “Palinurus”), in particular, that Ungaretti ‘rewrites’ Virgil’s poem. For example, in the third of the nineteen *Choirs*, cited here simply as a specimen, the alluring queen of Carthage is depicted in her quivering sensuality, and in the pained awareness of her own fragility. In the project of the work, in which, as Ungaretti himself stated to Leone Piccioni, “Aeneas is beauty, youth, naiveness, forever

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seeking the Promised Land, where he can make his own beauty smile and enchant, in the contemplated, elusive beauty”, while Dido “came to represent the experience of someone who, in the late autumn, is about to step beyond it; the hour when living is about to turn into a desert: the hour of the person from whom the final, tremendous, awful trembling of youth is about to be separated”.

Further reading:

- G. Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, a cura di L. Piccioni, Milano, Mondadori, 1969 (in particolare il capitolo di L. Piccioni, *Le origini della "Terra Promessa"*, pp. 427-464).
- R. Perrelli, *La Didone di Ungaretti tra Virgilio e Ovidio*, “Paideia”, LXXV, 2020, pp. 349-358.
- E. Tatasciore, *Moderne parole antiche. Cardarelli, Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Saba e i classici*, Novate Milanese, Prospero Editore, 2020.

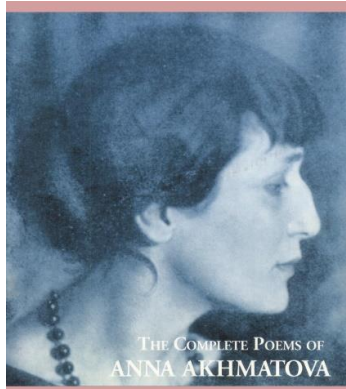
## 2 ANNA ACHMATOVA, *DIDO SPEAKS* (1962)

“I left your shore, queen, against my will’.”

(Aeneid, VI 460)

Do not be scared, – I can with even more likeness  
depict us right now,  
although you either are a ghost or a passerby,  
I, for some reason, keep your shadow.  
You were not my Aeneas for long, –  
back then I got away with bonfire only.  
We can keep silent about each other.  
And you have forgotten my cursed house.  
You have forgotten those hands,  
stretched to you in horror and agony,  
and the damned hope you have forgotten too.  
You do not know, what have been forgiven . . .  
Rome is built, the herds of fleet are passing,  
and the flattery glorifies victory.

Translated from Russian by Zara M. Torlone



  
 Translated by  
 JUDITH HEMSCHMEYER  
 Edited & Introduced by  
 ROBERTA REEDER



*Dido speaks* is the fourteenth text in the poem-cycle *Wild-rose is growing*, by the Russian poet Anna Andreevna Achmatova, the pseudonym of Anna Andreevna Gorenko (1889-1966), whose first husband, Nikolaj, was executed by the regime in 1921, and whose son Lev was imprisoned between 1935 and 1940 owing to Stalin's purges, and who was herself a victim of censure. The poem – which would later constitute one of the sources of inspiration for the poem by Brodsky shown below – centres on a time following Dido's separation from Aeneas, whose shadow the queen continues to retain, despite the fact that he has forgotten their love. If the reference to the funeral pyre, and to fire, suggest that Dido is already dead, and is speaking from Tartarus, the final lines seem to project this moment even further into the future, to a time after the foundation of Rome, even.

Further reading:

- A. Akhmatova *Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, ed. R. Reeder, trans. J. Hemschemeyer, Boston, Zephyr, 1992.
- Z. Ishov, *Eliot, Akhmatova, Brodsky: three Virgilian Moments*, in *Poesia russa da Puškin a Brodskij. E ora?*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Roma, Ed. Nuova Cultura, 2012, pp. 93-106.
- B. Zelinsky, *Dido und Aeneas bei Anna Achmatova und Iosif Brodskij*, in *Jubiläumsschrift zum 25-jährigen Bestehen des Instituts für Slavistik der Universität Giessen*, a cura di G. Giesemann, H. Jelittle, Beiträge zur Slavistik, VII, Bern, Verlag Peter Lang, 1987, pp. 265-277.
- <https://www.latinorum.tk/la-voce-di-didone/> (con altre reinterpretazioni poetiche e musicali internazionali del mito di Didone).

