



AENEAS TODAY

Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature

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AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

TRAPANI ERIX SEGESTA

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1 VINCENZO CONSOLO, *SICILY ON FOOT* (1991)

We stated, in reference to the origin of Segesta, the journey by the pious Aeneas to the banks of the Tiber. If, then, we were to go aboard a ship in the Trojan fleet, we could now get to know, place by place, just as Virgil names them, this western part of Sicily. Getting to see Trapani and the nearby woods, consecrated to Anchises, the beach where the sacrifices were made, and the games held in honour of the old king who had died, Lilybaeum with the cave of the Sibyl... And going up to the upper city of the Elymians and of the Trojans, to the temple of the goddess on the highest point ...

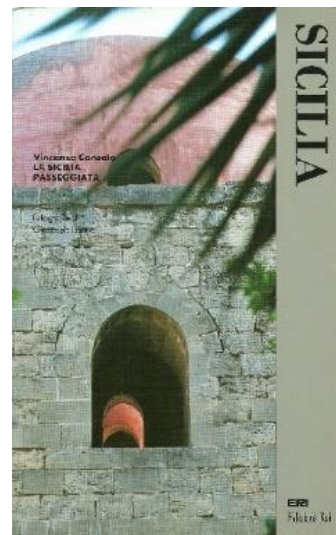
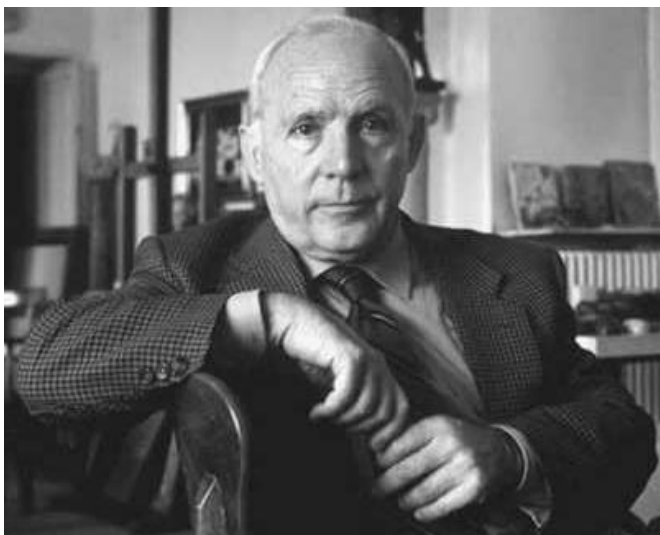
Poi vicino alle stelle, in vetta all'Érice, fondano
un tempio a Venere Idalia ...

[...]

Virgil, making poetry out of the myth, tells us that the city [Egesta or Segesta] was founded by Aeneas, who left a number of companions here, under Aceste or Segeste, until fate, or the divine mission, led him to Lazio.

Intanto Enea con l'aratro la città definisce
e sorteggiò le case, e qui Ilio e qui Troia comanda
che sia. Gode Aceste troiano del regno,
e convoca il foro, e ai padri riuniti dà leggi.

But, of that city, nothing remains today.



In that sort of travel guide, complete with photographs by Giuseppe Leone, entitled *Sicily on Foot*, Vincenzo Consolo intriguingly invites the reader to retrace Aeneas' journey in the western corner of the island: to Trapani, where Anchises died and was buried, and where, the following year, after the brief stay in Carthage, tributes were offered over his tomb, and funeral games held in his honour; to

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Eryx, with the temple founded on the top of the mountain of the same name for Venus; and to Segesta (or Egesta), with its mysterious origin. All this on the basis of the information given in the poem itself: indeed, the lines quoted are taken from the Aeneid translated by Rosa Calzecchi Onesti, respectively lines V 759-760 “And then, close to the stars, above Mount Eryx,/ to Venus of Idalium they raise/ a temple” (translated by Allen Mandelbaum) and 755-758 “And meanwhile with a plow Aeneas marks/ the city's limits and allots the houses:/ he calls one district «Troy», one «Ilium»./ Acestes, born of Troy, delights in his/ new kingdom; he proclaims a court of justice/ to the assembled elders he gives laws” (translated by Allen Mandelbaum). A reference to the temple of Venus is also present in *Retablo* and in *L'olivo e l'olivastro* (quoting the lines in Virgil). Consolo's words, and especially his decision to quote none other than the section relating to Segesta's foundation ritual, convey the full importance, in terms of civilization, which the Sicilian writer always attached to encounters and mergers between peoples, in this instance the merger of the local Elymians with the Trojans, foreign migrants.

Further reading:

- V. Consolo, *La Sicilia passeggiata*, con fotografie di G. Leone, Torino, Nuova Eri, 1991.
- V. Consolo, *Retablo*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1987.
- V. Consolo, *L'olivo e l'olivastro*, Milano, Mondadori, 1994.
- A. Bellanova, *Un eccezionale Baedeker: la rappresentazione degli spazi nell'opera di Vincenzo Consolo*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2021.

2 UMBERTO SABA, *ENTESELLUS* (1946)

For a woman far away and a youth
 who listens to me, celestial,
 I wrote, as an old man, these
 poems. I remember,
 as in me I joyfully go over them again in my mind, a former
 boxer. Entellus was his name. He won one last time in Aeneas' eventful
 games along the pretty
 beaches of Sicily, a guest of Acestes.
 White foam chased white foam on the waves
 which on the high seas were Sirens.
 His was a valiant heart, and he was a wise man.
 “Here – he said – are the baskets, and I here I lay down my art”.



The collection *Mediterranee*, which belongs to the final phase of the poetic output of the celebrated writer from Trieste, Umberto Saba (1883-1957), opens with a poem that is strongly Virgilian in style. Aware that he is now elderly and on the threshold of a ‘retreat’ from sentimental life, as also from the activity of poetry-making, the author transfigures this sensation, tinged with melancholy, into a literary memoir, evoking a marginal but significant figure in book V of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas and his companions are guests of Acestes, of Trojan origin, who settled near Eryx (in Saba he is called “Anceste”, perhaps influenced by the sound of the name of Aeneas’ father, as Mario Geymonat has noted). As part of the games held to commemorate Anchises, on the anniversary of his death, there is the basket contest (a sort of boxing contest, in which the “baskets” performed the same function as gloves do today). The prize is a splendid calf, but nobody dares to challenge the brave Trojan Dares. Thus Acestes persuades Entellus, a former talented boxer, but now somewhat aged, to enter the fray. And indeed it is Entellus – who seems to bear the same name as the city of Entella – who wins and who declares that that victory is the last in his career: with a mighty blow he sacrifices the calf to the spirit of his teacher, Eryx, speaking the words translated literally by Saba: *hic victor caestus artemque repono* (*Aeneid* V 484). As once Entellus, so now the poet: these writings celebrate the final splendours of a glorious muse who now ponders retirement. And all around shines the beauty of life, frozen in images of the sea: “the pretty/ beaches of Sicily”, the waves and the foam which, out to sea, can be assimilated with the fantastic Sirens, in a likely allusion to the *scopuli Sirenum* at the end of the same book (*Aeneid* V 864). A luminous Sicily that becomes twinned, remotely, with the sea of Trieste, just as, on the point of laying down his weapons, or rather his pen, Saba sees himself in the wisdom of the old companion of Acestes, in his “valiant heart”.

Further reading:

- U. Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, a cura di A. Stara, introduzione di M. Lavagetto, Milano, Mondadori, 1988.



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- E. Tatasciore, *Moderne parole antiche. Cardarelli, Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Saba e i classici*, Novate Milanese, Prospero Editore, 2020.