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Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature

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AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

LAVINIUM

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1 ROBERTO MUSSAPI, *AENEAS REMEMBERS* (1992)

[...]

Since you are here a man among the shades
 I speak to you of my human memories:
 there was no story after my death, but a long
 returning of images and characters.
 All those I saw were dead or dying.
 From Hector, dragged around the walls of Troy,
 to Palinurus, snatched away at sea with his rudder,
 to the thousand fallen by spear and sword,
 to the face of Turnus, fallen with his knees bent
 by my spear, who asked me for pity
 either for his life or for his remains.
 My pity was for life, believe me,
 because I was disgusted by pity for remains,
 I had received so many, and taken them to the fire and to the sacrarium.

[...]



Roberto Mussapi
Voci dal buio

Introduzione di
 Giancarlo Quirici

Jaca Book

When he meets a man (a poet) passing alive among the spirits, Aeneas accosts him and asks him to take to Dido, should he meet her along the way, a message of pained regret, and a request for forgiveness and understanding. Excessive *pietas*, and excessive love for his companions (even more so than for the mission entrusted to him), had led to him doing her an injury: “it was for another love that I betrayed her love”. As already seen on the stop-off in Carthage, in the conceit of the short play, the poet given this task is Dante: but ‘in reality’ it is Roberto Mussapi, who conceives the juxtaposed

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monologues of Aeneas and Dido in his *Voices from Darkness. Dramas in Verse* (see under “Carthage”). In his grave, once the trajectory of that Fate of which he was a protagonist has come to its conclusion, Aeneas cannot help but remember the “brief intervals” of joy he experienced at her side, confiding in the poet he has just met that he had perhaps made a tragic mistake in not choosing to “live alongside her in the brief time, and in the sunlight”.

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.

2 URSULA K. LE GUIN, *LAVINIA* (2008)

[...] “Lavinia,” he said, “when I left Troy I could not bring much with me: my father and my son, some of my people, and the gods of my household and my ancestors. My father is with the lords of the underworld; my son Ascanius stands there, and with him are my people, ready to do you honor as his mother and their queen. And my Penates and the sacred things of my ancestors I give you now to keep and cherish on the altars of our house, in the city that will bear your name. They have come a long way to your hearth and heart.”

I knelt down and put my hands on the vessel too. I said, “I will keep and cherish them,” in a thin voice.

“Where shall we build Lavinium?” he said, energetic, smiling now with open pleasure, looking from me to Latinus.

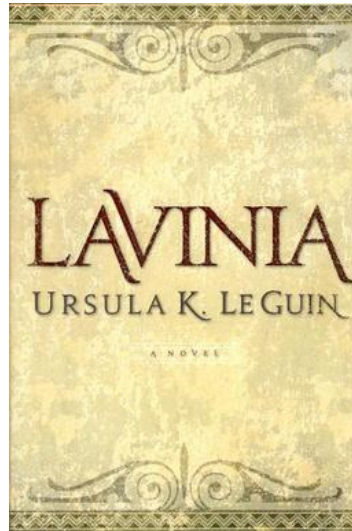
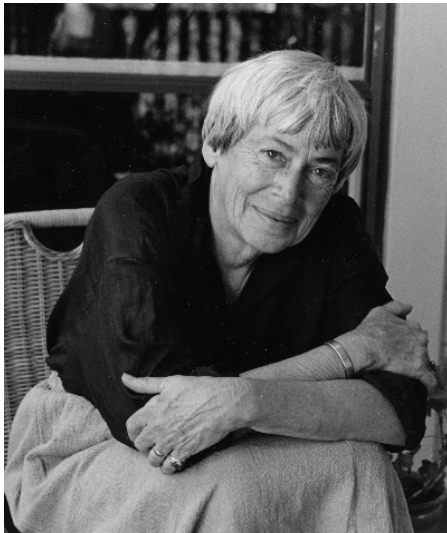
“We must go about the country and see what will suit best,” my father said. “I thought of a region in the foothills, up near the father river. Good growing land, and good timber above it.”

“Down the coast,” I said. My voice was still weak and hoarse. “On a hill, in a bend of the river that comes down from Albunea.”

They all looked at me.

“I saw it there, the city,” I said. “In a dream.”

Aeneas continued to gaze at me and his face grew grave and intense. “I will build your city where you saw it built, Lavinia,” he said.



Nine days after the death of Turnus, and after the end of the war, Aeneas presents himself at the court of the Latin king at Laurentum with gifts for Lavinia. This is the moment referred to in the passage cited above, the fruit of the imagination of American author Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018). With this novel, the writer has given a voice to the character of Lavinia, who, despite playing a central role in the plot of the *Aeneid*, triggering a war and leading to the foundation of the Roman civilization, does not utter a single word in the whole poem, effectively constituting a ‘minor’ figure. By contrast, Le Guin makes Lavinia the protagonist of the story, narrating the events by speaking in the first person. In the first part, the novel appears as a sort of narrative transposition of the second half (the Iliadic part, as it has been called) of the *Aeneid*, and, in the second part, as an imaginary sequel to the poem, which, as of the death of Turnus, recalls Lavinia’s brief but happy marriage with Aeneas, the birth of their only son Silvius, the premature death of the Trojan hero at the hands of a group of Rutulian shepherds, and the reign of Ascanius, until the death of Lavinia herself, who seems to turn into an owl. A central theme in the book is the protagonist’s dialogue with Virgil, during her almost Dantesque meetings with his shade, in the woods of Albunea. It is here that, after wondering why, among the many characters in the poem, it was none other than Lavinia who called up his spirit, and who allowed him to see her with his “living eyes”, just as he had seen her many times “with the eyes of his art”, Virgil lucidly manages to find an answer: “I think I know I came to you, Lavinia. [...] You’re almost nothing in my poem, almost nobody. An unkept promise. No mending that now, no filling your name with life, as I filled Dido’s. But it’s there, that life ungiven, there in you”. Naturally, the foundation of the city that takes its name from Lavinia, which is rapidly accomplished in the happy prospect of a fusion between the Trojans and the Latins, with a host of future developments, constitutes another crucial passage in the novel.

Further reading:

- U. K. Le Guin, *Lavinia*, San Diego, Harcourt, 2008.

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- U. Le Guin, *Conversations on Writing* with D. Naimon, Portland-New York, Tin House Books, 2018.
- S. M. Bernardo - G. Murphy, *Ursula K. Le Guin, A Critical Companion*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2006.
- Charlotte Higgins, *The Princess with Flaming Hair*, "The Guardian" 23 May 2009 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/23/lavinia-ursula-le-guin-review>).