### 3 IOSIF BRODSKIJ, *DIDO AND AENEAS* (1970)

The great man stared through the window  
 but her entire world ended with the border  
 of his broad Greek tunic, whose abundant folds



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resembled the sea on hold.

And he still stared out through the window, and his gaze  
was so far away from here, that his lips were immobile  
like a seashell where the roar is hidden, and the horizon  
in his goblet was still.

But her love

was just a fish—perhaps which might  
plunge into the sea in the pursuit of the ship,  
and knifing the waves with the supple body,  
perhaps yet overtake him—but he,  
he in this thoughts already strode upon the land.  
And the sea became a sea of tears.

But, as one knows, precisely at the moment  
of despair, the auspicious wind begins to blow.

And the great man left Carthage.

She stood before the bonfire, which her soldiers  
had kindled by the city walls,  
and she envisioned between the flame and smoke of the fire  
how Carthage silently crumbled  
ages before Cato's prophecy.

Translated from Russian by Zara M. Torlone



“It is an ‘historical’ poem, somehow. Aeneas abandoned Dido. She did not want him to leave her, but he went away. And, according to the myth, he founded Rome, the army of which, a number of

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centuries later, came to destroy Carthage. So we see what love is, and what a love betrayed is. The consequences usually remain invisible, but I have tried to make them somehow visible". This was how the Russian writer Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), who in 1972, forced to leave the country, moved to the United States, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987, commented on his poem *Dido and Aeneas*, taken from the collection entitled *A Stop in a Desert*, in an interview from 1974 – in which he also says that he drew inspiration from the aforementioned poem *Didone parla* by Anna Achmatova, and by the 17th century opera *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell. After a series of scenes that come one after another (Aeneas' decision to depart, his silence, leaving Carthage, the love of Dido, the final blaze), the poem culminates in a further overlap: the destruction of Carthage, the burning of which is associated with the queen's pyre: a blaze that, following Dido's curse in Virgil and the consequent hostility between the Romans and the Carthaginians that she prophesied (*Aeneid* IV 622-629), was called for several times by Cato the Elder. Added to the implicit references to revenge invoked by Dido is the image of Aeneas' sealed lips, a reference to the fact he was stubbornly taciturn (*Aeneid* IV 438-449).

Further reading:

- I. Brodskij, *Fermata nel deserto*, trad. it. di G. Buttafava, Milano, Mondadori, 1979.
- N. Bruno, *The Loneliness and the Resignation of Queen Dido in Brodskij's Poem Dido and Aeneas*, in A. R. Fernandes, J. P. Serra, R. Fonseca (edd.), *The Power of Forms. Recycling Myths*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 148-160.
- A. Ziosi, *Didone. La tragedia dell'abbandono. Variazioni sul mito. Virgilio, Ovidio, Boccaccio, Marlowe, Metastasio, Ungaretti, Brodskij*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2017.

## 4 ROBERTO MUSSAPI, *BESIDE THE DARK RIVER* (1992)

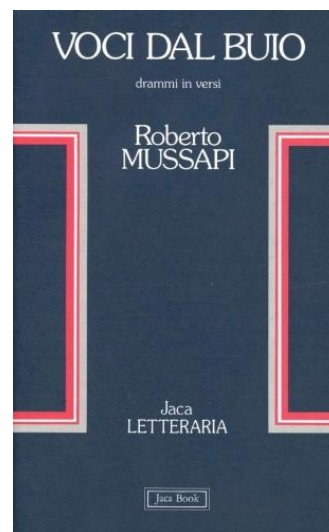
[...]

The memory that despairs may also hope,  
 it was his voice I loved, before ever his face,  
 and the story that had led him through the waves of the seas  
 and he seemed to me to have arrived on land to suffer, and to save:  
 I remember the first evening in the great chamber, the flames  
 flickering on the richly decorated walls,  
 I saw Hector's body dragged by the chariot,  
 and the dust rise up to the high city walls,  
 and Andromache from the citadel, with petrified gaze  
 and the flight from the burning city,  
 as if my own royal palace were ablaze,



