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**Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature**

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# AENEAS' JOURNEY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

**PALINURO**

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## Index

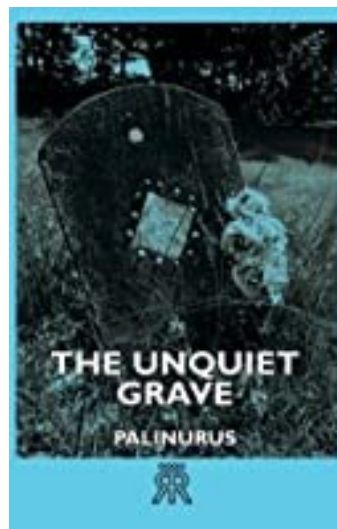
1	Palinuro [Cyril Connolly], <i>The Unquiet Grave</i> (1944) .....	3
2	Carlo Emilio Gadda, <i>War and Imprisonment Diary</i> (1955) .....	4
3	Giuseppe Ungaretti, <i>Recitative by Palinurus</i> (1950, 1954) and <i>The Origins of the Promised Land</i> (1969) .....	5
4	Giorgio Caproni, <i>The Passage of Aeneas</i> .....	6

## 1 PALINURO [CYRIL CONNOLLY], *THE UNQUIET GRAVE* (1944)

[...] Those are all the known facts about Palinurus. Whether he deliberately tried to abandon Aeneas, or whether he was the innocent victim of divine vengeance, or a melancholy and resentful character who felt his special nautical gift was henceforth unwanted cannot be deduced from the evidence. His bluff sailor's manner may belie his real state of mind. I am inclined to rule out both suicide (there are no symptoms comparable to those of Dido, when she felt all nature prompting her to the deed), and accident, for the sterns of ships do not fall off in calm seas. We are left, therefore, with design – either a planned act of escape and revenge by Palinurus – or with supernatural intervention, in the shape of a propitiatory sacrifice of the Pilot to Juno, who might otherwise have prevented the safe arrival of Aeneas and his whole expedition.

Which of these alternatives we accept is, in the last analysis, a question of the claims of reason versus those of revealed religion.

As a myth, however, and particularly as a myth with a valuable psychological interpretation, Palinurus clearly stands for a certain will-to-failure or repugnance-to-success, a desire to give up at the last moment, an urge towards loneliness, isolation and obscurity. [...]



Written in London during World War II, and first appearing in 1944, the book *The Unquiet Grave* is actually a collection of personal reflections of the literary critic Cyril Connolly (1903-1974), who wrote under the pseudonym Palinurus. In the *Introduction*, the only part of the book that bears his signature, Connolly explains: “the plot of the book is contained in the title. *The Unquiet Grave* first suggests the tomb of Palinurus, pilot of Aeneas; it is the cenotaph from which he haunts us. ‘The ghost of Palinurus must be appeased’. He is in the core of melancholy and guilt that works destruction on us from within”. But the Virgilian character only appears in the book’s *Epilogue*. *Who was Palinurus?*, where Connolly summarizes his whole story, presenting it as the medical case within the records of a

## Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature

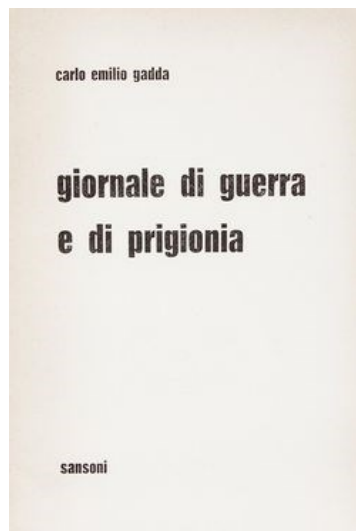
psychiatric case, whose “diagnosis” is “strongly marked palinuroid tendencies” and whose prognosis is considered “grave”. The quote above is the bizarre conclusion that the author comes to.

Further reading:

- Palinurus, *The Unquiet Grave. A Word Cycle by Palinurus*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1944 (first ed.), 1950 (second ed.).
- J. Cape, *Cyril Connolly. A Life*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1997.
- C. Fisher, *Cyril Connolly: A Nostalgic Life*, London, Macmillan, 1995.

## 2 CARLO EMILIO GADDA, *WAR AND IMPRISONMENT DIARY* (1955)

*Prospexi Italiam summa sublimis ab unda*



This line in Virgil, “High on a wave crest, I/ saw Italy” (*Aeneid* VI 357, translated by Allen Mandelbaum), occurs several times as an opening, or as a closing phrase, in lots of writings by that original writer-cum-engineer, Gadda (1893-1973). In particular, there are five occurrences in the various editions of the *War and Imprisonment Diary*, written between 1915 and 1919, later published several times in 1955, in 1965 and after the death of the author. Having volunteered to fight in the Great War, Gadda was taken prisoner by the Germans after the Caporetto defeat, and transported first to Rastatt and then to Celle (near Hanover, in Germany). In the lines in question, thus, there is not just the gaze of a man who, like the unfortunate helmsman in Virgil, seeks a metaphorical safe haven amid the stormy waves of existence. There is also the gaze of Gadda, raised aloft on the Alps, or beyond them, on the peninsula that he perhaps longed to see again, like the gaze of Palinurus, raised high on the peak of a wave, over Italy, the possible salvation that appears briefly before him.

Further reading:

## Aeneas' Journey in Contemporary Literature

- C. E. Gadda, *Opere*, edizione a cura di D. Isella, vol. IV *Saggi, giornali, favole e altri scritti*, tomo 2 (a cura di C. Vela, G. Gaspari, G. Pinotti, F. Gavazzeni, D. Isella, M. A. Terzoli), Milano, Garzanti, 1992 (1998<sup>2</sup>).
- G. Cipriani e N. Corlito, *Palinuro e Gadda: la cifra eroica del fallimento*, in *Gadda e classici latini*, a cura di A. Borali, "Schede Umanistiche" 33/2 (sezione "ANTICHI e Moderni" n. VI), 2019, pp. 115-159.
- A. Fo, *Virgilio nei poeti e nel racconto (dal secondo Novecento italiano)*, in *Il classico nella Roma contemporanea: Mito, modelli, memoria*, Atti del convegno (Roma, 18-20 ottobre 2000), a cura di F. Roscetti, L. Lanzetta, L. Cantatore, vol. II, Roma, Istituto di Studi Romani, 2002, pp. 181-239 (especially note 62).

### 3 GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, *RECITATIVE BY PALINURUS* (1950, 1954) AND *THE ORIGINS OF THE PROMISED LAND* (1969)

[...]

That peace eluded me for all time;  
out of strenuous loyalty I became a mere symbol  
of despair and, prey to every kind of frenzy,  
battered ever and anon by the cold waves' career,  
I became gigantic in size with fatal ardour,  
more reckless than the waves themselves, a deranged battle with sleep.

[...]

[...] "The rock of Palinurus, almost opposite Elea, after Paestum, is that magnified rock in which the desperate loyalty of Palinurus has found form for the centuries" [...]







While Gadda's inspiration is the second of the Virgilian accounts of the death of Palinurus, who survived three days in the sea and was killed on the fourth by *gens crudelis* (*Aeneid* VI 337-384), Ungaretti seems instead to be thinking, in his fragment of *The Promised Land* (see "Carthage"), of the first version of the tale of the helmsman, who, falling victim to Sleep, and after the rudder and part of the stern were torn away, falls head first into the sea (*Aeneid* V 833-871: the two accounts, famously, conflict with each other, probably owing to the fact the poem was not fully revised). Picking up on the idea of the "battle with sleep", Ungaretti makes this a symbol of "strenuous loyalty" to his role as helmsman, and to that promised land that the Aeneas' companions have to reach, imagining his metamorphosis into the picturesque rock that now stands opposite Velia, as he himself explains in one of the statements he made to the critic Leone Piccioni, and collated in the volume in the Meridiani series devoted to him, in the chapter *The Origins of "The Promised Land"*.