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with flames rekindled by his voice,  
 and in that glaring fire, as they poured the wine,  
 I recall his voice traversing time and events once anew,  
 retracing the tale, from the war of Troy to the flight,  
 to the storm-tossed seas, to the shipwreck,  
 to the solitary mission in the cedar wood  
 directed, as in a dream, to my capital,  
 to the fog in which his mother had enshrouded him  
 so he could evade dangers and hostile reactions:  
 thus, wreathed in mist, bodiless, invisible,  
 did I hear his voice, and only when I answer gave  
 reassuring him, did his person appear,  
 by some enchantment of Venus, his mother, I heard tell.  
 On a sudden, I felt a strange and new sensation,  
 a sense of peace coming from pain,  
 a profound, still calm generated by chaos,  
 hearing how, from death and destruction,  
 from exile and shipwreck,  
 his words spun a thread,  
 and from a painful subject, by magic, was born  
 a seductive and captivating tale  
 [...]



The imagination of the poet from Cuneo, Roberto Mussapi (1952), who is also a playwright, journalist and translator, gave rise to *Voices from Darkness. Dramas in Verse*, which consists in two monologues, the

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first delivered by the Virgilian hero, *Aeneas remembers* (see under “Lavinium”), and the second by Dido, *Beside the Dark River* (a third part of the collection is entitled *Lancelot and Geneva*). Each of the two Virgilian characters speaks from beyond the grave, addressing an unknown person who is passing through the shadows, alive, and to whom they confide their torments, and in particular the love that still binds the one to the other. Aeneas entrusts to the pilgrim travelling in the Underworld a message to give to Dido (“if you see her”); Dido, in turn, urges him, too, to transform their story into a tale, so that Aeneas (whom she seems to imagine as still alive) “may read it”. And thus, implicitly taking on this dual task personally, Mussapi becomes the epic poet who relates their past, and the bond destined to bind them for all eternity – not necessarily in the tempestuous terms in which their former encounter came to grief. Dido cannot avoid recalling the salient details of the first moments when she came to know Aeneas, falling helplessly in love with him: the parting of the cloud that shrouds him (*Aeneid* I 586-589), and the atmosphere in which, amid the lavish splendours of the royal palace of Carthage, the hero commenced the tale of his past travails (*Aeneid* I 723-756): harrowing events which gradually, however, turned into a seductive and irresistible story.

Further reading:

- R. Mussapi, *Voci dal buio. Drammi in versi*, introduzione di G. Quiriconi, Milano, Jaca Book, 1992.
- E. Canepa, *Rimandi danteschi nella poesia di Roberto Mussapi: Enea e Ulisse a confronto*, “Otto/Novecento: rivista quadrimestrale di critica e storia letteraria” XL, 2, 2016, pp. 139-169.
- F. Pagni, *Roberto Mussapi poeta*, Chieti, Noubs, 2004.

## 5 LOUISE GLÜCK, *THE QUEEN OF CARTHAGE* (1999)

Brutal to love,  
 more brutal to die.  
 And brutal beyond the reaches of justice  
 to die of love.

In the end, Dido  
 summoned her ladies in waiting  
 that they might see  
 the harsh destiny inscribed for her by the Fates.

She said, “Aeneas  
 came to me over the shimmering water;  
 I asked the Fates

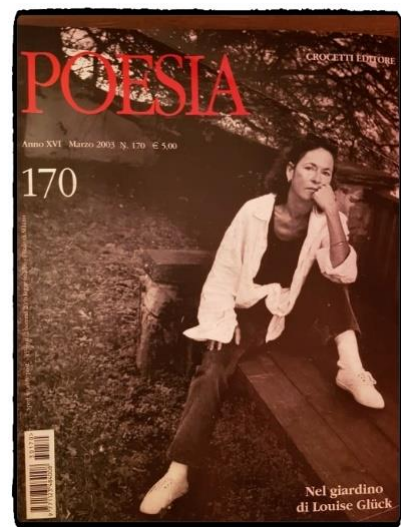
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to permit him to return my passion,  
 even for a short time. What difference  
 between that and a lifetime: in truth, in such moments,  
 they are the same, they are both eternity.

I was given a great gift  
 which I attempted to increase, to prolong.  
 Aeneas came to me over the water: the beginning  
 blinded me.

Now the Queen of Carthage  
 will accept suffering as she accepted favor:  
 to be noticed by the Fates  
 is some distinction after all.

Or should one say, to have honored hunger,  
 since the Fates go by that name also”.



The numerous classical myths reinterpreted in poetry by Louise Glück, of the US (b. 1943), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2020 “for her unmistakable poetic voice that, with austere beauty, makes individual existence universal” (and as yet only partially translated into Italian), would not have been complete without Dido. In this poem, from the collection *Vita nova*, after reflecting on the brutality of loving and dying, and the link between them, the poet allows Dido to take up her tale. The moment is that which precedes her suicide, but her handmaidens, whose gaze, in the *Aeneid*, conveys

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the way she fell on her sword, are here called upon as witnesses of the Queen herself. The curse against Aeneas is replaced here by the memory of his arrival by sea, and by the proud way she lays claim to her suffering. Dido also recognizes that she herself has her own fate, parallel to that of Aeneas, albeit a tragic one: a fate that will bring her immortal fame, although at the price of deep suffering, and the sacrifice of her life. This is the sense in which the Fates may receive the alternative name of “hunger” (“Or should one say, to have honored hunger,/ since the Fates go by that name also”): in line with an idea that already appeared in Virgil’s lines, the Fates cruelly show themselves to be ‘hungry’ for human lives, just so they can achieve their objectives.

Further readings:

- L. Glück, *Vita Nova*, New York, The Ecco Press, 1999.
- M. Bacigalupo, *Nel giardino di Louise Glück*, “Poesia”, 170, Marzo 2003, pp. 2-21.

### 6 MAURIZIO BETTINI, *HOMO SUM: BEING “HUMAN” IN THE ANCIENT WORLD* (2019)

[...] We can say that for two thousand years Ilioneus, Dido and Aeneas have not simply interpreted (for Virgil’s readers) one of the finest episodes in the poem; but they have continued to convey to our culture the principles according to which a people who are not barbarians – but who respect good morals, humanity, the will of the gods and who have their own future fame at heart – must behave when a group of castaways, fleeing a terrifying war, lands on ‘our’ shores. The dialogue between these Virgilian characters and the story that takes shape around them have become part of our cultural encyclopedia, or of our civilization, if you prefer to use this word. [...] We can say that – together with many other works that come to us from the ancient world – also the first book of the Aeneid has contributed to the creation of the cultural awareness that led to the development of these principles of mutual respect and guarantee, which are basic for our coexistence and that today we call ‘human rights’. [...]

Translated from Italian by Filomena Giannotti



“One of the finest episodes in the poem”: with these simple words, Maurizio Bettini (b. 1947), Emeritus Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Siena, as well as a writer and journalist, describes the meeting between the Trojans and Dido, narrated in the first book of the *Aeneid*. After the shipwreck on the coast of Carthage, Ilioneus, taken to Dido along with a number of his surviving companions, complains of the treatment they had received:

<p><i>Quod genus hoc hominum? quaeve hunc tam barbara morem permittit patria? hospitio prohibemur harenae; bella cient primaque vetant consistere terra.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Aeneid I 539-541</i></p>	<p>What kind of men are these? Or is your country so barbarous that it permits this custom? We are denied the shelter of the beach; they goad us into war; they will not let us set foot upon the border of their land.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Translated by Allen Mandelbaum</p>
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The Queen, struck by his words and by the subsequent words of thanks from Aeneas, who his companions thought had died in the storm, replies with words that have since become memorable:

<p><i>Non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Aeneid I 630</i></p>	<p>Not ignorant of trials, I now can learn to help the miserable.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Translated by Allen Mandelbaum</p>
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The importance of this episode is not due only to the parallel that it allows us to draw between Aeneas, who was shipwrecked in his attempt to abandon his mother country after its destruction, and the many Aeneas who today undertake similar journeys of desperate and often fatal migration, but also in the lesson of civilization, which we are given by Dido's words and which is still topical two thousands years later.

Further reading:

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- M. Bettini, *Homo sum: Essere "umani" nel mondo antico*, Torino, Einaudi, 2019.
- M. Bracconi, *Umani e cittadini, stranieri e ius soli al tempo di Seneca*, "La Repubblica-Robinson" 31 marzo 2019, p. 38 (con un'intervista a M. Bettini)  
(<https://www.einaudi.it/media/statici/newsletter/576/bettini-larep.pdf>).