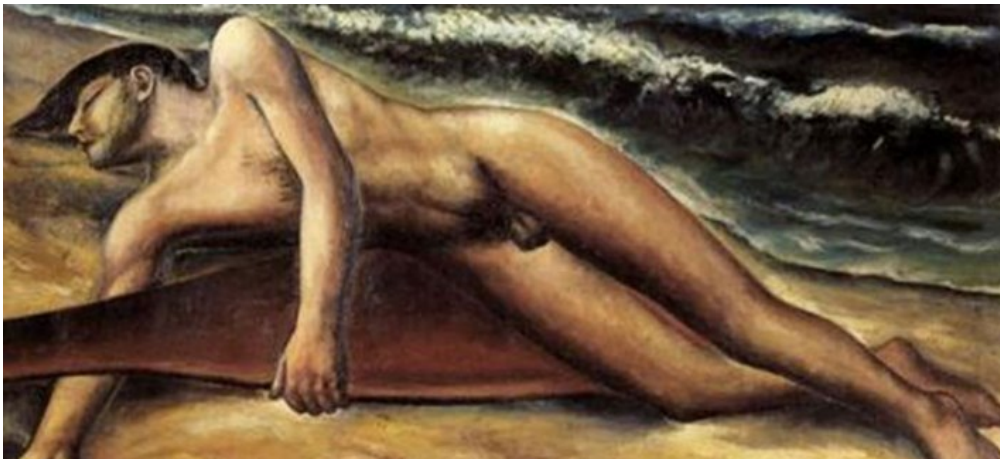
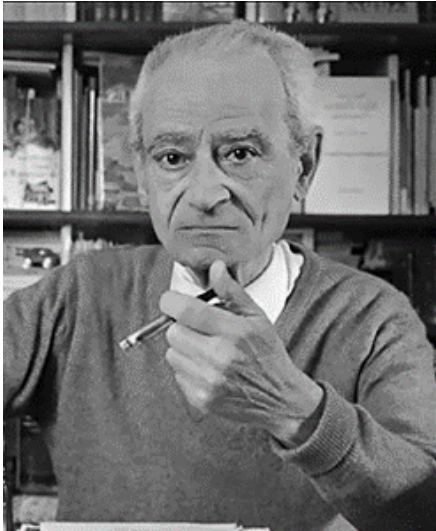
Further reading:

- 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).
- E.M. Ariemma, "Vicino non intesi farsi il sonno". *Il Palinuro di Ungaretti: un tentativo di messa a punto*, "Pan" 8, 2019, 147-162.
- E. Tatasciore, *Moderne parole antiche. Cardarelli, Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Saba e i classici*, Novate Milanese, Prospero Editore, 2020.

#### 4 GIORGIO CAPRONI, *THE PASSAGE OF AENEAS*

At last I'd reached the sands  
but drained of all my strength.  
Perhaps from the weight of my clothes  
sodden with my years.

Translated by Todd Portnowitz



Renato Guttuso, *Palinuro*

Both these passages in Virgil relating to the death of Palinurus seem to have been echoed by Giorgio Caproni (see under “Troy”) who, surprisingly, ends the *The Passage of Aeneas* with an implicit reference to Palinurus rather than to Aeneas. Indeed, in the final lines of the *Epilogue*, which also close the entire short poem, Caproni’s Aeneas, unlike Virgil’s hero, does not arrive in the land he was destined by the fates to reach, instead he arrives at the seashore without setting sail, because he no longer has the “strength”. And this foundering by him, albeit ‘on dry land’, is reminiscent of Palinurus’ drowning at sea. The Virgilian hypotext emerges in several places, but especially in the expression “the weight of my clothes”, although the water that entraps Caproni-Aeneas is the metaphorical water of years gone by:



<p><i>Paulatim adnabam terrae; iam tuta tenebam, ni gens crudelis madida cum veste gravatum prensantemque uncis manibus capita aspera montis ferro invasisset praedamque ignara putasset.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Aeneid VI 358-361</i></p>	<p>[...] I swam toward land slowly and was just at the point of safety – my sea-drenched clothing heavy, my hooked hands were clinging to a jagged cliffside – when barbarians attacked me with the sword, ignorantly thinking me a prize.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Translated by Allen Mandelbaum</p>
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Further reading:

- G. Caproni, *L'opera in versi*, a cura di L. Zuliani, introduzione di P.V. Mengaldo, cronologia e bibliografia di A. Dei, Milano, Mondadori, 1998.
- G. Caproni, *Il mio Enea*, a cura di F. Giannotti, prefazione di A. Fo, postfazione di M. Bettini, Milano, Garzanti, 2020.
- A. Fo, *Virgilio nei poeti e nel racconto (dal secondo Novecento italiano)*, in *Il classico nella Roma contemporanea: Mito, modelli, memoria*, Atti del convegno (Roma, 18-20 ottobre 2000), a cura di F. Roscetti, L. Lanzetta, L. Cantatore, vol. II, Roma, Istituto di Studi Romani, 2002, pp. 181-239.
- P. Pandolfo, *Memorie dell'Eneide nel Passaggio d'Enea di Giorgio Caproni*, "Invigilata Lucernis", in press.